

**“I HAVE TO HEAL MYSELF”: EXPLORING THE NEEDS OF  
INCARCERATED ABORIGINAL WOMEN IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA**

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## **Dedication**

To Yin Yang Rose and Pauly, who are no longer with us. You are remembered.

To Shauntay, Willow, Taz, and Horse, I will never forget any of you.

## **Abstract**

In this study, I examine the various needs of incarcerated Aboriginal women: a population that has been largely omitted from the current body of literature. Aboriginal offenders are significantly overrepresented in the correctional population, and Aboriginal women are even more so. Six participants were recruited from, and interviewed at, the Lethbridge Correctional Centre. Initial categories were selected from the needs chosen by the participants during a card sort, an intervention borrowed from career counselling, and from the interview transcripts themselves. A total of 12 categories were finalized for analysis, describing the various needs of the participants. Three themes were identified related to the strengths these women displayed and the struggles they have endured in the contexts of their own lives. The results are discussed using the lenses of risk factors for incarceration, ability to have their needs met, and the experience of historical trauma. Implications for both counselling practice and future research are discussed. In particular, additional investigation may be warranted into the impact of cultural and spiritual connectedness, the experience of complicated grief reactions, and the experiences and understanding of historical trauma among female Aboriginal offenders. Counselling practice with incarcerated offenders may be better informed by considering complicated grief as a contributing factor. Treatment approaches to consider include strengthening family relationships and transitioning into the community. The findings are the result of personal interpretations made throughout the research and analysis process and are based on intimate familiarity with the transcripts and the rapport created in the interviews.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

In our society, a person who commits a wrongful act or behaves contrary to acceptable laws receives punishment for that act. There have traditionally been several cited purposes of punishment in criminal matters (Bartol & Bartol, 2008; Hartnagel, 1998). Punishment serves to *protect* society from the offender through detention in a correctional institution. Punishment serves to *inhibit or deter* offenders from committing crimes. *Rehabilitating* those who commit crimes is often a priority in order to prevent similar future behaviour. Punishment can be for *retribution, restitution*, and also serves as a *denunciation* against the infringement of social laws and norms (Hartnagel, 1998). Whatever the purpose or goal of punishment, incarceration is frequently utilized as a punishment for a crime committed by an individual against another or against society.

In Canada, although Aboriginal people make up a relatively small portion of the population, they are found in abundant numbers within the criminal justice system (Brzozowski, Taylor-Butts, & Johnson, 2006; Correctional Services Program, 2015; Finn, Trevethan, Carrière, & Kowalski, 1999; Kong & Beattie, 2005). These numbers are even more discrepant when considering Aboriginal female offenders (Calverly, 2010; Kong & AuCoin, 2008). Despite their high numbers, little academic attention has been paid to the needs and issues of incarcerated Aboriginal women in Canada. Without research, this population may be subjected to a variety of programs and services that may not suit their unique needs or, worse, may go untreated due to a lack of programming and of awareness. Correctional services are “charged with the task of carrying out the sentence imposed by the court, a sentence that may attempt to incorporate several diverse goals such as retribution, incapacitation, and rehabilitation” (Hartnagel, 1998, p. 236). One

genre of rehabilitation is through the provision of counselling services within correctional systems (Bartol & Bartol, 2008; Sun, 2008). In order to best serve the psychosocial needs of Aboriginal women incarcerated in Southern Alberta, those needs must be identified and clarified.

### **Correctional Services in Canada**

The responsibility for the management of corrections in Canada is shared between the federal and provincial/territorial governments. Adults sentenced to custody for two years or more are the responsibility of the federal penitentiary system (Calverly, 2010). The mission of the Correctional Service Canada (2012) is to contribute to “public safety by actively encouraging and assisting offenders to become law-abiding citizens, while exercising reasonable, safe, secure and humane control” (para. 2). Correctional Service Canada has a wide variety of programs available to offenders, both in custody and under supervision, to meet their psychosocial needs and to help them re-enter their communities. Adults sentenced to less than two years, remanded offenders (i.e., those held while waiting or during, trial and sentencing), and community-based sentences are all managed by the provincial/territorial systems (Calverly, 2010). In Alberta, correctional services are managed by the Alberta Justice and Solicitor General (formerly Alberta Solicitor General and Public Safety). The Correctional Services Division holds the objectives of assessing inmates for needs and risk levels and helping offenders to access “services and programs related to their needs for the purpose of developing the abilities and skills necessary to conduct independent, law abiding lives” (Alberta Justice and Solicitor General, 2014, para. 6).

These statements make it clear that correctional services recognize that there are issues and barriers in place that have led individuals to come into conflict with the law. In addition to incapacitating offenders, at least temporarily, and serving as deterrents to future criminal activity, correctional services in Canada and in Alberta have embraced rehabilitation as one objective of punishment. In attempting to meet the needs of Aboriginal offenders, the public safety ministries would benefit from research exploring the psychosocial needs and criminogenic factors affecting Aboriginal people in order to best design programming that will provide the best hope of success post-release.

### **The Costs of Incarceration**

Keeping offenders separate from the public is an expensive endeavour. At any particular time during the 2008/2009 period, there were approximately 37,200 adults in custody in Canada, which is an increase of approximately 1% from the previous year, 64% of whom were the responsibility of the provinces and territories (Calverly, 2010). For the 2013/2014 period, the average counts of incarcerated individuals was nearly 36,900 for all centres, with 15,141 in federal prisons and 21,704 in provincial and territorial institutions (Correctional Services Program, 2015, "Incarceration Rate," para. 1). The cost of housing a federal inmate during the 2008/2009 time frame was \$323 per day, while the cost of housing provincial/territorial offenders was about \$162 per day (Calverly, 2010). By 2013/2014, total operating costs for both federal and provincial/territorial custody was more than \$4 billion (Correctional Services Program, 2015, "Operating Expenditures," para. 1). The average daily inmate cost for all Canadian custodial institutions was \$230, with federal sentences costing nearly \$300 per inmate, daily (para. 2). With almost 37,000 offenders in custody at any time, I calculated the total

average daily cost of housing inmates to be staggering at more than \$8.5 million. It should be noted, however, that data from Alberta institutions for the 2013/2014 time period were not available and are, therefore, not included in the statistical report on correctional operating costs.

In addition to the economic costs of incarceration, there are social implications to be considered. Ruddell (2005) cited research findings from various studies and noted that nations with higher minority populations had higher incarceration rates. His findings indicated that nations that utilized a common law legal system more often use incarceration as punishment. Common law is a system of law that developed in England and was based on judiciary decisions (“Common Law,” n.d., para. 1). This stance may be due to media and political systems in these nations that are able to disseminate ideas about punitive justice, increasing the likelihood of acceptance by the citizens.

What incarceration may be doing is acclimating offenders to a prison environment: a process termed *prisonization* (Walters, 2003; Windzio, 2006). It is a process by which offenders adopt the customs, traditions, and values of the institutional culture. It “may well be an adaptive response that becomes maladaptive once the individual leaves prison” (Walters, 2003, p. 413), and one could broaden the definition to include adaptation to the structured security offenders face in custody (Windzio, 2006). Exposure to other criminals in close quarters would certainly lead to interpersonal discourse, allowing offenders to actually *teach* each other how to commit crimes more effectively upon release. Prisonization may be a means of, for lack of a better term, higher criminal education. Furthermore, those serving sentences in custody are not able to work, provide for families, parent their children, or otherwise be active social citizens.

Nor does incarceration provide them, generally speaking, with the skills necessary for fulfilling such roles.

### **General Factors Contributing to Criminal Behaviour**

Risk factors for criminal behaviour can be grouped under social, parental/family, and psychological headings (Bartol & Bartol, 2008). Among the social factors, poverty has been strongly linked to persistent (and violent) offending for both sexes (Bartol & Bartol, 2008). Poverty is also related to victimization. It should be noted that a relationship between poverty and offending does not imply *causality*. The nature of the relationship is not fully understood, and it would be inappropriate to suggest that poverty causes individuals to commit crimes, violent or otherwise. Poverty influences the family and the individual in a variety of ways, such as increasing stress and decreasing access to basic necessities and adequate education.

There is a plethora of research and literature available on issues relating to those individuals who commit criminal acts and are placed in custody as punishment. One needs only to conduct a search in any academic database to be rewarded with a flood of articles and books, dissertations, and editorials. The majority of these writings have examined issues relating to male inmates or offenders, and fewer have focused on *female* offenders. When one is interested in research on the needs and risk factors of female offenders, the flood becomes a river. Even fewer have been published in the past decade (see Farkas & Hrouda, 2007; Heilbrun et al., 2008; Johnson, 2006a, 2006b; Loper, 2006; McMurren, Riemsma, Mannina, Misso, & Kleijnen, 2011; Palmer & Hollin, 2007; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009; Shamai & Kochal, 2008; Van Voorhis, Wright, Salisbury, & Bauman, 2010; Wong, Slotboom, & Bijleveld, 2010;

Wright, Van Voorhis, Salisbury, & Bauman, 2012; Zust, 2009). Of those listed here, only Rettinger and Andrews (2010) represented Canadian research. The river of available research slowed to a mere trickle when considering the needs of Aboriginal female offenders, even over the past 12 years (see also Abril, 2003; Angell & Jones, 2003; de Ravello, Abeita, & Brown, 2008; Feldstein, Venner, & May, 2006; Vigessa, 2013; Yuen & Pedlar, 2009).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the psychosocial, spiritual, and cultural needs of Aboriginal women incarcerated in a Southern Alberta provincial correctional institution. Borrowing the card-sort intervention from career counselling modalities, interviews were conducted with the offenders inviting them to share their stories of struggle and survival in their own words. Despite being a non-Aboriginal researcher who has never been incarcerated, it was my hope that, by giving voice to these women, an opportunity may be created to adapt programs and treatments to better serve them. Moreover, the results of this study may begin to fill a gap in the literature representing incarcerated Aboriginal women.

**Research questions.** The study was framed by the following research questions:

1. What are the psychosocial, cultural, and spiritual needs of incarcerated Aboriginal women in a Southern Alberta jail?
2. To what extent are these women able or unable to meet these needs?
3. What are the factors that have helped or hindered them in their struggles?
4. How has the experience of historical trauma impacted their abilities to have their needs met?

**Terminology.** The term “Aboriginal” is used by Statistics Canada as an umbrella term to describe the various groups of people in Canada who identify as First Nations (also known as Native American), Métis, Inuit, Treaty Indian, or Registered Indian (Indian Act, 1985; Statistics Canada, 2008). The term “Indigenous” is another common term employed in the literature describing Aboriginal peoples in an international context, but is also frequently employed by authors using a North American context. I will primarily use the terms Aboriginal and Indigenous to refer to the collective population throughout the review of literature. While it is acknowledged that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people are distinct groups with distinct characteristics and needs, a complete study examining all three groups is beyond the scope of this work; general Aboriginal statistics and characteristics are, therefore, provided. When referring to those who identify as Native American, the term First Nations will primarily be used, unless referring to works by other authors who employ alternate terminology. This term will include those individuals who are Treaty, Registered, or Status Indians, according to the Indian Act (1985). Terminology employed by participants in subsequent chapters will be reproduced in discussions about data. For the purposes of sensitivity, the term “Indian” will be used only when referring to legislative issues, such as the Indian Act, or Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), or when discussing Aboriginal issues within historical contexts that may require its use.

For the purposes of this paper, individuals who are serving sentences or are incarcerated while awaiting trial will often be referred to as *offenders*. This is a term frequently used in the literature and by governments at all levels to refer to this group of persons, and it is generally understood to refer to incarcerated individuals. The term may

impart some inference that people in conflict with the law are somehow offensive, but it is not my intention to use it in this manner. On the contrary, through my experiences in the correctional system, I have come to understand the varied—often traumatic—backgrounds of incarcerated individuals. Even so, I have chosen to use the offender nomenclature because it (a) is a term generally employed in literature and documents relating to this group, (b) lends itself to verbal economy, (c) allows for flow in writing, and (d) is less pedantic than more descriptive terms. It is not employed in ignorance or to bruise feelings.

The concept of domestic or family violence may, likewise, be better described in more detailed terms (i.e., partner abuse, spousal abuse, violence against women, or violence against children). The more general terms, however, may be used to better describe violence experienced by the cluster of all individuals living in those circumstances.

### **Situating Myself within the Study**

For the purposes of transparency, I would like to underscore my personal and social characteristics in order to better situate myself within the research. Identifying myself is an important step because my interactions with participants were the basis of my data, and my characteristics could leave their mark on my results. I am a White, middle-class, heterosexual woman conducting cross-cultural research. My educational background includes a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, and I am completing a Master of Education in counselling psychology. Consequently, my perspective is framed by the tenets of counselling and psychology. For this reason, I focus more on individual factors than I do on social factors; this is not to say that I dismiss social factors, only that my

focus is on personal ones. My interest in psychology has been long lasting, and my interest in becoming a psychologist began at an early age.

Another significant part of my identity, and a significant part of why I elected to conduct a study in the area of Aboriginal offenders, is my correctional experience. As early as undergraduate studies, I developed an interest in forensic issues. I completed an applied study at the Lethbridge Correctional Centre with the centre psychologist, after which I continued to volunteer at the institution. Following graduation, I pursued employment at the correctional centre as a casual correctional officer: a position I held for three years. During the time I worked as an officer, I continued to volunteer, with the approval of the psychologist, the director, and the security manager. Working as an officer, I met my future husband, who was also a correctional officer. He has worked in the provincial systems in Alberta and British Columbia and also for federal corrections. He is now a probation officer. Before being accepted to this MEd program, I also became involved in the final stages of a qualitative research study investigating the experiences of helpers in corrections.

Through all of these corrections experiences and my nearly life-long interest in counselling, I have felt very disconcerted by the lack of empathy and understanding about the circumstances faced by many Aboriginal peoples. I am deeply disturbed by the stories of violence against all women, particularly the accounts of those unsolved cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. I have found that I truly enjoy working with offenders, an often overlooked or ignored group of people, and have a fervent interest in issues concerning their treatment and wellbeing. All of these facts have combined in a perfect storm that has led to the development of this study.

It is my hope that providing these details will provide a clearer picture of me as a researcher, of my perspectives, and of my approach to this study. Readers can use the information to evaluate my interpretations and my findings to reach their own conclusions.

### **Aboriginal Offenders in Canada**

Aboriginal peoples are drastically overrepresented within the correctional systems in Canada. Aboriginal groups make up about 20% of the total Canadian incarcerated population (Brzozowski et al., 2006; Finn et al., 1999; Kong & Beattie, 2005) and only 4% of the general Canadian population. Provincial correctional populations can show even higher proportions of Aboriginal representation. In Alberta, approximately 40% of offenders admitted to custody during 2008/2009 identified as belonging to an Aboriginal group (Calverly, 2010). While this is not the highest proportion within the provinces, it is considerably higher than in most other regions. It should be noted that the Territories have the highest proportions of Aboriginal offenders, which is likely due to the higher number of Aboriginal peoples residing in those areas. Data for the 2013/2014 time frame were not available for analysis (Correctional Services Program, 2015), but provincial and territorial counts showed approximately 26% of all custodial admissions were Aboriginal People. In the 2011/2012 report, admissions to custody statistics for Alberta showed that approximately 45% were Aboriginal (Perrault, 2014). Nation-wide, Aboriginal people account for approximately 4% of the national adult population, but 28% of incarcerated adult populations.

LaPrairie (1987) cautioned that the concept of overrepresentation may not provide an accurate picture of Aboriginal people in offender populations. Percentages are most

often calculated by comparing Aboriginal versus non-Aboriginal people within the general population. A more accurate representation would compare across age groups. She noted that since the Aboriginal population is younger than the general Canadian population, various age groups may show differing representation in corrections.

Aboriginal adult offenders are younger, less educated, and more often unemployed than non-Aboriginal offenders in Canada (Brzozowski et al., 2006). They have been shown to be less likely to be granted parole and more likely to have their parole revoked. When parole is granted, it is typically later in the duration of the Aboriginal offender's sentence (Solicitor General of Canada, 1989). Rates of crime are three times higher on reserves than they are in the rest of the country, and violent crime rates are eight times the national rates (Brzozowski et al., 2006). Higher crime rates may be due, in part, to different policing or different methods of recording crime on-reserves. Aboriginal offenders are more often incarcerated for assault offenses and crimes against the person than are non-Aboriginal offenders, both provincially and federally (Brzozowski et al., 2006; Finn et al., 1999; Kong & Beattie, 2005).

Upon admittance to a federal correctional facility, assessments of risk and need are often carried out with offenders of all identities (Brzozowski et al., 2006); six areas of need are assessed, including attitude, social interactions (i.e., criminal associates), substance abuse, marital and family relationships, employment, and personal/emotional stability. With the exception of the latter, Aboriginal offenders were rated at higher needs levels than non-Aboriginal offenders. Higher needs ratings in comparison to their non-Aboriginal counterparts has led to Aboriginal offenders to be considered higher risk for re-offending (Finn et al., 1999) and suggests that programs designed for non-Aboriginal

offenders may be insufficient or inadequate for meeting the higher needs levels of Aboriginal offenders. Investigation into the six areas of needs and into the challenges faced by Aboriginal offenders may assist professionals in developing appropriate and effective treatments approaches, and this study may help to shed some light on the issue.

The experience of historical trauma has hitherto been an overlooked factor related to Aboriginal criminal behaviour and incarceration. Historical trauma is defined as the “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences” (Brave Heart, 2003, p. 7). Such wounding has social expressions as well and has been connected to the high rates of substance use among Aboriginal peoples, to the breakdown of family systems and communication, to mental distress, and to child abuse and maltreatment (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt, & Chen, 2004).

### **Aboriginal Women Incarcerated in Canada**

While statistics show Aboriginal people to be overrepresented in the offender population, Aboriginal women are even more disproportionately represented in corrections (Perrault, 2014). Although Aboriginal women account for only 3% of the Canadian female population (Kong & AuCoin, 2008), 28% of remanded and 37% of sentenced women admitted into custody in 2008/2009 were Aboriginal (Calverly, 2010). In 2011/2012, 43% of female admissions to custodial institutions were Aboriginal. During the 10-year period from 1994 to 2004, admissions to remand doubled for Aboriginal females, while there was only a 34% increase for Aboriginal adults and a 3% increase for non-Aboriginal adults admitted to remand (Brzozowski et al., 2006). Since 2004, the numbers have continued to rise (Calverly, 2010). In the first book on Canadian

female offenders, LaPrairie (1987) noted, “Recent statistics reveal that Native women are being incarcerated for more violent crimes than are non-Native women” (p. 104). Today, the proportion of Aboriginal females considered violent federal offenders is higher than that of all male federally sentenced offenders (Kong & AuCoin, 2008). This is especially disquieting considering federal female offenders (all groups) are less likely than male offenders to have prior involvement with the correctional system.

In the face of such struggles, traumas, and historical grief, one begins to wonder how these women have survived and carried on in their lives. Coping, according to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, is simply the attempt made to prevail over problems and troubles (“Cope,” n.d.). It involves moderating our responses to external events, or altering those events themselves, if we are able (Keil, 2004). By adapting to stressful life situations, consciously or not, one is said to be “coping with it” and thus reducing or avoiding psychological distress or strain. Resilience is a dynamic process that buffers against the effects of adverse or traumatic events, enabling the individual to experience limited disruption to daily functioning (Bonanno, 2004). Aboriginal women, especially those in urban settings, are exposed to a variety of vulnerability factors (Scarpino, 2007). Resilience may help in understanding how incarcerated Aboriginal women are able to meet their needs on various levels.

Of particular relevance to Aboriginal groups may be the concept of *cultural resilience*, a term which is often used to describe the “role that culture may play as a resource for resilience in the individual” (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008b, p. 10), especially when the concept is applied to communities such as First Nations groups. In this context,

cultural continuity, or the permanence of culture over time, has been shown to be a protective factor for community resilience (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998).

The statistics combine to create a grim picture of the status of Aboriginal women in custody. When looking at the characteristics of both female and Aboriginal female offenders, Aboriginal women are the group with the most needs, but given the least attention in research. The purpose of this study was to explore the needs of these women who have been overlooked in academic scholarship.

### **Overview of the Study**

In the next chapter, the available literature on female offenders and Aboriginal female offenders is examined in closer detail. The various identified needs areas, which include drug/alcohol use, employment and education, mental health, childcare and housing, and histories of victimization, are expanded and discussed as they relate to female offenders, generally, and to Aboriginal female offenders in particular. The issue of historical trauma is addressed more fully, and its impact on Aboriginal people today discussed. Chapter 3 contains a detailed description of the study's proposed method for honouring and analyzing participant's stories. My qualifications as a cross-cultural, non-Aboriginal researcher and the ethical concerns I faced are presented; particular attention is given to the issues related to conducting research with a vulnerable population and the vulnerability of the researcher in qualitative research.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed description of each of the 12 categories that were finalized and used during the analysis, and I use the four symbolic meanings of the Sacred Tree (Bopp, Bopp, Brown, & Lane, 1988) as an organizational framework for that discussion. These categories are abuse, care-giving, education, family support, grief and

loss, jail, mental health counselling, necessities of life, the old ways, parenting, spiritual practices, and substance use counselling. Through analysis, themes began to emanate from the data. In Chapter 5, the strongest three (betrayal, blame and self-blame, and craving) are examined along with the results of the data as they serve to address the research questions. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the results as they related to the proposed research questions; I then go on to underscore the limitations of this study and the implications for both research and counselling practice.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

When people commit crimes, they are convicted and sent to jail for their punishment and to repay society for their transgressions. Once confined in a correctional facility, society is content to trust in the system and little is said about the offenders. However, few offenders are given life sentences, and most are released back into society. Many are returned to custody for committing another crime or for breaching conditions of their parole or probation. When women commit crimes, they, too, are sent to prison; until recently, however, little attention has been paid to their existence in a male-dominated system.

Through this current study, I sought to explore the psychosocial, spiritual, and cultural needs of Aboriginal women incarcerated within a southern Alberta provincial correctional institution. Successive questions surrounding these women's capacity for having their needs met, for survival, and surrounding the effects of historical trauma on their ability to meet those needs, will also be considered. To that end, I will begin this chapter with a discussion of the characteristics of women offenders in Canada and a closer look at the factors that lead women to become incarcerated. Subsequent discussion will focus on Aboriginal offenders and, more specifically, on female Aboriginal offenders in Canada. From there, an examination into the influence of the experiences of historical trauma and complicated grief will be followed by an explanation of coping and resilience. Included in the discussion of historical trauma is a cursory discussion of colonization. It is assumed that the historical facts of this period are known and understood by most Canadians, and a full discussion of colonization is outside the purview of this paper; in order to do justice to the subject, more space than is available here would be required.

## Female Offenders in Canada

In a seminal work, Adelberg and Currie (1987) collected writings from several Canadian authors to examine the issue of women who come into conflict with the law. The editors were employed as social workers within the criminal justice system and were disturbed by the air of secrecy surrounding the female offender. Women at the time and, arguably, still today were caught up in a system designed by and for men, and they had been largely ignored by scholars, by the system itself, and even by the feminist movement. Many of the young women with whom the authors worked had been convicted of petty crimes, which caused them to “question the economic conditions and life circumstances which surrounded them” (p. 12). For offenders convicted of more serious crimes, the authors were left to wonder about the *social* conditions that led them to their current circumstances.

Female offenders make up only a small portion of the incarcerated population in Canadian corrections (Finn et al., 1999; Kong & AuCoin, 2008; Correctional Services Program, 2015). In 2008/2009, they accounted for about 6% of the federally incarcerated population, 12% of provincial offenders, and 13% of those on remand (Calverly, 2010). In 2013/2014, women made up 13% of offenders in custody (Correctional Services Program, 2015, “Males Account,” para. 2). Overall, female offenders were in custody for less serious crimes than their male counterparts (Finn et al., 1999, Kong & AuCoin, 2008). For example women were less likely to be incarcerated for committing crimes against the person. In provincial institutions their offences were most commonly drug-related (Finn et al., 1999) with almost half of women in 2005 accused of property crime (Kong & AuCoin 2008). Women were also convicted for fewer index offences (the initial

charges laid at the time of arrest) and had shorter aggregate sentences (total time for all offences). Statistics show that female offenders are less likely to be repeat offenders but, when they do reoffend, the seriousness of their criminal activity does not escalate with time, as indicated by a study in Great Britain (Johnson, 1987). About half of the women in custody in that study were first time offenders and most had no prior custodial history.

### **Risk Factors for Female Offenders**

Research has shown that female offenders are most often young and poor (Adelberg & Currie, 1987; Heilbrun et al., 2008; Johnson, 1987; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010; Singer, Bussey, Song, & Lunghofer, 1995). Poverty may be the result of many factors, but women in custody are typically unemployed and under-skilled (Adelberg & Currie, 1987; Blanchette, 1997; Dell & Boe, 2000; Hedderman, 2004; Loucks, 2004; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009). In addition to a lack of marketable job skills, female offenders typically have low educational attainment (Adelberg & Currie, 1987; Hedderman, 2004; Loucks, 2004; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009), or they may have difficulty working available jobs because the hours are not conducive to raising children (Blanchette, 1997; Braswell & Mongold, 2007; Dell & Boe, 2000; Finn et al., 1999; Loucks, 2004; Singer et al., 1995). Incarcerated women often experience family or marital problems and are often single mothers. Many women in the system have had their children removed from their care and struggle to regain custody. Female offenders may also hold antisocial attitudes or associate with criminal peers, including spouses (Blanchette, 1997; Hedderman, 2004).

A common problem faced by many incarcerated women is coping with mental illness or other mental health issues (Blanchette, 1997; Blanchette & Motiuk, 1996;

Farkas & Hrouda, 2007; Hedderman, 2004; Johnson, 2006a, 2006b; Loucks, 2004; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009; Singer et al., 1995). Other struggles include dealing with drug and/or alcohol addictions (Blanchette, 1997; Dell & Boe, 2000; Farkas & Hrouda, 2007; Finn et al., 1999; Hedderman, 2004; Johnson, 1987, 2006a, 2006b; Loucks, 2004; Malloch, 2004; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010; Singer et al., 1995) and traumatic experiences such as childhood abuse, spousal assault, and sexual and physical victimization (Braswell & Mongold, 2007; Hedderman, 2004; Johnson, 1987, 2006b; Loucks, 2004; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009; Singer et al., 1995). Many of the risk factors that have been identified as significant for female offenders are similar to those identified for male offenders; their importance to the individual, however, may not be the same for women as for men (Hedderman, 2004; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009).

### **The Psychosocial Issues of Incarcerated Women**

In 1995, Singer and colleagues published a study in which they interviewed more than 200 female inmates in the Cleveland House of Corrections in Cleveland, Ohio. In addition to the interviews, the researchers administered several psychometric tests to assess perceived social supports, psychological symptoms, and drug use. The purpose of their study was to explore the needs of incarcerated women in order to inform policy and develop appropriate programming for such women. Their results are noteworthy.

The majority of the women in this study were unmarried with children in the custody of others (Singer et al., 1995). Only one fifth had a history of prior incarceration, and half of the women were serving time for prostitution-related offenses. Results from the administered scales indicated women serving time in jail perceived little social

support from friends and family, and are primarily “clinically distressed” (Singer et al., 1995, p. 107). Approximately one quarter had been prescribed psychotropic medications at some point, and over half reported receiving treatment for substance use problems. More than half had co-occurring mental health problems and substance use issues.

Physical and sexual violence were considerable problems for these women (Singer et al., 1995). Just over three quarters of the women had been threatened with physical violence, and almost 70% experienced actual violence in the year just prior to the study. Violent incidents took place not only on the street, but also in the home. “Attackers were described as drug dealers, johns, pimps, neighbourhood locals, family members, and strangers” (p. 108). Passing reference to intimate partner violence was made by many of the women, though the study did not specifically address this. Disturbingly, the majority of the women reported forced sexual encounters as adults, and not quite half revealed being sexually victimized prior to the age of 18. When put together, a total of more than 80% of the women in the study had experienced sexual abuse in their lifetime.

Women were also asked to identify services or programs they felt would be of most benefit to them when they were released from custody, and cited more than 300 types of help (Singer et al., 1995). Housing and drug treatment were by far the most frequently mentioned; mental health counselling, financial help, alcohol treatment, and education were also common responses. Other needs articulated by the participants in the study by Singer et al. (1995) included medical care; support from religious/spiritual, family, and legal sources; and services related to their children (e.g., parenting classes, regaining custody, child care, etc.).

Not surprisingly, Singer et al. (1995) concluded that from policy, humanitarian, and economic perspectives, services available for incarcerated women were inadequate to meet their varied needs and issues. Women are turned out of the institution to face many of the same problems that led them to be incarcerated without additional tools or skills to better face them, leaving little alternative but tried-and-true coping strategies. The authors also noted the astronomical costs of building institutions and of housing inmates in the United States, even many years ago.

It should be underscored that the article by Singer and his colleagues (1995) was published almost 20 years ago and that it was conducted with women in the American correctional system in Cleveland, Ohio, but the results are both startling and thought-provoking. To this writer's knowledge, similar studies have not been conducted in Alberta, or in Canada, and have not been focused on the needs of Aboriginal women. As outlined in the previous chapter, Aboriginal women are grossly overrepresented in Canadian federal and provincial/territorial correctional services.

**Substance Use.** Drug or alcohol abuse is a significant problem for many female offenders (Blanchette, 1997; Dell & Boe, 2000; Farkas & Hrouda, 2007; Finn et al., 1999; Hedderman, 2004; Johnson, 1987, 2006a, 2006b; Loucks, 2004; Malloch, 2004; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010; Singer et al., 1995); drug use is an issue of concern for these women in a number of countries (Loucks, 2004). It seems to be a more significant problem than alcohol use, and female offenders tend to spend more money per week on their habit than do male offenders (Hedderman, 2004). Drug use tends to be heavy, involving multiple substances (Loucks, 2004), and women must often support their own habit as well as that of their male partners (Malloch, 2004). Women tend to have begun

their drug use before becoming involved with the criminal justice system (Loucks, 2004). Besides the effects of the drugs, these women also face social stigma. Society often takes an unfavourable view of women who use drugs and drink excessively, perceiving them as selfish, irresponsible, and deviant (Malloch, 2004).

While not as prevalent as drug use among incarcerated women, alcohol use is also a significant problem (Hedderman, 2004; Loucks, 2004). Many women report binge drinking, but several also admit to using alcohol on a daily basis. For many female offenders, a period of incarceration may be seen as a chance to get “clean” and start fresh (Loucks, 2004); however, drugs and alcohol are available illicitly within correctional facilities (Malloch, 2004), and many continue to use while in custody (Loucks, 2004). Jail is not an ideal place for female offenders who are addicted to substances.

**Employment and education.** As mentioned previously, women in jails and prisons tend to be impoverished (Adelberg & Currie, 1987; Heilbrun et al., 2008; Johnson, 1987; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010; Singer et al., 1995). Female drug users have lower incomes than male drug users and are more likely to be cohabiting with a partner (Medrano, Hatch, Zule, & Desmond, 2003). Lower economic attainment may explain the trend of “acquisitive” offending (i.e., activities for the purpose of acquiring money or goods, like shoplifting), and many women cite economic hardship as one of the key reasons for their index offense (Hedderman, 2004).

Women convicted of an offense show lower overall educational attainment than non-offender women (Adelberg & Currie, 1987; Hedderman, 2004; Loucks, 2004; Medrano et al., 2003; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009). Many offenders failed to complete high school and, consequently, have no post-secondary education (Hedderman,

2004). Most women held a grade nine education or less and had few marketable skills, and far more women than men had no job at the time they were admitted to custody (Adelberg & Currie, 1987; Finn et al., 1999; Hedderman, 2004; Johnson, 1987; Loucks, 2004). As a result, female offenders are largely unemployed and under-skilled (Adelberg & Currie, 1987; Blanchette, 1997; Dell & Boe, 2000; Hedderman, 2004; Loucks, 2004; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009). For many, finding employment that provided sufficient income while at the same time providing hours conducive to raising children can be very difficult (Adelberg & Currie, 1987), which could perpetuate low employment rates among this group. Another possible explanation for low employment may be that many women were engaged as homemakers or primary caregivers for their children, thus restricting the development of employment skills (Hedderman, 2004). This situation may affect the rates of unemployment at the time of incarceration. Programs in correctional facilities may provide inadequate training, making it difficult for women to obtain employment upon release (Hedderman, 2004).

**Mental health and well-being.** A significant number of incarcerated women are coping with mental health issues (Blanchette, 1997; Blanchette & Motiuk, 1996; Farkas & Hrouda, 2007; Hedderman, 2004; Johnson, 2006a, 2006b; Loucks, 2004; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009; Singer et al., 1995). Many women show high levels of hopelessness and distress. This may be due, in part, to the effects of being incarcerated (Singer et al., 1995). More women than men in custody suffer from depression, anxiety, or other mental disorders, and many of their issues are not covered by clinical definitions of mental illness (Hedderman, 2004; Loucks, 2004).

Rates of suicide attempts are much higher for female offenders than for women in the general population (Loucks, 2004). This group also has higher rates of self-harm, without suicidal ideation, and higher rates of hospitalization for mental health issues. While suicide attempts are more common for these women while *not* in custody, attempts in custody tend to employ more lethal means, and the experience of drug or alcohol withdrawal increases suicide risk.

**Exposure to violence or trauma.** Women who come into conflict with the law are often also victims of violence and abuse (Johnson, 1987). These women have experienced a variety of forms of abuse, including childhood abuse, spousal assault, and sexual and physical victimizations (Braswell & Mongold, 2007; Hedderman, 2004; Johnson, 1987, 2006b; Loucks, 2004; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009; Singer et al., 1995). For most of these women, violence is not an isolated incident, but can occur on a daily basis.

It is estimated that only about 1 of every 10 incidences of sexual assault are ever reported to police, making it difficult to obtain a clear picture of sexual assault in Canada (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008). Of those incidents reported to police, the vast majority are not severe, involving primarily unwanted touching. More severe sexual offences accounted for less than 20% of all reported incidents in 2007. Tempering this is the fact that over half of all reported incidents had been committed against children.

Many survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) are re-victimized at some point in their lives; many also develop maladaptive sexual behaviours, including transient or casual patterns in their relationships, and many experience aggression and/or low self-esteem (Davis & Petretic-Jackson, 2000). Survivors of this particular victimization are

more likely to have mental and physical health problems, more likely to be divorced, and more likely to experience intimate-partner violence. CSA survivors are less likely to ever marry, to have children, or to graduate from high school (Romito, Crisma, Saurel-Cubizolles, 2003). Additional sequelae of CSA may include depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse or misuse, suicide attempts, social dysfunction, lowered self-confidence, and reduced trust in others (Bagley & Young, 1987). The consequences of CSA, while not identical, are startlingly similar to the characteristics of female offenders.

Many women in the study by Singer and his colleagues (1995) served sentences for prostitution-related offences; therefore, the factors that lead to prostitution bear at least a cursory discussion. Women who engage in prostitution are more likely to be single than married (Medrano et al., 2003) and are likely to be experiencing economic constraints (Johnson, 1987). Although sexual abuse itself is not a significant predictor of prostitution entry, many women who are engaged in the street sex trade experienced negative home life and non-traditional home situations. Additional factors include having parents with drug or alcohol issues, having a history of abuse in one's lifetime, and higher rates of attempted suicide (van Brunschot & Brannigan, 2002). Running away from home as a youth is a predictor of prostitution entry and possibly a product of having a negative home life (Johnson, 1987; van Brunschot & Brannigan, 2002). Women who work in the sex trade also report abuse and assault from clients and from "pimps" (Singer et al., 1995).

**Childcare and housing.** One of the factors relevant to female offenders is having dependent children for whom incarcerated women are responsible. Most women in

custody have children (Blanchette, 1997; Braswell & Mongold, 2007; Dell & Boe, 2000; Finn et al., 1999; Loucks, 2004; Singer et al., 1995). Some women have custody of their children (Loucks, 2004), while many of these children are in the custody of others (Singer et al., 1995). An added difficulty to the separation from children while in jail is the difficulty in maintaining contact with them, due to the dispersed nature of women's institutions (Loucks, 2004). In the Lethbridge Correctional Centre, the cost of a phone call can be quite high, even for local calls, and visitation for sentenced offenders is on weekends only, making it difficult to see or communicate with children. For those incarcerated women who do not, or no longer have, custody, it can later be difficult to establish custody (Adelberg & Currie, 1987).

Many women who are serving sentences have unstable housing that is poorly maintained (Blanchette, 1997). Additionally, many have no residence upon their release, either having lost housing during custody or having had inadequate housing prior to incarceration (Loucks, 2004; Singer et al., 1995). Inadequate housing seems likely due to economic hardship and might contribute to the difficulty of obtaining custody of children.

Female offenders are certainly not the only people in Canada existing under these conditions, but the factors combine to create a recipe for distress and adversity. The conditions and factors affecting incarcerated women are comparable to those faced by Aboriginal people in Canada, even those who do not face incarceration. Family and domestic violence is a serious problem for Aboriginal groups and especially so for Aboriginal women (Bohn, 2003; Jones, 2008). A startling majority of Aboriginal women have experienced various forms of abuse throughout their lifetime; many of them deal with multiple drug and alcohol-related issues, mental health concerns, interpersonal

violence, and a history of suicide attempts (Bohn, 2003). Those Aboriginal women who are in conflict with the law may experience these issues more strongly; incarcerated Aboriginal women display “some of the highest health and social disparities in the [United States]” (de Ravello et al., 2008, p. 301).

### **Aboriginal Offenders**

In a study of the needs factors of Aboriginal and Caucasian female offenders in Canada, Dell and Boe (2000) noted that “research on Canadian offenders has invariably concluded that Aboriginal and Caucasian offenders have different criminogenic needs” (p. 1), though the authors did not note precisely which research showed this. Since female offenders have received less academic attention than male offenders, it is possible that such research is particular to the needs of men in the correctional system. Dell and Boe did note, however, that incarcerated Aboriginal women have higher scores on the various needs domains than do non-Aboriginal women in prison.

### **Aboriginal Women in Conflict with the Law**

Federally sentenced women are more likely to be young, single, and Aboriginal than are women in the general population (Kong & AuCoin, 2008). In fact, Aboriginal people are the single largest minority group found in correctional institutions in Canada (Nielsen, 1998). Though only comprising about 3% of the Canadian female population, about one quarter of federally sentenced women were Aboriginal (Kong & AuCoin, 2008). In Alberta, around 14% of incarcerated offenders are female (Mahony, 2011). Aboriginal women have historically been more likely to be incarcerated for violent offences or crimes against the person (LaPrairie, 1987). In federal corrections, maximum-security female offenders were even more likely to be Aboriginal (Blanchette, 1997).

In 1989, the Solicitor General of Canada noted in the final report of the Federal Task Force on Aboriginal people in federal corrections that detailed information regarding Aboriginal versus non-Aboriginal female offenders was virtually non-existent. Due to the continued paucity of research available on Aboriginal offenders, in general, and Aboriginal female offenders, in particular, information has been gathered together in the following section along with relevant information on non-offender Aboriginal people. Whenever possible, information specific to the conditions of Aboriginal women in prisons and jails will be given preference.

**Substance use.** The effects of alcohol use among Aboriginal populations have been extremely destructive (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Prior to contact with settlers, alcohol had been an unknown substance for Indigenous peoples; tolerance to alcohol was low, and drunkenness was an unfamiliar condition. Alcohol use has led to the deterioration of Aboriginal health and well-being. Studies show high, and often severe, levels of alcohol abuse among Aboriginal groups and among Aboriginal women (Bohn, 2003; de Ravello et al., 2008; Weekes, Morison, Millson, & Fettig, 1995). Treatment can take various forms, including hospitalization, outpatient treatment, and residential treatment facilities, with individuals often seeking treatment repeatedly (Feldstein et al., 2006). The results of one study (investigating adverse childhood experiences among incarcerated Aboriginal women in New Mexico) showed every participant but one reported having ever consumed alcohol (de Ravello et al., 2008). About half of the women in the study started drinking before the age of 15; almost half drank on a daily basis at the time of their arrest, and almost three quarters were intoxicated when they

were taken into custody. Gender does not seem to affect the level or severity of alcohol abuse (Feldstein et al., 2006).

Substance abuse is another serious issue faced by Aboriginal offenders. De Ravello and colleagues (2008) found the majority of the Aboriginal female inmates in their study had used drugs during their lifetime. Approximately half of the women had used four or more different substances, and many were under the influence at the commission of the offense. Approximately half were also serving sentences for drug- or alcohol-related offenses. In another study, participants reported an average of 12 alcohol-related incarcerations, with at least one individual reporting 100 such incarcerations (Feldstein et al., 2006). Brave Heart (2003) and Jones (2008) suggested that historical trauma is the basis for the high levels of substance use among Aboriginal peoples, while Finlay and Jones (2000) and Leach, Burgess, and Holmwood (2008) suggested unresolved grief may contribute to criminal behaviour; both concepts will be addressed later in this chapter.

**Employment and education.** Aboriginal offenders in Canada show lower levels of education and higher levels of unemployment than do non-Aboriginal offenders (Solicitor General of Canada, 1989). Compounding the issue, few Aboriginal inmates have vocational training, and around two thirds have no previous experience in skilled employment.

**Mental health and well-being.** Many Aboriginal women struggle with depression and other psychiatric diagnoses. One study found that 30% of participants had at least one prior suicide attempt (Bohn, 2003). Aboriginal women show high rates of mental health diagnoses; many take medications for mental health issues and access

mental health services (Collin-Vézina, Dion, & Trocmé, 2009; de Ravello et al., 2008; Libby et al., 2005). Suicide rates are also higher for Aboriginal people than for non-Aboriginal Canadians (de Ravello et al., 2008; Solicitor General of Canada, 1989).

**Exposure to violence and trauma.** The better part of the violence Aboriginal people experience is domestic abuse (Brzozowski et al., 2006; de Ravello et al., 2008). In the 2004 General Social Survey, around 40% of Aboriginal people over the age of 15 reported they had been victimized at least one time during the previous 12 months, while only 28% of non-Aboriginal people reported the same (Brzozowski et al., 2006). The rates of violence for Aboriginal women were even higher. Interestingly, Saskatchewan and Manitoba have the highest proportions of Aboriginal population outside the Territories (Statistics Canada, 2008) and also have the highest reported rates of sexual offences (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008); this is not to suggest there is a causal connection between those facts, but it might bear further investigation. Figures outlining interpersonal violence may be underestimated within the Aboriginal population. Domestic abuse is easy to hide, even more so in isolated and remote communities with a shortage of services (Jones, 2008). Several cultural factors may influence underreporting: strong values endorsing non-interference with others, fear of authorities or lack of trust in them, or a need to protect the victimized parent. Additionally, no national prevalence studies have been conducted regarding CSA in Aboriginal communities in Canada (Collin-Vézina et al., 2009). In their review of the available literature on sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities in Canada, Collin-Vézina and her colleagues (2009) noted that such violence is partly embedded in the experience of historical trauma and its consequences.

**Childcare and housing.** As with many issues regarding Aboriginal people, there has been a deficiency of literature available on housing/homelessness and Aboriginal groups (Beavis, Klos, Carter, & Douchant, 1997). In their literature review, Beavis and colleagues (1997) identified a variety of structural and personal factors that contribute to homelessness, and they acknowledged that Aboriginal people suffer from all “causes.” Such factors include family issues, unemployment or low pay, addiction and health issues, conflicts with landlords, demolition of affordable rental properties (e.g., gentrification of cities), release from incarceration, and deinstitutionalization. The authors pointed out that what may be considered personal factors to the general population, may, in fact, be structural factors for Aboriginal peoples, such as unemployment or conflicts with landlords.

As a result of risk factors like sexual abuse and family violence, Aboriginal youth are at a particular risk for homelessness (Beavis et al., 1997). Runaways may wind up on the streets; work in the sex trade begins early, sometimes as young as 8 years of age. Those at risk may also include children of parents who are ineffective or neglectful, often due to substance or alcohol use. There is prevalence among Aboriginal people for families to be headed by a single female parent. These women have often never been married and suffer deficits in education and employment. Aboriginal people with health problems or disabilities, including the elderly, are also at risk for homelessness; health issues can include mental health issues and may lead to loss of employment and family troubles.

Another group Beavis and colleagues (1997) clearly identified as vulnerable was Aboriginal offenders released from custody, though they acknowledged there was very

little research to explain why. My own interpretation of released offender vulnerability to homelessness would include difficulties in finding employment, loss of accommodation while incarcerated, loss of relationships (i.e., friends, children, spouse) while in jail, drug and alcohol abuse, and education deficits.

As noted earlier, women in custody often face unstable housing or poor living conditions in the community (Blanchette, 1997). This is even truer for Aboriginal peoples in Canada, including those who live in conflict with the law. Housing conditions on reserves are inadequate, even unsafe (Beavis et al., 1997; Statistics Canada, 2008), with many people living under one roof. It has been found that Aboriginal people are more likely to live in crowded conditions and in houses in a state of disrepair, though this number has shown to be declining (Statistics Canada, 2008). The status of housing varies for each Aboriginal group, but First Nations people are approximately five times more likely (15%) to be living in crowded dwellings than non-Aboriginal people (3%), and the proportion increases on reserves (26%).

Finding housing off the reserve can be a difficult venture if you happen to be Aboriginal and especially so if you also have been incarcerated. Some offenders are required to live in housing supervised by corrections (i.e., halfway houses), which are often rife with alcohol and substance use and criminal associates (Brown et al., 2008). In addition, waiting lists for publicly funded housing are lengthy, and private housing is often unaffordable. Rentals that *are* affordable are often inadequate, unsanitary, or in disrepair and located in neighbourhoods or buildings with access to ample drugs and alcohol. Financial assistance that is available to ex-offenders, such as welfare, is meager

at best, leaving little money for food, clothing, utilities, and other necessities after rent is paid (Brown et al., 2008).

Another barrier to Aboriginal people seeking housing, whether they have served time or not, is discrimination from landlords and rental agents (Beavis et al., 1997; Brown et al., 2008). Anecdotal reporting tells of Aboriginal individuals and couples being shown lower quality rentals by agents or properties in run-down areas. When prospective landlords see their potential tenants are Aboriginal, suddenly spaces are no longer available or have “just” been rented—often a fabrication. Attitudes toward homeless Aboriginal people in urban areas may include the belief that Aboriginal housing is an Aboriginal issue—that housing should be provided on the reserves and Aboriginal people in cities could return to the reserves to be housed (Kingfisher, 2005). As mentioned, housing conditions on reserves are often sub-standard and crowded. Conversely, Aboriginal people moving into urban areas may have difficulty navigating life in a city, face high rents and low employment, and may have difficulty accessing available services (Beavis et al., 1997).

Those who cannot find housing are forced to live with friends or relatives, turn to shelters, or live on the streets (Brown et al., 2008). Living with family and friends can be effective initially, but strains to relationships can occur when the arrangement becomes drawn out. Shelters suffer from the same troubles of halfway houses (i.e., drug and alcohol use, violence, and criminal activities), making it difficult for offenders to maintain a commitment to stable, crime-free living. In addition to these difficulties, offenders moving from incarceration into the community find the transition to be very abrupt, leaving them unprepared for life on the outside (Brown et al., 2008).

Those people living on the streets suffer from additional stigmatization and discrimination by members of the community (Kingfisher, 2005). Lethbridge has a long history of racism and discrimination between Aboriginal and White people. This continues despite changes, in the 1960s, to laws requiring “Indians” to have passes in order to leave the reserves. During a community debate regarding finding a location for a new homeless shelter, a debate that spanned months, it emerged that the term *homeless* was generally understood to mean *Native addicted male* (Kingfisher, 2005). The facts, taken from annual enumerations of the homeless in various cities across Alberta, have not supported this assumption. In the 2010 census in Lethbridge, a total of 207 individuals were reported as being homeless (Marcelin, Gausvik, & Balerud, 2010), and only 37% of those were observed to be members of a “visible minority” (p. 6). This is not very illustrative of the proportion of Aboriginal homeless, but the 2006 enumeration in the City of Calgary observed only 17% of homeless individuals to be Aboriginal (City of Calgary, Community and Neighbourhood Services, 2006). This is still disproportionate to the 2% of Calgary residents who identified as Aboriginal for that year, but does not support the notion that homeless people are male Aboriginal addicts.

Of the homeless in Lethbridge in 2010, just over a third was women, but no numbers were provided for the number of women on the street versus those in shelters (Marcelin et al., 2010). In Calgary, 22% of the total number of homeless persons was identified as female, with almost one fifth of those actually living on the streets being women (City of Calgary, Community and Neighbourhood Services, 2006). Notably, 37% of the street homeless were Aboriginal, and one quarter of all street-homeless women were Aboriginal. Almost 40% of the Aboriginal homeless were female. This is almost

twice the proportion of females among the total homeless population, and more than twice the number of Caucasian homeless women. Also worth noting is the fact that Aboriginal homeless people were most likely to be found living on the streets (37%) and least likely to be found in facilities; 14% were using shelters, emergency beds, and such (City of Calgary, Community and Neighbourhood Services, 2006, p. 15).

The issue of appropriate housing can have far-reaching effects beyond being homeless or housed. Living in inadequate accommodations can lead to health deficiencies, increased familial strain, and even mental health issues and violence. For women, removal from their families and children can be a source of great strain and distress, as children are highly valued in Aboriginal communities (Perrault & Proulx, 2000). Social Housing in Action, a community-based organization in Lethbridge working to prevent homelessness and minimize its impact, takes a “housing first” approach (Marcelin et al., 2010). This initiative is based on the assumption that all people have a right to a safe and permanent home, and thus, Social Housing in Action tries to work quickly to provide people with housing and the supports needed to maintain it.

### **Historical Trauma**

Historical trauma has been defined by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (1999) as “cumulative trauma over both the lifespan and across generations that results from massive cataclysmic events” (p. 111; similar definitions are also found in Brave Heart, 2003; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015; Weaver & Brave Heart, 1999). The concepts of historical trauma have also been applied to Jewish Holocaust survivors and their descendants, but have more recently been studied in relation to North American Aboriginal people (Brave Heart, 2003; Brave Heart &

DeBruyn, 1998; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). Historical trauma is collective, in that the community at large experiences the trauma reaction, and the trauma is compounded as the distressing events occur at varying time periods across the individuals' lifetimes and across generations in the community (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

**The roots of historical grief.** While it is understood that the historical experiences of traumatic events were varied among Aboriginal groups, some are common among the various nations (Evans-Campbell, 2008), such as the loss of lands and culture and attending residential schools. Evans-Campbell (2008) cited three characteristics of historical trauma: (a) the events were widespread among Aboriginal groups and were experienced by a large number of individuals, (b) the events have resulted in high levels of distress and grieving in present-day communities, and (c) these events were most often executed by those outside the community and were purposeful and injurious.

Colonization was a devastating force wrought upon Aboriginal people over a period that spanned centuries (Perrault & Proulx, 2000; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). Colonization brought military attacks, relocation to reservations (often unusable or undesirable pieces of land), erosion of traditional culture, institutionalization, and disease (Barlowe & Thompson, 2009; Perrault & Proulx, 2000; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

During the later parts of the colonization of North America, Aboriginal people were subjected to the often forced removal of children from the family and community (Brave Heart, 1999; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). The children were placed into residential schools run by governments and religious groups. They were

subjected to varying forms of abuse and neglect, and they were punished for any expression of their traditional ways or languages (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015; Weaver & Brave Heart, 1999). Another significant effect of the residential school system was the separation from family and community; the result has been “impairment in culturally normative parenting styles” (Brave Heart, 1999, p. 113). Parents who were themselves in boarding schools became uncertain regarding their abilities to parent their own children in a culturally healthy manner. In subsequent generations, parental stress increased along with the incidence of child maltreatment and neglect, substance and alcohol abuse among youth and adults, and reduced parental attachment.

One of the purposes of the residential school system was the assimilation of “Indians” into Euro-centric ways of life, leading to a sense of shame being instilled in Aboriginal children (Perrault & Proulx, 2000; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). By forbidding traditional activities and languages in the schools, Aboriginal children were, in effect, segregated from their culture and spirituality. Aboriginal peoples were traditionally very community-oriented, and the community as a whole was encouraged to take care of its members (Perrault & Proulx, 2000; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). Communities were very linked to their ancestors, and transgenerational knowledge was critical for the well-being of the group as a whole. Disconnection from traditional rites and activities interferes with the natural resolution of grief and bereavement (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998), leading to the disenfranchised nature of Aboriginal historical grief.

**The response to historical trauma.** Historical trauma remains a problem for Aboriginal peoples (Weaver & Brave Heart, 1999); a core element of the theory is that it

is perpetuated across generations (Brave Heart, 1999). This transmission may occur through several mechanisms. Historical trauma may be transposed onto successive generations when descendants identify with the pain of their ancestors and also live in both the past and the present, emotionally. Current members of the community can experience a sense of loyalty to their ancestors, maintaining the pain in their own lives. Losing present-day relatives and community members to suicide, homicide, or substance-related deaths re-traumatizes Aboriginal communities (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Physical and sexual abuse, child maltreatment, and domestic violence have also served to re-traumatize individuals as have “microaggressions” (Evans-Campbell, 2008, p. 332). This term refers to instances of “discrimination, racism, and daily hassles that are targeted at individuals from diverse racial and ethnic groups” (Evan-Campbell, 2008, p. 332), be they explicit or obscured.

The historical trauma response can be understood at the level of the individual, the family, and the community (Evans-Campbell, 2008). At the individual level, the experience of historical trauma results in survivor syndrome—guilt, emotional numbing, intrusive thoughts, agitation, and denial (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Evans-Campbell, 2008). Descendants of survivors experience subtler forms of this reaction, with symptoms of depression and anxiety as well as anger and difficulty in emotional expression. These individuals also show a vulnerability to potential or future stressors, reacting more strongly than those with no experience of historical trauma.

The impact of historical trauma on family systems includes a preoccupation with parental trauma and trivialization of contemporary troubles, especially in the light of what ancestors had been through (Evans-Campbell, 2008). Family communication may

become dysfunctional or impaired while parenting stress increases. The transmission of traditional, healthy child-rearing practices was interrupted by the implementation of residential schools (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Evans-Campbell, 2008). It has even been suggested that increases in child abuse and maltreatment are related to historical trauma response (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Whitbeck et al., 2004).

For communities, the effects of such trauma can be the most sinister. The breakdown of cultural norms and the loss of traditional practices (Evans-Campbell, 2008) are linked to increases in rates of alcoholism and substance use as well as physical illnesses. From a community perspective, residential schools were traumatic for the whole group, not just the children and families. However, events involving the loss or removal of children over several generations were particularly agonizing. Children have traditionally been viewed as the Creator's gifts among Aboriginal groups (Perrault & Proulx, 2000). The effects of trauma on the community at large also include increases in suicide and self-harm as well as child maltreatment, social malaise, a weakening of the societal structure, and the internalization of racism and discriminatory beliefs (Evans-Campbell, 2008).

The symptoms of historical trauma response are strikingly similar to the litany of criminogenic factors for incarcerated women: substance use, childcare concerns, mental health issues, abuse, and substance use. Yet the needs of incarcerated Aboriginal women have not been examined using the lens of historical trauma. It may be that Aboriginal youth today are attempting to adopt a new "rite of passage" into adulthood by serving time in jail (Barlowe & Thompson, 2009) or trying to find a new personal identity. The speculated purpose is to fill the void of the identity taken from them and from their

ancestors during colonization, providing a link back to those people of so long ago. The despair associated with not knowing who one is may lead individuals into drug and alcohol use. Barlowe and Thompson (2009) also suggested that the criminal behaviours may be a “knee jerk reaction to the atrocities which [their] ancestors have endured for hundreds of years” (p. 114).

### **Complicated Grief**

Related to the concept of unresolved historical trauma is that of unresolved grief. This phenomenon was also referred to as traumatic grief and complicated grief in the literature. Prigerson et al. (1997) developed the concept of traumatic grief, and Leach et al. (2008) implied a distinction between traumatic and complicated grief, but, for the purposes of this paper, the term *complicated grief* will be used throughout. Grieving is a natural response to death or loss through which most people pass in a healthful way (Worden, 2003), having either assimilated the loss into their previous belief system or accommodated the loss by reorganizing or expanding their beliefs (Neimeyer, Burke, Mackay, & van Dyke Stringer, 2010). According to Worden (2003), complicated grief occurs when a person’s responses to loss become so intense as to be overwhelming and disabling, leading the individual to behave in maladaptive ways or causing the individual to become stuck along the natural grieving process. The result is failure to assimilate or accommodate the loss.

There are many factors that could lead to complicated grief, including relationship with the deceased, characteristics of the loss itself, the personality of the bereaved, social perceptions regarding the loss, lack of social or familial support in bereavement, and a history of complicated loss, and so forth (Worden, 2003). The risk of a complicated grief

reaction is increased when death is violent, untimely, or sudden (Field & Filanosky, 2010; Neimeyer et al., 2010; Worden, 2003) and even in the case of significant non-death loss (Leach et al., 2008). Consequences of complicated grief include reduced health outcomes and harmful health-related behaviours (Prigerson et al., 1997); disruption of core beliefs (Neimeyer et al., 2010); drug and alcohol abuse (Finlay & Jones, 2000; Leach et al., 2008); depression, anxiety, and other diagnoses (Leach et al., 2008; Worden, 2003), and, in some cases, hallucinations and illusions of the deceased (Field & Filanosky, 2010).

According to Worden (2003), there are four types of complicated grief reactions: (a) chronic, (b) delayed, (c) exaggerated, and (d) masked. *Chronic grief reactions* are excessive and ongoing. The bereaved is aware that she/he is experiencing a grief reaction and that it does not seem to come to a reasonable or adequate conclusion. This type of reaction can carry on for months, even years, but is distinct from grief reactions that reappear around holidays or the anniversary of the loss. Chronic grief reactions occur when grieving tasks are not completed. *Delayed grief reactions* may manifest as a mourning that occurs at the time of the loss, but is inadequate to the loss at that time. For various reasons, the bereaved person sets aside or pauses the grief process, deliberately or unconsciously. When a subsequent loss occurs, a grief reaction occurs that is excessive or overly intense, as though the grief from the first loss carried over into the second. The second loss trigger may come from a variety of sources, including a book or movie. In *exaggerated grief reactions*, grief become so intense that the bereaved begins to feel overwhelmed. The individual is aware that she/he is grieving and that his/her reaction is excessive. Diagnoses, such as clinical depression, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD),

and anxiety disorders, are common with this type of reaction as are alcohol and substance abuse issues. Finally, *masked grief reactions* result in maladaptive behaviours and symptoms that are not immediately recognized as being related to the loss. Masked grief may even appear as the absence of mourning, though such restricted grief will find a way to manifest, typically as aberrant, abnormal behaviour or as physical symptoms.

When considering Aboriginal peoples, it is not difficult to see how historical trauma and complicated grief reactions could be co-occurring and would fit into any of the four types of reactions. Historical trauma reactions are certainly chronic and have a cumulative effect, as in the delayed reaction type, that is compounded by subsequent, present-day losses. The reactions to losses are overwhelming to many, and diagnoses of mental disorders are not uncommon. Another characteristic of the exaggerated grief reaction, specifically substance and alcohol use, is abundantly evident. The aberrant behaviours that may emerge from a masked reaction could manifest as anger, violent outbursts, abusive behaviour toward family, and criminal activity. To clarify, I am not trying to imply that all Aboriginal people exhibit these aberrant behaviours or that they will all exhibit any of the complicated grief reactions. The purpose of this discussion is simply to illustrate potential similarities between complicated grief and historical trauma reactions and that both may be able to inform this study.

Further relating complicated grief to this study was the comprehensive literature review conducted by Leach and her colleagues (2008) on criminal recidivism and traumatic grief; this term is specifically used in the study. These researchers are based in Australia and, therefore, devote much attention to Australian studies and issues. They noted that the issue of recidivism is a significant one in many Western countries,

including Australia, and they also acknowledged that programs implemented to address this issue focused largely on criminal behaviours, without considering how these behaviours may be underpinned by a complicated grief reaction. After a discussion of grief, Leach et al. covered links between (a) complicated grief and offenders; (b) childhood trauma, loss, and maladaptive behaviour; (c) youth, substance use, and grief; and (d) grief and mental or physical conditions and between grief, offenders, and recidivism.

Though, at the time of the study, Leach et al. (2008) indicated there were no studies directly connecting complicated grief to criminal recidivism, they did note that “research has shown that these losses (which can lead to traumatic grief) are also connected to maladaptive behaviours, substance abuse and mental and physical health problems, all of which have been shown to be associated with criminal activity” (p. 114). The losses they referred to include the passing of a loved one, incarceration of parents, being placed in foster care, physical and sexual abuse, childhood abuse, and attachment problems. In addition, the authors did address these issues as they relate to Indigenous populations. While I do not suggest the situations of Australian Indigenous people are identical to those of Canadian Aboriginal peoples, similarities in social and historical features do, in my opinion, permit some allowances for generalizing.

### **Coping with Trauma and Grief**

The definition of the verb cope, according to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, is “to deal with and attempt to overcome problems” (“Cope,” n.d., para. 2b). Implicit in the definition is an element of success in such attempts, and it is generally understood to be, at least in part, a psychological concept (Keil, 2004). “Coping has to

contain elements of modification or alteration” (Keil, 2004, p. 660) of either external aspects of the situation or one’s internal responses to them, the goal of which is to relieve stress in some way (Keil, 2004). Negative or stressful events in an individual’s life are usually those that “precipitate movement from one set of living conditions to another . . . [which in turn] pose significant adaptational challenges” (Armstrong, Galligan, & Critchley, 2011, p. 331) that could tax that individual’s resources insomuch that associated symptoms may lead to depression, anxiety, and other clinical distress (p. 331).

Coping occurs on an individual basis, both consciously and unconsciously, and is influenced by coping resources available, such as the individual’s appraisal of the situation and perhaps even personality variables (Keil, 2004). While everyone copes with life’s situations, individuals choose strategies on a situational basis, and there are varying degrees of efficacy in these coping strategies. The research on how people cope with traumatic events refers to two main concepts: (a) hardiness and (b) resilience. Some have suggested that coping itself is, in fact, an outcome of resilience and is not synonymous with the term (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Because it is considered to be a fixed trait that remains consistent and impervious to individual influence rather than an adaptive application of personal strengths and coping strategies, hardiness will not be the focus of this chapter.

Research on resilience has focused, at least in part, on development and *resilient* children (see Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000 for a critical appraisal). Resilience describes a dynamic process that occurs upon exposure to significant hardship and involves positive adaptation and self-regulation. Initially, researchers turned their attention to personal qualities and attributes of the young participants, but it soon

emerged that resilience can be impacted by families as well as larger social and environmental contexts. These three broad levels of individual, family, and community echo the three levels of the historical trauma response discussed earlier in this chapter (Evans-Campbell, 2008).

Despite decades of research, there has been little consistency in the definitions of resilience, although it has been distinguished from the concept of *resiliency*, in that the latter is suggestive of a personality trait, whereas resilience refers specifically to a process (Luthar et al., 2000). In this way, resilience also differentiates itself from the concept of hardiness, as discussed earlier. This is an important distinction because personality traits are generally thought to be fixed, while risk and protective factors are variable (Lalonde, 2005). In addition, resilience is applied to individuals who have experienced significant adversity, while resiliency makes no such requirement (Luthar et al., 2000).

Rutter (1987), one of the pioneers in resilience research, described resilience as the various individual responses to adverse circumstances and as maintaining self-efficacy and self-esteem in the face of such situations. In this definition, a crucial aspect of the concept is the presence of adversity. Bonanno (2004) noted that resilience is far “more than the absence of psychopathology” (p. 20), but asserted resilience is simply the ability of the individual to sustain overall equilibrium in life. Research has found resilience to be multidimensional in nature, as children designated as *high-risk* may display competence in one domain of life, but continue to show impairment in others (see the reviews by Bonanno, 2004; Luthar et al., 2000). This is likely, in part, a reflection of the natural variations in adjustment that all individuals exhibit across diverse domains over time. Perhaps the most simple and elegant definition is that offered by HeavyRunner

and Marshall (2003): It is “the natural, human capacity to navigate life well. . . . It means coming to know how you think, who you are spiritually, where you come from, and where you are going” (para. 5). This definition eschews the adversity requirement and, instead, places emphasis on the strengths of the navigator.

As noted, individuals, their families, and their communities may be sources of protective factors that enhance resilience. There are also risk factors that enhance the negative outcomes of adversity. Protective factors are those that help to moderate the negative effects of risk factors or that serve to enhance the protective effects of other factors (Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, Washienko, Walter, & Dyer, 1996). The result of these factors is to reduce negative outcomes associated with adversities. In their review of literature on resilience, Fleming and Ledogar (2008b) provided a list of protective factors available at the individual, family, and social/environmental levels and the mechanisms that are employed to access each resource. Included at the individual level are resources that describe traits or attributes that have been shown to be protective as well as communication skills, attachment, and attitudes. At the family level, protective mechanisms include material resources, but also the characteristics of family and upbringing, such as cohesiveness, parental warmth and encouragement, marital support, and a non-blaming environment. The community level covers positive school experiences (i.e., support from peers and any kind of success) and community supportiveness (i.e., a non-punitive community that sustains its social values). Fleming and Ledogar also chose to include cultural resources at the community level, and list the protective resources as traditional activities, traditional languages, traditional healing, and traditional spirituality.

Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) described three core models of resilience based on studies they reviewed by Garmezy, Masten, and Tellegen, by Rutter, and by Zimmerman and Arunkumar. These core models are (a) compensatory, (b) protective, and (c) challenge. A *compensatory model* of resilience is one in which a protective factor operates in direct opposition to a risk factor. This protective factor has a direct effect on the outcome of the circumstance: one that is not dependent on the risk factor for which it compensates. The *protective model* is one in which the protective factor moderates the effects of a risk factor in some way, to neutralize or otherwise weaken the negative effects or by enhancing the positive effects of another protective factor. The result is a reduction in the negative outcome of the adverse situation. In the *challenge model*, exposure to both high and low levels of a risk factor are associated with greater negative outcome, while exposure to moderate levels of the same risk factor are associated with less negative outcome. The individual needs to have enough exposure to become adept at coping with the factor, but not so much that it becomes overwhelming. Fleming and Ledogar (2008b) introduced a note of caution for those studying resilience in an Aboriginal context: Some risk factors, such as substance use, may be influenced by historical trauma and its associated vulnerabilities.

**Cultural resilience.** The term cultural resilience refers to the role culture can play as a resource for individuals. Fleming and Ledogar (2008b) and Lalonde (2005) applied the term to entire communities or entire cultural groups, thus expanding the concept of resilience itself to the manner in which such groups are able to rebound from difficult times and times of change while maintaining key aspects of identity and structure that make them distinct. Lalonde reflected on the dangers of successfully applying a primarily

psychological term to a social or cultural group and warned against the well-intentioned application of the terms *resilient* and *non-resilient* to communities, thus ascribing traits to these groups. This is especially concerning for communities already marginalized. The results inferred from, and implied by, Lalonde included the paternalistic treatment of groups deemed *non-resilient* to improve their perceived circumstances, as well as the extrication and distillation of the best qualities from the *resilient* groups and their introduction to communities that are struggling (something that has been perpetuated against Aboriginal groups in the past; see Brownlie, 2008). The history of Aboriginal people in Canada is rife with cultural assaults and paternalistic actions since colonization (Lalonde, 2005). Resilience in Aboriginal groups, as well as the risk and protective factors, must be understood within this historical context, lest history be repeated.

Chandler and Lalonde (1998) investigated what they initially termed *cultural continuity* in First Nations communities who were able to safeguard or recover their cultural traditions. They found that First Nations communities who displayed more cultural continuity components (e.g., self-government, land claims, health services, education, police and fire services, cultural facilities, etc.) also had lower rates of suicide among their youth. In fact, communities who had all six of these factors had no youth suicides within the 5-year time frame of the study (p. 212). Zimmerman and colleagues (1996), in attempting to create a measure for enculturation for Aboriginal people, noted that cultural identity itself can be a protective factor, as it is positively correlated with self-esteem among youth.

Cultural continuity refers to the tendency for a culture to persist over time, to change, and yet to maintain distinctive parts of itself and its identity (Chandler &

Lalonde, 1998; Lalonde, 2005). This is related to personal persistence, in which individuals seek an explanation for their continued persistence throughout time in the face of physical, emotional, mental, and temporal changes. *How am I still me?* Aboriginal youth apparently employ a different strategy to explain persistence than do other Canadian youth (Lalonde, 2005). The majority of Canadian youth use an *essentialist* strategy, asserting that the essential qualities of the self have persisted throughout time; therefore, real change has not occurred. These essential aspects of the self may be objective and physical, or they may be quite abstract. Aboriginal youth, in general, tend to use a more *narrative* strategy to explain their continued existence. This strategy does not deny change as having occurred; rather, continuity emerges from a story that incorporates the varying aspects of self and life as they have occurred throughout the lifespan of the individual. In a manner of speaking, the protagonist is clearly identifiable as the same character, even when the events of the story alter his or her development.

Whatever the strategy, the preservation of self over time appears to have protective properties for youth, at least in terms of suicidal ideation. This applies to cultural groups, in that “just as the loss of personal continuity puts individual young persons at risk, the loss of cultural continuity puts whole cultures at risk” (Lalonde, 2005, p. 65).

**Aboriginal culture and resilience.** Research has hitherto shown a scarcity of literature regarding Aboriginal women and resilience (Scarpino, 2007). According to HeavyRunner and Marshall (2003), each Indigenous language has its own word for the concept of resilience, with some referring to strength. In their article, they noted that such strength comes not from the rare qualities a person possesses, but from traditional

teachings, from family, and from spiritual protective factors. Though there has been little research conducted on such factors, HeavyRunner and Marshall asserted that “Indian people believe spirituality has been the cornerstone of their survival through generations of adversity and oppression” (para. 9).

Research has largely focused on resilience defined and described from Western perspectives that “do not account for a history of colonisation and the effects of outside systems” (Scarpino, 2007, p. 38). According to Scarpino (2007), this is a worldview that tends to be more linear, rather than one that is “based on processes or relationships” (p. 38). Approaching resilience in this way fails to acknowledge the interconnectedness of individuals to others and the world in which they live.

Aboriginal perspectives on resilience, on the other hand, are relational and holistic, striving for harmony (Scarpino, 2007). Problems occur when life falls out of balance; resilience, then, is what brings balance and harmony back into life. Balance is an integral part of Aboriginal belief systems (France, 1997; Frideres, 2011). In her study, Scarpino (2007) interviewed Aboriginal women about the concept of resilience; a common element that emerged was that of striving for balance. To the women in her study, resilience included “symbolism, the ability to grow despite adversity, and a universal energy that has been characterized as God or the Creator” (p. 44). Spirituality was of key importance to these women, and resilience was seen to incorporate both volition and spirit. Scarpino discussed the outcomes of her study in terms of the Medicine Wheel: a core part of Aboriginal culture and Spirituality. For her participants, journeying around the Medicine Wheel assisted in processing experienced adversities via one’s

relationships with self, other, and Creator. The Medicine Wheel will be discussed in greater detail later on in this section.

In their review of research related to Aboriginal spirituality and resilience, Fleming and Ledogar (2008a) noted that spirituality may be a protective factor when it comes to resilience. However, little research thus far has focused on spiritual factors as protective (HeavyRunner & Marshall, 2003). Even so, Fleming and Ledogar (2008a) did identify several studies whose results suggested that traditional spirituality and enculturation may act as buffers against issues like alcohol and drug abuse as well as suicidal ideation among Aboriginal youth. They also noted that many Aboriginal practitioners consider spirituality and culture as key responses in coping with historical trauma and grief (see also Fleming & Ledogar, 2008b). It is vital, however, to bear in mind that Aboriginal people do not comprise a homogeneous group (France, 1997; Scarpino, 2007), and enculturation into the dominant culture is one aspect of variability among the group (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008a). Identity is not always black-or-white when it comes to culture, and it seems plausible that such differences could result in differing pathways to resilience.

**A framework for considering Aboriginal culture.** As was noted earlier, resilience has typically been defined using a Western paradigm (Scarpino, 2007). This is significant given the disparity between Western and Aboriginal values (Garrett & Garrett, 1994), which can create what Garrett and Garrett (1994) termed *cultural discontinuity*. This is the conflict between the expectations from the dominant culture and the traditional values of Aboriginal culture, which can leave Aboriginal people feeling lost or confused. Western values tend to prioritize such things as aggressive effort, individualism, future

orientation, science, control over nature, and youthfulness (Aboriginal Human Resources Council, n.d.). Aboriginal values, by contrast, usually advocate collective being and living, including the sharing of property, non-interference with others, harmony with nature, living for the present, interconnectedness, and respect for age and elders (Aboriginal Human Resources Council, n.d.; France, 1997; Garrett & Garrett, 1994; McCormick, 1996).

The City of Lethbridge spans an area that was included in the traditional territory of what was once called the Confederation of Blackfoot Nations, made up of Kainai, Piikani, and Siksika peoples. The reserves of these three nations are located in areas surrounding the County of Lethbridge. Consequently, much focus in this area of Alberta is given to Blackfoot culture and people. The University of Lethbridge is fortunate to have been provided with a list of values approved and endorsed by Blackfoot Elders (Little Bear, Weasel Fat, & O'Dea, 2012), a reproduction of which can be found in Appendix A.

For Aboriginal peoples, who you are is defined by your origins and family (France, 1997; Garrett & Garrett, 1994). The term *family* is applied broadly to include non-blood relatives (Garrett & Garrett, 1994). This reflects the connectedness that is so central to Aboriginal cultural systems. Individuals are an integral part of a larger whole, rather than a whole being the sum of its parts. One person's actions can affect the entire group, be it the tribe or the family. Elders in the community fulfill many roles, including parent, teacher, and guide. Elderly group members have traditionally been very active in caring for children, embodying a multigenerational approach to child rearing. Elders hold a place of honour among Indigenous groups (Little Bear et al., 2012). They are the

keepers of knowledge for their communities, and each contributes to the body of knowledge through his or her own skills and areas of expertise.

In Aboriginal thought, illness is caused by a lack of harmony or balance (France, 1997; McCormick, 1996; Portman & Garrett, 2006). This imbalance can be due to internal or external forces, but the result is the same—“being out of step with the universe” (Garrett & Garrett, 1994, para. 22). Harmony can be restored by seeking out one’s place in, and reconnecting with, the universe (Portman & Garrett, 2006) and by balancing the four aspects of the self: (a) mental, (b) physical, (c) emotional, and (d) spiritual (McCormick, 1996).

Aboriginal cultures and teachings make ample use of symbols (Bopp et al., 1988). Symbols provide assistance to those seeking to understand deeper meanings in life. Meaning gives us direction. We have noted that Aboriginal people are a heterogeneous group, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. Even within these groups, there is a significant amount of variation; there are 615 First Nations groups alone (Statistics Canada, 2008, p. 41) spread across Canada and 10 different First Nations language families (p. 49). It is safe to assume that such diversity in language and habitat has resulted in diversities in cultural practices as well.

*The Sacred Tree*. In an historic endeavour held in 1982 in Lethbridge, Alberta, a council gathered to discuss the causes of substance abuse among Aboriginal peoples (Bopp et al., 1988). Members of this council included cultural leaders, Aboriginal Elders, and professionals from all over the continent, and the Four Worlds Development Project was born. Members, including more than 100 Elders, represented 40 different tribes from across North America.

The Sacred Tree is a symbol that has assisted many, but certainly not all, Aboriginal groups in their belief and organizational structure. It “represents life, cycles of time, the earth, and the universe” (Bopp et al., 1988, p. 22). According to Bopp and colleagues (1988), a sacred tree was planted by the Creator for the good of “all the people of the earth” (p. 9), which implies that the teachings contained within their book can benefit all peoples, even if not of Aboriginal ancestry. There are four great meanings that are represented by the tree: (a) growth, (b) wholeness, (c) protection, and (d) nourishment. Each of these is symbolized by the biological entity of a tree; for example, the leaves of the tree are as members of a communal family and ancestors. When the time is right, they fall from the Sacred Tree and are taken into the ground, where they nourish the tree to provide for future generations. Like individuals, the tree grows from the inside out, and most of the changes are not visible to onlookers. The Sacred Tree helps people attain a balance between their inner and outer selves. By the Sacred Tree, all things are connected to all things, and in that interconnectedness are found wholeness and harmony.

The symbol of the Sacred Tree is connected to another universal symbol for Aboriginal people: The Medicine Wheel (Bopp et al., 1988). The Medicine Wheel is an ancient symbol comprised of a circle split into four quadrants (Bopp et al., 1988; France, 1997). The four quadrants can be used to represent a variety of concepts: four directions, four stages of life, four “races” (the term used by Bopp and associates), four elements, or even four parts of the human being. According to the Aboriginal philosophy, humans are more than purely physical beings (Bopp et al., 1988). They have emotional and mental aspects as well, which are equally as important. These three parts, in combination with peoples’ spiritual selves, need to be equally nurtured to achieve the balance and harmony

that is so important to healthy life. The four directions, along with the four parts of the self, are described in *The Sacred Tree* (Bopp et al., 1988) as an integral part of the journey around the Medicine Wheel. In a way that felt very inclusive, the authors of *The Sacred Tree* employed the use of the first person plural throughout the text. I will continue that use of comprehensive language in discussions of this book because it feels natural and appropriate to do so. The book is about symbolism and lessons in Aboriginal cultures, but I believe it is intended for all people.

*Medicine wheel.* The Medicine Wheel is used to illustrate the many ways in which everything is connected (Bopp et al., 1988). It can be used as a reflection of ourselves, showing us what we could become and what we are at this moment in time. This revelation is accomplished by a symbolic journey around the Medicine Wheel, moving from one quadrant to the next, exploring and absorbing the lessons each has to offer. The journey is a constant one, with the traveler circling the Medicine Wheel many times in one lifetime, as the lessons and teachings vary, depending on stage of life, current circumstances, and previously learned truths from other journeys. Because the Medicine Wheel is used by many different tribes, the explanations for what is learned on the journey will vary by each culture. The process of the journey may also vary. This journey can be a healing process used to bring a person back into balance (McCormick, 1996).

The four parts of the self, like the seeds of a great tree, have the potential to grow into robust gifts (Bopp et al., 1988). This potential is realized, in part, by the application of one's volition, or will. Volition provides one with the drive to take action and the focus to stay the course. Volition is placed at the centre of the Medicine Wheel, meaning it is an

important influence in developing the gifts of each direction. One is granted vision in order to see what one's potential is and to plan one's journey to fulfilling it. To one who is sincere and open, these gifts can help facilitate the journey around the Medicine Wheel.

**Resilience in the face of trauma.** As recounted earlier, not all people respond to traumatic or adverse events in the same way. Resilience refers not to individuals who exhibit an absence of pathology following such events, but to those who are able to maintain a kind of equilibrium despite passing disruptions to their daily functioning (Bonanno, 2004). In the maintenance of stability, resilience differs from recovery, which is the return to pre-event functioning after several months or so of psychopathological symptoms and behaviours.

Until recently, little was known about resilience in the face of trauma (Bonanno & Mancini, 2010). It had hitherto been assumed that individuals who displayed minimal reactions to trauma or loss were either relatively rare or extraordinarily healthy individuals. As noted above, resilience is more common than that (Bonanno, 2004). Individuals displaying resilience do experience transient responses to traumatic events, but these are below the threshold to disrupt their daily functioning. There are several potential pathways to resilience, and hardiness has been identified as one such corridor. Self-enhancement, or "overly positive biases in favour of the self" (Bonanno, 2004, p. 25), may have positive outcomes in terms of personal well-being. Another pathway to resilience is thought to be through the use of laughter and positive emotion, which neutralize negative emotions and increase interaction with social supports.

## Summary

While each of the factors that contribute to the incarceration of women is worthy of discussion in isolation, it is worth mentioning that there is very likely overlap and interaction between the various issues. Mental health concerns, for example, could be the result of interpersonal violence and abuse, which may also contribute to drug and alcohol use. Substance use may also be impacted by the strains associated with living in poverty and raising children without a partner. Over time, substance use may contribute to mental health problems, which may affect the women's capacity for pursuing education and gainful employment. All of these issues could be considered using the lens of complicated grief.

With Aboriginal female offenders, the lines between the various factors are further blurred by the experience of historical trauma. Such experiences affect the community as a whole as well as the individuals within it. Historical trauma has been linked to increased use of alcohol and mind-altering substances as well as child maltreatment and domestic violence, which are all factors connected to criminal behaviour and subsequent incarceration. Quantitative research methods attempt to isolate variables within experimental design (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007), which is insufficient for the examination of the interaction of these variables within an individual's life experiences.

While there has been some research conducted on the effects of culture and spirituality as protective factors among those living in Aboriginal communities, a significant gap exists in the literature on the applicability of such constructs to Aboriginal peoples living off-reserve or in urban areas (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008a). Scarpino (2007)

has done some work in this area in her study of urban Aboriginal women. The current study may help to shed additional light on how off-reserve Aboriginal women manage to cope with risk factors in their lives, given that most participants live in urban centres or other non-reserve areas.

In spite of the fact that great strides have been made in the past decade regarding the study of female offenders and Aboriginal offenders, academic research specific to incarcerated Aboriginal females is still wanting. Aboriginal women appear to be marginalized, even within an already marginalized population of female offenders. This study approached the issue of the psychosocial, spiritual, and cultural needs of incarcerated Aboriginal women here in Southern Alberta, exploring them as they are perceived and experienced by the women themselves. The study also sought to explore how these women were able (or not able) to meet these needs, how they have come through their struggles, and how the outcomes of unresolved historical trauma have impacted their abilities to meet their needs. This research is timely, as the need for research in this area is considerable.

In a report outlining discrimination and violence against Canada's indigenous women, Amnesty International (2004) has tasked the Canadian government with encouraging research in these areas:

The social and economic marginalization of Indigenous women, along with a history of government policies that have torn apart Indigenous families and communities, have pushed a disproportionate number of Indigenous women into dangerous situations that include extreme poverty, homelessness, and prostitution. (pp. 5–6)

Kong and Beattie (2005) underscored a need for more information about the interactions Aboriginal people have with the justice system, at all levels. This information

will serve to provide evidence of program outcomes, to monitor trends within the system, to inform policies, and to provide sensitive evaluations of the conditions faced by Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system. As recently as November 2009, the Correctional Investigator of Canada emphasized the plight of this group, warning that a crisis may be imminent, as the system is in danger of failing these individuals (The Canadian Press, 2009). Steps are being taken to improve the system's response to Aboriginal offenders at all levels (Kong & Beattie, 2005). There is a need for data, both numerical and experiential, that offer details about the Aboriginal experience in corrections and throughout the justice systems of Canada.

In the next chapter, I will outline the method employed in conducting this study. Interviews were carried out with six women using a semi-structured interview with the addition of a card-sort technique borrowed from career counselling practice. The ethical considerations involved in conducting research with an incarcerated population, considered vulnerable, and the parameters of conducting research within a correctional environment are also discussed along with procedures applied during the analysis process. I also detail some of my own ethical concerns around conducting cross-cultural research as a non-Aboriginal investigator.

### **Chapter Three: Methods**

For this study, I explored the experiences and needs of incarcerated First Nations women, as perceived by Aboriginal women in a Southern Alberta provincial jail. The study was framed by the following question: What are the psychosocial, cultural, and spiritual needs of incarcerated Aboriginal women in a Southern Alberta jail? Subsequent to this question, other veins of inquiry were also considered: To what extent are these women able or unable to meet these needs? What are the factors that have helped or hindered them in their struggles? How has the experience of historical trauma impacted their abilities to have their needs met?

In this chapter, I will describe the design of the study and the processes and reasoning that led to it. The theoretical approach I employed will be outlined along with a brief discussion of the ethics of research with vulnerable groups. I delineate sampling and recruitment techniques, describe the setting and my experience within it, and explain the procedures employed in interviews. I then detail the processes through which I coded the transcripts, selected initial categories for analysis, and distilled those categories down to a final 12 analytical units.

This study was inspired by the work of Singer and colleagues (1995), in which the authors conducted a large-scale survey of 201 incarcerated women in the United States. The purpose of their study was to assess the needs of these women and create some appropriate interventions to meet those needs. They interviewed the women about prior life events and administered three short psychological measures to assess social supports, mental health, and substance use. Their results suggested a need for improved programs and interventions, better conditions for all female inmates, and alternatives for non-

violent offenders. My study, though inspired by the article, differed in two significant ways. I looked exclusively at the needs of Aboriginal women in the Lethbridge Correctional Centre and employed a purely qualitative design with both deductive (directly inspired by Singer and colleagues) and inductive (inspired directly from the data) processes. I chose to utilize this approach because the study by Singer and his associates is now quite outdated, being 20 years old at the time of writing this report, and because I was interested how their findings might apply in Southern Alberta, with the specific needs of the women who live, or serve sentences, here. Lethbridge is my home, my community. I have both worked and volunteered at the correctional centre, and I have many friends who are still employed there. Additionally, I have seen many women, similar to those in this study (and sometimes those same women), move in and out of the centre often throughout my years of experience there, and naturally, I would like to understand how to better help them in my future profession as a counsellor.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

In my three years' experience working as a correctional officer, my academic and volunteer time spent in corrections, my interactions with other corrections acquaintances, and in my daily interactions with the people around me, I found a distinct lack of understanding regarding the historical trauma experienced by Aboriginal people in Canada. In discussing the area of my research, I often heard it asked, "Why can't these people just get over it? It all happened so long ago." Even without consideration of historical trauma, I have witnessed discrimination and intolerance coupled with the absence both of sympathy and desire for understanding of the struggles many Aboriginal people face in their daily lives. Despite the fact that I am not Aboriginal, I desired more

understanding. I feel it is vitally important to understand such conditions *as they are experienced and lived* by Aboriginal people themselves in order to understand how the efforts of those in correctional and helping professions can be better applied. For this reason, I designed this study within a qualitative framework.

While quantitative research attempts to describe population characteristics in general terms, qualitative approaches focus on the details and minutiae of particular instances or phenomena (Hyde, 2000). Generalisation of theories is of greater concern than the frequency or distribution of the singularity in question. Qualitative methods are employed to study a particular phenomenon in its natural state, to delve into rich sources of data, and to analyse the emergent data to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). While it has been traditionally assumed that qualitative research favours an inductive approach to analysis, it has been argued that researchers employ both deductive and inductive processes throughout their research, regardless of whether they work under quantitative or qualitative modalities (Hyde, 2000).

I elected to employ a qualitative method for this study because I was seeking to understand my participants' experiences of the issues in question (i.e., the *what* and the *why*). What I sought to achieve through my research journey is that which is often overlooked by quantitative research: a deep understanding through rich, meaning-saturated information (Patenaude, 2004).

Contrary to traditional positivist perspectives, which contend there is one observable, knowable, and measurable reality for each phenomenon, qualitative perspectives hold that *reality* is a relative term, governed by social and contextual factors,

resulting in a multitude of realities (Gall et al., 2007; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Qualitative study is critically interested in the interactions between participants and their environment and, particularly, in the meanings and interpretations the participants place on these interactions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Qualitative paradigms take a relativistic stance when it comes to what is known and who is the knower and about the manner in which knowledge is created (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006).

### **Critical Realism**

Critical realism is a philosophical paradigm that has been enjoying an increasing popularity among the social sciences (Cruickshank, 2011). Critical realists acknowledge that there is a real world, but believe one's understanding of that world will be inexorably coloured by one's experiences and individual perspectives and is, therefore, not *objective* in the positivist sense (Maxwell, 2012). In this way, it is understood that all theories, indeed all knowledge, is partial at best; knowledge about the real world is fallible (Cruickshank, 2011; Maxwell, 2012). To put it succinctly, critical realism is made up of ontological realism and epistemological constructivism (Maxwell, 2012). In addition, critical realism holds that mental states, such as emotions, as well as attributes, mechanisms, and even causality are part of what is real, even if not tangible or observable in a direct way (Maxwell, 2012). From a critical realist perspective, then, the experiences Aboriginal women have through in their lives, and in jail, help to shape their own understanding of the real world, making them the best sources of accurate information about their supports, needs, challenges, and strengths.

While the needs identified in the literature (Singer et al., 1995; Whitbeck et al., 2004) are accepted as real and true, it is not understood how the perspectives of Aboriginal women impact their understanding of these issues. It was my hope, therefore, that by developing an understanding of their experiences, I could relate them in such a way as to make them vibrant and real for correctional and helping professionals as well as other researchers, despite my membership in the dominant culture.

### **Ethical Considerations and Research with Vulnerable Populations**

Research often involves careful and close examination of sensitive subject matter; private, intimate, and even incriminating material could emerge during the course of a study (Liamputtong, 2007). A researcher intruding upon such sensitive material could be seen as a threat to the participant herself or to her community. In the correctional systems, there are three groups of people around whom a researcher must work: (a) the offenders or inmates, (b) the correctional officers and other front-line staff, and (c) the administration (Patenaude, 2004). All three groups have the potential to be mistrustful of outside researchers and their motives.

The definition of what constitutes a vulnerable population is not always simple to isolate, as the concept is socially constructed (Liamputtong, 2007). There are a variety of criteria that may be relevant to a definition of vulnerability. A vulnerable person (a) is one who is experiencing diminished autonomy in some capacity or who does not share equality with what may be considered the dominant group; (b) may not be capable of self-advocacy or self-determination; (c) is susceptible to harm, whether real or perceived; and (d) may live in poverty or be stigmatized or otherwise disenfranchised. Offenders are individuals who are being detained or otherwise deprived of some freedoms (Mobley,

Henry, & Plemmons, 2007), and it is clear they could be considered susceptible to harm, incapable of self-advocacy, and disenfranchised.

A sensitive researcher has many moral and ethical considerations when working with any group, especially so when the group can be described as vulnerable (Liamputtong, 2007). Trust and rapport building are essential steps in the research process when working with vulnerable groups. For that reason, assembling data may take more time and effort than when conducting research with dominant groups (Liamputtong, 2007). It is important to invest this time in the research participants and not pillage data from the community. Reciprocity and respect are natural partners with trust and rapport building. Rapport may be seen, by those within the correctional environment, as a means of reciprocity (Patenaude, 2004). By honouring the gesture made by participants and by giving something back to the individual, group, or community, the sensitive researcher acknowledges and even empowers the group in question (Liamputtong, 2007).

Reciprocation for this study is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

Before beginning this study, I had many of my own ethical concerns surrounding the execution of the design and my role within it. I would like to outline some of those concerns here. One of my most pervasive ethical concerns was that my lack of Aboriginal status would be an impediment to the study itself. I was concerned that I would be unable to attract participants because of both my White, middle-class status and my previous experience as a correctional officer. I feared the participants I did attract would not provide me with rich data because they would not see me as trustworthy. I worried that I would not be able to adequately understand the stories of the women who would become my participants and that I would not be able to do them justice in my retellings. I was

concerned about overlooking important cultural aspects within participant stories. Even in designing the study, I was worried that I would not be culturally sensitive in the approach I used during interviews: that is, my choice of needs cards would be inappropriate for this population, would be culturally irrelevant, or would be too directive.

It has been important to me from the outset to be sensitive, non-directive, and respectful to my participants, the greater population of incarcerated Aboriginal women, and also the communities from which they come. I have a great respect for Aboriginal peoples and their cultures, in particular the Blackfoot nations that are situated in the areas surrounding Lethbridge. In the months leading up to beginning this research, I was given several opportunities to participate in smudges, healing circles, and even sweats. I was honoured to be invited to share in these spiritual practices and grateful for the experiences themselves, which I found moving and meaningful. Participating in these ways deepened my appreciation of Blackfoot culture and cemented my commitment to be respectful in my research approach. To that end, I considered and implemented suggestions for various aspects of the study from Aboriginal people working at the institution and multiple non-Aboriginal individuals who had extensive experience working with Aboriginal people. I engaged in informal journaling throughout the research process and for interviews in particular. I wanted to approach interviews from a research perspective, rather than a counselling perspective. An excerpt from my journal entry following the first interview underscores my desire to ask the “right” sorts of questions: “I have a few worries: that I was leading in some instances, that I interrupted too often, that I reflected content, etc., poorly or that I was too much a counsellor, that I didn’t ask the right questions.”

## **Participants**

This study employed purposive sampling to select participants, whose characteristics are described in this section. The methods of recruitment were conscientiously non-coercive and are described in detail along with difficulties encountered.

**Purposive sampling.** Purposive sampling utilizes intentional selection strategies, based on qualities or characteristics, to select participants (Robinson, 2014; Tongco, 2007). It is a measured choice to select participants or informants who will be able to talk about the issue under investigation and who have the necessary experience or history to be informative, rather than to stand in as a representative sample of the target population. In that purposive sampling is not representative and is a biased selection method, it is important to maintain transparency in reporting results, and the bias should be documented (Tongco, 2007).

The target population, or sample universe (Robinson, 2014), for this study might be considered to include all incarcerated Aboriginal women, though it would be difficult to define it completely, considering the transient nature of provincially served sentences. Sentences of less than 2 years are served in provincial institutions, and many are much shorter. In addition, in Alberta, offenders only serve two thirds of the sentence handed them by the court. These factors combined to make it impossible to clearly delineate the margins of the entire target population for this study.

Few inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants were ultimately settled upon, resulting in a heterogeneous sample universe (Robinson, 2014). Inclusion criteria were comprised of being female, being incarcerated at the time of the study and for the

duration of the interviews, in custody at the Lethbridge Correctional Centre (LCC), and identifying as Aboriginal. Limiting the criterion of incarceration to LCC was less restrictive than it initially appeared, given frequent and regular transferring of offenders to and from the various centres in the province of Alberta. A potential participant would have ideally been able to talk about the ways in which historical trauma may have affected her or her family. Exclusion criteria were simply that women who had acute mental illness or who were actively violent would not be considered for the study, nor would those under the age of 18, which was easily enforced at an adult facility. This was to preserve safety of both researcher and participant and to ensure adequate comprehension of consent. An original sample size of five to eight participants was selected, with the actual sample size representing the point of data saturation.

The current study consisted of six Aboriginal women incarcerated at the LCC in Lethbridge, Alberta, during the course of the study in 2012. A seventh participant withdrew after the first interview, and her data were not used in the analysis. Two other women were scheduled for initial interviews, but withdrew during discussion of the consent form.

**Participant characteristics.** Participants ranged in age from 22 years to 53 years at the time of the interviews, although four of the women were in their 30s. Two of the women identified as Blackfoot, three as Cree, and one as Métis with Cree ancestry. Participants originated from all over the province, from southern to northern regions and from east to west; all participants were born in Alberta. One participant was a remanded offender, while the other five were sentenced. Charges included assaults, drugs (i.e., possession and/or trafficking), and forgery. The nature of participants' charges and/or

sentences emerged organically during the interviews, and specifics on the charges were not directly sought because they were not the focus of this study. A description of participants' offenses is, therefore, only presented here in vague terms.

**Recruitment of participants.** Much thought was given to the manner in which participants were recruited, given the vulnerable designation of this population. Compensations or inducements are often used in research as a method of showing appreciation for, and acknowledging the value of, the participant's contribution. Their use should be carefully considered, however, when proposing research with a vulnerable population because they may be construed as coercion by the participant. Within the prison environment, compensation with material goods could be tantamount to trafficking in contraband, even if such material goods are available within the environment, and should be avoided (Patenaude, 2004). Instead, compensation could be as simple as giving one's time or providing a break from the routine of the institution.

I was very aware of the unequal status I held compared to the women in the local jail, despite the fact that I was not a paid employee of the correctional centre. I am neither incarcerated nor Aboriginal. I held the perceptually privileged position of being both Caucasian and free to leave the institution at any time. A member of my initial thesis committee noted that approaching women individually to ask if they would be willing to participate may have compromised voluntary participation (C. Chambers, personal communication, February 11, 2010), as the female offenders might have felt pressured to acquiesce when asked directly as a result of my *privilege*. Gall and colleagues (2007) also noted that a request from a researcher may have a different significance to different individuals. Efforts were, therefore, made to avoid coercion.

Rather than approach female offenders individually, I elected to make an open presentation to anyone in the women's unit who might be interested in the study, regardless of ethnicity. I posted a sign-up sheet for the presentation and, ultimately, gave my presentation to only half of the 12 women who signed up for the event. I prepared snacks consisting of a fruit tray, crudités, home-baked muffins and snack breads, and tea. These offerings were intended to serve as both inducement and compensation in advance, with no obligation to participate in the study, and also to honour the gift-giving traditions of many First Nations groups (C. Chambers, personal communication, February 11, 2010). The purpose of the study was explained to the attendees along with criteria for participation. Opportunities were given for questions, and the women were informed they could contact me via the Aboriginal Program Co-ordinator using an institutional Request for Interview form if they were interested in participating or simply wanted more information about the study. It was emphasized that making such a request did not constitute an obligation to participate.

The following is an excerpt from my journal entry made after the first recruitment presentation:

A sign-up sheet was posted in the unit about a week prior to this presentation. 12 people signed up, but only six came to the presentation. At first I was a bit disappointed, but the ladies seemed very receptive and appreciative.

I asked if they might spread the word of the study to people they thought might be good participants. Afterwards, I have second thoughts about this: is it too coercive?

This initial presentation resulted in only one participant, and when no other requests were submitted to the Aboriginal Program Co-ordinator, I began making *mini-presentations* at unit events, such as parenting classes, music concerts, and a weekly worship sing-along, with the cooperation and encouragement of facilitators of these

events. After four months of active recruitment, I reached my participant goal. Given these difficulties and the desire to avoid coercion, snowball sampling (Robinson, 2014) was employed in a modified manner. I was not comfortable asking participants to recommend a potential participant for me to approach, but women who completed the interviews were asked to spread the word of the study, if they felt comfortable doing so. They were asked to recommend me to other offenders who fit the criteria, rather than the reverse. The efficacy of this strategy is not known because interested women were not canvassed for how their interest was piqued.

A possible explanation for the difficulty in finding participants may be that some Aboriginal people are reticent to speak to non-Aboriginal researchers (Brownlie, 2008; Hunter, Logan, Goulet, & Barton, 2006). Potential participants may have felt that, as a non-Aboriginal researcher, I would take something valuable from them and give nothing in return. Liamputtong (2007) described this as a sort of hit-and-run or smash-and-grab approach, as though the researcher plunders and ransacks the participant's community of treasured and personal knowledge only to disappear from the community, leaving a void. In some cases, researchers have come and gone and have not been heard from again (Struthers, Lauderdale, Nichols, Tom-Orme, & Strickland, 2005). Historically, the *White man* has not honoured verbal or written word, making mistrust of dominant culture somewhat understandable. Occasionally, publications have created negative images of Aboriginal peoples, or it was discovered that researchers had used results for their own personal gain, leaving the Aboriginal participants feeling betrayed. Alternatively, the explanation could be much simpler: the process of consent was too daunting, the time

commitment too excessive, or the idea of discussing such personal matters with anyone was too intrusive.

### **Setting**

Because the participants were incarcerated women, interviews were necessarily conducted at LCC. One of two interview rooms in the programs office was used for each interview. Both parties were visible to clerical staff and correctional officers, when present, but the interview could not be heard by those outside the room beyond a murmur of voices, thus ensuring both privacy and safety for participant and researcher alike.

LCC is a multi-level security provincial institution, meaning offenders may be classified anywhere from minimum to super-maximum security. This means sentenced offenders are serving sentences of less than two years. The centre also houses remanded offenders—those who are not yet sentenced—as they await trial, conviction, sentencing, or release. Remanded offenders in the LCC may have been charged with any crime, including murder. In my experiences at this jail, I have learned that the centre offers sentenced offenders a variety of academic and trades programs via Lethbridge College; spiritual and cultural services, including two chaplains, an Aboriginal Elder, an Aboriginal program coordinator who also provides counselling, and Christian volunteer groups from city churches; mental health services, including a centre psychologist, an addictions counsellor, and addictions transition team; medical services that include a health unit replete with nursing staff, a visiting physician and dentist, and video conferencing with a psychiatrist; and substance use support meetings employing the 12-step structure (i.e., Alcoholics Anonymous and the various Anonymous incarnations).

I did not encounter any significant difficulty in manoeuvring around the correctional institution and in spending long periods of time with female offenders during the course of this research. My first experience at LCC was as an undergraduate student completing an Applied Study in 1999. Since that time, I have worked at the centre both as a volunteer, for several hours a week for 3 years, and as a correctional officer, for 3 years. Recently, I completed my practicum semesters for the Master of Education Counselling Psychology program at LCC. For this, I obtained security clearance at the centre that enabled me to move freely throughout the building, and I spent much time speaking with various incarcerated men and women. I also have good working relationships with many of the officers at the centre; many are the same individuals with whom I worked as an officer myself.

### **Procedures**

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Lethbridge Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee. Approval to conduct research on the premises of LCC was obtained from the Solicitor General. Please refer to Appendix B for the decision letters.

Each participant was interviewed on two separate occasions, at least a week apart. The interval between interviews was to ensure neither participant nor researcher was overwhelmed by the content of either interview. Although each interview varied in length, each woman took part in approximately three hours of interviewing.

**Interview process and card-sort technique.** The initial interview consisted primarily of rapport-building activities and a discussion of the purpose of the study. It began with a discussion about the purpose of the interview and a review of informed

consent and voluntary participation (Appendix C). Permission to record the interview was obtained at this time, as was very basic demographic information (e.g., participant's age and Aboriginal identification). The protocol for this first interview can be found in the interview guide (Appendix D). It should be noted that the interview guide was not created as a strict script for conducting the interviews, but was instead intended to provide a framework for me to follow to ensure interviews addressed the same information.

Participants were then presented with cards, upon each of which was printed an area of need. Each item on the cards was drawn from the list of services and issues identified as necessary for exiting a life of incarceration by the women in the study by Singer and colleagues (1995), with added themes of historical loss and trauma inspired by an article by Whitbeck and colleagues (2004) in which a measure for historical loss was devised in consultation with tribal Elders. For a full list of the cards used in the interviews, see Table 1. In addition, several blank cards were provided for participants to add any area of need they believed to be missing. Only two participants added cards to the pool of available items.

Each woman was asked to look at the cards and select those that were important or meaningful to her. Each woman was informed about the origin of the items written on the cards. For example, in my interview with Pauly, I said, "But these were needs that were identified by the women in the study, and then. I have some other needs as well that might be a little more appropriate to Aboriginal people." With Horse, I noted, "These themes are things that have been identified in other studies that women in jail have said, 'These are the things that we need.'"

Table 1

*List of Needs Cards by Source*

Singer et al. (1995)	Whitbeck et al. (2004)	Participant Additions
Alcohol Counselling	Ancestors	FAS and Drug Prevention
Custody of Children	Community	Gang Prevention
Drug Counselling	Spiritual Practices	Grief Counselling
Education	The Old Ways	
Family Support	Traditional Lands	
Financial Aid	Traditional Language	
Housing		
Legal Help		
Material Goods		
Medical Care		
Mental Health Counselling		
Parenting		
Religious Support		
Work Training		

While I intended to be consistent, however, I did vary in my descriptions to participants. Those cards not selected were set aside, and the participant was asked to order her chosen cards from most to least important. She was then asked to talk about why she selected each card and why she had assigned its particular priority level. The intention here was for each participant to identify areas of need as well as areas of abundance in terms of services and personal values that might assist her in exiting the cycle of substance use, incarceration, and release.

The second interview was far less structured in nature. Consent was reviewed and reiterated, and the purpose of the second interview was explained. Consent to audio-

record the interview was re-obtained. The cards selected by the participant in her first interview were set out in the order she had previously determined in case she wanted to refresh her memory or wished to re-order the cards. Each woman was then asked to continue explaining her selection of cards, in those instances where that discussion was not able to be completed in the first interview, and was then asked about difficulties she faced in the community and her sources of support and strength. The protocol for this interview can be found in the Interview Guide (Appendix D).

Participants were debriefed following each interview, which provided an opportunity for the participant to ask questions and to discuss her participation experience. This debriefing was not recorded with every participant. This was not a conscious decision, simply something that developed organically. It felt more natural to turn off the recording device when the interview was finished, making the debriefing seem a less formal part of the process. This may have occurred because of a desire to allow the participant to separate from the research process before returning to her unit. A summary of the interviews' content and purpose is presented in Table 2.

In each primary interview, the participant seemed nervous and uncertain, and I certainly did. My comfort level did not increase with each new participant; rather, I was sensitive to the differences between each woman's communication style from the moment of meeting. In each primary interview, however, we soon settled into more comfortable talk and were able to leave behind forced or nervous tittering for more genuine laughter, some meaningful eye contact, and comfortable pauses. As previously mentioned, the card-sort technique facilitated this shift as did the offering of tea or water. By the time of the second interview, all awkwardness was gone, and we were able to pick

up where we finished and keep momentum forward. Each and every time, I was astonished at the frankness with which each woman discussed her experiences and the open spirit in which she shared them. I concluded each set of interviews with a heartfelt statement of gratitude for such honesty and openness, saying how honoured I felt to be on the listening end.

Table 2

*Summary of Interview Content and Purpose*

Detail	First Meeting	Second Meeting
Duration	1 to 1.5 hour	1.5 to 2 hours
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cover purposes of study</li> <li>• Record demographic information</li> <li>• Build rapport with participant</li> <li>• Prioritize needs and coping cards</li> <li>• Debrief</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unstructured interview covering areas of strength and difficulty for the participant and allowing for continuation of their personal story</li> <li>• Debrief</li> </ul>
Consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informed consent obtained</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consent reviewed and re-obtained</li> </ul>
Recorded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes (with consent)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes (with consent)</li> </ul>

**Effectiveness of the card-sort technique.** It may seem capricious to begin the interview process with a more structured interview and then follow up with one that is less structured. In this situation, however, the needs cards and structured interview resulted in a level of disclosure that pleasantly surprised me. It is possible this disclosure occurred because the cards provided something for the women to focus on during the interview, both mentally and physically.

Mentally, the cards provided a starting point and a guide for the telling of her story, offering direction and momentum. They served as a map for each woman to talk, one of her own creation, thus allowing her to direct the majority of the discussion in ways that were meaningful to her. Although using pre-written cards may seem to impose categories on the conversations, the women were all encouraged to make additional cards as needed to fill any gaps. I liken this process to that of growing crystals, which many of us may have carried out as children. I am speaking of the simple experiment of suspending a string in a solution of sugar water: In time, sugar crystals adhere to the string, creating a beautiful, sweet sculpture. In this instance, the needs cards were the string, and the various parts of the participants' stories were as the sugar dissolved in water. The string provides a structure, a docking point, without having a significant influence on the shape and formation of the crystals upon it.

Physically, the cards provided something for the participants to look at and, often, play with during difficult or very personal parts of their stories. This may have helped to ease tension or discomfort in discussing such things with a relative stranger in the jail environment. Many times in the recordings of the interviews, there were sounds of the cards being sorted, tapped on the table, shuffled, and otherwise fingered as the women talked, laughed, cried, and shared.

Despite, or, perhaps, because of, the unorthodox design of this study, each participant shared very openly with me, as researcher, providing rich data for analysis. Although qualitative research is most often thought to employ inductive processes while deductive processes have been thought of as the domain of quantitative study, in reality, both qualitative and quantitative researchers operate under both inductive and deductive

processes (Hyde, 2000), making this study's design as workable as it was unconventional. Some participants commented on the process of the card sort. Yin Yang Rose, whom the reader will meet in the next chapter, mentioned, "Sorting through the cards was more or less how I want to see everything in my life." The effects of the card-sorting technique did not end with the interview. Several participants wanted a copy of their list of selections to bring back to their cell. Willow remarked on how she contemplated her card choices after the first interview:

I didn't even know what I was expecting. And it surprised me, too, that family support was my first one. I went back and I thought about all this, in order, right? The way I put it in order. And I sat about it, thought about it. I'm, like, wow!

The phenomenon of eliciting rich information using a card-sort technique is not new. This intervention has been used in counselling (i.e., most often in career counselling) for many years (Brott, 2004; Brown & Lent, 1996; Brown et al., 2003; Holland, Magoon, & Spokane, 1981; Slaney & MacKinnon-Slaney, 2000). In this intervention, clients are asked to go through cards printed with various vocations and sort them into piles; *careers I would consider*, *careers I would not consider*, and *careers about which I am uncertain* are the typical categories. The basic purpose of card sorting is to help clients make career choices and to clarify the things that are important in making that choice (Brown et al., 2003). Besides this aim, card sorting can be useful to the counsellor (Brott, 2004) to explore the client's various career choices and to verify the counsellor's comprehension of the client's disclosures. The card-sort intervention "goes beyond occupational information and is used to amplify the counseling process" (Brott, 2004, p. 194). A counsellor can modify the process prescribed by pre-fabricated card sets or can create personalized cards based on information that emerges through the sessions,

thus tailoring the intervention to the client's needs and interests. It has been suggested that counsellors who utilize this approach seem to know more about their clients, feeling more involved with the process (Slaney & MacKinnon-Slaney, 2000).

In the current study, the needs cards were a kind of personalized card-sort based on information from literature relevant to incarcerated women and Aboriginal peoples. They served to help the researcher explore the participants' various choices about what is important in their lives and increase understanding of their stories. While each participant handled the card sort in her own way, the process generally began by reading each card individually and asking questions about any that were unclear. As she did this, each woman culled out the cards that she decided were not sufficiently meaningful to her situation. The remaining cards were then examined more closely. Some participants laid the cards out face-up on the desk and shuffled them around like puzzle pieces. Others held them and placed them individually, in a Solitaire-esque manner, into the appropriate spot on the desk. The majority of the participants muttered and whispered to themselves as they made their determinations, as though they were explaining their choices to themselves before preparing to tell me about them.

Whatever the method, the result was a visual concept map of each woman's values, hopes, and desires. This map was typically linear, but many women set multiple cards at the same level of importance, which resulted in a cluster or constellation, which was not always a conscious choice by the participant. For instance, one participant, Willow, placed the Alcohol Counselling, Drug Counselling, Gang Prevention, and Mental Health Counselling cards in that sequence. These were all personal struggles she faced in her life, things she needed to "deal with." Shauntay placed Housing, Financial

Aid, and Material goods consecutively, followed by Family Support, Parenting, and Custody. These were preceded in importance by Drug Counselling alone. Taz, the only participant to assert that every issue on the cards was of importance, placed many of her cards in piles that were essentially categories that reflected personal needs, traditional issues, personal and community healing, and parenting needs, with individual cards interspersed between them.

### **Analysis**

An account of the processes and procedures I employed in selecting analysis categories, coding transcripts, sorting and sifting through data, and refining categories for deeper analysis is presented in this section. Before beginning to describe the analysis procedures, I would like to discuss the strategies I undertook to assure the trustworthiness of the study.

**Evaluating trustworthiness.** Assessing trustworthiness in qualitative research is akin to evaluating reliability and validity in quantitative methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In place of reliability and validity, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested evaluating four alternative measures for ensuring rigour in qualitative study: Transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability. I will describe some of the steps I took to ensure the criteria for trustworthiness were met.

With respect to credibility, I engaged in several activities to reinforce the trustworthiness of the data. Firstly, my years of experience in corrections have given me a good understanding of the research setting, inmate culture, and guard culture. I have also developed positive relationships with officers, programs personnel, and inmates in that time. Secondly, I was heartened by the similarities inherent in the stories told to me by

my participants, which indicated some triangulation of my data. Finally, when I needed more context for a particular aspect of a participant's story, I would consult with peers to assist me in developing a better understanding. This often included consulting with the Aboriginal Program Coordinator or the Elder at the institution.

To ensure the data from my participants' stories are transferable, I have employed *thick description*. The term, according to Gall and associates (2007), refers to utilizing rich, very detailed description to re-create a phenomenon, situation, experience, and context for the reader. I have attempted to use sufficient detail in retelling my participants' stories and in describing categories and themes so the reader may have a clear picture of their experiences. In instances of confusion or lack of clarity, I would turn back to the transcripts for the rich detail contained therein.

Confirmability can be established through the aforementioned triangulation of my participants' stories, but also through reflexive practices as a researcher throughout the process. I have three coil notebooks that are replete with writings and notes. These books include journal entries, personal impressions of the interviews, definitions of categories, notes from related readings and articles, and ideas about the data as they occurred to me. Excerpts are included in this document where appropriate.

These are but a few of the ways in which the trustworthiness of qualitative research can be evaluated and enhanced, but they bear discussion for the sake of transparency. In the same vein of transparency, I will provide detailed description of the processes I used in my analysis. This stage of my researching journey was iterative and undulating. I found myself returning often to rework a category or to rethink an organizational structure. It was at this point that I began to see the data as a living entity.

**Selection of categories.** Given the top-down processes that gave rise to the study's design, it became clear that analysis should also employ deductive processes. The cards become the analysis categories: specifically, those cards that were selected by five or six of the participants were used as categories for this particular study, and those selected by fewer than five of the women were set aside. During transcription and early readings of the transcripts, as well as the coding process, it became clear that there were categories in the interviews that were independent of the cards. Additionally, significant themes became clear across identified categories; those that were significant in answering the research question are examined in this report. Consequently, the analysis used in this study can be described as a primarily deductive thematic analysis seasoned with analysis of inductive themes and processes. Please refer to Table 3 for a listing of categories selected using the manner described above.

Table 3

*Initial List of Identified Categories and Themes for Analysis*

Card-Sort Categories	Categories from Transcripts
Education	Jail
Housing	Abuse
Financial Aid	Grief and Loss
Material Goods	Care-Giving
Parenting	One-on-One Worker
The Old Ways	Dreams
Spiritual Practices	Prostitution
Family Support	
Mental Health Counselling	
Drug Counselling	
Alcohol Counselling	

While the categories selected from the cards were, in fact, needs identified by women in the 1995 study by Singer and associates, the categories that emerged from the transcripts did not always articulate a need for a service or intervention. The abuse and jail categories, while not necessities themselves, were nonetheless of such significance to the stories of these six women that I could not discard them as viable categories.

**Thematic versus content analysis.** At this point, a short discussion comparing thematic analysis and content analysis may be in order, as there has often been a lack of well-defined boundaries between the two in the literature (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). These terms are sometimes used interchangeably in publications, while close examination of analyses has often revealed them to be thematic in nature. Content analysis has also been considered by some to be best applied to quantitative, over qualitative, analyses (Weber, 1990) and utilized for frequency or description purposes. In order to uphold a transparent analysis process, I will endeavour to delineate the boundaries between the two and explain my choice in applying one over the other.

Both thematic and content analyses are employed in probing narrative texts; both break down the data into more manageable bits or units, and both would be suitable for addressing questions similar to those asked by this study (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Both approaches can be used with either inductive or deductive designs (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). As discussed earlier, content analysis has had many applications in quantitative research methods, describing what was said and/or how often, while thematic analysis is qualitative and delicate in nature and looks for patterns across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis can be applied within both constructivist and realist theoretical frameworks and underscores the

context of the data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). While content analysis describes a schism between manifest and latent content, thematic analysis stresses integrating the two. In short, according to Vaismoradi and colleagues (2013), content analysis slants more toward quantifying data, while thematic analysis leans in the direction of qualifying data. Since my analysis categories have been defined based on the frequency with which they were selected by participants, further quantification would be superfluous. The next step is to see what the participants have to say *about* these categories.

Another reason for selecting thematic analysis, though certainly secondary, was the assertion by Braun and Clarke (2006) that thematic analysis should be considered a foundational skill and the first method of analysis selected by neophyte researchers. They also maintained that thematic analysis is an analytical method in and of itself, rather than being simply a method utilized within other *grander* analytic approaches. The authors stressed its flexibility and usefulness in providing “a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data” (p. 78).

**Coding the data.** Once the deductive, and some inductive, categories were identified, I wrote out a brief description or definition of each one, detailing the type of information that would be included and the process of coding participant transcripts commenced. For this study, I elected to code transcripts manually, rather than using a software program. I made this choice for a few reasons, one of which was the small number of participants. Another was my unfamiliarity with all of the software programs, which would have required me to study their use. However, the primary reason for coding my transcripts manually was that I was very drawn to the tactile and visual procedures of highlighting and underlining text and having a visual image of each page in

my mind. I consider myself a visual, hands-on person with these kinds of tasks. For example, I find my information retention is better when I read printed articles and textbooks than when I read them on a computer screen, and I am better able to locate particular passages when I have read and/or highlighted them on hard copies.

I began the process by purchasing highlighters and felt-tip pens in a variety of colours and assigning each category a unique colour. I then painstakingly read each transcript and underlined or highlighted passages, noting the category and a brief description of the passage content in the margins. Making the process more complicated was the fact that many passages of transcript fit into more than one category, requiring multiple codings. The result was a colourful and well-marked stack of pages. A sample of coded transcript can be found in Appendix E.

I then transferred each coded passage into new category documents, with one document for each category. This was done using basic word-processing software and copy/paste techniques. For example, all of the passages from all 12 transcripts coded as “Mental Health Counselling” were copied and pasted into a new “Mental Health Counselling” document, and all of the passages from all transcripts coded as “Jail” were copied and pasted into a new “Jail” document, and so on. In order to facilitate my ability to keep track of which passages were said by each participant, each woman was assigned a unique font colour in these category documents. It was my intention to print the category documents and cut the passages into individual *data strips* in order to be able to physically manipulate them into subcategories, but my trial printing of one category document proved less effective than I had hoped. I added spaces between each coded passage to allow for larger data strips and printed the category documents on cardstock to

provide a stiffer medium and was satisfied. The data strips from each category document were placed in a large manila folder and each folder was labelled with the category name.

**Data sorting.** I went through each category envelope individually and sorted all the data strips into subcategories. This usually began with reading individual data strips and placing them in piles of similar data strips. These initial piles were often very broad categories. In the case of the Abuse category, my initial piles were along the lines of “childhood abuse,” “abuse by partner,” and “assaults by others.” I soon added another pile for “violence.” Each data-strip pile was then sorted in the same manner as the category envelope, when necessary, to further refine subcategories. Initial piles in any category were merely starting points and often did not fully represent the final subcategories and sub-subcategories for the larger category. Continuing with the example of Abuse, the final subcategories were Violence, Being Abused, Knowing Other Victims of Abuse, Reactions to Abuse, and Being Protector/Protected. After each category envelope had been sorted, I created a concept map for each category to provide a visual representation of the main category and the various sub-categories within it. For a sample concept map, please refer to Appendix F.

Throughout this process, from coding to data-strip sorting, I maintained a file for Miscellaneous data. Initially, data passages that seemed significant, but did not obviously fit into any of the delineated categories as I coded the transcripts, were coded as Miscellaneous and assigned their own envelope in the event that a new category should emerge. During the data-strip sorting, data strips that did not work with subcategory configurations, or which no longer seemed appropriate to the category, were transferred to the Miscellaneous envelope. Periodically, the miscellaneous data strips were re-

evaluated to determine if they should be moved into other categories. The Miscellaneous envelope was in a continuous state of flow during the analysis stages.

When all category envelopes had been sorted, I again took each category envelope and laid out all the data strips in their subcategory groupings. When possible, the entire category was laid out all at once, but I was often forced, through space and time constraints, to work with individual subcategories. Data strips were laid out on a flat surface, such as a table or counter, where they could all be seen and read for analysis. At this stage, I was looking for what each subcategory was *about*, in a descriptive sense, and I would write my observations and musings about each one. Often in this stage, it became clear that the organization of data strips was just not working—sometimes the subcategories were not well delineated or the data strips just did not seem to fit together as they had in the previous phase. The data strips would then be rearranged in order to find the sense within the subcategory, and sometimes the concept map would have to be readjusted to accommodate the changes.

This whole process was very iterative and organic, with the subcategories emerging and being absorbed as necessary until an image of the category emerged. The data were almost like a school of mackerel or a flock of starlings, with hundreds or thousands of small creatures making up a larger form. In the case of this study, the shifting nature of the “fish” led the larger image to be in a continuous state of flux before they finally settled into a form that felt comfortable, both for the data and for me. At one point, I likened this analysis process to that of putting together a jigsaw puzzle, without the picture on the box, and with all pieces being more-or-less the same shape. There was a lot of shuffling, readjusting, reconsidering category and sub-category definitions,

standing back to see the bigger picture, and reflecting on what the data strips were trying to say before I could tell I was heading in the right direction. After much consideration, any data strips that were resistant to being placed in a particular subcategory were transferred to the miscellaneous file or to a category envelope that better accommodated them.

**Refinement of categories.** Initially, I had some reservations about ignoring the other cards selected as important by my participants, but I did appreciate how essential it was to create boundaries around the data in order to be able to present it. I was, fortunately, able to arrive at a compromise during the definition of my categories and am confident that I was able to honour participant values while also maintaining workable limitations for this paper. I found many of the cards that did not meet the criteria for category selection were, in fact, related to some selected category descriptions. For example, though Work Training was not chosen by at least five participants, it seemed to classify as a type of Education, which did meet criteria. Additionally, I had no category specific to historical trauma because it was not one of the needs cards, yet was an important part of the research questions. An overview of how content from other sources was integrated into the usable data is presented in Table 4. Only those categories that absorbed additional data are listed in the table.

Very early in analysis, it became clear that I would need to merge some of my categories in order to best analyse them. For example, within the first few pages of coding the first transcript, I made the choice to collapse Drug Counselling and Alcohol Counselling into a larger category that I termed Substance Use Counselling. This was due to the interconnected experiences of drug and alcohol use as told by the women in this

study. Many used drugs while drinking, or vice versa, and most reported having significant problems with both. It would have been inefficient to consider each as separate entities and virtually impossible to extricate one from the other in many of the data units. During the sorting stage, multiple similarities across several categories led me to integrate more categories into single units. Housing, Material Goods, and Financial Aid were merged together to become Necessities of Life. Later on, One-on-One Worker was also absorbed by Necessities of Life, as it became apparent the need for a personal worker was more of a life necessity than a separate category.

Table 4

*Integration of Data from Needs Cards Not Selected as Analysis Categories*

Analysis Category	Additional Data Included in Category
Education	Work Training
Family Support	Custody of Children, Child Care, Community
Financial Aid	Legal Help
Grief and Loss	Grief Counselling, Custody of Children
Jail	Medical Care, Legal Help, Gang Prevention
The Old Ways	Ancestors, Traditional Lands, Traditional Language
Spiritual Practices	Religious Support, Community
Parenting	Historical Trauma, Child Care
Alcohol Counselling and Drug Counselling	Medical Care, FAS, and Drug Prevention

Some categories were discarded when it was evident they were not significant to the threshold number of participants. The category of Prostitution was discarded because

only half of the women talked about this concept, and only one (Horse) did so in any sort of depth. The data strips for this category fit easily in other categories, like Substance Use and Mental Health Counselling. Another category I dissolved was that of Dreams. Again, four of the six women spoke of having dreams that were significant to them, and two spoke of believing the dreams contained messages for them to decipher. Yin Yang Rose dreamed of meeting her husband by a waterfall, where he drew her under the cascade of the water. After much consideration, I elected to set this entire category aside based on the fact that it was not directly relevant to the research questions for this study. This was a weighty decision for me because, through every stage of this study, I keenly felt my obligation to represent my participants in the most authentic way possible. The final categories used in analysis, along with the initial categories that were merged into them, are represented in Table 5.

In a perfect world, analysis categories would be discrete units with clearly delineated borders. In the inherent messiness of qualitative research, however, that is not always possible. This final list of analysis categories was challenging to finalize because of the interconnectedness of many of them. For example, Abuse is linked to Mental Health Counselling because these victims of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse suffered reduced self-esteem and have post-traumatic symptoms that impact their mental health. Abuse is also related to Substance Use Counselling because the trauma suffered by these women seemed to have a significant impact on their choices to drink and use drugs. I struggled, in particular, with the Spiritual Practices and The Old Ways categories because I had an instinct to try and combine them in some way. It seemed the traditional Aboriginal practices these women had experienced in their lives were inevitably spiritual

in nature, even when not directly *religious*. Spiritual practices, despite considerable attempts, did not integrate well into The Old Ways because many spiritual activities were modern and Christian. I then turned my eye to The Old Ways, attempting to collapse it into one or more categories, including Spiritual Practices and Parenting. No matter how I tried to manoeuvre it, I was unable to satisfactorily disperse its elements into other categories.

Table 5

*Final Analysis Categories with Integration of Initial Categories*

Final Category	Integrated Categories (where applicable)
Abuse	---
Care-Giving	---
Education	---
Family Support	---
Grief and Loss	---
Jail	---
Mental Health Counselling	Prostitution
Necessities of Life	Housing, Financial Aid, Material Goods, One-on-One Worker
The Old Ways	---
Parenting	---
Spiritual Practices	---
Substance Use Counselling	Alcohol Counselling, Drug Counselling

In reflecting on the residual ambiguity of many of the categories, I must emphasize that their messiness mirrors the messiness of real life. In asking participants to tell me the stories of their lives, as they related to cards or otherwise, I was wordlessly

accepting they would not provide me with neat, orderly, well-defined pieces of those stories. How could I expect to pull on one thread in the tapestry of a woman's life and have it come free without remnants of other threads clinging to it? If I were to isolate all the blue points of colour from a Seurat painting, I would have an artificial, unfinished representation of the finished work. I consider each woman's life to be a unique work of art: a whole that is far greater than the sum of its parts. With this in mind, I have been left with 12 perfectly imperfect categories for consideration in analysis.

### **Summary**

A substantial amount of thought and attention to detail went into the preparation for this study, with special consideration given to the vulnerable nature of the participant pool and the cultural particulars of this target population. Several incarnations of the proposed method were explored before finding the right balance. Even so, I encountered difficulties in finding participants and engaged in a very active, but non-coercive, recruitment program. The results were well worth the wait.

In spite of using non-traditional procedures in the interview stage, transcripts proved to be rich sources of data for this study. This was, in all likelihood, largely due to those procedures: namely, the card-sort intervention borrowed from counselling techniques (Brott, 2004; Slaney & MacKinnon-Slaney, 2000). Category assignment, deductively selected from the needs cards as well as inductively obtained from the transcripts, yielded an abundance of data-strips for analysis. After significant time spent sifting through category envelopes and data strips, 12 final categories emerged for analysis and discussion, and these will follow in impending chapters. In the next chapter, I will provide a short biographical snapshot of each woman before describing the

categories and what participants had to say about them. I will then begin to take you deeper into the categories, and into the lives of these six women, to unearth the hidden nuggets that lie therein.

## Chapter Four: Analysis Categories

In this chapter, I will provide a detailed description of the categories used in analysis. These categories were partly selected from the needs cards used during the interview card sort: a career counselling intervention (Brott, 2004) that proved to be a very effective technique for eliciting data-rich information. Additional categories emerged from multiple readings of the interview transcripts. Before introducing the categories, however, I would like to take some time to introduce the six women who were generous enough to share their stories for this study.

### The Participants

I will provide a biographical snapshot of each woman here, but more detailed biographies for each woman can be found, in their own words, in Appendix G. Each participant chose her own research name, and any identifying information has been altered to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. Every one of these participants has remained very real and clear to me. I could almost hear their voices as I read through the transcripts and data strips, and I was often transported back in time to the interviews. Each laughed, cried, protected herself, and shared her vulnerabilities. Each was beautiful in her own unique way, and I will carry their stories with me for many years to come.

**Yin Yang Rose.** Yin Yang Rose was a Blackfoot woman in her mid-30s from southern Alberta. She had smiling eyes and a raspy, *whiskey* voice. Her earliest memory was of being in a kind of orphanage or group home; it was not a happy memory, full of abuse at the hands of the house mother and other children in her care. Throughout her childhood, she lived in group and foster homes, both on and off the reserve. Her fondest memories were of living with her foster parents in a small town, a place she continued to

call home. She felt safe with them despite much physical discipline, until an initiative to place Aboriginal children with Aboriginal families resulted in her being moved to a family on the nearest reserve. Thus began her exposure to drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes, as well as increased physical and sexual abuse. Yin Yang Rose credits this as the turning point in her life, saying the reserve corrupted her.

Yin Yang Rose began drinking and smoking, both tobacco and marijuana, at a young age, and she was constantly running away. She began dating much older men when she was only 13 because they would take care of her in exchange for letting them “do whatever they do to me.” She moved in with a boyfriend in Medicine Hat and became pregnant with her first child at the age of 15. During this pregnancy, the boyfriend revealed his abusive nature; she attempted to leave him many times and was eventually permanently successful with the help of her brother. This same brother also reintroduced her to the childhood friend that would become her one great love. Their relationship would be tumultuous, with Yin Yang Rose unable to accept his unconditional love, respectful treatment, and commitment to her despite all her indiscretions. Her drinking and drug use escalated with each passing year, while he remained responsible for their home and the children. Yin Yang Rose began using drugs intravenously and initiated her husband in the practice, which ultimately led to his death by overdose. She blamed herself for his death.

After his passing, Yin Yang Rose continued to drink and use drugs at an increasing rate. She lived primarily on the streets and in shelters, but had been in and out of jail since losing her husband. She had a total of four children, all either adopted or in foster care. She died two years after I interviewed her, more or less alone; her foster

parents, with whom she had maintained a close relationship, both passed away the previous year. She enjoyed caring for other people and found purpose in helping her friends. She loved her children and had hoped to be able to rekindle relationships with them in the future, once she got herself clean.

**Pauly.** Pauly was a Cree woman in her mid-30s from south central Alberta. She wore a broad smile and had a hearty laugh, which rang out often during the interviews. Pauly grew up in a large family with many siblings (i.e., full-, half-, and step-siblings) and other youth her mom would “adopt.” Her mother, a heavy drinker and residential school survivor, was very physically abusive, and her step-father was a kind man who took a lot of abuse himself. Pauly’s older siblings were no kinder to the younger children; her brothers would set up a fighting ring where she was made to fight another sister for their entertainment, and at least one older sister was very violent toward Pauly. When she was 14, two of her brothers engaged in a serious physical altercation over alcohol and drugs, and one of them later died from his injuries. There has been extensive drug and alcohol use among her siblings, but a few have been clean and sober for some time now.

There was also a significant history of sexual abuse in her family. Pauly, herself, was molested by her step-brother as well as by an older man from their neighbourhood when she was a pre-teen. It was around this time that she started drinking and using drugs. She admits she has tried almost every kind of drug available to her, and it was soon after smoking crack cocaine for the first time that she started her jail career. She lived on the streets when not in jail and sold drugs to make money. Her drinking escalated, and she started using intravenous drugs, including morphine, to which she soon became addicted. She came to understand that her addictive nature was due, in part, to

having a Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD) when she learned her mother drank while pregnant with her.

She attempted treatment several times, and it was during one of those times that she learned she had Hepatitis C as a result of her intravenous drug use. She completed her high school diploma requirements while in jail and developed a love of writing, both of which gave her a sense of pride. Though she had no children of her own, she helped to raise several of her nieces and nephews and was considering adoption once she was clean. Pauly was a self-described follower of Jesus; she believed there was a lesson from God to be found in every struggle and that it was important to be thankful even for difficulties. She died approximately a year after I interviewed her, at roughly the age of 36.

**Shauntay.** Shauntay is a Cree woman in her early 30s with a smooth, soothing manner and a gentle voice. She hails from a small community in northern Alberta. Shauntay was taken in by her grandfather when she was born and was raised by him; she calls him her father. She did spend time with her mother, stepfather, and her half-siblings, but felt she was treated differently; she wasn't sure if this was because she was fathered by a different man or because she was older. Her grandfather was a good father figure to her, teaching her Cree and instructing her in various spiritual practices.

When she was 13 years old, Shauntay witnessed the shooting, and subsequent death, of her younger brother. She blamed herself for his death long after because she was babysitting; she felt her family also held her responsible, but they now enjoy a good relationship. After her brother's death, Shauntay began smoking marijuana and drinking. She attempted suicide several times, leading to hospitalization. She ran away from home

and moved in with a friend's family, where drugs and alcohol were plentiful. At 15 years of age, she moved in with her 21-year-old boyfriend.

She became pregnant with her first child at the age of 17 and went on to have three other children with her partner. During this time, Shauntay said that he began showing signs of jealousy, which intensified into physical abuse over the years they were together. When she was finally able to leave him, she took her children and moved back with her grandfather, who helped her raise them until his death. At this point, Shauntay spiralled into heavy drinking, so much so that her mother took her kids from her. She wanted to die and sought out crack to help her accomplish this. Instead, she became addicted and wound up living on the streets of a northern Alberta city and selling crack. She said she wanted to come to jail to help her get clean and get her life back on track. She missed her children, but looked forward to having a whole family again.

**Taz.** Taz is a Blackfoot woman from southern Alberta. She was in her early 40s with a round face and a strong voice, who laughed with her entire body. Taz grew up in two different worlds: that of her grandparents, where she would speak Blackfoot and listen to stories of times gone by; and that of her parents, where she endured physical abuse. Taz's parents were residential school survivors, and she has come to realize they have a sickness that she said has filled them with anger and inhibited their ability to express love. In her teens, her mother decided to enroll her in a boarding school in central Alberta in an effort to get her away from her father's violent moods. Unfortunately, being the only Blackfoot student in a Cree school, Taz suffered even more abuse than at home and returned an angrier young woman. Taz put herself in foster care, where she found structure and caring; her foster parents took her to counselling and gave her an allowance.

She respected them and felt they cared for her, but her foster mother encouraged Taz to re-establish contact with her mother and, according to Taz, everything just went downhill again.

Taz disclosed extensive use of solvents (or *sniffing*), which started when she was 10 years old. She did not drink much in her youth, but at a party her brother had when she was about 17, Taz did become quite intoxicated and was raped; she soon found she was pregnant as a result. In addition to the physical abuse from her parents and the incident at the party, Taz shared that she was molested by two relatives, beginning from the age of 3 and continuing until she was 17. One of these relatives was a woman, which she said left her feeling very confused about her sexuality throughout her life. All this contributed to Taz's use of drugs, solvents, and alcohol; she didn't want to be who she was, and she found comfort in the oblivion of substances. Taz's 12-year marriage was also abusive, and her husband drank a lot; she said she eventually started drinking more than he did. After he left her, Taz realized she was not capable of properly caring for her five children because of her drinking and was going to give them over to children's services when her mother decided to take them in. Her drinking and sniffing continued after, and Taz eventually went into treatment. While there, she met the woman who would become her partner for the next 13 years.

Taz has spent more of her adult life in jail than out of it, with her longest stretch of freedom having been six months. She has primarily lived on the streets when not incarcerated, but would sometimes stay with her mother on the reserve or with her older children. Her mother looks after Taz's younger children and raises them without

violence. She is very proud of her children and the lives they lead; she wants to change her life so she can be a grandmother.

**Willow.** Willow, in her early 20s, was the youngest of all the women in the study. She is a Cree woman with very expressive eyes, who could go from gangster to girl in a flash, depending on which part of her story she was sharing. She grew up in south central Alberta, raised by her grandmother because her mother wanted to give her up for adoption at birth. She did have some contact with her mother while growing up, and her biological father was in the picture briefly, but she lived principally with her *gookum* (i.e., grandmother) and *moosoom* (i.e., grandfather). She spoke fondly of her early years with them, and proudly told of her late moosoom's status as a medicine man, saying she learned a lot about spirituality at his side. There was no alcohol permitted in her gookum's house, but some of her relatives did sneak it in after her moosoom died. This loss, when she was 10 years old, was a turning point in her life: it was around this time that Willow started drinking and getting involved with drugs, running away from her gookum, getting placed in group homes, and even selling drugs. Due to her lifestyle, Willow became pregnant at the age of 12 by a man much her senior. Six months after the birth of her son, 13-year-old Willow made the difficult decision to leave him in the care of his father.

Willow became more heavily involved in selling drugs and eventually joined a gang, which is something she would like to leave behind her. Despite her tender years, Willow has served sentences in both provincial and federal institutions. She spent six months absent without leave and on the run from authorities, during which time she became involved with hard drugs for several months. Willow's mother, who was addicted

to crack, died by suicide on Willow's 17th birthday, and she blamed the substance for the death. Despite this, Willow both dealt and used crack cocaine.

Willow says she has very little family support, but what she does have is strong. Participating in this study even prompted her to reach out to some family members and ask for their help and encouragement, which is not something she had done before. With the assistance of agencies like the Elizabeth Fry Society, Willow is finding housing and financial assistance post-release and is hoping to begin a college program. She is a very introspective young woman and seems very cognizant of the external challenges facing her as well as the personal issues that may impede her progress.

**Horse.** Horse, in her mid-50s, was the eldest of the participants. She was also the smallest: a sweet, diminutive woman with a sweet, diminutive voice who hailed from north central Alberta. Horse's early life was, in a word, "beautiful." She lived with her mother, grandparents, and many siblings in a small, single-room house "in the bush." They had no electricity or running water; they used "bitch lamps" (i.e., bear grease lamps with fabric wicks) for light and bear grease for cooking. They had a radio, but most entertainment came from listening to her grandmother's stories, playing outside, and reading their few books. Clothing was mostly handmade from fabrics obtained in town, and special treats at Christmas were homemade ice cream, hand-knit socks, and maybe a Barbie doll. Horse's grandfather would go hunting for weeks at a time, and her grandmother tended a large garden. This food kept them through the winter. Her family lived in this way until the government required their land, and they were forced to move into the nearest small town.

This was her life's pivotal moment, according to Horse. Her father lived in this town, and she moved to his house with her mother and siblings. He was extremely abusive, both to her mother and to the children, but he was often in jail. It was during one such incarceration that Horse's mother moved herself and the children to Edmonton. Her mother had also begun to drink heavily, and this increased while in Edmonton. Family services eventually stepped in to apprehend the children, and they were sent off to various group homes and foster care. It would be many years before Horse would see any of her family again.

In foster care, Horse was subjected to abuse by multiple foster parents. At the age of 15, her social worker removed her from one last home and left her at a women's shelter, where she says she had to grow up very quickly. Because of beginning school late and being moved around so much in foster care, Horse's education had suffered, and she had significant literacy issues. She learned, from some of the other women in the shelter, that she could make money working in the sex trade. Horse had her first drink before her first "date" in order to bolster her courage; this was also around the same time she started smoking marijuana. Horse worked on the street until she met her first husband and became pregnant, around the age of 18.

While Horse was a wife and mother, she managed her life very well and things were good for a while. Her relationship with her husband deteriorated, and he eventually divorced her and married her best friend. Horse still feels betrayed by this and also felt like she has been replaced in the lives of her children. Horse has been drinking heavily since then and has gone back to living on the streets. She is now in a relationship with a loving and supportive man, but they are both battling addictions. Though he makes very

good money, they spend it all on drugs and alcohol, and consequently, they live in shelters and rely on dumpsters for food, but she has hope that things are changing and will continue to improve after her release. She wants to repair relations with her children and be involved in the lives of her grandsons. She is scared, but hopes she can be strong.

### **The Categories**

In the previous chapter, I described my process for analyzing the interview transcripts for these six women and provided a list of the final categories used in the analysis. To remind the reader, those categories are Abuse, Care-Giving, Education, Family Support, Grief and Loss, Jail, Mental Health Counselling, Necessities of Life, The Old Ways, Parenting, Spiritual Practices, and Substance Use Counselling. I would also like to remind the reader of the symbolism of the Sacred Tree (Bopp et al., 1988). As described in the literature review, the Sacred Tree is an Aboriginal cultural symbol that encompasses four great meanings: (a) growth, (b) nourishment, (b) wholeness, and (c) protection. I have chosen to structure the remainder of this chapter according to these four great meanings. I would like to emphasize that the Sacred Tree meanings were not used in data analysis, and they should not be interpreted as a tool employed in this study. As the discussion of the symbolism of the sacred tree was intended as a framework for understanding Aboriginal cultures, so, too, does it serve as a scaffold here upon which to build the discussion of categories. My initial impulse was to employ the symbolism of the medicine wheel to structure this discussion, but the nature of the categories did not lend themselves to that framework. By contrast, they easily fit within my understanding of the four meanings of the sacred tree.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, it was not always easy to create discrete categories that were completely separated from one another. I believe this was due, in part, to the *messiness* of real life; another way to describe this messiness might be that each aspect of a person's life is connected to all other aspects of that life. The collaborative authors of *The Sacred Tree* (Bopp et al., 1988), in addressing the general concept of wholeness, referred to the interconnectedness of all things. They said that all things in the universe are connected, parts of a great whole, and that one cannot hope to understand any one thing without acknowledging its connections to everything else. In that way, these analysis categories are all interconnected, and they may each represent more than one of these meanings.

**Growth.** Growth, in the context of the Sacred Tree is about pursuits that encourage personal development (Bopp et al., 1988). Just as a tree grows from the inside out, much human development is not immediately noticeable on the surface. Sacred Tree growth is also about being respectful of our one's personal growth even when one must endure struggles. The categories that embody this aspect of the Sacred Tree are Education and Jail. The category of Education is about more than just going to school, but academics are part of it. This category certainly deals with the education received in classrooms, including any skills- or work-related training received, either in jail or in the community. Jail is about experiences these participants have had all throughout the criminal justice system.

**Education.** Many of the women in this study attended school and other programs while incarcerated, including Pauly and Willow working to obtain their General Educational Development equivalent. Taz and Pauly specifically spoke of work skills,

like welding and construction, which they learned while incarcerated. Formal education is one aspect, but some learning was also self-directed. Horse, who was shuffled around to various schools, had to teach herself to read while figuring out life on the streets, and Pauly began creating her own personal lexicon when she encountered unfamiliar words while reading in her cell.

Almost all of the participants talked about goals and dreams regarding education. Yin Yang Rose, Pauly, Shauntay, and Willow all wanted to go back to school, even just to finish high school. While most of these women aspired to manual labour in the workforce, they sometimes dreamed about more erudite goals; Pauly spoke about becoming a writer and Taz about wanting to be an addictions counsellor. Their reflections about the importance of education revealed that it is (or would be) a source of pride to finish school. Horse was certain that her life would be better if she had been able to get a stable education:

I envy the goddamn people that can read and write. I wish I could be like you because I think my life would be much better, you know? Yeah, if I can pick up that pencil and, you know, read and write. (Horse)

The women I interviewed often experienced barriers to obtaining or completing their education. Drug and alcohol use was a common hindrance, interfering with the desire to go to school and taking over many other life priorities. Moving from place to place was another barrier, whether by her own choice (i.e., Willow constantly running away) or the actions of others (i.e., Horse in foster care). Horse also was late beginning school because of lack of access, growing up so far from the nearest town. She first attended school when she was 10 years old, and then she faced further difficulties because she spoke no English. Horse's literacy issues created further obstacles because,

though she would love to take some of the programs offered in the correctional centres, “the only thing that’s gonna hold me back is my reading and my spelling.”

*Jail.* Being incarcerated was certainly a growing experience for the participants. As mentioned in Education, many of the participants took advantage of formal learning programs available in institutions. More than that, jail provided opportunities for self-improvement activities and programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Cocaine Anonymous (CA), and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meetings; counselling; release planning; chapel and other religious services; and helping services such as those offered by the Elizabeth Fry Society (E-Fry). Taz, in particular, talked about the Healing Lodge, where she served some of her federal sentence, as being a very healing experience, allowing her to learn about herself and how her experiences have helped shaped her life. Willow believed being incarcerated has been good for her. She credited her jail learning with helping her manage her drug use and drinking. Yin Yang Rose, talking about her life aspirations and the things holding her back, noted, “And all this I’ve figured out throughout these years that I’ve been here.”

The participants talked about getting medical care, having access to medications and nurses, and being able to physically heal from life on the street while incarcerated. Taz said jail has added years to her life: “I know I’m healthy because I’ve been in jail, right? You get your medical done here, right? And whatever’s wrong with you they’ll take you to the hospital, take you wherever you need to go.” Yin Yang Rose held similar beliefs, stating, “Jail is the only thing that really kept, keeps me alive.”

*Challenges on the inside.* Despite the benefits of being in jail, life inside can be fraught with challenges. There are always drugs and other contraband available for those

willing to pay the price, though none of the women I interviewed admitted to partaking of the offerings. Rather, to a woman, they talked about jail as a time to sober up and be clean. Shauntay admitted she actually wanted to come to jail to give her a chance to get off crack. Fellow inmates constitute another challenge that can make it difficult to commit to a clean life, especially when they talk about the partying they plan to do upon release. Having to hear about others' drug and alcohol use was difficult for these women.

Inmates in an institution also have to live by two sets of rules, according to Taz. There are the rules of the institution and the guards, but there are also the rules of the offenders. "Yeah, I've been living my life both ways," she said. There is also an adjustment to having to live in community with that many people, all women and all in one unit. Taz talked about being looked up to by other offenders and having young inmates come and ask for her protection, while Shauntay told of being drawn into situations or conversations without wanting to get involved:

It's only when somebody involves me in something that I have nothing to do with. I'm not into that, and they'll be, like, "Oh, well Shauntay's here, she'll help me with this." And like, fuck, they don't even know who I am, you know? Like, just leave me out of it. (Shauntay)

*Denying the outside world.* Many of these women said they reduced or cut contact with families and friends outside of jail during their incarceration. Willow divulged having no contact with her son while incarcerated because it felt like leaving him all over again. Shauntay said she did not call her children often because it is difficult for her to talk to them; it makes her miss them painfully. Taz said thinking too much about what is going on outside the jail while incarcerated is crazy-making, so she has kept her jail and community lives separate.

*In-and-out of jail.* The correctional histories of these six women all shared one main quality: repeated incarcerations. In fact, most of the women I interviewed used the phrase *in-and-out* to describe their incarceration experiences. Yin Yang Rose and Taz both have been in-and-out since turning 18 years of age. Yin Yang Rose had experience in the youth justice system, while Taz did not, but they both have lived more than half of their respective lives in custody. Willow, having the advantage of youth, has not clocked the number of years Taz and Ying Yang Rose have, but she has only spent eleven months of her few adult years out in the community, six of which were “on the run.” Horse, on the other hand, reported her first time in jail was only four years before the interview, but she has been in-and-out ever since. Shauntay had an even shorter history, but again, has accumulated charges since the first sentence, mostly from breaching conditions of her probation order. Charges and convictions earned by participants were largely for violence, drug possession, and crimes related to drug use (e.g., fraud and theft, etc.). Violence was usually assaults on siblings, partners, and the like.

What has kept these six women going in-and-out of jail? Most often, it was drugs and alcohol, but sometimes it was more esoteric than that. Pauly said she could trace the traumas related to one brother’s recklessness by her criminal record:

Every time he’d almost get killed, I’d come to jail. . . . That’s how I dealt with a lot of my issues in life. I couldn’t deal with it, so it seems like I would end up in jail. (Pauly)

Taz described a slightly more sinister reason for her recidivism, saying she has become institutionalized because of her time in custody. She has developed a kind of learned helplessness after having her day-to-day decisions made for her for so long and, as a result, is ill suited to dealing with life outside the institution.

‘Cause, like, nobody understands the life that you live in here. You have no control. Like, you have no power over your own life. Because people are in power to tell you to do this, and act like this, and don’t act like that.

For Taz, institutionalization has meant being afraid to ask for help and finding it difficult to find services and support. She is more comfortable in jail than she is out of jail; she said she feels at home inside. Taz is not the only one who felt that way, although no one else called it institutionalization. Pauly proclaimed jail to be her “comfort zone” more than once; Yin Yang Rose also felt at home inside. She said, “My life’s been in and out of jail for the last seven years. I’m used to it, you know what I mean? I’m used to coming in here, I’m used to the way things are.” Taz admitted that she would sometimes do something just to be in jail, even if she had no pending charges. For her, being institutionalized meant being unable to ask for anything, including help, and being unable to manage her own life choices.

*“I’m tired of being in here.”* Despite the institutionalization, and in spite of the benefits of being in jail, all six of these women have had enough of this life. “I am sick of it” was something voiced by many of them, and all of these women (except Horse) spoke of never wanting to come back to jail. Horse’s discontent was more with living a life on the street, but she, too, has grown tired of the in-and-out lifestyle. Each spoke as if this would be their final incarceration.

**Nourishment.** Nourishment, in the context of the Sacred Tree is what is necessary for one’s growth and development (Bopp et al., 1988). A tree bears fruit that will nourish those who eat it, but the fruit also provides a source of growth for the seed within to become its own tree. This is much like the nourishment a mother provides for her children, both in terms of food and nurturing. Spiritual teachings and wisdom, foods

for the non-physical self, are passed down to feed future generations. This great meaning of the Sacred Tree also refers to the sustenance one gets from one's interactions with the physical and spiritual parts of our world, which helps to support one's physical, social, spiritual, and emotional maturing.

The categories that represent nourishment are Necessities of Life, Parenting, and Spiritual Practices. Necessities of Life is a compilation of several categories, all of which represent more tangible needs in order to live (like housing, food, clothing, and money) as well as the need for someone to help guide them in managing these basic needs more effectively. Parenting is about nurturing these participants gave to their children, as well as nurturing they received from their own parents, and communication in these relationships. Spiritual Practices refers to Christian religious practices as well as more traditional Aboriginal customs and the intersection between the two.

*Necessities of life.* The state of being in need was usually brought up in relation to housing, whether it was seeking, losing, or simply not having housing. All of the women in the study admitted to being homeless at some point, but some (like Horse, Taz, and Yin Yang Rose) have been chronically un-housed. Some participants lived in shelters or stayed with other people. Shauntay assured me she was not literally sleeping on the street, saying, "I was selling drugs so I always had people that wanted to accommodate me, people that always wanted to give stuff to me. I had enough money to get my own place, I just never did." Horse has lived in shelters since being "dumped" at one, at the age of 15, except for the years she was married to her husband. While a couple of the women I interviewed have had their own place, a place where they could "hold the keys all the time," as Willow put it, these often did not last for long. Housing was most often lost

because of drug and alcohol use. Horse remembered feeling hopeless in one of several apartments she and her husband had managed to obtain, feeling sure they would lose their shelter yet again, stating, “It came to the point I said to hell with everything that one time.”

*Finances.* Attitudes about money influence the feeling of being in need. Those attitudes can range from Willow, who admitted, “I love money,” to Shauntay, who felt “useless” when she was not permitted to contribute to her grandfather’s household budget and even more so when she could not manage it at all following his death. Sometimes, these women have had to deal with large sums of money, as when Pauly received band money upon turning 18 and a residential school settlement cheque later in life. Taz spoke openly about her opinions of the residential school settlement money being bestowed upon survivors. She did not believe it is helping Native people to heal from that hurt.

This residential school money that is coming out is killing people because we don’t know how to handle money. That’s too much money . . . they coulda put it into some, like, services. They coulda put it into some healing programs. They coulda put it into a lot of things instead of just giving a lump sum. (Taz)

*Abundance.* There have been times for all the participants when they were not in need, times when they were doing fairly well financially, were housed, and were managing their lives. These were good times for these women because they had few worries and were, for the most part, happy. Often, these times were when they were raising their children, usually with the support of a partner or other family member. For Horse, being a mother was certainly one of the good times, but her happiest time was when she had little in the way of luxuries, yet still had everything she needed: growing up with her grandparents and living off the land.

*Choices and consequences.* Having, or not having, was sometimes a product of the choices each woman made in her own circumstance. Choosing to use drugs or drink, choosing to run away, and poor spending decisions all impacted access to basic necessities and led to accumulation of debt, ruined credit, and loss of the *normal* life. Running away was a decision participants made for different reasons. Sometimes it was preferable to where they were living at the time. Shauntay felt unloved at home, Yin Yang Rose ran away from abusive foster homes and an abusive boyfriend, Willow left her mother's home when her stepfather began sexually abusing her, and Taz ran from violence at boarding school. Sometimes, it was for company, as when Willow repeatedly tried to return to her gookum, or when Yin Yang Rose chose to be with her boyfriend.

Poor spending habits result in not having money for things that are needed. This was Shauntay's chief problem with money. She did not know how to budget and wanted to buy her children the best of everything or buy clothes that would look "cute," even if they didn't need them:

With the money that I did get, I'd take them to the store, and it would be all gone. I'd get them what they wanted, and then I'd have not enough money for groceries, and all their stuff for school. And then I'd feel depressed.

Shauntay talked about spending recklessly on her children because she felt guilty for taking them away from their dad, but she also acknowledged that she has never learned budgeting skills because she was "babied a little too much" by her grandfather.

Drugs and alcohol constitute a choice that has a broad impact on health, criminal activity, finances, housing, and family support, but I will focus on financial impact here. Money, though sometimes earned by selling drugs as was the case for Willow, Pauly, and Shauntay, was frequently depleted by consuming drugs and by drinking. An astonishing

amount of money can be spent entirely on drug and alcohol activities, and the choice is made at the expense of other needs. Horse and her husband are perfect examples of this. Her husband worked and earned a good wage, but she said, “It all goes to the drugs. We can spend \$3,000 every two weeks. That’s every two weeks. And that’s \$3,000 that can go to something else. We can have furnished probably 10 houses by now.”

*Meeting their needs.* Despite challenges and barriers, these six resourceful women still struggled to have their needs met. This was sometimes accomplished by relying on themselves, but also by the assistance of others. Relying on self meant finding some way of making money or finding what they needed. When Horse found herself on her own, she got a job at a bakery, but then turned to working in the sex trade when the bakery was insufficient. Now, after various jobs, she had collected bottles to support her need for alcohol. In tough times, she and her husband have learned to forage for food in dumpsters. Yin Yang Rose would fix roofs with her husband and work at other odd jobs. Willow, Pauly, and Shauntay, as mentioned, all financed themselves with varying success by selling drugs and, as youths, Willow and her brother would steal and sell cars to make money.

Relying on other people could be as plain as Horse begging for money on the street, or it could mean turning to family or government supports (e.g., Alberta Income for the Severely Handicapped, residential school settlements, money doled out by the reservation band, and getting First Nations-allocated funding for school programs). Sometimes Willow is forced to ask her grandmother for money. In order to get, or remain, housed, participants often relied on the kindness of family or partners, but they

also used the services of agencies, such as church groups handing out clothing and food, and the E-Fry Society assisting in finding housing and employment.

Several of the participants identified the need for some one-on-one guidance, a kind of transition worker (or “babysitter,” as Horse put it), to teach them how to live life as law-abiding, sober citizens. Taz and Willow suggested peer support from former offenders who have left jail behind and former gang members who have escaped that lifestyle, respectively. Horse and Shauntay both needed financial management assistance, and Yin Yang Rose thought she would be more successful with someone to help her keep track of appointments and generally live on her own.

*Parenting.* In sorting through the data strips, there was a difference between talk of motherhood and general parenting. Motherhood was about becoming a mother or a better mother. Only Pauly did not have her own children, being unsure if she even could. All of the other participants had their first child young, with Willow being the youngest at 13. The others ranged in age from 15 to about 18 years at first pregnancy. The fathers of these children were primarily much older, usually in their 20s. After her first child, Taz went on to have four more children. Yin Yang Rose had four children, all of whom are in the custody of others. Shauntay also had four children, all in the care of her mother at the time of the interview. Willow has only one son, but would like to have more children in the future. Horse did not directly state how many children she has, but talked of her daughter and the boys.

*Motherhood.* While Yin Yang Rose was excited to be starting a family at the tender age of 15, Shauntay and Taz admitted they were less enthusiastic. Neither had wanted children before they became pregnant. For Taz, this was partly due to the way in

which her daughter was conceived, but also to the confusion she had surrounding her sexuality. For Shauntay, it was because her brother's death taught her that children can be taken away all too soon. These differences notwithstanding, being a mother was a positive thing for all of these women. When asked about points of pride, they all mentioned their children. Being a mother made them feel responsible, gave them purpose. All six of the women expressed a desire to become better mothers to their children, better models for them, or involved grandmothers. Most expressed joy, regret, and pride when it came to matters of their children, and all expressed a desire to be an active part of their children's lives. They felt pride in how their children have grown up, and they sometimes even cited their desired relationship with their children as incentive for improving their circumstances and staying clean.

*Being a parent.* Being a parent, as opposed to a mother, is more about general parenting activities. The experience of parenting seemed to begin with babysitting, especially for Pauly and Yin Yang Rose. While Pauly helped look after nieces and nephews, Yin Yang Rose helped care for her younger foster brother and sister and, later, her boyfriend's nephew. These babysitting memories were positive ones for both Pauly and Yin Yang Rose. Currently, Taz had supported her daughters by babysitting her grandchildren for short periods of time, but became easily overwhelmed. This, however, was how she is able to spend time with them.

Being a parent had its hurdles, especially for Yin Yang Rose and Taz, both of whom had limited or intermittent involvement in their children's upbringing. Both expressed hesitations about parenting their children now due to anticipated rejection. Yin Yang Rose asked, "Why should I be telling them how to be and stuff when I didn't raise

them, you know what I mean? . . . They might get mad at me, and I don't want to bring up me not being there." Taz said, "I'm not gonna go out and try to be a mother to my children. Because they're just gonna say, 'Well you haven't been there all my life.' They'll put me down. So I never tell them anything like that."

As parents, the participants tried to set good examples by endeavouring to help and otherwise support their children. Keeping promises, babysitting grandchildren, and teaching values were ways in which the participants tried to set an example for their children. However, behaviours like drinking, using drugs, living on the streets, and being otherwise neglectful of parenting duties made it harder for these women to be that example.

*Separation from children.* Each woman experienced having to be parted from children, even if temporarily, because of being too much under the influence of drugs or alcohol to properly care for them, having to go to jail, or children growing up and leaving home. When children were given into the care of others, it was always a choice made in the best interests of the children. When not in the participant's custody, children were most often raised by other family members, and usually grandmothers, but were sometimes given over to foster care or adoptions services. Most of the participants recognized that they could not care properly for their children, and so they made the difficult decision to give up their children.

*Being parented.* This category is not only about how they raised their children, but also about how these women were raised when they were young. As children, the participants were raised by their own parents, stepparents, grandparents, and foster parents. Foster care could be a blessing, a curse, or both. Of the four women who talked

about being in foster care, Taz and Willow found it to be a positive experience that provided structure, security, and safety. Horse and Yin Yang Rose had appalling experiences in foster care, including neglect and physical and sexual abuse. Yin Yang Rose, however, also had some positive experiences in foster care with her White family, whom she still thinks of as her “mom and dad.” She described feeling safe and considered this time to be one of the happiest in her life. Most of these women described significant parenting interactions with grandparents, the exceptions being Yin Yang Rose and Pauly. These were always positive and usually involved more traditional ways of life (i.e., speaking their ancestral language, smudging, listening to stories). For Horse, it involved a simpler way of life without access to much television and more playing outside. For Shauntay and Willow, grandparents stepped in to prevent these women from being given over to foster care or adoption. No one spoke ill of grandparents or the life they had while in their care. Although these women were often abused by their own parents, there were no descriptions of grandparents being abusive, even when grandparents were residential school survivors.

*The impact of residential school.* Residential school impacted the lives of many of these women, even if only indirectly. Taz and Pauly both recognized the effect residential school had on their parents’ and, consequently, their own lives. “I’m greatly affected from that,” said Pauly. “Because my mom always seemed distant, and she only told me she loved me when she was drunk. . . . She just kind of raised me like the way the nuns would.” Taz recognized that her parents “raised me like how they were raised in residential school. . . . It just paved the way for my life.” For these two, being able to connect residential school to their violent upbringing was not much comfort, but it did

provide a springboard for understanding their experiences. When grandparents were the residential school survivors, the women in this study noted that efforts were made not to treat young ones in the manner of the schools. While discipline is part of parenting, it can be taken to extremes. Yin Yang Rose, Pauly, Willow, and Taz all reported excessive physical punishments at the hands of their parents. When discipline was unpredictable or violent, it led to fear and confusion and created problems within the home and the parent-child relationship. Failing to provide any structure also had negative effects, such as not learning how to budget and manage money.

Taz spoke a lot about how the Aboriginal family system has deteriorated in recent generations and how family was very different even for her own generation. This deterioration, she felt, is due largely to residential schools and the foster system, which interrupted the natural parenting practices of Aboriginal communities. She said, “For the Blood tribe, the family thing is broken.” According to Taz, parenting has changed because parents have lost the skill. The result of this, for the women in my study, was often abuse coupled with poor communication. Taz said her family “couldn’t express love . . . because my mom said, when they were in residential school, they were taught that [love] was dirty.” Likewise, Pauly was discouraged from asking about difficult matters, like her mother’s physical scars. Even though she is not a parent, Pauly felt the issue of parenting was important enough to select it from the needs cards. She believed good parenting made for a better and stronger community and acknowledged that she had little guidance growing up. Pauly wanted to break that cycle, saying, “I have to learn not to treat the younger ones how I was treated.” Communication patterns can be changed; while their parents often refused to talk about difficult issues and discouraged asking

questions about them, Taz and Yin Yang Rose, at least, have made efforts to share their life struggles with their children in order to foster understanding.

*Spiritual practices.* Residential schools often had religious foundations; several of the participants spoke of family learning or adopting Christian spiritual practices through their schooling. On the other hand, traditional spiritual practices were also common to most of these women. How did they manage the intersection between the two worlds?

*Commingling of Western and traditional approaches.* Pauly, for one, did not believe they could coexist. Her mother was a significant influence in her identification with Christianity and told her not to be discouraged from her belief by Aboriginal practices. Yin Yang Rose, too, believed Christianity and Aboriginal practices were not a good mix, but later contradicted herself by admitting both sides blend together to become spirituality. Despite their convictions, both women regularly participated in smudging with the unit, and Yin Yang Rose would attend sweats when she felt it was right to do so. The other participants did not share this sentiment. Taz was convinced all spirituality is “all the same but different languages.” Shauntay participated in chapel services while in jail, but also was drawn to traditional spirituality. She said her grandfather was very spiritual and did not distinguish between the two modalities. Willow’s moosoom was a traditional medicine man, but after his death, her gookum turned to Catholicism learned in residential school. Horse said she found attending church to be helpful in coping with her addictions and also wished to learn more about her traditional spirituality, believing it will help her become stronger.

*Aboriginal spiritual practices.* When speaking of Aboriginal spirituality, the participants spoke warmly, often remembering grandfathers who would smudge and

teach them in the traditional ways. This was especially true for Willow, who said the smell of sweetgrass still makes her think of her grandfather. Smudges, sweats, powwows, and dancing; these things were all comforting in their familiarity. These are the practices these women knew from their childhoods, practices that were meaningful and performed by family members, practices the participants said have made them feel lighter, stronger, connected to ancestors, and cleansed. Traditional spiritual practices are not innate, however. Shauntay, Willow, Horse, and Yin Yang Rose all indicated an interest in learning more about this side of their spirituality. Taz was grateful for the Healing Lodge because of the spiritual healing she received there.

*Prayer.* Despite their different approaches, there were some elements that all of these women shared. They all attended church regularly at some point, and all but Taz articulated that it felt good to be doing so. It provided a sense of belonging to some and created a bond with family members for others. Another commonality was prayer. All but Horse and Taz, spoke of praying regularly and relying on prayer as a source of strength. Prayer was the fall-back action for most of the women I interviewed during difficult and hopeless times, but it was also a regular pursuit. Many of them felt they did not pray enough, or consistently enough, and intend to spend more time in prayer.

Taz's failure to mention prayer in a significant way, and her assertion that church was not a beneficial thing for her was is not surprising considering her attitudes about religion. As a child, her family had to portray the image of the perfect family at church, but once home, her father would again become violent. Taz had difficulty reconciling that incongruity and soon grew to despise the religion her family held dear. In contrast, Pauly held very positive attitudes about Christianity, despite her mother's violent tendencies. In

Shauntay's case, her attitude about religion and spirituality has not remained consistent throughout her life. When her brother died, she "used the word 'hate' against God, like, so many times. And I still try to forgive myself for that."

*Beliefs.* Participants also had particular beliefs about particular aspects of spirituality. Shauntay believed some of her burdens were lightened because she spoke them out loud during a sweat. Willow said, "There are tests. He does test us, meaning God. He does test us. And it's just a matter of strength, faith, believing in yourself."

*Barriers to living spiritually.* Drugs and alcohol are perhaps the biggest spiritual hurdles faced by these six women. Substance use creates a barrier to practicing spirituality and leads to a loss of faith, loss of drive to engage in spiritual pursuits, and weakening of spiritual connection. Pauly expressed it beautifully and hauntingly:

An Elder told me that, when you use drugs and alcohol, your spirit leaves you. It'll stay with you, it will follow you and stuff, but it won't be with you, inside of you. 'Cause you're abusing yourself. I was abusing myself, so it would step out of me. And I also heard that when someone is using so much or drinking so much and then they just sober up really fast, that's when your spirit jumps back into you. Like, "Wait a minute, you gotta do something," like, maybe you gotta sober up or you're gonna OD or something like that. I don't wanna abuse my spirit anymore because it'll just leave my body again.

Shauntay also talked about the relationship between spirituality and substance use: "It does take away a lot from you, but then, as you pray more, it comes back in."

**Wholeness.** The wholeness of the Sacred Tree is about unity and balancing (Bopp et al., 1988). The lessons one learns here provide a base around which one organizes values, and a platform for comprehending and balancing all aspects of one's self, even those that appear to contradict another. As beings, one begins life in a state of wholeness. Interactions with family, community, and society can cause rifts in that wholeness;

fortunately, people are able to heal themselves spiritually through seeking balance within themselves (Bopp et al., 1988).

The categories under this heading exemplify rifts in the wholeness of each of these women. There are the things that hurt them, eat at them, and cause them to feel shame. Grief and Loss is about abandonment, death of loved ones, and other forfeitures. Abuse examines the various assaults endured by the women in the study, the violence to which they have been witnesses, and the abuses they have committed against others. Substance Abuse Counselling deals with drugs and alcohol, using and drinking, treatment and addiction.

*Grief and loss.* Being abandoned by a trusted other was a loss that some struggled to overcome. These women felt abandoned by parents. Taz's mother left her children in the care of their abusive father and remarried. Yin Yang Rose clearly felt betrayed by her White parents' allowing her to be moved to a home on the reserve, especially since she and her brother had been hoping to be adopted by them. Horse was abandoned by her social worker at the age of 15, at a shelter for women in Edmonton. "I remember my social worker saying, 'Here she is,' and she walked away. . . . All I seen was the door closed. . . . So that's how she got rid of me." This was a person whose job it was to look after Horse's best interests, and "she just dumped me. Totally dumped me right there when I was 15 years old."

Not surprisingly, death was another common cause of grieving, and the women in this study have held on to the grief of those losses, some for many years. Some of the deaths were violent, and some were from more natural causes. Some of the participants were coping with the suicide of a loved one. Some lost people who were young, and

some were mourning grandparents. The circumstances of the death did not seem to be connected to the level of grief experienced by each woman. Shauntay said her life fell apart following the death of her grandfather, and she still has difficulty talking about his passing even though it has been many years. Willow, too, felt lost after her grandfather passed away. Yin Yang Rose said she laboured to cope with the death of her natural parents, even though she had only just begun to develop a relationship with them.

Half of the women I interviewed had siblings die violently. Shauntay witnessed her brother's death by shooting when he was but 10 years old. Pauly's young brother was killed by another brother, who was only about 16 years old at the time. That brother went to jail, which was another loss. Horse had a sister who died in custody at a correctional institution, killed in a struggle with officers, according to other inmates. Re-traumatized by hearing the death occurred at the very institution where I held the interviews, Horse admitted she has "been having a lot of problems since [she died]. . . . I just can't get rid of her," said Horse.

Suicide, also a form of violent death, was another source of grief. Willow lost her mother to suicide; she hung herself on Willow's 17th birthday. Willow remembered: "When she did it, it made me feel like I was nothing to her because first came the abandonment, the abuse, and then using me [for money], and then my birthday." Pauly was surrounded by suicide when she was young. It was a "very big thing" on her reserve. She wrote in a letter for her pre-sentencing report, which she shared openly in the interview,

Things were really getting tough because everyone I grew up with started killing themselves. All the kids from down the road hung themselves, my best friend died in a freak accident, my brother was in jail for murder and he was only 16.

Participants' emotional reactions to death included the expected sadness and regret, but also blame. Many of them blamed themselves for the death of a loved one. Blaming self was not affected by type of death among these women. Willow admitted she wondered about her culpability in her mother's suicide for a time, but has since absolved herself. Yin Yang Rose blamed herself for her husband's death by overdose. They avoided these emotional reactions by drinking or using drugs, getting sent back to jail, or otherwise "going downhill." They gave up on themselves, hid their feelings, and put on a happy front. Shauntay said, "I guess I just don't wanna feel like I'm gonna lose that somehow. It's kind of weird, eh? Like, if I talk about him then I'll lose him. I don't know."

*Abuse.* Pauly, Taz, Horse, and Willow all suffered abuse at the hands of their parents as did Yin Yang Rose, who considered her foster parents to be her "mom and dad." Pauly, Yin Yang Rose, and Willow were physically abused by their mothers, while Horse and Taz suffered with violent fathers. Willow was also sexually abused by a stepfather, and Pauly's natural father sexually abused some of her older sisters. Sometimes, the physical abuse endured by the participants involved a weapon, like a wooden spoon or a spreader, but was also exacted with bare hands and fists. Yin Yang Rose was also repeatedly locked in a cellar, furnace room, or closet when she misbehaved.

Some understanding about why parents had been so violent came with age and an understanding of the impact of residential school. Taz said she now understands that her father was sick: "I think he was abused, you know? I think he was abused and I understand that now." Pauly's mother drank a lot which, she admitted, means she saw a

lot of violence. Yin Yang Rose made excuses for her mom, saying she and her brother were “outta control,” and her mother had difficulty in handling them.

In foster care, abuse seemed to be even more extreme than in biological families. For Yin Yang Rose, her earliest memories were of being abused physically and sexually in the group home where she lived. When she was moved to foster care on the reserve, she was subjected to more abuse. Being tied to a chair, left in dark rooms, and beaten publicly at a powwow were all punishments Yin Yang Rose suffered at the hands of foster parents. Horse described foster care as being a kind of hell as well. She was whipped for being disrespectful to a foster brother, molested by her various dads and a mom, and she woke one morning naked with no memory of what had happened.

*Abuse at the hands of others.* Siblings could also be very abusive too, in Pauly’s case. She had been beaten by more than one sister, and her brothers would create a sort of fighting ring where she was forced to fight her younger sister, sometimes with weapons, for the boys’ entertainment. When abuse was at the hands of non-relatives or extended family members, it was usually sexual in nature. Pauly’s stepbrother and Yin Yang Rose’s White foster cousin each interfered with each woman as children, and Taz divulged being sexually abused by two different relatives, one of whom was a woman, through most of her life. Pauly had also been raped by an older man who lived down the road from her family. Shauntay, who shared no instances of abuse of any kind as a youngster, was the only one who grew up relatively unscathed by familial violence. It seems that grandparents never beat their grandchildren or used physical punishment for discipline. This held true even when participants’ violent parents became grandparents

themselves. For example, Taz was confident that her mother, in raising Taz's children, has never been violent with them.

As these women grew up and became involved in more adult-like relationships, they were no longer abused by parents and adapted to others in their lives being the aggressors of violence. For Taz, this occurred when her mother sent her to boarding school in an attempt to remove her from her father's violence. Taz was the only Blackfoot student in a Cree school and was subjected to merciless abuse, including an initiation rape, by the other students. She said she had to be isolated from the other students when not in classes and that even some teachers treated her poorly. She said, "When I came back home, I was worse than I was ever in my life. I didn't care. I didn't care if my dad beat me up or anything. I didn't care." Horse, too, found school to be a frightening place. She recalled being taunted by the other, mostly White, students at the school and bus stop and being struck by her teacher in front of her class because young Horse could not speak English. Willow took beatings from other gang members as a part of her initiation and was required to do "things" she did not disclose, in order to be accepted by them. Both Taz and Ying Yang Rose have been assaulted by other people on the street.

*Abuse at the hands of partners.* A significant source of abuse in adulthood was the personal, romantic relationship. Spousal abuse took many forms, including threats and jealousy. Shauntay, Yin Yang Rose, and Horse were all accused by their partners of being, or wanting to be, unfaithful. Shauntay had been so effectively isolated from friends and family by her boyfriend that infidelity would not have been possible. Horse's husband even went so far as to "go down there and check, to see if I did [fool around]"

when she would return from a night out with friends. Being young, Shauntay thought the jealousy meant her boyfriend loved her, but these women soon learned that jealousy was a precursor for additional abuses. Mental abuse from spouses and boyfriends went beyond the jealousy and isolating behaviours described above; it also included being controlling, stalking, and searching for the woman when she had managed to leave and giving ultimata (i.e., when Taz was told to choose between her husband and the children). Other kinds of spousal abuse were, of course, physical, but Yin Yang Rose also told of her boyfriend forcibly having sex with her at times when she was not willing.

In some cases, the woman's life was threatened or was placed in potential lethal danger. Taz's female partner managed to hit her with a minivan. Yin Yang Rose had a knife held to her pregnant belly while her boyfriend threatened to kill her and the baby. Pauly was severely beaten by boyfriends and was even held hostage by one. Shauntay finally found the strength to leave her boyfriend when she realized her children were witnessing her beatings.

My oldest son knew. He was three and a half, and he was the one who came up to me and asked me, "Mommy, did daddy hit you again?" And I was standing in the mirror and I was pregnant with my fourth kid, and I was, like, "Your dad is never gonna hurt me again. You're never gonna ask me that again." And we left that same night. (Shauntay)

*Responses to abuse.* The participants' responses to, or consequences of, a lifetime of abuse can be organized into three main groups: development of *mental scars*, *avoiding or denying* the abuse, and *taking control* of her life back. Mental scars are the emotional ramifications the participants experience as a result of abuse. These included feeling hurt and betrayed, disappointed in the abuser, ashamed, ugly, dirty, or lonely. Confusion surrounding what to do about the abuse and about herself was another aspect of this type

of reaction. Taz became confused about her sexuality, which she believed was a result of being molested by a woman from a young age. Another reaction was keeping other people at an emotional and physical distance. Horse, because of being abused by foster fathers, consequently became very shy around men and did not want to engage with them. Yin Yang Rose would allow men to be with her, but withheld affection from them, especially after her non-abusive husband died.

Avoidance and denial of abuse refers to blocking out the memories of what the participants had experienced, which Yin Yang Rose, Taz, and Horse suggested was a necessary part of coping. Horse said,

You get to learn how to do that. At the beginning, when it first happens, you can't tell nobody because nobody's gonna believe you, right? And counting that, they'll threaten you when they do that. So you get scared and you don't tell anybody. Just keep it to yourself.

When Pauly's mother asked her directly if her stepbrother had sexually abused her, Pauly denied it because she was too ashamed to admit it had happened. Shauntay, also feeling shame, stayed with her abuser for a long time because she did not want the community to know what was happening behind her closed doors. Drinking and using drugs was another effective way to avoid feeling the mental scars of abuse: a discussion I will save for the next category.

Taking back control of life refers to the ways in which these six women were able to regain some of their power, whether by managing to leave the abuser, talking about the abuse with trusted others, or comforting those who have been through similar experiences. The participants in the group were rarely alone in being victims of abuse. Other known victims included parents and siblings, who were often subjected to abuse alongside the woman in question. Shauntay learned her boyfriend's previous girlfriend

was one of his victims, and Horse said her husband was rumoured to have molested one of his own sisters. In Pauly's case, several of her siblings were involved in abusive relationship and also abused their own children.

It was not uncommon for steps to be taken by the women I interviewed to protect others from abuse, even if they could not always protect themselves. Horse was protective of her younger sister as children, keeping her close at night to guard her from a lascivious uncle. She was, perhaps, overly protective of her daughter; Horse rarely left her alone with the girl's father. Shauntay wanted to protect her children both from being abused and having to watch their father hit their mother. There were also instances of others protecting the participants. Even though it backfired, Taz's mother sending her to boarding school was an attempt to protect her daughter, and Horse's mother would hide the children behind their wood stove when Horse's father had a rage upon him. Mothers were not the only protectors, either. Horse's brother would wake her during the night when she had wet the bed to clean her before their father could see, and Taz's violent father stood up for her against her cousin who abused her throughout her childhood.

*Witnesses to violence.* A thread of violence was woven through each woman's tapestry. These women have been not only victims of abuse, but also witness to violence committed against others, and they often visited violence upon others. I have told of Pauly's exposure to the rash of suicides around her and of the death of her brother; I have shared, too, the tragedy of Shauntay's brother's death. So much exposure to violence allowed it to become almost normal. Pauly said she "grew up with a lot of violence in my family. It was accepted and it was, like, a learned behaviour." Fighting was a common problem. Besides Pauly being made to fight her sister, she also recalled choosing which

knife to carry as she got ready for a night of peddling drugs. Taz said she has fought most of her life; she learned, from her father's abusive nature not to argue with people, but simply to start hitting. Horse released her foster care frustrations by being physically aggressive with other children at her schools. Yin Yang Rose said her first jail sentence was for a fight with another woman.

Besides fighting, participants were sometimes abusive to others in their life or at least cognizant of their potential to abuse others. Taz gave her children over to family services and, ultimately, her mother, in part because she was worried she would begin to abuse them. About her current partner, a very volatile relationship, Taz said, "I can't stay with somebody I don't love because I'm gonna end up abusing her." Yin Yang Rose shared how she would physically assault the husband who treated her gently. Pauly admitted she would be physically aggressive with boyfriends, but, more often, would behave in ways she considered mentally abusive.

*Substance use counselling.* Perhaps not surprisingly, all of the women in this study experienced problems with drug and alcohol use. Willow, however, was the only one who did not frame her substance use as an addiction.

*Substances used.* A vast assortment of substances were used by these women, including alcohol, marijuana, crack cocaine, cocaine, morphine, methamphetamine (i.e., speed), solvents, acid, mushrooms, and prescription medications. The most pervasive were alcohol and crack. Each woman except Willow acknowledged having significant problems with one or both substances. Willow's experience with crack and also with speed lasted but a few months. Then, she said, she smartened up and just quit. Now she only drinks and smokes marijuana. Each woman's opinion varied as to whether crack or

alcohol had a more negative impact in their lives, but all of the women I interviewed felt they needed to remove substance use from their lives.

*Exposure to substance use.* Almost all of the women in the study had family members who would drink or use drugs. Taz said, “My parents didn’t drink but they were dry drunks. Like, they still had the anger and stuff of a drunk. They’d rather be drunk, right?” Her husband was a drinker; she learned after they were wed that he came from an alcoholic family, and it was with him that her drinking really began: “I don’t know, one day I just ended up drinking more than him, and I could never stop.” Yin Yang Rose was not raised with any Aboriginal relatives until she was moved to the reserve, but she associated with them on the street. She said, “We’re pretty much all alcoholics, you know what I mean?” While with her Mormon foster family, she was not exposed to any drug or alcohol use. Pauly’s family has displayed extensive drinking and drug use, and at least three of her siblings have successfully been through treatment. Even her nephews and nieces struggle with substance use issues. She said, “A lot of the kids, too, they have addictions. They didn’t have much guidance. Well, I never had much guidance either.” Pauly’s sister has a son with FASD, and Pauly learned that her own mother drank while carrying several of her children. Learning she also has FASD was uncomfortable for Pauly, but she was trying to come to terms with it.

Horse’s mother did not engage in much drinking until the family moved into town and began living with Horse’s abusive father. Willow had a family who, like her, enjoyed partying, but drugs and alcohol were never permitted in her gookum’s house. She would frequently attend parties at nearby houses of relatives, even when she was young. Her mother, she says, was addicted to crack. Shauntay’s family did not seem to have any

issues concerning substance use, even though Shauntay did make anecdotal references to drinking with her family.

Alcohol and drug use typically started very early. Horse was the oldest at her first exposure; she had reached the advanced age of 15 the first time she had a drink. Taz was around 17 years of age when she started drinking, but had been sniffing solvents since the age of 10. Other participants began their drinking as early as 8 to 11 years of age, and drug use began around the same time. Pauly had her first line of cocaine at the age of 13, and Willow was smoking marijuana by age 9. Those first-time experiences were usually had with family members who initiated them into the use of the substance. Circumstances that propelled substance use into the problematic domain included coming into large sums of money (i.e., Pauly receiving band money upon turning 18), self-medicating, being under the influence of another substance at the time, being in a substance-saturated environment, and experiencing feelings of depression and despair.

*Availability of drugs and alcohol.* One of the thorny aspects of substances, according to the participants, was that they were ubiquitous and relatively easy to access. Willow pointed out that there is a liquor store on almost every block and that low-rent houses will invariably be let to drug dealers. More than one woman commented that drugs just seemed to find her even when she was trying to get clean. Shelters, friends' houses, the street, and even jail were all identified as potential sources of drugs. Whenever money was plentiful, it would usually be spent on drugs. If the participant (i.e., Pauly) was selling for another dealer, she may even get paid with drugs. Shauntay's grandfather gave her money each month once she moved in with her boyfriend, and they

used that money to buy alcohol and marijuana. When living with her friend's family, Shauntay had free access to drugs.

*Selling drugs.* Half of the women in the study fell into selling drugs. Willow and Pauly both had older brothers who were drug dealers, and Pauly, at least, said she looked up to hers. She did not always enjoy selling drugs; however, when she found herself getting back into the business after a month or two of clean-living, she said, "The way I felt when I was holding all those drugs, I just felt sick. I thought, oh no." Willow, on the other hand, loved the money she made selling, and I suspect she also enjoyed the very intense lifestyle associated with being a drug dealer and being in a gang. Whatever the feeling associated with selling, all three of the women managed to survive without supports, and they met some of their needs through this enterprise. They were all very good at what they did and soon cultivated infamous reputations.

*Under the influence.* The participants talked about what they were like when under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Willow became popular among her younger siblings for her partying ways, but she admitted she usually did not make sound decisions while drinking. Shauntay said the type of drunk she was would depend on the people with whom she was drinking. Sometimes, she could be fun and happy, but most often she cried herself to sleep. While Horse admitted alcohol turns her into a "mean bitch," she said crack allows her to mellow out and become more comfortable in public. These women found themselves doing things, either while on drugs or to obtain drugs, which they had previously considered outside of their characters. Yin Yang Rose said she would steal, rob people, and manipulate others to get what she wanted. Pauly said she would trade sex for drugs. Horse would "put my house upside down" looking for change to buy

alcohol and then drink openly in the street, and Shauntay would intimidate other people who had what she wanted.

Cravings were a part of the experience of addiction, and Horse gave a particularly vivid description of what it was like to crave alcohol:

I'm coming to that point now that I know I'm an alcoholic because I crave for it. And when I crave for it, I'll do anything just to get that drink. . . . That craving is awful, like it's right in your mouth. It's like you can't take it outta your brain. You know when you're craving for a candy? You're just, like, oh I gotta have it. That taste is there, the mind thing is there. It's like you gotta have it.

Horse said the cravings can drive you crazy, and in a poem she wrote, Pauly described craving as “beyond mental control.” More than one woman intimated that she was afraid of drugs or of alcohol, that she felt powerless against them. Giving in to cravings meant electing to spend money on drugs rather than housing or food, choosing substances over friends or personal safety, deciding to run away or leave home, and embracing a return to selling, using, and living on the street. Shauntay said crack was the first thing she would do in the morning and the last thing she would do at night; if she didn't have any, she would go out and find it.

*Barriers to sobriety.* It was very difficult for these women to stop using, with the exception being Willow who used and drank only recreationally. Some things made it more difficult to quit. In jail, even if they did not partake of drugs, they still had to contend with other inmates talking about using. Shauntay said one barrier she encountered in her journey toward sobriety was always returning to the same city wherein she would find the same associates and the same areas in which to use. Horse said getting handouts on the street and having access to shelters made it harder to stop because these

amenities made it easier to use. It was just very hard to quit, plain and simple. Pauly summed it up nicely when she said, “One is too many, and a thousand is never enough.”

Even when the participants managed to quit for a time, there was always something that would drag them back. Triggers (i.e., situations or feelings that provide a reason for using) kept them turning and returning to substance use. When participants experienced something they did not want to feel, substances numbed the sensation and erased associated thoughts. Grief, guilt, depression, shame, and loneliness are all emotions that these six women temporarily kept at bay by engaging in substance use. They used in order to not think about what happened to them as children, to not remember that their children were taken from them, and to forget about the people who have died and left them behind. Any void could be filled and blankness created with bottle or crack pipe. Willow described her reasons for using in a very stirring way when she said, “The real emotions are laid out. I have the drugs on top of it, and I only feel what I feel when I’m feeling the drugs.”

*Choices and consequences.* Choosing to use drugs was not without its consequences. Getting in trouble was one such consequence, and it was usually of the legal kind; charges and crimes were most often drug or alcohol related. Taz asserted that most of the offenders in jail have substance use problems. Horse said alcohol gets her in far more trouble than crack will, and Willow noted, “When I’m drunk, I do stupid shit. . . . I tend to steal cars.” A further consequence of drug and alcohol use was the loss or neglect of personal values and family. Between them, these women have lost family trust and respect, faith, relationships, and opportunities for education; they have neglected children, self, responsibilities, and spiritual development.

Neglect of self, coupled with drug use, can lead to another consequence: health complications. FASD is but one health issue, but there are others, both witnessed and experienced. Horse witnessed a woman experiencing delirium tremors while at the Calgary Remand Centre, and Pauly heard horror stories of the physical effects of morphine addiction. Yin Yang Rose had been hospitalized many times because of drug use and drinking and said her arms would be so sore and full of puncture marks that she would scream when they were touched. Pauly had a serious kidney infection, and she had contracted Hepatitis C from her intravenous drug use. Shauntay's family was shocked to see how much weight she had lost when she was using and living on the street. Then there are the physical effects of the drugs themselves: Willow once went 13 days without sleeping, and Taz said her brain has been affected by her use of solvents.

Shame and blame acted as both triggers and consequences. Horse blamed the government for taking away her grandfather's land and exposing her to the life she inevitably led, and she blamed the drugs and alcohol for her divorce. Shauntay laid some of the blame for her current circumstances on crack because she became addicted almost as soon as she tried it. Guilt and shame centred around relapses, the types of drugs used, and allowing people to witness the drug use, but this guilt was also drowned out with alcohol and drugs; Yin Yang Rose and Horse both drank while working in the sex trade, and Yin Yang Rose and Taz turned to drink to deal when their children rejecting them.

*Sober success.* According to Pauly, support from a network of sober people is necessary for getting clean. Support can be emotional or pragmatic; Horse's brother encouraged her to take her medications, Pauly's sister brought her to AA meetings, and Shauntay received needed drug counselling in custody. Sometimes, support was purely

damage control, as when Yin Yang Rose's husband brought her to treatment or looked after the children as she drank. Treatment and meetings worked well for most of the participants, but the effects were frequently short-lived. Pauly had been to treatment multiple times and lamented that her brother only needed to go once for it to work. CA and AA meetings, however, provided her with specific activities that kept her moving forward in spite of relapses. Despite finding meetings helpful, Pauly, Shauntay, and Horse all stopped attending for reasons undisclosed.

All six of the women had periods when they were not using or drinking. For Yin Yang Rose, the only time in her life she was truly clean and sober was when she was a young child. Willow, too, was drug- and alcohol-free before becoming a preteen. There were times when they would say no to one thing, but indulge in another. For example, Horse stopped drinking when she was married and raising her children, but she continued to smoke marijuana, and, of course, there were times of incarceration when all six of these women had limited access to drugs and alcohol or simply chose not to use them. All of the participants, but Taz, mentioned times in their lives when they were able to resist a craving, and all expressed a hope or desire to withstand in the future. Being in jail made it easier to refuse or distract from a gnawing need and also to consider the consequences of using before giving in.

*Wanting to stop.* Not one woman said she loved her lifestyle; not one wanted to continue getting high or drinking. They all wanted to escape the clutches of substance use, but were uncertain how to do this. They did, however, have some insights about substance use and sobriety. They all recognized that they could not reach this goal on their own, that they needed some outside help. For some, this meant counselling; for

others, it meant spiritual guidance and connectedness. Sentiments about making their own success, there never being just “one more time,” and needing drive and resources to be free of drugs were verbalized by the participants. According to them, they simply needed a push and perhaps a navigator, similar to the transition worker discussed in *Necessities of Life*, to get them to their destination: a life without drugs or alcohol.

**Protection.** A tree offers natural protection from the elements and the Sacred Tree offers symbolic protection (Bopp et al., 1988). It is to be a place of peace, of centring, and balance. Values are born under the canopy of the Sacred Tree, and it is here that people able to see their potential for wholeness and to nurture and nourish the seed of that self.

The Old Ways is about older ways of living, but not strictly referring to life as it was prior to colonization. It also refers to how participants’ lives used to be, including life with grandparents. Mental Health Counselling encompasses issues relating to the participants’ mental health, including counselling, treatment, or diagnoses; comments related to their self-esteem and their understandings of their own personalities; their own experience with suicidal ideation, hope and hopelessness; and the expression and experience of a variety of emotions. Care-Giving, which is the smallest of the categories, is about the caring the participants provided to others and also the caring they received from others. Family Support is about the support participants received from family members, including, but not limited to, child care and custody, practical help, and emotional support.

*The old ways.* When presented with the needs cards, some participants asked about what individual cards meant; they were encouraged to use the cards as they

understood them best. Willow explored the Traditional Lands card as being the cultural grounding of her lineage, with her ancestors serving as the foundation for her own life and the life of her tribe. She saw this as particularly important to her because of her moosoom's status as a medicine man. She noted, "We lived that traditional life when he was around." Most of these women expressed a love of their culture in some way, but Willow was particularly effusive about it: "I love being Aboriginal! I love it. . . . We have such a nice culture, like, a beautiful culture, and that's why it's important to me." As I have mentioned, Pauly and Yin Yang Rose were not deeply connected to traditional ways related to spirituality, yet they both described participation in smudging, a yearning to learn their traditional language, and time spent with Aboriginal Elders. All of the others expressed a desire for increased connectedness with their culture and their background.

*Living the old ways with grandparents.* While Shauntay and Willow considered at least one grandparent to be a parental surrogate and enjoyed their upbringing, only Taz and Horse talked at length about what it was like to live with grandparents. Taz and Horse were not able to watch television, but had their grandparents' stories to entertain and teach. Respect for grandparents was simply the expectation for all four of these women. Family was about togetherness back then, but Taz said this is changing: "There is no family togetherness anymore. Like, you don't all go to grandma's house anymore, all the family. . . . Today you don't see that. They'll just throw you out on the street, right?"

That older way of living also included rites and traditions, many of them spiritual. There was no easy way to extricate the activity from the spirituality, as they were so closely intertwined, but the participants did provide examples of traditions observed by

their families and communities. Shauntay spoke of the tradition of burning the belongings of someone recently deceased as a way of releasing that person's spirit: "My dad used to tell me that it kinda stops a person from being at peace to hold on to their stuff."

Shauntay's grandfather taught her son how to drum, and he drummed at her grandfather's funeral, a memory she continues to cherish. Willow talked of her grandfather's role as a medicine man and the strength of his medicine. Horse told of her brothers going on vision quests, Native burials for aunts who passed away, and celebrations when girls experienced menarche.

*Traditional language.* One of the ways in which the participants wanted to rebuild cultural connections was through their language. All of the participants, except for Yin Yang Rose, talked about exposure to their families' languages and yet, Yin Yang Rose, too, wanted to learn Blackfoot. Some of these women spoke their language when they were young; Horse, in fact, spoke no English growing up. Most have lost what they knew of their language since growing up, although Taz admitted she can speak hesitatingly in Blackfoot. Grandparents were typically the source of traditional language. This was because they made a point of speaking it with their grandchildren or because they couldn't manage—or did not want to use—English. Unfortunately, alcohol and drugs disconnected these women from their ancestral language. Taz also made mention of the impact of residential schools on traditional language, noting that students were forcibly discouraged from speaking anything but English, while their families at home spoke little to no English.

*Losing traditions.* Sadly, the old ways are slipping away, according to participants. Taz and Pauly both noted that things are not the way they used to be,

especially when it comes to respecting Elders. Language and traditions that are not being passed down are being lost, and new generations have different priorities. Besides the impact of residential schools on cultural attrition, Taz also credited television, gang influence, and the indifference of the current generations, which for Taz, meant that Aboriginal people are losing significant parts of what it means to be Aboriginal. Anger and past hurts, Taz said, are contributing to decreased communication, interest, and respect, and she did not believe her people would be able to repair the damage entirely: “Everybody says, ‘Well, no, we’re trying to get back.’ You can’t get back something. It’s already gone.”

*Mental health counselling.* The participants would often talk about what was *wrong* with them or their lives, which they called “my issues” or “my problems.” Sometimes, the constructs were amorphous and vague, but they could be more specific and articulate things like feeling lonely or abandoned, guilt, shame, or blame, facing childhood trauma issues, and having difficulty in asking for help and coping with grief. Pauly very astutely assessed what has been holding her back: “I don’t wanna change. It’s different, and it’s work. And it’ll hurt.” Yet, she knew that change is necessary for healing.

*Self-esteem.* Generally speaking, interactions with significant others did not contribute positively to participants’ self-esteem. Shauntay’s sister’s daily harassment about her drug use is one example of this that resulted in Shauntay feeling “worthless.” Her grandfather’s refusal to allow her to contribute financially to the household left Shauntay feeling “useless.” When she had not started dating boys as an adolescent, Taz’s parents encouraged her to be “normal,” which exacerbated her feeling that something was

wrong with her, and Horse's father calling her his "White lady" had a negative impact on her, as did differential treatment by her siblings.

When these six women did have positive things to say about themselves, they were often brief and non-specific. Yin Yang Rose experienced increased self-esteem while with her husband. Shauntay acknowledged that she deserved better than the lot she has given herself: "I deserve more than just giving up, being a fall down." Pauly felt good about herself when she was attending AA meetings with her sister. Despite all she had been through, she ended the poem she shared during the interview with the words: "I like who I am today."

These positive self-esteem gems were grossly outnumbered by negative statements. Some of the participants, Yin Yang Rose and Pauly in particular, admitted they just could not reconcile themselves to the good in their lives. They could not believe good times would last and would often self-sabotage rather than wait for imminent failure. Poor self-esteem had them reporting feeling left out, useless, worthless, dirty, and ugly. When they were mired in low self-esteem, they felt undeserving of respect. They allowed themselves to be used by others in exchange for acceptance, safety, shelter, and more.

*Feelings and emotions.* Willow, Shauntay, Pauly, Horse, and Yin Yang Rose experienced the full spectrum of emotions, both in their lives as they told them to me and in the interviews themselves. Taz alone displayed a narrower continuum of emotions. Positive emotions that were articulated included happiness, forgiveness, and feeling safe, while the more difficult emotions that emerged included shame, loneliness, anger, and fear. Yin Yang Rose and Shauntay talked about feeling safe—or unsafe—around specific

people. Being safe did not mean free from harm; on the contrary, I have already discussed how both women felt safe with people who were abusive. When she was older, Yin Yang Rose felt safe with a homosexual friend because he never tried to touch her sexually, even though he acted as her pimp. Almost all of the participants talked about forgiveness, usually toward others. Shauntay forgave herself for leaving her abusive boyfriend and taking her children away from their father. Horse forgave a cherished sister who confessed to having fooled around with her husband. Willow let go of the blame she was bearing regarding her mother's suicide and, in so doing, was able to forgive herself. Nearly every woman spoke of a time in which she was happy, however fleeting that moment may have been. The moment was often a time in childhood, especially when living with grandparents. Sometimes, happiness was related to children and being a mother and other times to helping other people.

The interviews revealed some difficult emotions experienced by these women. Shame, guilt, and self-blame have prevented them from talking about abuses, improving relationships with children, seeking help for specific problems, and enrolling in programs while incarcerated. The women in my study were fearful of being released and having to cope with everything the outside world could throw at them, especially in terms of drugs and alcohol. Taz was afraid of her partner and of her own escalating violence. Horse and Shauntay were afraid of their addictions, and Yin Yang Rose was afraid of rejection from her children. Pauly noticed a trend in her own life: "I think when I choose to be violent it means that I'm scared." Anger led to violence for some of the participants (i.e., Pauly, Shauntay, Taz, and Horse), especially when substances were involved. It is sometimes

held in, as with Pauly's experience of sexual abuse. Anger increased as abuse increased, and it was sometimes directed at people who have died—those who “left.”

*Coping with difficult emotions.* Most of the ways in which these six women coped with negative emotions were maladaptive. Shauntay would lie to her family about how she was doing or feeling to hasten their departure. Many of them spoke of running away. Drinking and using drugs was another quick, if costly, way to avoid negative emotions and memories. Denying them was another option and was often helped along by substance use. These strategies of avoidance were not effective in actually dealing with the issue represented by the negative emotion. As Pauly said,

I've also learned that, in order to pick through the pain, you have to go through the pain. You can't go around it, or turn around. I've done that. Can't go over it, but to get through it you have to go through it.

Positive coping strategies included talking about negative events, and some even found these research interviews helpful in that way. Sometimes, holding on to hope was all the coping strategy these women needed. Statements about hope were all future-oriented and were typically about this finally being the time that each woman would make permanent, positive changes in life. Hopeful data strips outnumbered those for hopelessness, which was heartening, but hopelessness did creep into the participants' lives. Hopelessness was one feeling that led directly to thoughts of self-harm and suicidal ideation.

*The shadow of suicidal thoughts.* While none of these women showed any sign of suicidal thoughts at the time of interviewing, more than one admitted to thinking about, or attempting, suicide in the past. Shauntay spoke often about her desire to die, both after her brother was killed and following her grandfather's death. She said,

I tried committing suicide so many times after my brother died. . . . I went to a psych ward a couple of times because I was suicidal. They didn't know what was wrong with me and I wasn't opening up, so I didn't know what was wrong with me. All I knew was that I wanted to die and that I never wanted to have kids.

She also shared that she deliberately sought out crack after her grandfather passed away because she had "heard you could die from crack cocaine."

Willow said she tried suicide after her moosoom died: "I didn't know what to do. I was lost. I was hurting. I didn't wanna feel everything I was feeling." She was not successful thanks to the intervention of a cousin. Pauly did not recall being suicidal herself, but did note the large number of suicides occurring on her reserve growing up. Yin Yang Rose once threatened her own life when she could no longer cope with her abusive boyfriend, but did not clearly state an intention to kill herself. Willow, who once blamed herself for her mother's suicide, has come to learn that it had nothing to do with her or their relationship. Suicide is very personal. She said,

There are a lot of things that lead to suicide, a lot of emotions, a lot of things built up. A lot of pain, you know? Not knowing who to go to, just feeling alone, and I believe that that's how she felt. That was her only way out of the pain.

*Mental illness.* Some of the participants had been medically diagnosed with a mental illness, and others spoke about undiagnosed symptoms that could, potentially, be considered to be anxiety, depression, or other mental health concerns. Statements about depression or feeling depressed comprised the largest single group of data strips in this area, and depression was largely self-identified rather than diagnosed. Depressed feelings invariably led to becoming intoxicated (i.e., avoidance) and other self-harming behaviours (i.e., suicide attempts). Feelings of depression most often came about because of bereavement, but were also linked with worthlessness, abuse, self-esteem, and loneliness.

When it came to other mental health issues, some of the participants had actually received diagnoses and were being treated. Horse was diagnosed with a panic disorder after an episode of irrational fear that occurred at the park with her children. She was unable to leave her house and carry out daily tasks until she was given medication. Taz said she has schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, and she takes medication for them while in jail. She believed her use of solvents may have contributed to the etiology of her mental health concerns. Pauly was diagnosed with PTSD while in a treatment facility, and she also believed herself to have FASD. She also described her relationships with several boyfriends as codependent. Shauntay, other than her hospitalizations for suicide attempts, disclosed having had anxiety attacks in jail and anxiety dreams about drugs.

*Meeting their mental health needs.* There are ways to improve one's mental health, even when struggling with a diagnosed disorder, and the women in this study could prove very resourceful in this endeavour. Where someone had a mental disorder, medications were found to be very helpful and stabilizing. After Horse began her course of treatment, she was effortlessly able to get up and take her children to school. Taz, too, found her medications to be of great benefit when she was able to take them. In the community, she has to find other ways to cope, which often meant drinking. Horse also used alcohol to medicate herself when she ran out of her prescription medication.

Some of the women I interviewed found help in formal therapy, whether individual or group, in treatment or independently. Pauly continued sessions in the community with a psychiatrist who ran a treatment group. She said she developed personal insights from discussing "my problems" from different angles and with a professional helper. Taz found the spiritual and personal guidance she received at the

Healing Lodge to be very helpful, beginning her process of healing. Yin Yang Rose met with trusted helpers at the correctional centre to find help and comfort. Even if the helper was not professional, simply talking about their struggles proved helpful. Yin Yang Rose would share stories with other girls in a secure group home, and Pauly made use of the Kids Help Phone line as an adolescent. Formal therapy, depending on the woman's commitment and attitude, could be very effective. Pauly admitted that she put herself in counselling when she was young, but found it to be ineffective at that time. Taz admitted, "I'd rather be helped by a White person. Because if you ask another Native person to help you, they will gossip about what you've said. There's no confidentiality at all on the reserve." She learned this lesson through personal experience; she said, "I really don't trust a lot of Natives, but White people? Yeah, sure. Because I know that's their job."

Particular aspects of therapy, or particular programs, were identified as beneficial by several participants. Besides the Healing Lodge programs as an adult, Taz was getting help through counselling when she was in foster care, a place of peace and safety for her. Pauly spoke about specific interventions that have made lasting impressions on her, which included a treatment centre group therapy program. Willow gained insights from many different programs taken throughout her incarcerations, layering the learning with each new approach. Sadly, none of them have continued with therapy or remained in counselling.

*Personal strengths.* Each woman was able to talk about her own strengths or at least recognize that she had strengths. One of the foremost strengths they identified was simply the desire for change and self-improvement. The ability to learn lessons from past mistakes and apply them to future situations was another common strength, as was the

ability to question the validity of their negative assumptions. Recognizing the need to be an active part of their changes, knowing their limitations, and believing in themselves are all skills that might assist them in realizing change in their future.

*Care-giving.* Being cared for (by those other than parents, who are covered under the Parenting category) was carried out by partners, non-parental family members, and associates from the street. Those who told of being cared for by partners spoke of feeling safe and secure. Yin Yang Rose had her husband who took great care of her, watching over her when she was drinking, bringing her to the hospital when she was sick from drinking and drugs, taking her to treatment, and searching for her when she ran away from him. “If I was drinking, I was sick, he would save the day,” she said of him.

Horse shared a remarkable story of care she received from a man, who was barely more than a stranger to her, not long after she was left at the women’s shelter in Edmonton. She had decided to leave Edmonton and search for her family again, and this man, whose street name was Snake, offered to go with her and help her find them. Snake, she said, was someone she had met while at the shelter and had known slightly for only a couple of months. They hitchhiked together, and when they arrived at the town where she had lived and Horse encountered her brother, Snake accompanied her home with him, stayed the night there with her, and was the perfect gentleman. “And you know what? We slept together and everything else, and he didn’t even lay a hand on me. That’s how much he respected me.” The next day, after ensuring she had made contact with her mother, Snake hugged Horse, and then turned and left town. She never saw him again. This was one instance of care received over a short period of time, and from a relative stranger, but Snake has stayed in Horse’s memory for more than 40 years.

He was an angel. I think God sent him down to me for a guardian angel and, you know, I still say he was. . . . Boy, if I knew who he was, I would say thank you very much for what he did for me. (Horse)

While being cared for may have felt foreign to these women, caring for others was familiar and comforting. They often began by caring for siblings and occasionally taking care of a parent, but care was also given to Elders, people on the streets, partners or boyfriends, and families of boyfriends. This demonstrated the wide variety of people to whom these six women reach out and offer help. Helping others provided a sense of satisfaction to these participants, and it was important to them. It gave them a purpose and helped to offset the need to use drugs and drink, while having no one to care for would leave a void in their lives. Horse said raising her children “felt good. I felt, I guess how I would say it was somebody needed me.” Pauly shared how good it felt to take care of her nephew and how happy it made her to give out clothing to people she knew on the street. Yin Yang Rose was pleased to be a caregiver, even when she was homeless, helping others find food, a shelter, or alcohol.

If somebody needs my help, or somebody’s sad, if I’m trying to help somebody, I look forward to that feeling, ‘cause I get satisfaction out of it. I don’t know what it is, what feeling it is, but I get off on it. (Yin Yang Rose)

***Family support.*** Relationships with family can affect levels of perceived and actual family support. Familial relationships were often in flux for these women; even when the relationship was good, it could be tenuous. Some, like Taz, have never had good relationships with parents or siblings. Horse has never forgiven her father for his abuse and has refused to call him “dad,” even since his death. Pauly’s relationships with her mother and siblings were often volatile and filled with violence. Shauntay damaged the relationship she had with her mother and her sister by lying to them about her drug

use and by causing them to worry about her well-being. She wished to reclaim some of her family's trust and faith in her and has been slowly doing so. Sometimes, tragedy experienced by a family worsened relationships, as in the circumstances of Shauntay's brother's death, and sometimes tragedy brought the family together: Willow said she and her siblings grew closer after her mother's suicide. Some of these women, Horse and Willow in particular, expressed feeling ostracized by their family members; for Willow, it was because of her being in jail so frequently, while Horse felt excluded by siblings for looking "White."

*Inadequate support.* Family can be unsupportive in different ways. In some cases, they simply lacked the capacity for understanding the participants' circumstances, as when Taz's children question her about why she feels comfortable in jail. Attempts to help are sometimes perceived as being unsupportive because they were abrading previously sore spots in the woman's life (e.g., Shauntay's aunt or Horse's father). For some, support was provided in a way that was unexpected or was not what the woman had hoped—a kind of tough love approach. This was true for Shauntay when she recommended her mother and sister as collateral contacts for her presentencing report, knowing they would give their honest opinions about her. Yin Yang Rose was allowed to return home to her foster parents, but only very temporarily.

Sometimes, family support was simply not helpful. Horse's current husband encouraged her to eliminate her anti-anxiety medication, even though it would alleviate her symptoms. Taz's foster parents encouraged her to renew contact with her mother when she wanted to avoid the woman: "That's why I, like, sometimes blame my mother. If she had just left me alone, I coulda been a better person." The tough love approach

could also be unhelpful, despite all intentions. When Pauly's mom saw how distressed she was by the suicides being committed all around her, her response to Pauly was discouraging: "And then my mom would tell me, 'You better not think of doing that yourself. Better get the hell on that school bus.' Like, holy shit, I need some help here. I knew I needed help."

*Incarnations of family supports.* Family support was provided in many forms. Raising the participant and raising, or taking custody of, her children were almost universal. Custody in this sense was not necessarily a traumatic loss, but was often appreciated because the children would otherwise have ended up in care. Emotional support was another way in which each woman received help from family members, including advancing trust, believing in the participant, making efforts to include her in the family once again, taking an interest in her, and merely making themselves emotionally available to her. Taz was invited to babysit her grandchildren; her daughters know and accept Taz's limitations in this area and are careful not to allow her to become overwhelmed. Willow said, "My grandma, no matter what, I know she's always gonna be there 'cause she raised me. She's like my backbone."

Other forms of support were more pragmatic, but no less valued by the participants. Pauly's sister provided a place for Pauly to serve her conditional sentence order, also called house arrest, and brought her to AA meetings. Yin Yang Rose's mother and husband brought her to the hospital when she was sick from drink. Her foster parents also provided her with an apartment and groceries when she had young children. Shauntay's grandfather bequeathed his house and all its contents to her. Horse's current

husband, knowing about her difficulties with literacy, assisted her in filling out forms and reading larger documents.

### **Summary**

The categories combined to tell a more complete story about the lives of the women in this study than would any single category. The needs of these Aboriginal women, incarcerated for a time in Lethbridge, Alberta, were diverse, and yet they shared much common ground. As described by their own revelations, participants required the basic necessities of life, including food, shelter, clothing, and money. They needed medical care, and they wanted more education. Counselling was, according to these women, necessary for substance use and personal concerns. Spiritual care and pursuits were requisite for their living healthily and wholly, and a connection to their Aboriginal roots was a critical part of this. These women had a need to love and to be loved by family, by spouses and partners, and by their children. They required support from their families and from the communities at large, in order to succeed in their struggles against addiction, grief, and abuse.

There was much overlap between the categories, making it difficult to create distinct boundaries between them, but also creating rich descriptions of their experiences. In the next chapter, I will examine the themes that tie these categories together. I will also discuss how the data address the research questions listed in Chapter 3 and examine the connection between these individual women and the available literature.

## Chapter Five: Findings

In the previous chapter, I provided a detailed description of the analysis categories that were selected from the needs cards and from multiple readings of the transcripts, which were further refined through analysis for a final count of 12 categories. These categories were primarily concrete concepts that provided a framework for participants to discuss aspects of their lives, like the string in the aforementioned sugar crystal growing experiment. There were also additional, more abstract, concepts that became apparent through the reading and analysis of transcripts: the themes. In the analogy of the crystal experiment, themes might be thought of as the shapes and silhouettes formed by the crystals as they adhere to the dangling string framework. The final shapes, while neither predictable nor an integral part of the success of the experiment itself, are beautiful, even awe-inspiring, aspects of the results. In the case of this study, the themes were found in multiple categories and describe experiences and phenomena that go beyond the spoken word of the participants themselves. The themes are more interpretive and provide a glimpse of the bigger picture, while the categories describe only isolated parts of that final image.

Although there are surely a number of themes that could be gleaned from the available data, this paper will not endeavour to examine them all. Because the themes are largely a result of my own interpretations, another researcher or analyst may have pulled out different themes for discussion. I have elected, for the purposes of this study, to limit discussion to the three strongest themes that arose from my analysis: (a) betrayal, (b) blame and self-blame, and (c) craving. Their strength came from encompassing the experiences of all, or most, of the participants. Alternatively, they spanned multiple

categories and also leant themselves to more abstract interpretations of concrete terms. The most compelling argument in favour of their strength, at least from my personal perspective, was the way in which they invaded my thinking. When it came time to choose, these three themes sang loudest to me.

**Theme 1: Betrayal: “It’s Just a Hurt that’s There All the Time”**

The theme of betrayal deals largely with the feelings participants experienced as a result of, but is not limited to, abandonment and disappointment. The women in the study were abandoned or otherwise betrayed by parents (especially mothers), foster parents, social workers and other government bodies, and also because of death. In some cases, they also perversely felt betrayed by partners who treated them with love and respect.

**Betrayed and abandoned.** Abandonment was always accompanied by a sense of betrayal and always cut the participants to the quick. Horse and Taz both had husbands who left them and betrayed their wedding vows. Horse put up with her husband’s indiscretions for many years, until he had an affair with “my best girlfriend,” whom he later married. Her pain, anger, and bitterness at the whole situation were still very plain and may even have contributed to her use of alcohol and drugs. She repeatedly told me she was under the impression saying *I do* was a commitment to stay together forever, but she was also wounded by the knowledge that she had cherished a false friend. To further intensify this double rejection, Horse said, “I felt like the kids were taken away from me. I mean, they were old enough to know better, right? But still, it felt like someone replaced me, um, as a mother. I don’t see my kids anymore.” Horse’s sense of abandonment was augmented by the perceived loss of her relationship with her children, despite acknowledging that she has not actively tried to reach out to them herself.

Taz wanted to hold on to the “normal” life she had; so, when her husband told her she needed to choose between him and their children, Taz decided to place the children into care. “He wanted me to make a choice. . . . And then he left.” Taz was not terribly invested in her relationship, saying that after the birth of her first daughter, “I just decided, well, I might as well get married. Might as well get married. So I tried to be normal.” Even so, in an attempt to preserve that normality, Taz gave her children over to foster care (and ultimately to her mother’s care), only to have her husband leave her anyway. “He wanted me to make a choice . . . And then he left.” I was left with the impression Taz felt betrayed by her own self as much as by her husband in making that choice. Not only did she give up her children (another betrayal itself), she denied her own sexuality in clinging to a heterosexual persona.

**Betrayed through death.** Death was its own form of abandonment. Dying and leaving the participant behind constituted a betrayal on the part of the deceased; resentment was sometimes the by-product. Shauntay’s life fell apart after her grandfather died; his death was a betrayal to her because he left her sorely unprepared to cope with life without him and because she loved him so dearly. Horse felt angry with her sister who died in correctional custody. “I always asked why did she carry them pills? If she didn’t she wouldn’t be gone. Then she wouldn’t leave me behind.” Leave, was the word she used. Even the language used to describe death indicated a sense of treachery or disloyalty. While some used typical language, saying someone “died” or “passed away,” other participants would refer to the deceased as having been “lost” and “taken away.” However, some even used language of abandonment to refer to someone’s death. Just as

did Horse, Willow would say, “After he left...” when talking about her grandfather’s death.

**Betrayed and disillusioned.** Abandonment was more than just being left; it was also about being disappointed by someone who had made a promise or commitment, even if tacit, to protect and care for the woman. Yin Yang Rose felt betrayed by the foster parents she had come to love when they allowed her to be moved to a home on the reserve. Shauntay and Yin Yang Rose were both betrayed by boyfriends who became abusive and violent; these were men who had promised to take care of them. Shauntay said, of when she left him, “It was the hardest thing I ever had to do, actually, because he was the one who was actually made me feel loved.” Horse clearly felt betrayed by her social worker. Even these many years later, the disgust seemed fresh as she talked about how the woman disposed of her case by leaving her at the shelter. “That’s where my social worker dropped me off. Dumped me off. She just dumped me. Totally dumped me right there when I was 15 years old.” In addition to the repetitive use of the word “dumped,” Horse returned to this event several times in the interview, saying this was how the social worker “got rid of” her, and this desertion led to her learning about drugs and alcohol.

***Betrayed by parents.*** Parents are supposed to be the primary protectors of children, and failure to protect leads to disappointment and feeling betrayed. Relationships between these women and their parents were frequently complicated by a sense of betrayal, especially mother-daughter relationships. These difficult relationships were often, but not always, a product of the parent failing the daughter in some way, especially as related to abuse. When participants had difficult relationships with fathers, it

was because of abuse. Horse and Taz have never forgiven their fathers for the beatings they bore as children. For some, paternal betrayal was simply not being around while they were growing up. Shauntay, Pauly, and Willow had biological fathers who were not involved with their rearing, but did have stepfathers who were able to fill the role. Interestingly, relationships with stepfathers were usually good. Perhaps the expectation of protection is less for a non-blood parent.

*A mother's betrayal.* Mother and daughter relationships, on the other hand, were multifaceted. Mothers were expected to be protectors against abuse; sometimes they succeeded, sometimes they failed, and sometimes they *were* the abuser. In an interesting contradiction, daughters both resented and excused the mothers who failed them; justifications were often given for mothers' shortcomings, while at the same time, mothers were also cited as the reason for many of the participants' own shortcomings. Yin Yang Rose believed she and her brother were too unruly and caused their foster mother so much grief that she became violent with them.

Willow and Shauntay were both deserted at birth by mothers who were unwilling to care for them, which seemed to be a special kind of betrayal. For Shauntay, this abandonment was the result of her mother choosing a new boyfriend over Shauntay. Willow did not provide a reason for her mother's willingness to give her over to adoption, but that was possibly due to her criminal activities and use of crack cocaine. Taz was convinced her life would have been different had it not been for her mother tracking her down in foster care, even while she admitted her mother's failure to protect her in childhood was probably due to fear for her own safety. Knowing her mother's violence was a product of her experiences in residential school did not comfort Pauly

when she was in need of emotional support; it did, however, give her a context for understanding it.

Mothers who drank or used drugs were seen to have stopped caring about their children while under the influence, according to participants. This loyalty to drug and drink was another betrayal experienced by the participants. Pauly, in her presentence report letter, said her mom was “the kindest, best mother with great intentions, but only when she was sober. Most of the time she wasn’t.” Horse’s mother had parties in her home, and “When she was drinking, she didn’t care who she brought home, so we had to keep an eye on each other” and protect each other from the groping hands of the men who were in the house. Willow’s mother would ask her for money, ostensibly for food and bills, and spend it on drugs. Willow did not describe an instant where her mother approached her other than for money; perhaps none existed. She admitted, “After a while, I just wanted her to tell the truth. I wanted her to say ‘I’m buying drugs with it.’ But she never did.” These daughters (i.e., participants) seemed to want more from their mothers, wanting them to raise their grandchildren, be honest and forthright about their failings, and open lines of communication to atone for lack of protection. Any breakdown of that script led to disappointment.

**Betrayed and wary.** The products of being betrayed in interpersonal relationships are mistrust and expecting the worst. It becomes, for all intents and purposes, impossible to believe that a significant other is capable of being loving and committed. Being treated respectfully is viewed with suspicion or rejected outright. Yin Yang Rose and Pauly both spoke to this way of thinking. Yin Yang Rose had been treated so poorly by the men in her life that when faced with a man who was gentle and kind and who was always trying

to protect and support her, she became abusive to him. She ran away from his love, she rejected him time and again, and she attempted to sabotage the relationship before it fell apart around her. She admitted, “When it didn’t go wrong, I had to make something go wrong because I wasn’t used to it. . . . He was so good to me that I would literally run away from that.” Even her feelings for him were not to be trusted, as evidenced when she said, “I loved him so much, but I hated him because I was so used to being abused.”

Pauly, too, was so accustomed to things falling apart in her life that she had difficulty believing good things would last. She said,

I’m always one to self-sabotage and wreck good things for myself. When I used to have low self-esteem, I was, like, I don’t deserve to have something good, and I would just wreck it anyway and say, “Well, it’s just gonna be ruined anyway, I might as well just do it myself.”

**Betrayed and bereft.** The concept of betrayal is complex and convoluted. Being abandoned, forsaken, or otherwise betrayed has left its mark on each of these women. Like a form of grief, the women in the study have struggled to release the feelings of rejection, resentment, and neglect to no avail. Despite putting on a brave face and saying the right things, the hurt was evident in faces and voices, in the words they chose, and in the observance they paid these memories. I saw with clarity that betrayal played a significant role in the moulding of their lives, even though the participants themselves did not couch their experiences in those same terms. The mark of betrayal is deep and lasting, and it is visible to those who look for it.

**Theme 2: Blame and Self-Blame: “It Wouldn’t Have Happened if ...”**

In the face of failures, struggles, drug addiction, loss, and lack of support, it is natural to look around to find a reason for all the suffering. Blame is another convoluted and complex issue because it is not as simple as finger-pointing or saying someone or

something is at fault for the participant's disappointments. Self-blame is almost always present, even when these women are condemning other people or issues as the source of their problems. Blaming external factors (i.e., parents, deceased persons, substance use, the foster system, and the government) for their strife was sometimes a desperate attempt to save face and hold on to hope.

**Blaming others.** The burden of tribulations in these women's lives was sometimes placed on the shoulders of others. Parents were frequently placed at fault for the trajectories of their children's lives, especially when abuse was a factor. Taz laid responsibility at the feet of each of her parents. Her father's violence was a critical contributor to the anger Taz experienced today: "That's why, sometimes I, I blame him, well, for my anger. And for stuff he did to me as a child. 'Cause they affect me today." Taz saw her mother's failure to protect Taz in the face of that violence coupled with her insistence on tracking Taz while in foster care as to blame for the course of Taz's life: "That's why I, like, sometimes I blame my mother. If she just left me alone, I coulda been a better person." In this case, blame was closely linked to the theme of betrayal, in that parents are meant to be protectors rather than abusers. Blaming parents was, perhaps, a way of offsetting the personal guilt participants carried for the choices they have made, a frantic attempt to find alternate explanations for behaviour and personality. It could be a kind of preservation of the psyche, a way of assuring themselves that they are not bad women, but a product of things that have happened to them.

**Blaming extrinsic forces.** Additional factors were cited as contributing to or causing many of the personal struggles these women faced and may also play a part in the self-preservation mentioned above. Horse placed the blame for her upbringing squarely

on the shoulders of the government. She said, “The way I grew up, is, uh, I blame the whole thing on the government. Even the social workers, I blame them, too. Might as well say they threw me to the wolves.” Even though Taz did not agree with the sentiment, she acknowledged that a lot of Native people point fingers at the foster system to explain the breakdown of the family system. She blamed Native parents for the hurt and anger their children exhibit. Placing the onus on an impersonal entity (e.g., the government) or a large group (e.g., Aboriginal parents) may be easier than blaming an individual or one’s own self.

Drugs and alcohol constituted another impersonal entity and were the root of many evils in the lives of the participants in this study. Horse blamed drug use for her inability to maintain a residence, for the breakdown of her first marriage, and for getting her in trouble. Willow noted that her repeated readmissions to prison and jail were directly due to her choice to drink each time she was released. Pauly and Yin Yang Rose both suffered serious medical conditions that they ascribed to drinking and drug use. Drugs and alcohol were imbued with such strength and power as to be practically irresistible to these women. Substances become a controlling force, almost a living entity that took over rational thinking and took over one’s life. In addition to the control substances had in their lives, drugs and alcohol were threatening substances that created feelings of fear and doubt. Blaming them seemed to feel appropriate to the participants.

**Blaming self.** Self-blame is pernicious and has a deep impact on the participants who placed the burden for some tragedy on themselves. The quote selected for this section’s heading is excerpted from Pauly’s description of her reaction to hearing of her brother’s death: “It wouldn’t have happened if I stayed home.” Pauly carried guilt with

her for not being in attendance when her two brothers were fighting, as though she might have somehow prevented it despite being many years younger than either of them. It is possible this guilt is actually about being absent when her brother died, missing out on last moments with him. Perhaps it is that, if she had witnessed the death, she might have been able to learn a greater truth about what happened. It might even be a form of survivor's guilt. Pauly admitted she had never cried for her brother, but when she was asked to write a letter for her pre-sentence report, she said her sorrow was as fresh as if he had just died, and she found it overwhelmed her.

Shauntay, by contrast, *was* present for her brother's death. Instead of feeling like she could have prevented the event, Shauntay felt responsible for many years, and I suspect she still does. She was babysitting him; by extension this means she should have been protecting him. Because Shauntay was responsible for her brother's care, it stands to reason that she was also responsible for his death. Complicating this was her perception that her stepfather also blamed her. It is possible, although it was never uttered in the interviews, that she believed other family members also blamed her. She may even believe that she somehow miscarried her duties that day and failed her brother: "I was *supposed* [emphasis added] to be the one babysitting then". Shauntay was only 13 years old when the tragedy occurred, but held herself responsible for what happened. Shortly after that, Shauntay began using drugs, running away, and attempting suicide. Leaving home could be an attempt to flee the blame she believed was being heaped upon her by her stepfather, but she could not escape the blame she was heaping upon herself. Drugs failed to quell that accusing voice, and perhaps she thought dying would.

Blame seemed to occur when the death is violent, unnatural, or premature. It is possible that the loss is made more poignant when it is believed to have been preventable in some way. Yin Yang Rose sometimes blamed herself for her husband's death by overdose because she was the person who introduced him to intravenous drug use. Willow struggled for some time with the idea that she was somehow responsible for her mother's suicide. Horse admitted she is sometimes angry with her sister for being so thoughtless and selfish as to smuggle pills while in jail, which was the incident that eventually led to her accidental death in custody. Whether self-blame was present or absent, the feeling of loss was something that seemed to cling to these women and influenced their coping choices.

Blaming oneself was not limited to situations where someone died. Yin Yang Rose blamed her own and her brother's behaviour for her foster mother's violence toward them. She also, at one time, believed she was doing something to incur the sexual mistreatment she received from men and boys on the reserve. Horse blamed herself for her ruined credit because she committed fraud. Shauntay blamed herself for her family's years spent worrying about her and for their lack of trust in her. These examples demonstrate that blame can be unduly laid upon one's own shoulders, but participants also censured themselves for many of the poor choices they made, especially where drugs were concerned. Horse lamented all the things she and her husband could have been enjoying were it not for all the money they spent on drugs. Pauly told of returning to drugs even though she suffered serious health complications. Yin Yang Rose turned to drugs and drinking and away from the man who loved her.

**Taking responsibility.** There were also instances where the participants spoke about taking responsibility for other aspects in their lives, not just negative or tragic events that occurred. Pauly admitted, “I keep doin’ the same things over and over again, expecting different results. Which is insanity!” In saying this, she acknowledged that she would need to take action if she wanted to see changes in her life. This was consistent with her admission that, as a youth in counselling, she did not fully participate in therapy and did not see results. She understood that she needed to take an active role in her recovery: “I think it’s easy, it’s just me; I make it hard for myself. It’s so complicated. It’s so easy.” Horse told me, “I’m the only one that has the key, right? To unlock myself from that bottle and let myself out. I’m the only one.” Even though she admitted she did not know how to start, she knew she was ultimately responsible for changing the course of her life.

When the participants experienced negative events in their lives, they searched for reasons for the occurrence and assigned causes. It is a natural response, the attempt to find meaning, but the causes ascribed by the participants were not always realistic or reasonable, as was the case for much self-blame. Nor did attributing meaning or reasons for their misfortunes alleviate the negative reactions these women experienced. On the contrary, many continued to carry the burden of their experiences without realizing it is even possible to lay it down, with or without help. All of the participants have held on to self-blame for things that have happened in their lives. Perhaps some self-forgiveness can help to alleviate some of the pressure.

### **Theme 3: Craving: “It’ll Just Eat You Up until You Get It”**

In trying to think of a title for this theme, I was originally inclined to use something like *wanting* or *yearning*. The women I interviewed used the word *want* a lot during our interactions, especially in the context of wanting to change aspects of their lives. I felt it important to acknowledge that sense of desire, but the word *wanting* did not seem to be sufficient to describe the theme. The next word to come to mind was *yearning*, and again, this word did not sit well. Although *yearning* certainly described the hunger I sensed from the participants, it was not a word used by any of the participants, and it did not feel in character with the data. I then turned to a writer’s best friend: the thesaurus. When I researched the word *yearning*, the first synonym to stand out was *craving*. This word was certainly used in the transcripts, but in the context of drug and alcohol use. It struck me that it could also be applied to more than just the symptoms of addiction. In the case of this theme, craving is about participants’ hunger and yearning and their wanting things other than drugs or alcohol: a normal life, a clean slate, a relationship with significant others, and a connection to their culture.

**Craving normality.** One of the strongest cravings experienced by participants was the desire for a normal life. This seemed to mean one in which drinking and drug use are absent, housing is stable, finances are managed, and jail is a distant memory. Sometimes this wanting was strengthened by seeing how others are living, such as siblings who have homes or who have successfully completed treatment. Pauly talked about friends who were living that kind of life, and she also spoke about siblings who were perfect pictures of clean and sober living. She lamented that her brother only needed to attend treatment once for it to work for him, while Pauly has been many times without

success. Taz was proud of her older children, who are mothers and wives. Sometimes, the craving was spurred by how others saw the woman. Shauntay admitted she feels a bit odd because no one else in her family has ever been to jail, and she felt conspicuously abnormal. In spite of her sexual orientation, Taz married a man, remained so for 12 years, and had multiple children with her husband as an outward proof of how normal she could be. Horse was somewhat mortified to admit she drinks in plain sight, saying, "I'm finding myself drinkin' more and more in the street, and I never done that in my life before. When I see somebody else doing that, I say 'Oh that looks so awful.'"

Having the basic necessities of life was important for all the obvious reasons, but it also seemed to be about more than just having what they need. It was about being normal herself, as though having a home, some money, and a high school education could improve the quality of her inner being and stamp her with the indelible mark of being a "good person." Having a roof over her head, food in the cupboards, clothes on her back, and a basic education all appeared to be a marker of this craved normality. It was as others do: those who do not regularly go to jail or engage in excessive substance use. The idea of craving a normal life included having a place of their own, someplace safe and clean, a place they have worked for. It was about having money left over after bills were paid to be able to buy extra things for themselves and others. It was about having a life that is safe and welcoming for children or grandchildren, a life not unlike that of neighbours, friends, and even family members. Failing to obtain these objectives led to feeling abnormal, possibly increasing the participants' cravings for a more normal life.

Wanting to live a life in the same ways others do is one facet of craving a clean slate in life. Taz talked about how difficult it was for her to function on the outside: in

part because of becoming institutionalized, but also because she believed no employers would trust her enough to give her a chance. She believed the community at large has a mistrust of offenders. Many expressed a desire to go back and change what they viewed as a turning point in their lives. Horse said that point was when her grandfather's land was taken from them, and Yin Yang Rose saw her move to the reserve as that pivotal moment. Only Willow, when asked if she would change anything in her life, said she had no regrets. Yet, even she craved a fresh start in her life, a chance to try again without the gang or selling drugs, with an education and a regular job.

**Craving intrinsic change.** Wanting to improve themselves or “change my life” was another common sentiment expressed by these women. This was another aspect of craving normalcy and a clean start at a new life and was something that was discussed primarily in vague, rather than specific, terms. They did this without a real plan for making changes or even apparent certainty about what changes are necessary, but the hunger, the craving for living the changed life remained. This craving was further fuelled by the need to prove something to themselves, their children, grandchildren, family members, and even society. In *Betrayal*, I discussed how participants were disappointed by others, but there were also ways in which these women disappointed others. Part of craving a new life may be a desire, or hunger, to make reparations in some way to those who have been let down.

**Craving connectedness.** Craving is not limited to being hungry for a new or different life, for a drug, or even a food. Craving is also about being hungry for connectedness. Connections to others, to spirituality, and to culture were all cravings expressed by the women in this study. In wanting to prove themselves to others in their

life, the participants were expressing a yearning to reconnect with them. Willow reached out to family members in asking them for their support through her journey, which was a tacit request for a stronger tether between them. Horse and Taz both expressed a desire to be more involved with their grandchildren. Horse missed her children very much and would like to renew connections with them, while Taz valued the relationship she has had with her children, but feared it has been damaged by her partner. Shauntay, too, missed her children and wanted to be whole as a family again, but she was also craving the connection she once had with her mother and sister and a new connection to her stepfather.

Yin Yang Rose was just tired of being alone. She wanted to be with someone, to have someone to care for again. Yin Yang Rose reports her happiest times as those when she was caring for someone. Whether it was time spent with her own children, helping to care for foster siblings, housekeeping and babysitting for her boyfriend's sister, or caring for her husband following his workplace accident, Yin Yang Rose felt fulfilled by helping others and was, perhaps, her healthiest during these times. An aspect of the concept of craving is being in need of something, and these women needed to be needed. Being needed by others or having someone to care for gave their lives direction and meaning. This was their purpose, and so they could feel connected to a reason for living and being. Having no one to care for, no one who needed them, left them at loose ends and created a void in their lives. This void wants filling, just as an empty stomach wants to be fed. That abyss leads to feelings of depression and the urge to engage in substance use; being able or unable to care for others appears to be linked to one's sense of self-worth and of worthiness. Feeling lost, alone, and lonely is really about wanting to feel

loved and to have the acceptance of others in their lives. The absences of that sense of love and acceptance, that void, were often replaced with drugs and alcohol by the participants. If these substances did nothing to satisfy the craving for connection, they at least enabled these women to forget all they are lacking.

*Connection to Aboriginal culture.* This craving for connectedness was also sometimes a craving for an older way of life. Horse would give anything to return to the life she had with her grandparents, and Willow talked of wishing she could have lived in pre-colonial times. They seemed to feel that the past was free of troubles and strife and that life could be perfect if that snapshot in time could be preserved. This desire to be Native was particularly strong for Horse, who had the misfortune of being fairer of skin and hair than her siblings. Her father would call her his “White lady,” which she resented. “So that hurt me when he said that because I wanted to be Native and he told me I looked White. . . . So I dyed my hair black.” Willow, too, wanted to embrace her Aboriginal heritage, voicing her love of her beautiful culture and speaking reverently about her moosoom’s medicine man status. Shauntay spoke with pride about how her grandfather taught her son to drum and said she wants to be able to teach her children about their culture. Actually, most of the women in the study expressed a desire to pass cultural knowledge and experience on to their children. Feeling connected to their culture was a significant part of personal identity and contributed to the participants’ wholeness of being.

*Connection to spirituality.* Enmeshed in the concept of living an older way of life was the idea of connectedness to spiritual practices. There was a sense that spirituality was vital to these women, that it would help them to become whole again if they could

only welcome it back into their hearts and lives to provide strength to overcome their addictions. Taz shared how healing the spiritual programming was when she was serving a federal sentence at the Healing Lodge. Horse admitted resisting temptation was easier when she was attending church services. Pauly has embraced her born-again Christianity wholeheartedly. Shauntay felt lighter after attending a sweat. The kind of spirituality did not appear to be as significant as the sense of connection to spirituality; even though Pauly and Yin Yang Rose both denounced more traditional spiritual practices, they still talked of taking part in smudging and other aspects of Aboriginal spirituality. It would seem, to adapt a phrase, you can take the girl out of the sweetgrass, but you cannot take the sweetgrass out of the girl. Even those who disparaged Aboriginal spirituality could not abandon it completely.

Craving, as a theme, is about the desire for more than just the basic necessities of life. It is about yearning for something more, something that fills an abyss, creates a sense of wholeness and worthiness, and increases connectedness to family, others, spirituality, and culture. It is a craving for life over survival. Pauly articulates it well, in stating,

Cause there's a difference; surviving is just day-to-day, tryin' to stay alive and maintain something that's really worthless in our lives just to feel something. And living is just experiencing everything, experiencing people in our lives, happiness and, you know, having true love and laughter.

### **Summary**

The complexity of the categories is reflected in the complexity of themes that were developed from the data, and both themes and categories reflect the natural complexity of human existence. It was my intention to take a deeper look at the lives of the women who participated in this study through the lens of the themes, plunging beyond the superficial statements toward the core of their experiences.

In the crucible of Betrayal, Blame and Self-Blame, and Craving, it became clear that the women I interviewed are suffering mentally, emotionally, and spiritually as much as they have suffered physically, if not more. The burden of psychological and spiritual pain is one that was carried through every facet of their lives, and yet they were often not aware that they were so encumbered. This pain resulted in acts of self-sabotage, loss of hope, turning from loved ones, feelings of isolation, and self-destructive behaviours. The burden weighs so heavily at times that it must be offloaded to someone or something else in order to preserve the well-being of the woman who has carried it. Even so, these women would often reclaim the burden, and sometimes additional blame from other sources, and hoist it back upon their shoulders, and all the while, they were hungering, yearning for what everyone else seems to have and they did not: a life free from incarceration, substance addiction, crippling grief, and violence—a free life.

In the following chapter, I will examine the research questions proposed in the discussion of methods as they were addressed by the data. I will also discuss the limitations of my study and the experience I had as a researcher throughout the process of this study. Finally, I will conclude with the implications of the results on counselling theory and practice and final thoughts about the project as a whole.

## Chapter Six: Discussion

According to the women in this study, there are several areas of life in which they need assistance, intervention, or service. Besides necessities like food, housing, and financial support, they need medical care and various incarnations of counselling for personal and substance use issues. They want more education and need job experience and work skills. Connections to traditional culture and to spiritual practices, traditional or otherwise, are a vital part of their ability to live whole, full lives. Family relationships and support are imperative as is the need to be loved and needed by significant others. Support and understanding from their communities would go a long way toward their goals of changing lifestyle and life choices. I begin this chapter with a description of the characteristics of the participants as related to literature about female offenders. The participants' needs, and their ability to meet those needs, will be examined along with participant experiences of historical trauma. Limitations of this study, the importance of this research, and implications for research and practice are all addressed. I briefly discuss my attempts at reciprocation for the privilege of having shared in these women's stories and my personal experiences as a neophyte researcher, and I conclude with some final thoughts about this research.

### **The Characteristics of the Participants**

A review of some of the characteristics of female offenders, as they apply to the participants in this study, is described in this section. Participant demographic information and experiences of abuse are compared with the literature.

**Jail.** While the participants incurred some charges related to assaults, the greater parts of most of their criminal histories involved incarcerations for less serious offenses;

these were usually drug-related offenses. This was consistent with statistical reports indicating female offenders are in custody for milder crimes than were men (Finn et al., 1999; Kong & AuCoin, 2008) and were more often jailed for drug crimes (Finn et al., 1999). In contrast to Johnson (1987), who found women were less likely to be recidivistic offenders, all of the participants in this study were repeat offenders; some have been in and out of jail nearly all of their lives. It should be noted, however, that the participants in this study did not constitute a representative sample of female offenders or even of Aboriginal female offenders.

The ages of the women I interviewed ranged from early 20s to mid-50s at the time of the interview, with four of them being situated in their 30s. They all expressed deficits in education, work skills, and work experience. They all experienced difficult relationships or marital problems. Of those who had children, only Horse was never a single mother or had her children removed from her care in some way. With the exception of their ages, these particulars were consistent with available literature (see Adelberg & Currie, 1987; Blanchette, 1997; Dell & Boe, 2000; Hedderman, 2004; Heilbrun et al., 2008; Johnson, 1987; Loucks, 2004; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009; Singer et al., 1995).

The existence of diagnosed mental illness was a factor for half of the participants, while almost all described a self-diagnosed mental issue (i.e., depression). All of the participants but Willow described their relationships with drugs, alcohol, or both as addictive and problematic, and they all suffered abuse of one kind or another during at least one point of their lifespan; many have suffered lifelong abuses. These were also consistent with available literature on the characteristics of female offenders (see

Blanchette, 1997; Blanchette & Motiuk, 1996; Braswell & Mongold, 2007; Dell & Boe, 2000; Farkas & Hrouda, 2007; Finn et al., 1999; Hedderman, 2004; Heilbrun et al., 2008; Johnson, 1987, 2006a, 2006b; Loucks, 2004; Malloch, 2004; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009; Singer et al., 1995). All of the characteristics of the participants in this study serve to highlight areas of need that they experienced. In terms of the body of research, these participants were unremarkable, but for the tragic picture they paint.

**Abuse.** Female offenders are often victims of abuse, including childhood abuses, spousal assault, and physical and sexual attacks as adults (Braswell & Mongold, 2007; Hedderman, 2004; Johnson, 1987, 2006b; Loucks, 2004; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009; Singer et al., 1995). The women in this study were no exception. Although not every woman in this study experienced childhood abuses, most of them did. They all, but for Shauntay, have been victims of sexual assault or childhood sexual abuse, and four of them experienced violence at the hands of spouses. For most of them, as with the women in the literature, abuse was a daily occurrence. It has been suggested in the available research that sexual assaults are seriously underreported, resulting in a skewed view of the true rates of occurrence (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008).

Of the five women who disclosed the experience of sexual assault or childhood sexual abuse, few reported telling anyone that it had happened, and none admitted to making a formal report. Horse may have been one who reported abuses experienced in foster care, resulting in her being moved around so frequently, but she did not directly admit to reporting her assaults. She did mention that her school had called her social

worker on at least one occasion. Willow told her mother that her stepfather had been sexually assaulting her, and Yin Yang Rose confessed to her Aboriginal stepmother that other boys were doing “things” to her. Neither was believed, and neither was supported. If other victims of sexual assault or abuse have had similar rejection experiences when they shared their experience, it could contribute to lower rates of reported assaults.

Having abusive parents meant living in fear much of the time, or at least in a constant state of alertness, and behaving tentatively. This was especially so when the abuser also had problems with alcohol. There seems to have been no real sense of safety amongst family for these women. Perpetrators of sexual abuse were often extended family members, so many of the participants grew up in a state of apprehension when almost any relative was around, excepting grandparents. As noted in Chapter 5, grandparents were never described as abusive. Finding the courage to leave violent partners was complicated by the feelings of safety and love they had in the relationships, however fleeting. Pauly and Shauntay both spoke of another complication: that of having given over control of themselves, and as Pauly said, “It came to the point where I allowed myself to get abused.”

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) are likely to be re-victimized during their lifespan and also tend to have transient sexual patterns, aggressive behaviour, and low levels of self-esteem (Davis & Petretic-Jackson, 2000). This may include issues like suicide attempts, depression and other mental health issues, substance abuse, and socially maladaptive behaviour (Bagley & Young, 1987). In addition to these consequences, CSA survivors show increased rates of health problems and intimate partner violence and are less likely to complete high school (Romito et al., 2003). This litany certainly describes

the women in my study. In addition to the spousal assaults, suicide and self-harm, mental health concerns, and reduced levels of education already discussed, other similarities exist. With regards to sexual patterns, Horse and Yin Yang Rose both worked in the sex trade, and Yin Yang Rose also described transitory, casual sexual relations with men. Shauntay and Taz, neither of whom reported CSA, spoke of longer-term relationships with partners. They all described aggressive behaviour toward others, including spouses for Yin Yang Rose, Pauly, and Taz, and they all, but for Willow, expressed poor self-esteem.

For some, violence was a normal part of life due to prolonged exposure, but for Shauntay, violence was not a part of her life until she began using drugs. Shauntay, Pauly, Willow, and Taz are all women who intimidated, and were feared by, others. None seemed particularly proud of that accomplishment. Horse was the only one who did not speak about recent acts of violence, though she did allude to aggression when she spoke about the effects of alcohol consumption on her behaviour. All of the others recognized that being violent is a maladaptive way to live, yet they could not, and some still cannot, escape it.

### **The Needs of These Six Incarcerated Aboriginal Women**

In drawing my needs cards largely from the results of the study by Singer and associates (1995), it is perhaps not surprising that the women I interviewed expressed many of the same needs found therein. Substance use counselling, education, and mental health counselling are categories taken directly from those cards, while necessities of life was formed by amalgamating housing, financial aid, and material goods. Grief and loss is

a category that emerged from transcript readings, but the need to manage grief reactions was painfully clear.

**Substance use counselling.** The women in this study are excellent examples of the deleterious effects of alcohol use on the health and well-being of Aboriginal peoples (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). They were consistent with other studies that have shown alcohol use among Aboriginal groups to be very high and frequently severe (Bohn, 2003; de Ravello et al., 2008; Weekes et al., 1995). They all started drinking at a young age, and the majority admitted to drinking on a daily basis (de Ravello et al., 2008). Those who said they had attended treatment (Yin Yang Rose, Pauly, and Taz) have been several times without success, consistent with findings by Feldstein and associates (2006). Substance use was a significant problem for the women in this study. De Ravello and colleagues (2008) found most of their participants had used drugs, were under the influence when committing the crime, and were serving sentences on drug-related charges; these characteristics were all consistent with those of the participants in this study. Similar to the women in the de Ravello study, my participants used multiple substances.

The participants also showed consistencies with studies not limited to Aboriginal offenders. Some participants reported having bigger problems with drugs than with alcohol (Hedderman, 2004), used multiple substances, and used heavily (Loucks, 2004). One participant (Shauntay) told of supporting her own and her partner's drug habit, as found by Malloch (2004). One study found women tended to get involved with drug use prior to becoming involved in criminal activity (Loucks, 2004). Horse, Shauntay, and Taz exemplified this, and for the remaining participants, the stories they told did not make it

clear which came first. Many of the women in the current study, as in other studies, found incarceration beneficial, in part because it was a chance to take a break from substance and alcohol use (Loucks, 2004). Although Malloch (2004) and Loucks (2004) both suggested jail is not ideal for getting clean because many offenders continue to use substances readily available within correctional centres, none of the participants in this study admitted to ongoing substance use during their sentences.

**Education.** Female offenders, in general, and female Aboriginal offenders, specifically, have lower overall educational achievement than non-incarcerated women (Adelberg & Currie, 1987; Hedderman, 2004, Loucks, 2004; Medrano et al., 2003; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009; Solicitor General of Canada, 1989). This lower attainment includes a failure to complete high school education or go onto post-secondary (Hedderman, 2004). While unemployment and want of work skills were problematic for many women offenders (Adelberg & Currie, 1987; Blanchette, 1997; Dell & Boe, 2000; Hedderman, 2004; Loucks, 2004; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009), they are particular problems for Aboriginal women in the correctional system (Solicitor General of Canada, 1989). Of the women in the current study, only one had completed high school equivalent education, the GED, and Pauly did this while incarcerated. Horse's lack of consistent education has left her literacy significantly impaired, making it difficult for her to take the programming necessary to obtain even a GED. Of the others, none had finished secondary education prior to becoming involved in drug and alcohol use and the correctional system. Willow was the only one who spoke directly about pursuing post-secondary education, although some others talked of ideal careers that would require additional scholarship.

Adelberg and Currie (1987) suggested that a possible reason for underemployment among female offenders is the difficulty of finding jobs that are conducive to obtaining child care. For the women I interviewed, this did not seem to be a contributing factor. Pauly had no children of her own and still had no meaningful employment. Horse was employed while raising her own children. Yin Yang Rose, Taz, and Willow all relinquished custody of their children; therefore, they were not barred from finding work because of childcare. Hedderman (2004) suggested another factor contributing to low employment rates may be that women are often homemakers and, therefore, out of the workforce. This may have been the case for Shauntay, who was forbidden to work by the father of her children and then “babied” by her grandfather when she left her abusive relationship and returned home.

**Mental health counselling.** The women in this study revealed many mental health issues, consistent with findings in a variety of studies (Blanchette, 1997; Blanchette & Motiuk, 1996; Farkas & Hrouda, 2007, Hedderman, 2004; Loucks, 2004; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009, Singer et al., 1995). Aboriginal women also struggle with issues such as depression and often take medications for them (Collin-Vézina et al., 2009; de Ravello et al., 2008; Libby et al., 2005). Those who were diagnosed were also being treated with medication, so long as they were incarcerated at least. Medications were harder to come by, or a lower priority, when out in the community. The mental issues described in the aforementioned studies also included hopelessness and despair. While it was clear that many of the women in the current study experienced bouts of both, they were also tempered by bursts of hope and cherished moments of joy. Hopelessness was mired in the past and had dragged itself into the present for these

women; it was thick with self-pity and giving up, with not caring about what happened to them or about what they had done and would do. Hope was held that each woman would become stronger and left the taste of optimism in her mouth and on her lips.

Research indicated that female offenders show increased rates of suicide and self-harm behaviour (Loucks, 2004), and rates of suicide are even higher among Aboriginal populations (de Ravello et al., 2008). Willow understood more about suicide following her mother's death. She said,

There's a lot of things that lead to suicide: a lot of emotions, a lot of things built up, a lot of pain, not knowing who to go to. Just feeling alone. And I believe that that's how she felt. That was her only way out of the pain.

While Shauntay and Willow were the only participants who revealed having attempted suicide in the past, all of the participants seemed to engage in such reckless substance use and other behaviours as to indicate a disregard for their well-being. Shauntay may not have been the only woman to try and end her life through drugs, even if no other woman verbalized that specific objective.

**Necessities of life.** Like incarcerated women in available literature (Adelberg & Currie, 1987; Heilbrun et al., 2008; Johnson, 1987; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010; Singer et al., 1995), the participants in this study were all impoverished. One possible exception to this would be Willow, who admitted to having a large bank account balance as a result of selling drugs. Despite this, she had no assets to assist her upon her release. While Hedderman (2004) found a trend of *acquisitive* offending among incarcerated women, it is difficult to say with certainty that the crimes committed by the women in the current study were also for the purposes of acquiring goods and basic needs. Charges and crimes were not a specific focus of the interviews, and they were discussed in vague terms.

Participants did say their crimes were drug- or alcohol-related, and more than one reported the recent charge was for violence. Horse was serving a sentence for fraud, which would indicate a desire to acquire, at least, money.

Housing was a significant concern for all of the women in this study. Beavis et al. (1997) outlined several factors that may contribute to homelessness among Aboriginal people, and they noted that youth are at an increased risk for homelessness. The risk factors they identified that resonated with my data include CSA, family violence and other family issues, unemployment, addiction, release from custody, running away as a youth, and having ineffective parents. Many of the women I interviewed repeatedly ran away from their families or their foster placements as youth. Shauntay and Yin Yang Rose both spoke of living with boyfriends beginning at a young age. All of the participants, except Shauntay, described violence in their childhood, including sexual trauma. All, including Shauntay, described tension within their family for one reason or another. All of them were wrestling with drug and alcohol addiction or misuse. Not one participant was serving her first sentence at the time of the interview. Not one was gainfully employed at the time of her arrest, nor did any of them have employment in place for their release.

While some research suggested inadequate housing and deleterious living conditions also contribute to homelessness for Aboriginal offenders, especially housing on reserves (Beavis et al., 1997; Statistics Canada, 2008), these were not factors specifically discussed by my participants. Currently, most of the women I interviewed were living in urban settings, but were not housed. Every participant, but Horse, had some experience living on a reserve, but no one described either the types of conditions

in which they lived or whether they felt any of their housing had been inadequate. Even when speaking of staying in shelters or long-term hotels, discourse centred around the availability of drugs in that type of environment: a condition that was also noted in Brown et al. (2008). Taz, specifically, scoffed at the idea of being released to a shelter or transitional housing because of the prevalence of both substances and the peers who use them. When the women in this study gave voice to possible reasons for unstable housing arrangements, the only significant factor was their use of drugs or alcohol and the lifestyle associated with it. Likewise, none of them described difficulty in finding housing or people willing to rent to them (as described in Brown et al., 2008) other than in choosing to spend money on drugs rather than shelter.

**Grief and loss.** Unresolved grief, about significant or traumatic deaths as well as multiple non-death losses, had been a significant factor in the life outcomes experienced by the women in this study. None of them seem to have passed through the natural experience of death- or loss-related grieving in the healthful way described by Worden (2003). Instead, the grief they experienced remained intense and led participants to feel overwhelmed by grief. This led, in turn, to drug and alcohol use to relieve the pressure they felt. For most of the participants, the loss they experienced has been neither assimilated into their existing belief system nor accommodated by altering those beliefs. They had become stuck in the process of grieving. It is not clear if these women have had good models for grieving among their family members, which may have contributed to the development of complicated grief. Being unfamiliar with healthy coping methods could have made it more difficult for them to adjust to the losses they experienced.

Worden (2003) identified a variety of factors that create conditions conducive to the development of complicated grief, and many of those fit with the circumstances described by the women in this study. For most of them, the death that pushed them over the edge of grieving was that of a significant person in their lives. Shauntay and Willow were both struck down by the passing of their loved and respected grandfathers: men who filled the role of father for these two women. Yin Yang Rose lost the husband who was the one true love of her life: the one who loved her wholly and unconditionally. For some, the death was particularly shocking or violent; Pauly's brother died from injuries incurred during a fight with another brother, Shauntay's brother was shot to death before her eyes, Horse's sister died violently in custody in the very jail where she was currently serving her sentence, and Willow's mother committed suicide on the day of Willow's seventeenth birthday. Violent death has left its mark on these women; none of them has been able to release their grief about the death. The circumstances of these deaths may have created hurdles in trying to move through the grieving process.

Worden (2003) also noted another factor, a history of complicated loss, as contributing to the development of complicated grief. It may be that one death or loss would have been something bearable to the women in the study, but they have suffered multiple losses, due to death or to other factors, that each further loss became another straw added to the back of the proverbial camel. These compounded losses, without resolving grief in between them, could be creating the sense of being overwhelmed by each new loss. Historical trauma also added to cumulative loss.

During the interview phase of this project, I noticed that the concept of grief was a common element among the women I had already interviewed and wondered if it might

become a category or theme of its own. I spoke with the interim Native Program Coordinator at the correctional institution to get some additional perspective on the issue. She confirmed that grief was a significant issue for Aboriginal people (R. Many Grey Horses, personal communication, May 28, 2012). She noted that there are so many losses with which her people must deal on a daily basis that it is easy to become overwhelmed by it all. These losses included the deterioration of culture and language; loss of children to the system; and deaths of elders, children, relatives, and friends.

The women I interviewed displayed many of the consequences of complicated grief described in the literature (Finlay & Jones, 2000; Leach et al., 2008; Neimeyer et al., 2010; Prigerson et al., 1997; Worden, 2003). All of them abused drugs and alcohol, including harmful health behaviours like intravenous drug use. They suffered from symptoms of depression and anxiety and reduced self-esteem. It is possible some of them experienced an assault on one or more of their core beliefs

### **Ability to Meet Their Needs**

It is clear that, while the participants were able to meet some of their needs, they were unable to meet others. In some situations, they could rely on their own devices to meet needs, and other times, they were bolstered by assistance from family, systemic supports, and factors like their connection to culture. There were also significant barriers that prevented them from getting what they needed in some areas. Jail served as a mechanism for the participants to meet both tangible and abstract needs, but they specifically articulated the need for assistance in transitioning away from a life of incarceration. These six women were successful in meeting some of their mental health

needs, even if their strategies were not always ideal. In other instances, the participants resisted their own attempts to actualize change in their lives.

**Meeting needs while incarcerated.** One aspect that is remarkable, but was not noted in literature, was that each woman had a part of her that found comfort and solace in being incarcerated, if for no other reason than that it was such a familiar occurrence. I think this is a difficult phenomenon for most people to understand, since most of us would probably value our freedom very highly and make efforts not to lose it, but the outside world can be overwhelming for someone who is accustomed to a smaller environment. Horse talked about there being “too much freedom” in the community, and Willow said, “You come in a place like this and the world is so small. It’s just like, it’s right there. But you never knew it because the world just seemed big.” Side by side with the part of them that felt at home in jail, there was another part that recoiled at the idea of returning for another sentence. That part might be bolstered if participants could feel as though they belong and can survive in the community.

As I noted in Chapter 3, jail is not something that might be considered a need when considering what would be of assistance to the participants in leaving behind a life of incarceration. It is, in fact, the mechanism of incarceration. Following analysis, however, it becomes clear that, for these women at least, being incarcerated did fulfill certain tangible and abstract needs. Education, counselling and support services, medical care, and the issue of food and shelter are all dealt with behind bars. Moreover, jail has provided some of these women with a sense of belonging and community they have not received on the outside.

**Transition assistance.** Feeling comfortable in jail and uncomfortable in the community is but one example of where the frequently verbalized need for transition assistance and life skills training could be of benefit and was likely a factor in their articulating such a need. Taz frequently bemoaned the sentiment that there was no help for released offenders in the community and that the community did not understand the needs of offenders. She said, “It’s very hard for me to get out in the community because they don’t trust me, right? . . . When you get outta jail, there is no support. ‘Cause you don’t know how to live.” A personal mentor could, perhaps, assist in liaising the offender with resources in the community, thus making it less intimidating and more inviting.

Mentoring, in the context of corrections and criminal justice, is a fairly under-researched intervention (Hucklesby & Wincup, 2014; Kavanagh & Borrill, 2013), but could be promising for assisting offenders if implemented sensitively (see Hucklesby & Wincup, 2014, for detailed discussion of drawbacks of ineffectively implemented mentoring programs). Shepard, Kapil, and Shepard (2012) described a successful mentoring endeavour: Moms Mentoring Moms, in Victoria British Columbia. This program was directed at assisting mothers with substance abuse difficulties with advocacy; meeting needs; retaining or regaining custody of children; and accessing support, information, and resources. Mentors, unlike those identified in the Hucklesby and Wincup (2014) review, were peers: women who had, themselves, experienced substance use, thus improving the relationship between mentor and mentee. Peer mentorship can result in positive outcomes for both mentors and mentees (Kavanagh & Borrill, 2013; Shepard et al., 2012).

An alternative approach for working with offenders, and a term sometimes synonymously used with mentoring, is that of life coaching (Smyth, 2014). Smyth made a particular distinction between life coaching and mentoring, in that a coach does not engage in advising or sharing personal knowledge; rather, the coach is there to empower the client through the client's own agenda. According to Smyth, this may mean that reducing recidivism is not a direct target of the process, and yet, it may be a by-product of increased self-worth, resourcefulness, and confidence. Coaching may also increase the client's likelihood of accessing other services, such as counselling, available in the community. A life coach is meant to assist the offender in mapping out what she or he wants from her or his own life and how she/he can go about realizing it. Some of the women in the current study, in describing their ideas of a one-on-one or transition worker, individually seemed to indicate a preference for a mentor or life coach. Taz and Willow specifically made mention of wanting someone who had experiences similar to their own (i.e., mentor), while Shauntay, Horse, and Yin Yang Rose all expressed a need for assistance with specific areas of living. Both mentor and life coach could be of services in areas like budgeting, financial planning, attending appointments, grocery shopping, and daily living skills.

**Mental health and well-being.** The employment of positive coping strategies (e.g., seeking counselling, talking with trusted others, nurturing hope, and using prescribed medications to manage mental illness, etc.) enabled participants to reduce their rates of negative coping strategies (e.g., drinking, using drugs, avoidance, running away, etc.) in the face of adverse life experiences. Formal counselling and healing programs provided insights, an outlet for pent up emotions, cultural healing, and comfort.

Unfortunately, most did not complete these programs, or they were not fully engaged during the course of counselling. None put into words why they did not fully commit to mental health programs, but perhaps it was because of fear; change can be frightening, and these women have become accustomed to the ways in which they live. Experiencing improvement in these mental health areas leads down an unknown path where hurts may be healed and the spirits of loved ones released. It is possible that a life without these things is too foreign to seem liveable. The fear that keeps them from healing their emotional selves could be more intense than fear for physical safety and fear of succumbing to addiction. Once the layers of drug, alcohol, and trauma are peeled away, the participants would be left vulnerable to their own scrutiny; this could be most frightening of all. Participants seemed to understand that not wanting to face “my problems” was a major part of the trouble. Wanting change, and meaning it, is frightening. It seems that, when you must choose, you choose the devil you know; the unknown may be angel or saviour and no devil at all, but perhaps the risk is too great.

From a counselling perspective, it may also help to consider the stages of change. The transtheoretical model was born from research on smokers and integrates the various processes and procedures individuals utilize in effecting personal change from a variety of theoretical perspectives (Prochaska, Redding, & Evers, 2008). Six stages of change were identified along with 10 processes of change. The six stages are pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and termination. Processes of change describe a variety of activities, including raising consciousness, counterconditioning, and stimulus control. From the interviews, it is possible these women have become stuck in one of the stages and may not be implementing the necessary processes. In particular,

participants may be stuck in the stage of contemplation, in which they are aware that there is a warranted change and of the benefits of that change, but they are also cognizant of the risks associated with taking action toward change. In their correctional setting, many of them have partaken in programs and groups that are designed to facilitate change, yet have not realized those changes.

This may be explained by some of the processes of change (Prochaska et al., 2008). While most of the women I interviewed had obtained information and facts about getting clean (i.e., consciousness raising), articulated how important making the change was to their own identity (i.e., self-re-evaluation), and recognized the impact their substance use had on their social and physical surroundings (i.e., environmental re-evaluation), they were unable or unwilling to engage in other processes. Dramatic relief is a process that involves experiencing and moving through the emotions, often negative, that are associated with an unhealthy behaviour like drinking. The participants described the lengths to which they would go to avoid experiencing such emotions. They also were not always able to substitute substance use with a healthy, positive behaviour (i.e., counterconditioning) or to increase rewards for staying clean while also reducing the experienced rewards for continued drug use (i.e., reinforcement management). In the case of stimulus control, which involves eliminating reminders and other environmental cues for using or drinking as well as adding reminders for staying clean, the inability to engage in this process may be more systemic. Living in shelters and returning to associate with peers who use is not conducive to controlling substance use stimuli.

Most of the women in the study had poor self-esteem; they did not like who they are. Their self-image was a product of their own self-talk, but was also influenced by

others around them. Self-esteem had an impact on their decision making, their sense of personal strength, and their interactions with others. Negative self-esteem can even result in self-sabotage, which proved to be a barrier to meeting needs. Participants noted a connection between how they felt about themselves and their ability to manage their addiction and substance use issues as well as their relationships. Loving and believing in themselves would be an important part of manifesting change in their lives.

Difficult emotions seemed to have a greater impact on participants than did their positive counterparts. Difficult feelings held them back from activities and people, disconnected them from self and others, decreased self-esteem, and could even lead to violence and avoidance behaviours like drinking, using drugs, and running away. Judging by comments about drug and alcohol use, participants spent more time wallowing in negative emotions than rejoicing in positive ones. Negative, or difficult, emotions were a significant trigger because they were uncomfortable. It is possible the unexpressed anger is what drove these women to the bottle or the pipe. Expressed anger may even be a form of avoidance, because lashing out at others is much easier than facing the negative events of one's life, as it seemed to be for Taz.

It is clear that there needs to be some concrete way for these women to harness their strengths and moments of self-awareness to help them stay the course of change. Certainly, they are in need of healthier grieving processes and a release of their continued bereavements. Confidence, commitment to change, help-seeking, and motivation might all be enhanced by focussing on strengths rather than hardships. There was a schism between knowing they have internal resources and being able to apply and utilize them. It is possible that their ideas of strengths are simply learned responses based on previous

therapeutic experiences, and it is possible that they merely said these things about themselves because they have heard them said before. The conviction I witnessed in faces and voices, however, belies that idea. I expressed gratitude to each and every one of the women who participated in this study, and, to most of them, I confessed that I was awed by the fortitude they have shown thus far in their lives and the courage they displayed in continuing to face each day.

**The role of culture and spirituality.** Besides their own personal strengths, feeling connected to culture and engaging in spiritual practices appeared to be protective factors. These factors may also have contributed to the resilience these women display in the face of great adversities, providing a foundation for some level of stability and of hope. Belief in God or Creator appeared to give them an anchor: something they could count on to stabilize them through any storm. Participants described taking comfort from prayer, smudging, sweats, and church services and finding strength in these activities. Pauly noted, “I can endure anything if I depend on God for everything.” She, along with Yin Yang Rose and Willow, spoke of her belief in the power of prayer. Even Taz, who denounced religion as a result of how she was raised, now emphasizes her need for guidance from her Creator.

Cultural activities, which are often inextricable from spiritual practices, were spoken of with a quiet reverence that underscored their importance to the participants. Language was a significant part of culture for the participants. Speaking a traditional language created more of a connection for participants, both with people and with the stories being told. When asked why language was so important to her, Shauntay replied, “Because it tells who I am.” Pauly was not fluent in Cree, but her mother was. She

lamented that her mother did not speak much Cree at home, and as a result, Pauly was not able to carry on much conversation with Elders. Asked what she believed might happen to the Cree people if the language were to eventually disappear, she answered, “They’ll just end up being like everybody else, I guess.” The implication is that language is an important part of identity.

*Effects of family support on resilience.* The idea of culture as a protective factor was discussed in Chapter 2 as *cultural resilience*. Walters and Simoni (2002) found the impact of risk factors and stressors on Aboriginal women was tempered by protective cultural factors, including identity attitudes, enculturation, and traditional health practices. These factors act as buffers against adverse experiences, including assaults and abuse, discrimination, and historical trauma. Angell (2000) noted that among Aboriginal peoples, culture enhances coping abilities of individuals through the mechanism of the family. The family, then, becomes a critical component of resiliency because it is the vehicle through which individuals learn culture and spirituality. This was true for all of the participants in my study. Shauntay and Willow learned their spirituality from their grandfathers and, especially for Willow, from her grandmother. Taz and Horse experienced traditional cultural practices at the sides of their grandparents, including learning through storytelling, exposure to language, respectful behaviour, and ways of living. Pauly and Yin Yang Rose were drawn to dominant religious practices through their mothers’ involvement, while Taz was negatively influenced by her parents’ hypocritical portrayal of Christian attitudes.

Relationships with family serve more than merely the delivery of culture and spirituality; the effects of these relationships and perceived support from family may be

protective or negative. The significance of family support for the participants is that it served as a foundation that sustained the participants as they attempted to improve their circumstances. Willow pronounced, “I guess what would keep me going would be first to have my family’s support.” The support of family was a failsafe, a motivator, and a measure of worth, especially for Shauntay.

I feel like, if I don’t have family support, I don’t have anything. . . . Without them there, I’d have no reason to go on the right path. . . . If I wasn’t able to get their approval for anything then I’d feel like I’m not worthy.

For Shauntay, obtaining the support and approval of her family seemed to be a marker of regaining some of her life; the closer she moved to family approval, the farther she got from a meaningless life filled with drugs and alcohol. Strained relationships with family contributed to life stress. This was illustrated by the sometimes volatile relationships many of the participants had with their mothers. Positive emotional support provided the women with a sense of safety and security, instilled them with hope, and gave them the strength they needed to keep going through life.

*Interaction of spirituality and substance use.* If family, spirituality, and culture are so powerful and provide so much strength to these women, you may be wondering why they continue to struggle with addictions and recidivism. Certainly, a relationship exists between spirituality and substance use (Miller, 2013). Involvement in religion is a significant protective factor when it comes to substance use disorders, and meditative practices seem to lower the likelihood of engaging in drug and alcohol use. Miller (2013), paraphrasing Carl Jung in a missive to AA co-founder Bill W, said, “Spirits (alcohol) and spirituality seem to be mutually exclusive. They drive each other out” (p. 1258). He also noted this is an area that has been underdeveloped in terms of its role in recovery. There

were challenges and barriers to the participants living in a spiritual way. Confusion about to whom they should pray, what to believe, what to do about their faith, and how to pursue a relationship with their Maker prevented these women from realizing their spiritual goals. Taz was adamant that she cannot pray to someone she doesn't know and trust. When Willow's moosoom died, she said, "I didn't know what to do; I didn't know who to believe in. I didn't know who to listen to. And not knowing got me where I am today." It is not clear whether a weakening in spiritual commitment led to an increase in substance use or vice versa.

When participants lapsed in their spiritual and cultural pursuits, they felt disconnected from their families, their higher power, and themselves. Lapses generally occurred because of drinking and drug use and were beautifully explained by Pauly's description of a spirit leaving the person who is under the influence. Shauntay said her spiritual connection is there; "it's just that I'm not as strong as I was when I wasn't using drugs." She said that drug use takes her spirituality away from her, but she knows that it will get stronger once she gets it back because of what she learned of traditional spiritual practices from her grandfather. Even though there was a lot that interfered with living a spiritual life, all of the women I interviewed held out hope that prayer and faith would eventually give them what they need to move past addiction and into a more holy, and whole, life.

### **The Experience and Impact of Historical Trauma**

Historical trauma, defined as accumulated trauma experienced throughout the lifespan and across generations, is a term that has been applied to the effects of colonization on Aboriginal people relatively recently (Brave Heart, 2003; Brave Heart &

DeBruyn, 1998). One of the stated purposes of this study was to examine the effects of historical trauma on the lives of the participants and their abilities to ensure their needs are being met. On the surface, the data are rather disappointing on this point, as very few of the participants could identify any such effects in their lives. When one looks more closely, it is possible to see the impression of historical trauma on these women in the form of childhood abuses, substance use, parental Christian practices, and complicated grief reactions.

One possible reason why participants were unable to identify directly with the concept of historical trauma is that the term was coined in academic circles and used most extensively in academic ventures. The women in my study, being undereducated, had never been exposed to the term prior to our interviews. When I mentioned historical trauma in the interviews, it drew a blank look from most of them and confusion from the rest. Although I did include a description of the concept in my interview and recruitment materials, perhaps it was presumptuous to use an academic term with my sample population. While participants were unfamiliar with the concept of historical trauma, they were very familiar with residential schools: one of the legacies of colonization. Stories of family members who had experienced residential school were abundant, and at least one participant was able to draw a line from residential schools to the breakdown of family systems among her people.

Residential schools, imposed by colonial governments in North America, resulted in the forced removal of children from their community and parental care (Brave Heart, 1999). These schools spanned generations of Aboriginal people; the last residential school in Canada was closed in 1996 ("A History," 2008). Yin Yang Rose, not having

been raised with her biological family, was the only participant who had no examples of residential school. All of the others told of parents or grandparents who attended residential schools. Fewer were privy to stories about what that relative experienced while in residential school. For Taz and Pauly, it was clear that their parents' residential school history had impacted their upbringing. Pauly admitted she and her siblings were raised the way her mother was raised in the schools. Taz believed her parents were so damaged by the schools that they became "sick." Both women gave examples of their parents expecting them to put on a perfect and respectable public show, and both women were badly abused behind closed doors. These abusive behaviours were consistent with the impairment of parenting that occurred as a result of historical traumas (Brave Heart, 1999). Children in the schools returned to their homes disassociated from their culture and their old ways of life; they could not fit in with the European ideals forced upon them at school, and they no longer belonged to the traditional world of their parents and grandparents ("A History," 2008). Long-term consequences of this dual alienation include substance use, increases in parental stress, child neglect and abuse, and decreased attachment (Brave Heart, 1999). All of these consequences were visible in the lives of the participants in this study.

Horse, Willow, and Shauntay each had grandparents who attended residential schools. These elder relatives reacted very differently than did the younger generation of parents. Shauntay and Willow both described their grandparents' determination not to treat young people as they had been treated in the schools. Horse, while not explicitly stating that, demonstrated the same sentiment in her stories of her "beautiful" early

childhood living with her grandparents. What was not clear is whether these grandparents behaved in abusive ways to their own children only to find the anger mellowed with age.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations inherent in this study, and I should like to take the time to highlight them for the sake of clarity and transparency. Such limitations include structural concerns directly related to the design of the study, others are related to the qualitative nature of the enterprise, and others have to do with the researcher and the manner in which the study was carried out.

In designing this study, I opted to use both inductive and deductive methods for both the interview process and the analysis phase. Although I feel this approach was very effective for this study, there is some possibility that it imposed structure on the data that would have been absent had I chosen a purely inductive approach. In presenting pre-written needs cards to the participants, did I close doors to other issues not contained in cards? Did I fence in the participants with the prescribed boundaries of the card-sort intervention? The needs written on the cards were selected from studies whose authors utilized participants' points of view to arrive at their results, and I believe this tempered the potential imposition of values on my participants. I have also already discussed the relationship-building benefits of the card sort I used and its effectiveness in enabling participants to structure their thoughts and experiences. Other than the words on the cards, no other boundaries were suggested to participants. Not everyone may agree; one may argue that the issues on the cards, while identified by participants in other studies, were not issues identified independently by *my* participants. One may suggest that this placed unnecessary strictures on these data.

Participants in the study were not able to discuss the effects of historical trauma in their lives to the extent I had hoped for, which could be due to their being insufficiently prepared to do so. While it has been noted that the concept of historical trauma is primarily academic and that the gaps in education might have impacted how participants were able to understand what I was asking, I made the decision to present the construct to them in an ambiguous manner, in the hope that I would not impose anything on their understanding of it. Results may have been different had I more clearly outlined what the concept was prior to requesting they tell me about the impact of historical trauma

The participant sample poses another limitation. Because this was a purposive, convenient sample, the women in this study are unlikely to be a representative cross-section of all incarcerated women, even if one considers only this local institution. Additionally, the sample size is very small, which is typical of in-depth qualitative studies (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). This makes generalization unrealistic; therefore, the results are not able to explain the circumstances of all Aboriginal women who are in custody. The study speaks purely of the stories shared by these six women and nothing more. A small sample size enabled me to spend time delving deep into the lives and the experiences of my participants and steep myself in the small details. Because participants were self-selecting, I may have missed data from individuals that could have enhanced the data, but those women chose not to take part. In the end, I am very happy with the participants I was able to interview and with the rich data they were willing to share with me. Although not a truly representative sample of incarcerated women, I believe these six women represented themselves and their experiences very well.

Being a non-Aboriginal researcher exploring issues related to Aboriginal women could have had a significant impact on the results of the study. Participant discourse might have been different had the interviews been conducted by someone with Aboriginal heritage. Additionally, the interpretations of the transcripts might have led to alternate conclusions had I been an Aboriginal investigator. It is not clear to what extent my ancestral heritage may have impacted the study, but it is nonetheless important to consider.

As a novice researcher, my participation could itself be considered a limitation. My experience in the area of interviewing had previously been limited to the clinical counselling training received through my coursework and practicum within my academic program. It is possible that the techniques I used to conduct the interviews were sometimes more therapeutic in nature than investigative. Additionally, the follow-up asked of the participants may have taken the interview in a different direction had my training been in the investigative slant. When I did ask supplementary questions, it was often for better clarity; occasionally, the questions I asked followed a particular piece of the participant's story that piqued some instinctual interest of mine. Because I utilized the interview guide less as a script and more as a map, there were inconsistencies in how I introduced the study, the needs cards, and the interview processes to each participant.

Furthermore, as could be the case with any researcher, my personal experiences, circumstances, and feelings may have influenced my questions and the course of the interview. These facts may have impacted the outcome of the interview. In an attempt to circumvent this, I spent several minutes in meditative activity (i.e., journaling, prayer, reviewing the interview guide and research questions, and deep breathing) prior to each

interview. It was my hope that such activities would help to remind me of the purpose of the study, alleviate any anxiety I may have been feeling, and to identify and isolate biases.

It should also be noted that I am but one individual conducting this research. Had I been working with a team of researchers, or even a partner, who could have co-conducted the interviews or assisted with the analysis, my results might be very different than they are. Multiple individuals would pick up different nuances, bring diverse approaches and voices, and dialogue about the transcripts and categories. This was the case in a previous qualitative study I became involved with; there was a team of at least seven people who met regularly to discuss transcripts, category nodes, meaning, and themes. Sometimes, there was universal agreement, but, more often, there were debates about what was the reality being told. The categories and themes in my study, and their interpretations, could have turned out quite differently had this research been conducted with more than one researcher or even by a different individual researcher. I attempted to be as transparent as possible in my design and analysis decisions and procedures to enable another reader to better understand how I came to my conclusions. My decision to transcribe all interviews myself, rather than to hire a professional transcriptionist, was made in part to ensure I was fully immersed in the data and, therefore, would be as familiar with them as possible.

### **Importance of the Current Study**

This study was exploratory in nature, seeking to develop the body of knowledge surrounding the needs of incarcerated Aboriginal women. This is an area of research that has been underdeveloped in academia in the past and one that deserves more attention.

Aboriginal women are highly overrepresented in the correctional system; the proportion of women in federal custody who are Aboriginal is approximately eight times that of women in the general Canadian population (Kong & AuCoin, 2008). This overrepresentation is disconcerting and needs to be addressed.

Aboriginal women are not only overrepresented in corrections. Concern for the safety of Aboriginal women has been ongoing in Canada for many years now; one reason for that concern is the disparity between the number of missing and murdered women in this country who are Aboriginal and those who are not (Amnesty International, 2004; Royal Canadian Mounted Police [RCMP], 2014). According to the RCMP report, there have been almost 1,200 cases of Aboriginal women being murdered or gone missing in the last 30 years. The issue is so significant that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation has devoted a website to their database of the 230 unsolved cases of missing or murdered Aboriginal women that have occurred in Canada over the past six decades (<http://www.cbc.ca/missingandmurdered/>).

The results of this study, while addressing the specific questions I had proposed to investigate, left many more questions unanswered and even spawned new queries. The study has many implications for both research and counselling practice and also raises considerations for correctional policy. Several potential courses for additional inquiry present themselves to me as a result of this study, and others may occur to the reader. Practices and policy may benefit from considering alternate avenues of treatment, therapy, and programming when addressing the various needs of Aboriginal female offenders.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Studies like the current one offer a glimpse into the violence and trauma Aboriginal women face; it also provides some description of the unsafe conditions that result from a lifestyle of drug and alcohol abuse. The study also provides a flash of insight into the life conditions that bring about repeated incarcerations and into some of the barriers these women face in trying to turn their lives around. There is still an abundance of research to be done. Areas warranting additional investigation discussed in this section include replication studies, the prevalence and effects of grief, the role of culture and spirituality, and additional avenues related to historical trauma.

**Replication.** A larger-scale study of similar design might be in order to be able to provide results that can be generalized to the greater population of Aboriginal women in custody. A larger-scale study would also be warranted to determine whether the results discussed here are, in fact, representations of that population. Is it a lived truth that complicated grief reactions are common and problematic for other female Aboriginal inmates? Do other incarcerated Aboriginal women need an intensive transition program with one-on-one supports to teach them the ways of living a jail- and substance-free life? Are family support, traditional cultural activities, and spirituality vital to the wholeness of Aboriginal women from Blood, Cree, and other Nations? Are the notions of motherhood and being needed by others significant parts of healthy female Aboriginal identity? The results of the current study should be replicated on a larger scale before making definitive statements about how they apply to women living under the umbrella of the criminal justice system.

**Grief.** The relationship between grief and substance use among Aboriginal women bears further enquiry. In the current study, the effects of grief on the participants were obvious to this observer-analyst. Grief wreaked havoc with their self-esteem, compelled them to use escapist coping strategies, and created confusion and resentment. The participants clung to their grief reactions even when the death or loss happened many years previously. Grieving patterns among Aboriginal women, specifically, and Aboriginal people, in general, may show tendencies toward complicated grief reactions. In relation to the grieving patterns, the prevalence of grief and complicated grief among Aboriginal population bears investigation as well.

**Culture and spirituality.** Another potential area for research is the role of spiritual and cultural connectedness in the lives of female Aboriginal inmates. One notable query could be the impact of cultural influence on the treatment of addiction and substance use. Another vein of inquiry would be the effectiveness of spirituality and cultural identity as protective factors against stressors like grief reactions and historical trauma.

**Impact of historical trauma.** Finally, the fact that none of the participants reported experiencing violence or abuse at the hands of grandparents begs the question of whether their grandparents experienced historical trauma differently than the subsequent generation. Is it possible the participants' grandparents were more resilient against historical trauma, or do the negative consequences of historical trauma soften somewhat as the individual ages? For the latter, that could mean participants' grandparents displayed abusive behaviours toward their own children (i.e., participants' parents), but learned to control those behaviours when they became grandparents. This is purely

conjecture on my part, but there is room for study in this area: the progression of historical trauma effects over the lifespan of the individual. Another area of interest to researchers may be the factors that enable some individuals to weather historical trauma better than others.

### **Implications for Counselling Practice**

Several considerations emerged regarding the application of this study in counselling practice. Specific approaches to counselling, issues to consider when working with clients, and even new techniques might be informed by the results of these analyses. Ideas for helping professionals discussed in this section include the experience of grief, the importance of family relationships, applications for addictions counselling, and accommodation of transition needs.

**Grief.** Given the pervasiveness of complicated grief reactions among the participants and the resultant negative effects on their lives, those in the helping profession should consider grief as a factor in issues presented by their Aboriginal women clientele. This would be especially true for clients who reveal a loss or death during session. It might be prudent to consider grief as a potential contributing factor, even when no death or loss is disclosed. Complicated grief reactions are varied and significant and may be impacting clients without their being able to draw a cognitive line between their issue and the loss. In order to avoid being paternalistic or proscriptive, it would be more effective to ask clients about recent and past losses, rather than to assume grief is an issue.

**Family relationships.** Approaching therapy from a family systems perspective, or at least considering the effect of family on the client, could prove beneficial for

counselling outcomes with Aboriginal women. The importance of family support and approval on the participants was clearly expressed in the transcripts. It may even be valuable to have willing family members participate in therapy and healing sessions along with the individual. These sessions may be even more effective if they are made culturally relevant in harmony with the client's own cultural connectedness. At the very least, the influence and significance of family to individual clients should not be dismissed.

**Addictions counselling.** In treating Aboriginal female offenders for addictions and substance use issues, practitioners might be well advised to focus more effort on treating the root cause of the issue rather than the visible symptoms. By this, I mean that the actual behaviours in which clients engage may be less important than what is driving them to self-medicate. The source of drug use and drinking for Aboriginal female offenders may not be the same as that of a non-Aboriginal offender, nor may it be readily apparent from intake interviews. Complicated grief reactions would be excellent examples of this. In their review of the literature on grief and prisoners, Leach and her colleagues (2008) noted relationships between grief, adverse life experiences like childhood trauma, and maladaptive behaviours. Worden (2003) encouraged all professionals treating issues like substance abuse to consider grief as an underlying source of the behaviour.

**Transitioning to the community.** This may be the most significant implication for practice because it was a specific need verbalized by many of the participants. Being released into a bigger environment with less structure and non-specific expectations was intimidating for these participants. Being unsure of things like financial planning,

budgeting, and even grocery shopping increased their feelings of self-consciousness and whittled away at their already delicate self-esteem. Feeling shunned or despised by the community to which they were transitioning increased feelings of helplessness and isolation. Potential interventions that merit additional consideration would include mentoring and life coaching, as described earlier in this chapter. It would be important to ensure neither of these approaches results in monitoring of the offender and focuses, instead, on supporting and empowering the client. Making transitional skills and activities part of treatment plans could result in greater successes for Aboriginal women exiting the corrections environment by increasing their self-confidence and their chances for success.

### **Implications for Policy**

Correctional policy makers and ministries may be better able to serve the Aboriginal women who fall under their purview by considering the results of this research. In particular, correctional institutions may benefit from having trained and experienced grief counsellors on staff to assist clients with complicated grief reactions, while also retreating somewhat from a medical model perspective on issues like addictions treatment. Treatments and therapies for Aboriginal offenders may be more effective if the institutions could accommodate family therapy approaches. Another boon might be the employment of transition workers or mentors, who not only assist incarcerated Aboriginal women with release planning, but are also able to follow up with them post-release.

In a perfect world, the women in my study would have largely avoided incarceration by being diverted into programs that might assist them in overcoming

barriers to the “normal” life they craved. Having said this, I also recognize that being incarcerated has likely prolonged the lifespan of many, if not all of these women. A better alternative may be to create provincial healing-lodge-type institutions for Aboriginal women who are in conflict with the law and who, themselves, are victims of crimes and violence. In a correctional facility that facilitates daily spiritual activities, family-friendly therapy and healing, restorative justice activities, reconnection with community and culture, mediation between offender and victim, and other holistic approaches, Aboriginal female offenders may fare better than they do in traditional correctional centres.

I would like to make very clear that provincial institutions do offer programming and spiritual practices that are specific to Aboriginal offenders. Because of my personal experiences, I am able only to speak confidently about those offered at LCC, but I acknowledge that many strides have been made in provincial, territorial, and federal institutions across the country. Although I assert that different approaches to sentencing and incarceration may be in order, I am neither naïve about those who are sentenced to custody nor the realities of the correctional system. My suggestions here are made purely for the sake of consideration.

### **Reciprocation**

I was granted a gift by each of these six women through the mechanism of this research. These gifts were freely given, and many expressed hope that their stories would be of some help to other Aboriginal women in similar circumstances. I am sensitive to the fact that I was dealing with women who would be classified as vulnerable under the parameters of ethical research, as outlined in Chapter 3. I feel honour-bound to see that

their wish to help others is fulfilled in some way, and I believe it is important to reciprocate by giving back to the participants and the community.

With respect to participants, I offered to provide those interested with copies of transcripts, a written summary of their story (as told in their own words), and a summary of results. To that end, I obtained mailing addresses from each participant for the best place to reach them and forward the documents. I encountered a joyous setback in the form of having a baby that resulted in my taking a leave from this academic program for a year. Because I was not confident the provided addresses would still be accurate for all of the participants, and not wanting to send confidential documents like transcripts to a stranger, I opted instead to mail out self-addressed, stamped reply cards to each address asking individuals to confirm that (a) the address was still approved by them, and (b) they were still interested in obtaining their transcripts. At the point of this writing, none of the response cards have been returned. I will continue to look for response cards following my defense.

While that avenue for reciprocation may be closed, I believe I have still been able to give something to each woman I interviewed. In their article on the therapeutic effects of research interviewing, Costello, Burns, and Davidson (2009) noted that the interview, itself, can be of benefit to the interviewees. In their study on women who were treated for cervical cancer, many participants noted they felt better after having completed the interview. According to the authors, in-depth interviews conducted with an open structure allow participants to share their stories in their own way and at their own pace. Active listening and reflecting emotions and empathy are skills that improve the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. These are some of the same skills I learned through

my coursework in counselling psychology. Costello and his fellow authors noted that “a therapeutic effect can occur if the interviewee is left with an enhanced sense of well-being at the end of the interview” (p. 19). At least two of my participants stated they felt better, or found more clarity, as a result of the interview and the card-sort intervention contained therein. Others thanked me for the opportunity to talk to someone who would really listen to them. All of the participants left the interviews smiling, and each seemed energized at the end of our time together. In listening with a non-judgemental ear and without seeking to repair her, I believe I gave back to each of the women in this study before even beginning formal analysis.

I have contacted the Deputy Director of Programs at the LCC about the possibility of giving an open presentation to the women’s unit, welcoming all female offenders who might be interested. She has indicated her support of such a presentation, which will be set up following my defense. I will also offer to present results to officers and managers at the centre. To address the community, I will offer the same presentation in public locations, with an open invitation to any and all community members. I will also propose to present my findings to community organizations, like the Family Centre of Southern Alberta, and open it to the public and those in the helping professions.

### **My Lived Experience as Researcher**

This thesis study has been, without exaggeration, a life-altering experience. This is not to say that it has altered every aspect of my life, but I have certainly been changed by the process, interviews, analysis, and writing. I became pregnant just prior to beginning the interview phase of the study and was able to identify with participants as they told their stories of motherhood. I returned home each time, grateful for the loving

husband and good family circumstances I might otherwise have taken for granted. As a woman, I was struck deeply by the stories of suffering I heard, including the participants' issues with alcohol and drugs. While I believe individuals make their own choices in the execution of their lives, some are making those choices from very slim pickings. I knew this on an academic level prior to experiencing these interviews; however, hearing first-hand accounts of the kinds of choices available to these women and the paucity of resources available at the time of choosing has given me greater insight. I believe this is something that will greatly benefit me in my future career as a counsellor.

As a student and burgeoning researcher, the volume of detail and work that went into the preparation, execution, and completion of this study has given me a new appreciation for professors, instructors, thesis and dissertation students, and other researchers who have gone before me and those who will continue to contribute to academia and practice long after this work has turned to dust. Besides the work, I also had to contend with time lags. The first was a period of six months as I waited for government approval of the study proposal and permission to begin my research, including having to wait for another researcher to finish her work at the institution. The second was what *I* considered to be the excruciatingly long recruitment period. I say it was excruciating because I was very energized at the beginning of that stage, and the lull between each participant and the repeated recruitment strategies were somewhat deflating, especially when I reached the point of needing only one more participant to reach my minimum! It was almost painful to me that not everyone was in love with my study because I certainly was! This entire experience has given me a new and permanent appreciation for the authors of academic works everywhere.

Lastly, the interviews I had with these women will remain indelibly inked upon my memory and my life. I think of them as old friends, even though I shared only a brief three hours with each of them. The level of intimacy that was created in those three hours allowed these women to share, with a complete stranger, some of the most private aspects of their lives; I will never forget that gift. I feel honoured to have been present while they shared these things—some of which they had never shared with any other person. I can hear their voices and see their faces in my mind’s eye. Upon hearing of the deaths of two of my participants, I grieved for them, however disenfranchised a grief it was. When I heard of good news, I rejoiced silently. For those who are still alive, I have hope that they will find what they need to move into the lives they have been craving for so long. I feel regret only in that I may never know the final chapters in the lives of those remaining four.

### **Summary and Final Thoughts**

Through this study, I sought to explore the varied needs of incarcerated Aboriginal women in a Southern Alberta correctional facility. Participants came from all over the Province of Alberta and hailed from Blackfoot and Cree Nations as well as Métis ancestry. They shared the details of their complex lives and, in doing so, were able to verbalize many of their needs. These included the basic physical needs of food, shelter, clothing, and money; they also identified more intangible needs that included family support, spiritual and traditional cultural activities, giving care to others, and several genres of counselling or therapy. Many articulated a need for someone to assist them with the transition from a life of substance use and incarceration to one of living healthily in a supportive community; more than one felt that assistance should be intensive.

Through analysis, several additional considerations became clear. The participants both appreciated and loathed jail, wanting to be free and yet being fearful of what that freedom might mean. Grief was a significant barrier to these women being free from drug and alcohol abuse and feeling whole, and most of them were mired down by a sense of betrayal from other people and government agencies. Much blame was expressed, most notably self-blame for events out of their influence. Most of all, they hungered for another way of living: a normal, everyman life in which they manage a home; relationships with their children, grandchildren, families; a sense of connectedness to their culture; and a strength of faith to sustain them through struggles.

This study could not have been completed without the generous spirit of the women who agreed to participate in it, and I am indebted to them. It is my hope that I have been able to capture their stories and experiences and have encapsulated them accurately through the categories and themes presented in previous chapters. Research and counselling practices that are informed by those results may, indeed, lead to improved circumstances for other Aboriginal women in Canadian correctional centres; I certainly hope this to be the case. My own practice as a future counsellor will be enlightened by my experience as a researcher and by the knowledge I have gained through this process. I hope to be able to work with offenders in my career, and the issues covered by this paper are very near and dear to my heart. I offer my gratitude to the remaining four participants and fervently hope they are finding peace and balance in their lives.

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## Appendix A:

### Niistitapi Values Endorsed by Blackfoot Elders<sup>1</sup>

Values	Description
Aatsimoyikaan (Prayer)	A daily ritual that one performs in order to ask for guidance from the Creator.
Kimmapiiyitsinni (Compassion)	Being empathetic to your fellow man, including unconditional love, compassion, and an appreciation for others.
Innakotsiyyinni (Respect)	Showing respect for everything in our world.
Niistitapiyisinni (Way of Life)	The “Real People,” our language, stories, legends, and prayers that make us who we are.
Ihpiopotsp (What We Have Been Given)	The knowledge and wisdom (culture) that has been passed on to us.
Aksistoiyipaattapiisinni (Self-Starter)	Giving the best in all your endeavours, it is always positive. Not rushing into tasks recklessly.
Isspommaanitapiisinni (Helpful)	Care, compassion, and helpfulness to your fellow man. We must consider the collective rather than the individual.
Ao ahkannaistokawa (Balance)	Connectivity in our family, clan, tribe, country.
Ihkanaitapstsiwa (Reciprocity)	This can best be described as a mission. Our mission is to educate the younger generation about KIPAITAPIIYSINNOONI (Our Way of Life). Being adaptive in our lives through the knowledge of our elders.
Pommotsiisinni (Transfer of Knowledge)	The transfer of knowledge to our children in order for us to keep our cultural identity. As educators, we should pass on the ideals of KIPAITAPIIYSINNOONI in both the native and non-native school environment.
Kakoysin (Awareness)	Being aware of our (environment) surroundings. For example, watching and learning during ceremonies.

<sup>1</sup> These values are reproduced in their entirety from *Report to the president: First Nations, Métis, Inuit (FNMI) Centre* (pp. 44–45), by L. Little Bear, R. Weasel Fat, R., & J. O’Dea, 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.uleth.ca/president/sites/president/files/Report%20to%20President%20%28FNMI%29%20-%20May%2023%2C%202012.pdf> Reproduced with permission.

**Appendix B:**  
**Approval Letters**



The  
University of  
Lethbridge

MEMORANDUM

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TO: Danille Lazzaretto-Green  
FROM: Richard Butt  
Date: May 18, 2011

RE: Human Subject Research Application: "Exploring the Psychosocial Needs of Incarcerated  
First Nations Women in a Southern Alberta Correctional Facility"

The Faculty of Education Human Subject Committee has **approved** your HSR application. The approval adheres to the tri-university council guidelines, published on the website <http://pre.ethics.gc.ca/english/policystatement/introduction.cfm>.

Good luck with your research.

Richard Butt, Ph.D.  
Chair Human Subject Committee  
Faculty of Education

Cc: Graduate Studies  
Blythe Shepard

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Research Unit, Strategic Services Branch  
#102, 4709-44 Avenue  
Stony Plain, Alberta  
T7Z 1N4

January 4, 2012

Danille Lazzaretto-Green  
(mailing address)

Dear Ms. Lazzaretto-Green:

**Re: Research Application – Exploring the Psychosocial Needs of  
Incarcerated First Nations Women in a Southern Alberta Correctional Facility**

I am pleased to inform you that the research application named above has been approved. Please note the following:

- You are required to submit a copy of all draft and final documents resulting from your research to the Correctional Services Research Unit.
- The Research Agreement is specific to interviews with up to eight first nations' sentenced female offenders.
- All policies, procedures, and operational requirements of the Lethbridge Correctional Center must be adhered to.
- Ms. Tammi Cazal will be your contact at the centre.

Please contact me should you have any questions.  
I wish you success in your research.

Sincerely,

Dawn Marie Chalas, R. Psych.  
Correctional Services Division Research Unit  
Alberta Solicitor General and Public Security



## Appendix C:

### Consent Form

# PARTICIPANT (ADULT) CONSENT FORM

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## Exploring the Psychosocial Needs of Incarcerated First Nations Women in a Southern Alberta Correctional Facility

### What is this all about?



You are being invited to participate in a research study called **Exploring the Psychosocial, Cultural, and Spiritual Needs of Incarcerated First Nations Women in a Southern Alberta Correctional Facility<sup>2</sup>**. This study is being done by me, Danille Lazzaretto-Green. I am a graduate student at the University of Lethbridge.

I have to conduct research to complete my Master of Education degree in Counselling Psychology. Because I am a student, my work is being supervised by Blythe Shepard, a professor at the University. You can contact her at the University of Lethbridge (phone #). If you have any questions about this research, you can call my supervisor or contact me by filling out a request form to the Native Program Coordinator (Rebecca).

### What are you studying in this project?

I am hoping to learn about what has helped you in your life and what has got in the way. I am hoping that you will share with me how the experience of historical trauma may have affected your ability to meet your needs.

Not a lot of research has been done in this area, so there is not very much known about the needs of First Nations women who come to jail or prison.

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<sup>2</sup> This research is funded in part by the Social Sciences and Human Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada and by a scholarship provided by the University of Lethbridge.

## Do I have to be part of this research study?

**No! You don't *have* to participate.** You should only participate if you want to. The jail does not require you to participate, and your good time will not be affected in any way, no matter what you choose. If you decide you want to be part of the study you can always change your mind – even in the middle of an interview – without any consequences to you. You can ask to have your story excluded from the study up to one month after the last interview. If more than a month passes before you change your mind, your story will still be used.

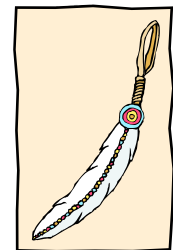


## What will I have to do?

Basically, you just have to talk and answer some questions. There are no right or wrong answers, only what is true and honest for you!! You will be interviewed twice. The first time we will get to know each other, and you can ask me any questions. I will ask you to look at some words printed on cards and to talk about the ones that are important to you. The second time, I will ask you to share your personal story about your needs and what has helped you along the way.

## What makes me a good participant?

You are being invited to participate in this study because you identify as a First Nations woman, you are a sentenced offender, you are 18-25 years old, and you can talk about your experience of historical trauma and how it has impacted your life. You should also have about 2 months left in your sentence.



## What are the pros and cons to me being part of this study?

**Pros** include:

- You might find you feel better after sharing your story and having it heard.
- You may feel good that you could help make a difference for other women like you in the future.
- This study could help to bring greater awareness of the issues faced by First Nations women to society in general, and possibly also to corrections systems and the government. This is a group of people whose voices are not often heard in our society.

- There is also a possibility of keeping women from coming back to jail over and over.
- Because there has not been much research done in this area, this study will help to provide information to researchers and future helpers and could inspire more research in the future.

**Cons** include:

- Being tape recorded may make you feel self-conscious or uncomfortable.
- You may experience some negative reactions by remembering and talking about some of your life experiences. These may be very natural, and could include feeling sad, embarrassed, angry, helpless, or hopeless. You may also find you feel very tired after the interviews.
- People may believe you are a participant in this study, and you may feel some pressure to talk about the study and what you said.
- You may experience some inconvenience in participating, like having to change your regular schedule to make time for interviews.

There are ways to help you if you experience any of these negative effects. Please ask if me if you have worries.

### Will people know that I am a research participant?



I will not tell anyone that you are participating in the research project unless it is necessary for security purposes. However, officers, staff, and even other offenders may guess based on the length of time we spend together. This means I can't guarantee you will be an anonymous participant.

### Will anyone know what I say in the interview?

I will protect your confidentiality. **Confidentiality** means your name will not appear on any papers for the study, and no one but me<sup>3</sup> will hear the taped interviews. The only place your real name will appear is on this form. Interviews will be , transferred to a computer, and deleted (forever) from the recorder and interviews will be typed out.. Anything that is stored electronically will be password locked and encrypted (like a jumbled code) so they will not be readable. The only other person who may see paper

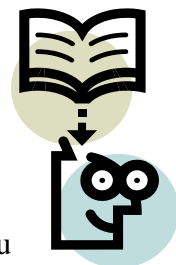
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<sup>3</sup> I may hire someone to type up the interviews. If I do this, that will be the only other person to hear the recorded interviews. That person will not have access to any other information related to the research project.

copies of the interviews is Blythe, my supervisor. No one from the jail or the government will have access.

### How will the research results be used?

The report will be published through the University and available to the public in the University library. I will also publish at least one article in a scholarly journal, which will be available to students and researchers everywhere. The results may be presented at conferences, which are attended by other researchers, students, and professionals.



The results may be shared with you and the others I interview, if you are interested. I will offer to present the results to the female unit at the jail. If you are released before the results are ready, you are welcome to come to any public presentations. We can also arrange some way for me to get you the results after your release, if you would like.

The results may be shared with local public interest groups or groups of mental health and corrections practitioners. A presentation will also be offered to the Alberta Solicitor General and Alberta Health Services correctional health people.

### What if I have other questions?

You can verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge (phone #). Also, I would be more than happy to answer your other questions!

By signing your name below, you are saying that you want to participate (of your own free choice) and that you understand what is involved in participating in this research study. You are also saying that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

**Yes! I want to participate in this study!**

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*Name of Participant*

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*Signature*

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*Date*

*A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*

**Appendix D:**  
**Interview Guide**

**First Meeting**

**ID number:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Native Identification:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Consent.** The purpose of our meeting today is to get to know each other a little bit more, and for me to learn some general information about you. Before we begin, I would like to confirm that you understand what was in the consent form, and that you are willingly participating in this study.

To protect your identity, I will keep your real name out of my report. But I still have to have some way to make your story stand out from those of other women in the study. I would like to give you a chance to pick your “research name.” Is there a name you would like me to use in my report? You may like to choose the name of an animal or symbol that is meaningful to you.

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Since I am asking you so many questions, it seems fair that you should be able to ask me some questions, too! Is there anything you would like to know about me or this research project?

**Strengths and Needs.** I have several themes printed on some cards here. I would like you to take a look at them, and would be interested in how important they are to you. Could you put them in order from most important to least important? There are also some blank cards in case you think of something that isn’t included and we can create a card for it.

**Debrief**

What was it like for you to answer these questions today, and to work with the cards? Was there anything we could have done differently to make the experience more comfortable or meaningful for you?

Is there anything you would like to add to what we have talked about today?

Is there anything you would like to ask me now?

## Second Meeting

**Generative Question.** There are three things I would like to hear from you today. I would be honoured if you would share the story of the difficulties you face on the outside and where you find strength, support, help, and safety. How have you been able to come to this point in your life? And finally, how has this journey been affected by your experience of historical hurts to yourself and your people?

### Additional Questions (optional and as needed).

- What kinds of help or support do you think you need to be able to stay out of jail?
- What kinds of programs or treatment options would help you the most?
- What are some of your qualities that have helped you the most? How can those qualities be strengthened?
- Which programs have you attended that you have found very helpful?
- What gets in your way when you are trying to be legit, trying to “do good?”
- What are the things that make you want to keep trying to get yourself on track?
- How do your cultural or spiritual beliefs help you? Or is this an area you would like to spend more time on?
- If you could change one thing from your life story, what would that be? Would that make a difference in where you are right now? What parts of this story would you never change?
- What part of your story are you most proud of?

### Closing Statement

Thank you for sharing your personal stories with me. I am so grateful for the opportunity to have met with you, and so honoured to be part of this moment. Is there anything else you would like to add that you consider an important part of your experiences?

I will do everything I can to make sure that your story is told accurately. Part of doing that includes having you look it over again before I start to explore it for my study, if you would like to do so.

**Debrief**

I would like to take a moment to check in with you now that we have gone through your story. What was it like for you to tell me about yourself in that way? Have you ever told anyone this story before?

How was talking with me compared to what you expected?

How are you feeling right now? Would you like to be able to talk to someone in the near future about anything that has come up?

Do you have anything you would like to ask me now that we have finished?

## Appendix E:

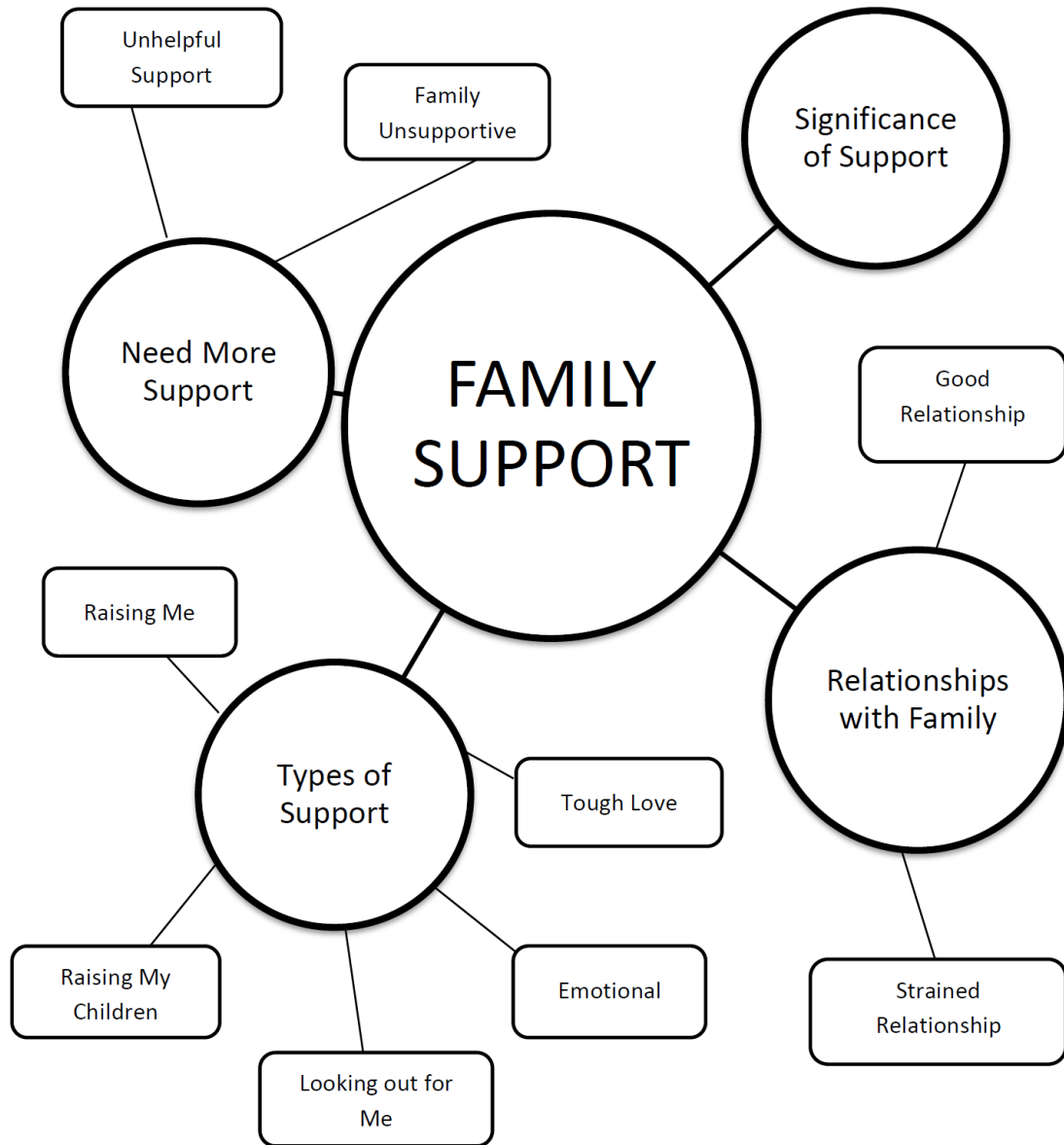
### Sample of Transcript with Coding

S = Shauntay, R=Researcher

Transcript Passage with Colour Coding	Code and Notes
S: And <u>the second time I stayed home for 6 months.</u>	<u>Housing</u> – going home
R: Wow.	
S: <u>I got a job and I worked.</u> <u>And then I relapsed and that was hard.</u> <u>Because then I had so much belief in me and-</u>	<u>Financial</u> -working <u>Substance</u> -relapse <u>Family</u> -trust in her
R: Right.	
S: <u>-trust and everything.</u> And my kids were so happy I was home. I was happy I was home. <u>I felt really happy and I was starting to look healthy</u> and, and <u>then I got in a argument with my sister, well, she's my auntie but I call her my sister. And I guess I just got tired of her asking me, like, from day to day, like, "Are you still using? Are you still using?"</u> and, like...	<u>Mental</u> -happy <u>Family</u> -unhelpful support <u>Substance</u> -pressure (trigger?)
R: Mmm.	
S: You know? Like, I don't need to hear that. I know I messed up. And then I kept telling her that, like, "You don't have to ask me that every day. You know? Because <u>that's making me feel, like, worthless.</u> " Like, <u>it makes me think about it and I don't want to think about it.</u> Like, when I g-, I was takin' the AA and CA and all that on my own.	<u>Mental</u> -feel worthless, avoiding
R: Mmm hmm.	
S: Like, <u>I was gonna go to treatment, I was set up to go to treatment and everything and, and then when n-, then when we got into the argument, I guess I was more, like, it seemed like I was looking for an excuse to go.</u>	<u>Substance</u> -treatment, excuse to use
R: To go back to drugs?	
S: Yeah.	
R: Maybe.	
S: <u>All that week, like, I felt it.</u> <u>But then I'd tell my sister about it, too, right, because I wanted help. And then she would still phone and, and ask me those stupid questions.</u> And then, finally, I just fuckin', it was like a week before my birthday and I just, <u>I just went out and had a couple o'drinks, and had money. And I just bought a plane ticket and I was outta there.</u>	<u>Substance</u> -urge <u>Family</u> -ask for help, unhelpful <u>Substance</u> -back to drinking
R: Wow.	
S: And haven't went back. But <u>I've been sober, like, before I came to jail, I sobered up for 2 weeks on my own.</u>	<u>Substance</u> -sober
R: Good for you.	

Appendix F:

Sample Concept Map from Analysis



## Appendix G:

### Participant Autobiographies

#### Yin Yan Rose

I had two families growing up: my Native family and my white family. My Native family, they don't support me. The only ones who support me are my White family, my foster mom and dad. I still call them mom and dad and think of them as my family. It was a Mormon family so there was no drinking, no alcohol, no drugs, no swearing, nothing like that. If we did wrong, we got, you know, disciplined. If we did right, we got praised.

I was in other homes, too. I can't even remember my first home because I was just a baby. The first one I remember, I don't know if it was an orphanage or not. It was not a good place. I was there with my brother, but all I remember is I didn't feel safe there whatsoever. I didn't like the lady that took care of us there; it was like she couldn't handle all us kids. They used to tie us up naked and hit and abuse us. Sometimes we wouldn't really get fed, so we would steal food. Some of the older kids would come in when we were asleep and do things to us, molest us. We tried to run away a couple of times.

When we moved to my mom and dad's house, we were pretty timid. We started feeling comfortable there, safe. But we were hyperactive and my mom couldn't handle us. She would lock us in the closet or the furnace room for hours at a time and let us out before my dad came home. The abuse started getting worse, hitting, biting, pulling hair, hitting with wooden spoons. She would get really, really violent and abusive, like she would turn into a really scary person sometimes. I think it was because she just didn't know how to handle us. It was a good home, but, I don't know, it was pretty strict, too. It was the only decent place that we actually called home. We were pretty out of control from being so abused and so scared of people, and running away. Again, we started running away. Me and my brother wanted to go find our real mom and dad.

My mom and dad were going to adopt us but Social Services came and took us away. The government decided White kids should be with White families and Native kids should be with Native families. They moved us to the reserve to this family that they said were my relatives. We didn't know who they were, this big, tall Native guy and this Native lady. I didn't like the reserve; it corrupted me. There was drinking going on, smoking, drugs, sexual abuse. We never been around anything like that before. We didn't like the smell of the smoke, we didn't like nothing. They would go to bingo, and the woman would drop us off at places where we didn't know the people, and those were times when things would happen to us. I thought it was my fault, so I didn't say anything anymore; I just let it happen. When the Native lady took me to the doctor, he said I wasn't a virgin anymore and I got punished for that. She would call me really bad names, like whore; I didn't know what that meant.

Being moved to the reserve really pissed me off. I hated everything and I was mad at everybody. I was really mad at my mom and dad. That's how I started drinking at a

really young age and that's when I started smoking. One of my girl cousins got me to smoke, and then I started stealing cigarettes. So that escalated from there. One of my friends wanted me to smoke weed, so I started smoking weed. On the reserve is where I found alcohol and fooling around with guys. I started going out with much older guys when I was, like, 13. They wouldn't hit me, they'd take care of me, you know what I mean? All I'd have to do is lay down and let them do whatever they do to me.

Then I started going to group homes, and I ran away from them. And I started prostituting myself. At that time, I didn't care because I was always drinking and I didn't care anymore; I felt nobody cared and that was how life was meant to be for me. I met a friend from one of the group homes when I went to jail in Medicine Hat and I started seeing her brother. Our relationship was really good at that time. That was my first love. I was almost 16 and I remember we had been together around 2 years when I got pregnant. And then things changed.

I was 5 months pregnant when he first hurt me. This one day he just snapped. He thought I was fooling around but I wasn't with anybody else, you know? I was happy I was pregnant. I got to have something of my own and have a family. And that's what I wanted, I was ready. I thought he was the one I would spend the rest of my life with.

The abuse got so bad I would run away from him, but he would always come find me. I had nowhere to go, so I thought about my mom. One night, I walked from the teepee in Medicine Hat all the way to the highway. This truck came up from behind me and stopped and drove me right to my mom's house. And it was good for a bit because my mom wouldn't tell him where I was, but somebody said I was out at my mom's, so he came out there and he literally stalked me. And it just all began again; he would come live with me in the apartment my dad gave me. I had my baby and I was with him for about 5 years because I ended up pregnant with my second child.

The abuse just continued until my brother came down from Edmonton and told him to leave me alone. My brother reunited me with a guy we used to play with as kids. My brother brought him to the house one day and I was dressed up really nice and my hair was long. I was so shy because he was so handsome. He kept complimenting me. This is the man I call my husband. He treated me with respect, he never hit me, he never sexually abused me, he never neglected me, never did nothing to me. It was a big shock, you know what I mean? And I was abusing my alcohol and partying. I loved him so much, but I hated him because I was so used to being abused. The more he loved me, the more he wouldn't treat me bad, the more I would abuse him, yelling at him, drinking, running away from him. He was so good to me that I would literally run away from that. I just couldn't get the picture. I would be around these people that were a bad influence on me, I would get into fights. I don't know why, but I would go cheat on him with these guys. One of them got me into shooting up, so drinking escalated into doing drugs.

One day my sister phoned me to tell me my husband wanted to talk to me, that he was in the hospital. He was working, doing a roof and his shoelace got caught when he was carrying two buckets of tar and he fell. And those things landed on him. He had burns on his face, on his hands, and I guess his heart stopped 3 times. I quit drinking and took care of him. I dedicated everything to him; I didn't want to lose him. For about 6

months there I changed him, bathed him, helped him with his physio, clothed him, everything, took care of him. When he got better, we started into the crack. And then it escalated into shooting up. I blame myself for his death because I brought that into his life. He couldn't see me doing it, so he started doing it. He died from ODing. We had a little girl together; she was only 3 when he died and I was in jail. Now I wish I would have got married, and I wish now that I wouldn't have done those things to.

I haven't had a place of my own since the last time my husband was alive. After he died, I just went downhill. I've been in and out of the hospital so many times, I've tried to give up on myself so many times by drinking or doing drugs, starving myself. When I got out after my husband died, I had nothing. He wasn't there to pick me up this time so I got dropped off downtown and that's where I stayed. I started drinking from there and I started forgetting everything, you know, my morals and everything. I was living on the streets, and I was drinking so much I was getting sick. I have quite a few health concerns, actually, and a lot of them are because of the alcohol and drugs. I'm on the verge of cirrhosis, so I got to really smarten up. If I start up again, I know I'm not going to live, you know what I mean? I should have been dead a long time ago

I lost my kids after my real mom and dad passed away. I took it really hard 'cause I started to get to know them. When they took my kids away, I started going to jail. I can't get my kids back, just because of what I've been through. I have really good communication and a relationship with my 2 oldest ones, I'm trying to have communication again with my third one now. My youngest I gave up for adoption. But when I had my kids, I always had food in my house, I always had a roof over my head, I always had clothes for my kids and I always had milk and whatever. Everything that my kids needed they had but me, because I would never come home. But now that my kids are getting older, I really hope they start coming to me so that I can be a caregiver again. I look forward to that feeling when I make somebody laugh, or if somebody needs my help or is sad, I get satisfaction out of the feeling of helping them. I can actually crave that feeling. I want to be with somebody, I want to have a family, a partner in my life.

## Pauly

*Pauly brought several previously written documents to the second interview, which she asked to read on the recording. Where appropriate, excerpts from those documents are interwoven in this narrative.*

I am the second youngest kid in a large family. We aren't a normal family, but I don't think there is a normal family! A lot of my family is struggling with alcohol and drugs. Only me and 2 brothers don't have kids, so I have a lot of nieces and nephews. I really love my nieces and nephews. My sister left my nephew with me a lot, so I kinda raised him and I knew how to take care of him. I would like to adopt a baby some day, but I don't know if I can have kids.

I grew up with a lot of violence. It was accepted and it was like a learned behaviour. My mom drank a lot. It was just traumatic; I would be scared and just go and cry, go and hide. When mom was out playing bingo with my stepdad, we'd always have to clean the house real fast and go hide when she was coming home because she'd be drunk. Depending what mood she's in, she'd come and hit us if the house is messy. My dad (I call him dad) was never abusive, but he did take beats from my mom.

I have one sister who was really abusive to me, mentally and physically; she's very abusive to her own kids, too. And my brothers used to make me fight one of my older sisters when I was around 8 or 10 years old. They used to make a ring in the living room and make us fight for their entertainment. They'd throw in weapons, too, whatever was around. I was a tomboy when I was growing up, I was always hanging around with the boys. So I had no choice to fight. I wanted acceptance and attention, and this was the only way to get it. I rarely lost; violence was a way of life.

I put myself in counselling when I was a kid, but I didn't really bother trying to open up or anything. And I used to call the Kids Help Phone. I'd talk for hours about my family and suicide, and then I'd feel better. I don't think I was ever suicidal, but it was a very, very big thing back where I'm from. Things were really getting tough because everyone I grew up with started killing themselves – the kids down the road all hung themselves, people in school. And one of my best friends, she got into a freak accident. I would just sit there and cry for nothing, I didn't know why. And then my mom would tell me, "You better not think of doing that yourself, better get the hell on that school bus." Like, holy shit, I needed some help here! It affected me greatly, all these kids killing themselves.

One of my sisters got me high when I was about 9, 8 years old. I took my first line of coke at about 13. I was a big pot-head and tried acid and mushrooms, even pills. I started drinking at a young age, too, at 11, maybe 12. That was around the time that I was sexually assaulted by an older man from down the road. One of my adopted brothers used to molest me when I was a little girl, too. I never told my family about either one till this day. It made me feel ugly, and I just didn't want it. I just carried on, suppressing my anger. I always felt shame that it happened, that my family would think bad of me. The first time I smoked crack was the day before my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. This was when I started to get in trouble with the law. When I turned 18, I got \$104,000 from the reserve and I bought a truck. Then I got an impaired a few times. The judge gave me 6 months in jail

for the last impaired. I was scared at first, but I knew it was gonna happen. And then I started liking jail. It was my comfort zone.

After my brother was killed in 1991, I just started to rebel more. He was killed in a fight by my other brother, who was, like, 15 or 16. He beat up our brother so bad that he died in the hospital from skull fractures. I always used to blame myself for what happened to him, like it wouldn't have happened if I had stayed home. For years it bothered me.

My mom was in a residential school ever since she was a little girl. That means I am a second generation residential survivor. She didn't talk about it much, but once in a while she'd say how mean the nuns were and stuff, how they used to beat and molest the kids, how they chopped her hair off. She always seemed distant, and she only told me she loved me when she was drunk. It was a lot of walking on eggshells, not knowing what to say or what to do next. And she raised me like the way the nuns would. My biological father left when I was 3. I later found out he was very brutally abusive to my mother and older brothers, and was sexually abusive to my sisters. I'm just glad he left; I'm grateful that he didn't do that to me. I also found out my mother drank during her pregnancy while carrying me, and maybe the some of the other kids, too, which, in result, makes me FAE. I am still coming to terms with this and it is very hard to understand and cope with.

When my mom was sober, she was the best mother with great intentions. She gave us a lot of knowledge and had a good sense of humour and stuff. I wasn't raised speaking Cree, but my mom speaks Cree. I don't know why my mom never raised us speaking Cree, which would have been cool. Because of residential school, she despised the Catholic Church and never pushed religion on us, but she started believing in Jesus and we went to this retreat where we were born again. She turned me to believe in Jesus, so that was a good thing for me. I learned that prayer is very strong, that Jesus saves.

Like I said, jail became my comfort zone: I became institutionalized. It was a way to just get away, to take a break, you know? It was free meals and stuff like that and it helped me deal with a lot of things, like taking life skills and stuff. Anger management. I just went back to AA and CA in here this time. I got my GED just recently in Fort Saskatchewan, and I'm really proud of that. I think, if I had more family support, I wouldn't be in jail. I would be more educated, I would have my own home and probably a bunch of kids. But to work on family support, I would have to work on myself a lot. I can't do anything about what I've been through or what I've done to anyone else. I just have to accept it and try to deal with it.

I was involved in a gang (well, I still am I guess) in Edmonton. More a supporter than a gang member. I lost count of the people that I stabbed that belonged to a different gang. And it was easy for me because I was violent and it was mean. And I was used to it.

I'm hardly ever on welfare because I've made my money selling drugs. It's not an honest way to make a living. I wasn't able to hold a job, but just once I had my own place. When I was getting out of treatment, Catholic social services hooked me up with this sober place and all I had to do was just keep going to meetings. I did this for maybe a month or so. I started drinking, and then it didn't take long for the lady running the sober

house to find out. I lost everything in one week. Other than that, I never had a place of my own as an adult.

I never thought I'd do needles, but I did. Maybe about 8 years ago out in Edmonton, I was drunk and I figured I'll just check one out. I found myself doing other things I swore I'd never do in my life: I became a street person, sleeping outside, in shelters, at friends' places and crack houses; things like choosing drugs over friends, being a backstabber and lying, being a cheater and stealing; even trading sex with a drug dealer for what I needed or with someone else for a place to stay a while. I overdosed more than once, and that did not stop me from wanting more.

In 2009, I was going to treatment again and I went to the detox in Edmonton and got blood work done. And I was freaking out because I was injecting drugs at that time. I was using with someone that already had Hep C. So I contracted Hep C, which I was more relieved to hear than having them say "You have HIV." It's still hard to tell people. In Poundmakers treatment centre, I was diagnosed with PTSD.

I don't know much about my mother's past, but that every man she was with was abusive. I find myself going through this cycle also. I've been taken hostage and beaten badly by a boyfriend before and I didn't leave him after that. I know that I'm a strong person, but it came to a point where I allowed myself to get abused. I would give up, give away my power, and allow myself to be hurt mentally, physically, sexually, and spiritually. And I was okay with that. I became very co-dependent. I always seemed to take care of them first, and stuff. I would just stay because I needed something. I could have just left, but it seemed I had nowhere to go. Maybe I did, but, I chose to stay for my addictions, I guess. I was abusive to my boyfriends, too. I think it was more mentally abusive, but that's where it hurts more. My mom told me that, with physical abuse, the scars go away, but mental abuse, it always leaves scars on you in your soul, in your heart. The boyfriend I'm with now, he's really good to me; he doesn't hit me or anything. I've never, ever been with anyone that I love so much like that. And I've never cheated on him, even though I'm always the one to self-sabotage and wreck things for myself. That was because I used to have a low self-esteem, and I felt like I didn't deserve to have something good.

This has to be it. Because I know what's gonna happen if I keep going on; it's just gonna kill me. It was okay when I was younger, messing around and stuff like that, but now I have to choose. And it's hard for me, letting go of people and letting go of places that I'm so used to. Failure is not falling down, it's refusing to get back up. What makes me a survivor is that I always get back up. It's time to start loving myself. I guess I'm learning from my mistakes, finally, and that gives me wisdom. To stay sober, I need to believe in myself and know that I can't do it on my own. I need a good support system and a network of friends that are sober. I've learned not to keep secrets and to just be honest. I've learned not to regret things because it makes me who I am today and it gives me character. I've learned to just let it go, to accept it.

## Shauntay

I never met my real biological dad in my life. I was grown up by my grandpa and I call him my dad. My grandpa took me from my mom in the hospital. She lived with my step-dad and she had to choose between him and me. It was really different back then, I think. I don't know, but I guess he didn't like the fact that she was having a kid from someone else. I was her first kid and then she had two other kids with my step-dad. When I went to visit my mother, I was always treated differently because of my age. Plus I wasn't her husband's biological kid. I had to do things 'cause I was older and I had to teach my sister and brother; I always had to do the laundry, I always had to clean for my family. I always felt like I was being picked on, but it was more or less teaching me. It took my step-dad a while, but he calls me his daughter and I call him dad now.

My dad (my grandpa) was the best man I ever met in my life. He would make me laugh all the time, and he took care of me, made sure I had everything I needed. He taught me a lot, a lot of good things, like the Cree language. I still understand it and I speak it a little, but not fluently. And the spiritual practices, too. I still know everything that he taught me, it's just that I'm not as strong as I was when I wasn't using drugs. It does take away a lot from you, but then as you pray more it comes back in. He was into both traditional spirituality and religion, like he believed in the Creator and God. He liked going to church. And once I get into that again, with my religious background and spiritual practices, I know that I'll get stronger because, my grandpa, that's what he really taught me. My dad went to residential school way up north when he was really young. He never really talked about it; he just told me it was a really awful place, that he didn't like it. They were mean there. I think that's why he was so nice to his grandchildren and loved them so much, and he would never let anyone take them away or anything. I think it taught him how to be a better person, and not to be the way they were at the residential school. And I think that's what made him so spiritual, knowing that he never, ever, lost his spirituality.

We lost my little brother when he was 10 years old; he got shot. They said it was an accident, but I still don't know about that. I was only 13 years old, there was nobody home, and I was supposed to be the one babysitting. At that age it was really traumatic; and seeing it happen, that's totally different than actually hearing about it, right? I blamed myself and that made me hate myself even more, every day. After my brother died, that's when I started drinking and smoking weed and hanging out with older people. I tried committing suicide so many times after that, not knowing that I was hurting my family more than myself. My suicide attempts went on for maybe 4 or 5 months, until I went to the hospital a couple of times. All I knew is that I wanted to die. And I never wanted to have kids because I knew how easy it was for God to take them away.

I took off from home all the time, ran away. I moved out when I was 14 and moved in with my best friend and her family because they treated me more lovingly; then again, there was always more drugs and more alcohol there, too. I met my kids' dad when I was 15, and went out with him for 11 years. He was already 21, and all I knew is that he said he would take care of me and always be there for me. All I wanted was love, because I felt no love.

At first, everything was perfect. That first 3 years after my brother passed away, he made me feel like I had something to live for. He was more or less my whole life. He was telling me that he loved me, but it was because I gave him all control over me. I always had a lot of money because I was getting it from my dad, and that's what paid for our alcohol. After I got pregnant when I was 17, he started being really mean and really controlling: like not letting me wear the clothes I was wearing before, I wasn't allowed to wear make-up, and wasn't allowed to go to my mom's and visit. He wouldn't want me talking to anybody. It was overwhelming because he cut me off from seeing my best friend and her parents, and they were like my family. A lot of the times it made me feel lonely. I cried a lot. I wanted to go home to my mom so many times, but I didn't have her because he had kept me from my mom for how many years. And I didn't want her to freak right out and call the cops. Nobody knew it was happening so I didn't want it to be out in the open. I didn't want everybody judging us. My dad never hit me, and I never seen my stepdad hit my mom. I never seen anybody actually hit a woman the way that my boyfriend hit me. And I was so surprised, hurt, and disappointed, and still loving him. My oldest son knew. He was 3 ½ and he came up to me and asked me, "Mommy, did daddy hit you again?" I was standing in the mirror and I was pregnant with my fourth baby. We left that same night. That was the thing with him, his way of keeping me was to keep me pregnant. I moved in with my dad, and I never went back.

I used drugs for the first time after I lost my dad. He passed away and I was trying to find a way out. It's still really hard for me. I started drinking heavily, so my mom took my kids from me. I would just drink for days and days and days, just me by myself. I wasn't taking good care of my. My dad gave me his house and everything in it, and I gave that up because I was drinking. When my mom took my kids, that's when I thought I hit rock bottom and I wanted to die. I heard that you can die from crack cocaine, and that's what I went looking for. Instead of killing myself, I got hooked on it; it was my first time trying crack and I was doing it every day after that. After a while, I started figuring out that there's other ways you could use it. You can make money off it, and things I needed I could get through it. So then I started getting into selling drugs and meeting more people, and pretty soon I was known as a drug dealer.

I've been to jail 6 times since my first time smoking crack, it's been pretty much all breaches for the same couple of charges. This time now, I took charges for somebody else because I knew there wasn't any other way I was gonna quit using drugs on my own. I wanted to come to jail, and I kept telling people on the outs but they wouldn't help me because I was such a good drug dealer.

I'm scared to mess up, scared to lose my kids. I keep having dreams that they're gonna go far away and I'm never gonna see them again. I couldn't provide for them financially, so the financial support is what I need. I need to hold down a job for at least a year before I even think of getting my kids back. I don't have very much education and I know that, if I wanna get a good job, I'm gonna have to go back to that too.

I just want to be the way I was before. I never smoked or did any drugs until about 3 years ago. When I get out, I have to go to treatment, I already sent my papers out to go. I can't do it on my own. I tried. I gotta keep my head on one track, and that's to recovery. I have a lot of family support. I feel like, if I don't have that I don't have anything, there

would be no reason to try. My family, they don't trust me at all, they don't wanna hear anymore lies. They have a lot of hurt, but they want me to come home and they still love me. I feel really grateful for that.

I wish there were something like transition workers before your release, because you have to figure it out on your own. Someone to help you move into your new life. And more treatment in places like my home town. It's just a small community, so there isn't a lot there. I also wanna take counselling and stuff for the parenting that I didn't have. I am gonna do it. I'm gonna finish my dreams. I'm gonna finish school and become a better mother. I want to be there when I have grandchildren. I wanna see my kids graduate instead of not being there. I wanna show them the things that my dad showed me, and do it for my dad. He did a lot for me. Everybody makes mistakes, and I made a big mistake and I wanna correct it. I want to make my life better.

## Taz

I come from 2 different places; like I would be in my mother and father's world, then I go back to my grandparents where it's a whole different story. I didn't have to do anything at my grandparents' house. I listened to the old stories they told. They would talk to us in Blackfoot and tell us about a long time ago; it was like a lesson or something. And we had to talk Blackfoot to them; they didn't want us to talk English. I think they were still angry because their children got taken away and, when they came back, they were different. My grandparents instilled a lot of stuff in me that I still apply to my life today. When they were alive, we never spoke back to them, and today I still have that belief. I was taught to stand on my own. I always think about my grandparents, how they raised their kids all in one house, and they were all close. When I was young, I had all my uncles and my aunties there with their kids, a big family, right? Today you don't see that. The Native family system is not there anymore. It was destroyed from the residential school.

My parents went to residential school. I think they were sick because of what happened to them there. They were angry and everything and they didn't know how to be parents because they were taken away from their families and taught not to speak their language, to take everything out, right? So when they come back home, they can't even talk to their parents. My parents raised me like how they were raised in residential school. We had to be like a perfect family. Everything perfect. So that in itself, because of how they were raised in residential schools, just paved the way for my life. And I suffered a lot of abuse from my parents, any kind of abuse except sexual. Most of it came from my father. He abused us so bad. And my mom would rather let me get beaten up than her. I understand now that she was afraid. I know he was a very sick man, and he did what he thought was right for me, but it made it worse for me. That's why sometimes I blame him for my anger.

My dad would fight with my mother and he would talk down to me about my mother. So my outlook on women was very bad. I spent a lot of time with my father and he put a lot of negative thoughts in my mind. I don't know why he did that to me and today I still think "You should've just left me alone, took your son." But I was the one always getting abused so I thought that I was not his child. When I was 14, I think my mom thought it'd be better for me if she put me in residential school, so my dad will stop beating me. So I went to residential school, but it was amongst the Crees, and I'm Blackfoot. She thought it was good for me, but it was the worst time of my life, it really messed me up. I was there for 3 or 4 months, and I took off. I was abused there more than I was at home so that when I came back I was worse than I was ever in my life. I came back home really, really, really angry and with this racial feeling – before I went up there I didn't have anything like that. I didn't care if my dad beat me up or anything, I just didn't. I put a lot of guilt on my mother.

I put myself in foster homes after my mother left me and my brother with my dad. She just left, got married again and left us. I told my foster parents I didn't wanna have nothing to do with my family because my mother did not protect me through my life. It was better there, it was a life that I wanted. They treated me really good: I got an allowance, they never hit me, they brang me to counselling and it was helping me. They

actually cared and I listened to them like they were my own parents. Until my mother found me. When she started phoning, I said I didn't wanna talk to her, but my foster mom said, "Talk to her, that's your mother. Why don't you go visit?" Same thing happened, same thing happened. That's why sometimes I blame my mother. If she just left me alone, I coulda been a better person.

I sniff a lot of solvents. That started when I was about 10 and I haven't stopped. That's one of my biggest, biggest problems and I don't tell a lot of people. I realize I need help for that and I don't care how embarrassing it is. I didn't want to be the person that I am, I couldn't look at myself. I wanted to be somebody else because of my life and the way it was. That was one of my escapes for the child abuse. I've endured all kinds of abuse at home amongst my relatives. My parents didn't sexually abuse me, but I was sexually abused by my cousins, a guy and a girl. So I was confused about the sexuality stuff. I was confused for a long time and I felt dirty; I just didn't know what to feel. Even when I was a teenager I knew that there was something wrong with me 'cause, at a young age, I was attracted to women. I wasn't gonna get married, and I wasn't gonna have kids.

I started drinking when I was about 17. We had a house party and my brother brought a bunch of his friends to our house. I got drunk, and one of them raped me and I got pregnant. It wasn't in our beliefs to have an abortion, so my mom just told me to carry it but I didn't want to. I was angry at myself for me getting in that situation, so I drank constantly and I took drugs through my pregnancy I didn't care, 'cause I was gonna give away the baby. But when I had her, my mother told me that I had to take care of her. And then I just decided, well, I might as well get married. So I tried to be normal, to have a family, to have children, to have a husband, to have a home. And I did it for a while. I was married for 12 years.

I knew my drinking was going really far and I knew I couldn't have my children around in, in my home. So I gave up my children to Child Welfare for their safety. I told my mother, so she took all 5 of them. So my children were raised by my mother. My mom didn't hit them; they were raised differently from me. After I gave up my children, I never stopped drinking. I went to treatment and then I met up with my partner and I stayed with her for 13 years. All my children are very close to her. I don't know if it's gonna be so easy leaving her 'cause my children were raised around her. Sometimes I think I just married somebody just like me. She's been in jail lots in her life, but she doesn't like jail, and I do. But, when I get out, I wanna get a restraining order against her. I have to, because I have this ex-partner that's trying to kill me.

First time I came to jail was when I was 18. I got caught fighting with my husband, and assault. And it escalated to where I'm gonna end up in jail for the rest of my life. This last time I blacked out and I don't know what happened; I came to and I was in jail with all sorts of charges. 'Cause I was drunk. Sometimes I'm clean, I don't even have charges or anything, and I do something just to come back. People think it must be lonely, but it's not 'cause the inmates are more my family than my own family. And I'm healthy 'cause I've been in jail, right? You get your medical done here, whatever's wrong with you they'll take you wherever you need to go. If I wasn't in jail frequently, I'd probably be dead somewhere. Sometimes I feel lonely for jail. But I have to get out of

that institutionalization. I wanna be done with this life, 'cause I have 4 grandchildren that I wanna be out there for. I don't wanna live in jail for the rest of my life.

The old ways is not the old ways as it used to be, because of the residential schools. Most of the people now, my age or younger, have been abused by their parents 'cause their parents didn't know how to deal with their residential issues. So they have a lot of anger and hate, and they put that toward their children. For the Blood tribe, the family thing is broken. So we're really losing our heritage, our old ways, and our language because there's nobody really anymore to teach it like it should be taught. And this residential money that is coming out is killing people because we don't know how to handle money. That's too much money, okay? They coulda put it into some services, into some healing programs. They coulda put it into a lot of things instead of just giving a lump sum. There's a whole bunch of reserves in Canada, they could have put a big Healing Centre, got a lot of professional people to work with the Native people, on your own and with your family. But the money was like a band-aid to cover how a lot of people grew up hating. As Native people, we don't get that much money. We get our welfare cheque, but you hand me \$250,000, what do you think I'm gonna do? Go nuts.

When I'm out of jail, it's very difficult for me to find support, anything like that. There is no services out there to reintegrate you into the community. If there is, I can't find it. You can't get a job because everybody wants a record check, and they look down at you. They don't trust you. They should have a recovery house or something, but only specialized in institutionalization, to integrate into the community again. I feel like I'm a handicap or something and it frustrates me, so I drink. And that's all I know is to drink. The mental health people, they're really helping me. They got me into housing, and the mental health thing when I get out. They're gonna try to put me on AISH because of my incarceration, how long I've been in jail. If I can't go to my mother's, then I'm on the street. I've been homeless lots of times, so I've learned in the years to survive on the streets. And if somebody can give me a chance to get a job, maybe then it will be better. I feel like I'm hiding because I'm always in jail. I don't want the responsibility of my own life. But I'm startin' to not like being here anymore.

## Willow

I grew up in Hobbema. My grandma, my Gookum, raised me from when I was born. My mom was gonna put me up for adoption and my Gookum took me in. My stepdad stepped up and put his name on my birth certificate and took me to all my appointments when I was a baby. My real dad came back into my life when I was maybe 3, but then my mom didn't wanna be with him so he left. When I was about 6, he used to write me from jail and he would make earrings for me. From what I hear, he's a good guy and was good to my mother. He would tell me when he gets out he was gonna come see me, but I'm still waiting. I don't know if he's alive, if he's dead, if there's other kids out there.

My Moosoom, my grandfather, he was my father. He was the best father ever. He was a medicine man, so we lived that traditional life when he was around. When I smudge and I smell sweetgrass, it reminds me of him. Feasts, sweats, and ghost dances, all that stuff. It was always sweetgrass that would start them. It's a beautiful smell, and it's powerful if you believe. I love being Aboriginal. I love it. We have such a nice culture, like, a beautiful culture. And that's why it's important to me.

He passed away when I was 10, and that's when my life turned. Back then, I was always scared to pray, 'cause I didn't know who I was praying to. I was very confused about, I guess, who and what to believe in. My Gookum, she turned Catholic, which is what she knew from residential schools, and I started going to church with her. And I even started to like it. And then I slipped once I started drinking. I started to lose everything. Lose faith, lose everything. I got distant with my Gookum. It all started with the drinking. I started smoking weed when I was 9; one of my aunties would come and spark us up. My first alcohol drink was when I was 11. That was at a family party. My Gookum never allowed alcohol in her house but, after my Moosoom passed away, family snuck it in there.

And then, as I got older, nobody could control me. I couldn't control myself. Sometimes I still think that I can't control myself. It was just alcohol and weed, and running away from my Gookum. I was in group homes from 10 to, I guess 16. And I would always run. Every group home they've put me in, I ran, and I would always make my way back home. They tried placing me with her at home, but she couldn't control me. I was already lost in the alcohol. I was on the street for a bit, till I got to know people and started staying with people. I was in 3 foster homes, 2 were the same woman. I really enjoyed her. She was somewhat nice, but she also had, like, rules and stuff to live by in the house. Which I really liked because I never lived by them and it was something different for me. And I was already, like, living by my own rules so it was, like, kinda nice to live by somebody else's. Then I would get sick of it and I ran. She would always take me because she had really liked me, too.

I got pregnant at 12 because of the lifestyle I was living. I was lost. I had my baby when I was 13 and I was still a kid but, to me, I was grown up. He's with his dad. There's no custody agreement, there's nothing between us. It's just when I wanna see him, I'll see him. When he wants to see him, he'll see him. It's just, like, he lives with him. We stayed together till my son was 6 months. And then I just, I told him I couldn't be with him. It

hurt just to abandon my son like that. But I had other things that were important to me. I don't ever talk to him in jail. I don't communicate in any way. 'Cause I just, I think back to when he was 6 months and I remember when he was a baby, and just leaving him. So when I come to jail, to me, it's like that all over again.

When my mom started to see that my Gookum couldn't control me, she tried to. And by trying, all she would do is abuse me. I tried moving in with her after the first time I ran away from my Gookum, from my grandmother. I would get hit from her, she used to whip me with a spreader. With anything I did: if I was up late, if I didn't listen right away, if I didn't do the dishes right away, if I didn't sweep the floor right away. Then my step-dad started to sexually abuse me and my younger sisters. I tried to tell my mom, but she didn't believe me; she believed him over her own kids. So I ran away from my mom.

My mom was a jailbird just like me. She spent a few years behind, she was in and out. A lot of women inside knew my mom. She was addicted to crack, and nobody knew that my mom was doing it until, probably, 4 years after my Moosoom left. She used to ask me for money to buy groceries and stuff, but I knew she spent it on drugs. And then, after a while, I just wanted her to tell the truth. I wanted her to say "I'm buyin' drugs with it." But she never did. She never could tell the truth about anything. Crack. I fucking hate that shit. I lost my mom to it. She hung herself, committed suicide on my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. When she did it, it made me feel like I was nothing to her because first came the abandonment, the abuse, and then using me for money, and then my birthday. I've tried suicide, after my Moosoom left 'cause I didn't know what to do. I was lost and I was hurting. I felt that there was no one else that I could be around but him and I didn't like the emotion and confusion. That's why I would use, 'cause I didn't wanna feel what I felt. If it wasn't for my cousin, I wouldn't be here. I tried to go the same way my mom did.

First car I stole, I was 10. In the past, I used to do it to save money. Me and my brother had a friend who owns a car dealership and we'd bring nice cars to him. He's strip them and give us money for them. My first drug sale was crack. I was 9. I was visiting my brother and there was somebody at the door. He gave me what they wanted because I brought him the money. And I was doing that for him every time I was over there. So after I left Hobbema, I started doing it on my own. I was working for other people, but I was still making a little bit money in my pocket to survive. After about a year of selling for this gang, they wanted to bring me in because of the money I was bringin' in. So I did what I had to do to get in and they done what they done to me. And I was mean, an ugly person inside. If you looked at me the wrong way, if you said the wrong thing to me, I was punching you. I didn't care who you were.

After my mom's suicide, that's when I hit juvie. For a stolen car. When I drink, I drink to get drunk, and then I do stupid shit; I tend to steal cars. That's how my life's been since she's been gone: jail after jail after jail. I went to provincial, then federal, and came back to provincial. I was in federal for 4 years starting when I was 18 and I just came out in December of last year. And now I'm back in again. I was only out a month and a half. Out of the past 6 years, I was probably only out 11 months and 6 of that was me on the run. I would get out, go party, get picked up and go back to the pen. I was sick of it, so I took off.

Within that time, I got into speed. I don't know what ever possessed me. Those heavy drugs ain't my choice, but I had a friend over who was into smoking speed. Then I got into it and I started snorting it. And I would drink on top of that, too, and I would smoke weed on top of that. My ex-boyfriend is a crack dealer and so I started smoking that, even though I hate that shit. I think about it now and, to me, it's just gross. My ex-boyfriend started losing money because of me. We started to get behind on bills, on rent. So I smartened up and I just quit it. So when I got picked up, and I went back to jail, I was thankful, you know? Because I was getting my sentence done with and I got out of that drug shit. And it made me a better person.

I'm thankful I ended up where I am. Not that I love being in jail, or anything, but you take programs that you would never think of out there. When you're out there, the world seems big. You don't know where to go, you don't know where your resources are. But you come in a place like this and the world is so small and it's all just right there. And they help you find the resources that you need. Like, when I was in the pen, I studied for the GED and I studied my ass off for 2 months but I got released 2 days before the test. It's something that I do want to pursue because I'm so close to it. The thing I would be most proud of is to finish school. I know I have a lotta skills because, if you think about it, sellin' drugs, you're handlin' money. I could sell whatever. I have a mind, to do these things if I put my skills to other, more positive things.

I think it's important for me to do counselling because I have so much inside that has built up over the years that I need to talk about and, you know, need to deal with. I want a place of my own where I can hold the keys all the time, not pass it back and forth. I want it to be my place, I want to work hard for it, 'cause if I don't have a place, I'm gonna go stay with people that aren't gonna be good for me. I would like to be in a community where I have positive supports and people I know I can turn to. And have a clean community around me, which is so hard to find these days. I don't know where it is yet because if you honestly really think about it, drugs are everywhere.

## Horse

The Old Ways is the way I was raised. That's the good part. I love that part! We lived way up north, outskirts of a small town. We were inna bush, real middle of nowhere, right? And we were 13 of us, raised in my grandfather's one room little house. We had no power, nothing. All we had was a wood stove and our bitch lamps. That's where you curl up a piece of material, dip it in bear grease, and you light it. And that's your light. We usually just play outside all day long. My Gookum would be cooking and my Moosoom would be chopping wood, and we'd be running around picking berries. It was just beautiful, absolutely just beautiful. For entertainment, we had no TV. All we had was a radio, some books, and my grandmother's stories. That's what we waited for in the evening is to jump in grandma's bed and listen to her stories when she was growing up. We had a huge garden in summer time. We had a cellar and we put hay and sawdust in there and keep our vegetables. In the winter, my grandfather used to go hunt for months. We lived out the winter with that. My brother and I did the hunting a lot if grandpa's gone. 'Cause I was the tomboy of the girls. We go snare rabbits and bring something home for the family or else we'll go fishing.

We didn't go to school right away, that I can remember. We never went to town because it was miles away. We had to walk to the highway when we went to catch the school bus. I didn't know anything about school until I was 10 years old. That was my first day of school, but I didn't know how to speak English. I was speaking Cree. I remember the teacher standing there with a thing made out of rubber, really thick, and if I didn't speak English, I used to get a smack over that.

The government came and kicked us outta the land because I guess they want to put cattle in there. Then we had to move and grandpa built a home in closer to town. That's when mom found out about liquor and stuff and she started getting really into drinking. I remember my dad being in the picture when we moved closer to town, but he was going in and out of jail. He used to beat my mom up all the time, that's why she started to drinking. And he used to hit us all the time for nothing when he's drinking. I used to be scared of my dad all the time. When I got older, I never called him dad. One good thing I remember about my dad, that really stuck in my head, is we were hungry again, really hungry, and had nothing in the house. Not even flour to make bannock. My dad went to the next farm and killed a pig. And he brought it home to feed us. That's when he went to major big time jail; that's what mom told us. That's when my mom took off to Edmonton with us, because she had the chance to take off.

In Edmonton, she started having parties and stuff like that and she didn't care who she brought home. We didn't live far from the bar, I remember, because she used to get dressed up in her black skirt and her red top and her high heels. The one time, we were all home and mom went out. I guess we were making too much racket and the neighbours phoned the Welfare, I guess. We were all taken away to a children's home, waiting to get into a foster home. We were there for months. I was foster home to foster home after that, when I got taken away, until I was 15 years old. I went through a lot when I was different foster homes. I was raped, I was drugged, and when I got moved from another foster home, none of my belongings came with me. The last foster home, the guy drugged my water. I don't remember anything until the next morning. I mentioned to the teacher that

she phone the Welfare. When I came home from school, all my stuff was already packed and my worker was sitting there. In the car, I asked her where I was going and she said I was too old to be in a foster home now and she wouldn't talk to me after that. We pulled up to this big building in Edmonton and we walked in there. She set one of my boxes down and said, "Here she is." And she walked away. I found out that I was in a women's shelter in the skid row. That's where my social worker just dumped me. Totally dumped me right there when I was 15 years old.

I didn't know anything about the skid row, about alcohol, about drugs. Nothing at all. And I didn't have no education, I didn't know how to read and write because all the foster homes I was in. I had to grow up quick that summer. I only had clothes on my back and the clothes in the boxes. And that's when I started finding about drugs and alcohol. When I was 15 years old, I was in the bar already. I was working in the streets, sleeping with different guys just to get money. Some of the older Native girls showed me the ropes. Some of them were kind and they wouldn't touch any of my money. 'Course, I was a tomboy back then, too. I knew how to fight, how to protect myself. The first time that I found out about alcohol was, uh, my first trick. I needed some money because I want some new clothes and I needed some pot. And, uh, I was going to a party and the girls told me, I said I had no money and they said, "Well, you can make some money this way." I was a virgin, my first job, and I didn't want to, you know. They were drinking and I said, "Can I have a drink?" And since then, I started drinkin' just to kill the pain. When I was drunk, it wasn't hurting anymore. It was gone.

I finally got on my feet and got a job. I worked part time in a bakery. I quit my job my second paycheque and went back to the women's shelter. I knew where I was from. I grabbed my packsack, um, grabbed my woolly blanket, and I was on my way to go home. I was gonna find it. This gentleman, Snake was his street name, said he knew where my town was and he came with me to find my family. I still remember how he looked back then. If I see him again, I will say thank you very much for what he did for me. I found my brother, and he called my mother. She came to town with my sisters to pick me up and I went back to Edmonton with her.

I kept on working the streets, even when I found my mother, until I met my husband. Every day until I was 18, until I got pregnant with my first child. And then when I knew I was pregnant, I quit working inna streets and since then I didn't, didn't bother going back in the streets. I had three beautiful kids with my first marriage and they all finished their high school. There was no alcohol allowed in the house when I was raising my kids. I still did my marijuana, I still did drugs, but I didn't drink. When they were moving out, that's when I started drinking heavy again. And that's when I got my first divorce. I thought when you say "I do" it was supposed to be for the rest of your life, right? But he turned out to hurt me down the road. He started sleeping with other women and I ignored it because I wanted him, I was in love with him. So I put up with it until I turned 40. That's when he did it with my best friend and I finally said enough is enough. After the divorce, he married my best girlfriend. I feel like the kids were taken away from me, it felt like someone replaced me as a mother. So I don't see my kids anymore.

When my social worker dropped me off at the shelter, I didn't even how to read and write, like I said. I had to teach myself. How I learnt was reading signs. When I was

walking, passing a sign, I will pronounce it, right? When I turned 16 or 17, I started picking up a newspaper. Now I can read it a little bit, to pass on my own. There's letters that I can't understand still. And any kind of paperwork, I'm stuck. But my husband's there to help me out now, my second husband. He's an angel.

I've lived in the streets since my divorce. I haven't got stable into a place. When we get a place, it only lasts a month or so because of our addictions. When we have money in our hands, it's basically going to drugs and alcohol. That's what we always think of. He makes good money, but it goes right to drugs. So we just basically stay in shelters. We don't have any friends, it's only him and I. He doesn't really get along with his family and I'm basically a black sheep in my family. We support each other. We survived through the garbage can, um, but they had good food. You know when to get the meat. And you know when to get the vegetables. Uh, the meat was frozen through the winter time and you could see the dates and everything else like that.

Now we moved to the city, we have the shelters. But now we're realizing it's too easy because we know the places are there to help us. They're not gonna turn us down. We need a babysitter, I guess, to teach me how to take care of my bills and how to take care of my rent first, to teach me how to do this. You know, to live like a person. I took care of all that shit when I was raising my kids. I was a good mother, I was good in bills and everything. I knew all that shit. I was working, too. I was a nanny, I was housekeeping, I was a head housekeeper. I was a good worker and that. And when I got that divorce, that knocked me right on my ass again.

I'm coming to that point, now, that I know I'm an alcoholic because I crave for it. And when I crave for it, I'll do anything just to get that drink. I might dress pretty and whatever, and look innocent in the outside. But once that bottle's in me, in my purse, look out. I can stand there middle of the sidewalk and drink it. That's how bad it is. I don't have any shame anymore. When I drink, all them pains are gone. I guess sometimes it feels good to not even face them because it hurts so much. You don't think about anything. You just think about drinking and it just takes everything away. The whole pain, all the ugly stuff, and everything. Alcohol is my worst problem. Crack doesn't get me in trouble alcohol does. I'm not really desperate for drugs, I will not put my house upside down, I will not go ask for change, I will not go and collect bottles for drugs. With crack, I mellow out and I'm happy. It's like smokin' a joint. But alcohol? I will go collect bottles, I will ask for change, I will put my house upside down. Just to get that drink.

We both want a place of our own, we both deeply want what we want together, right? I keep thinking to myself to not look on the bad side anymore. I'm tryin' to put some hope in there. Right now my husband's doing good. He's staying off crack, and I'm in here. Our difficult part is we don't know how to say no to each other. I just hope our strength is there. Because we're tired of it. I mean, I have 9 grandsons and I have only seen one of them So I wanna start being a grandmother. I want to have that life like I had before with my kids. It was a beautiful life. Where we have to get our strength from is each other.