The Northern Experience of Street-Involved Youth: A Narrative Inquiry
L'expérience nordique de jeunes de la rue : Une enquête narrative

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ABSTRACT

This research explored the experiences of 8 street-involved youth (4 male, 4 female) between the ages of 20 and 27 living in north-central British Columbia. The analysis was carried out in 3 phases based on the narrative approach developed by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998). The narratives represented the holistic experiences of the youth and the meanings they attached to their experiences. The 26 themes that emerged from the data were organized into 5 main categories representing the participants' experiences prior to street life, the challenges associated with being on the streets, supports, personal qualities, and moving on. Three overarching metathemes were interpreted from the youths' narratives: trauma, coping, and the essence of living.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette recherche a porté sur les expériences de 8 jeunes de la rue (4 garçons et 4 filles) âgés de 20 à 27 ans et vivant dans le centre-nord de la Colombie-Britannique. L'analyse était menée en 3 phases fondées sur l'approche narrative mise au point par Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, et Zilber (1998). Les narrations représentaient les expériences holistiques des jeunes et le sens qu'ils conféraient à ces expériences. On a dégagé 26 thématiques à partir des données organisées en 5 grandes catégories, qui représentaient les expériences des participants avant la vie dans la rue, les défis associés au fait de vivre dans la rue, les appuis, les qualités personnelles, et le passage à autre chose. Les narrations des jeunes ont permis de dégager 3 métathématiques globales : le traumatisme, l'adaptation, et l'essence de la vie.

The problem of homelessness remains a serious social issue that affects all communities and age groups. Youth are leaving home at earlier ages and remaining on the streets longer, increasing their risk of long-term street involvement (Hyde, 2005). Recent homeless counts in British Columbia verify that youth homeless rates are increasing, yet they remain the most understudied group within the homeless population (Brown & Amundson, 2010). It is difficult to estimate the actual number of street-involved youth due to their hidden, transient lifestyles (Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004). Youth increasingly report "couch surfing" at the homes of friends and family or engaging in "survival sex" for temporary shelter (Rew, 2008; Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz, & Jarvis, 2001); therefore, these individuals may not be visible in the street community or likely to utilize emergency services. It is

possible that underage youth may not access services out of fear of being reported to child protection services (De Rosa et al., 1999).

The reasons for youth homelessness are complex and, therefore, difficult to isolate. Family conflict and histories of physical or sexual abuse are consistently reported among homeless youth (Hyde, 2005; Williams et al., 2001). Youth may leave home to escape difficult experiences resulting from poor family attachments or parental substance abuse (Zide & Cherry, 1992). Parent-child conflict occurs in the home for several reasons including parental disapproval of sexual orientation, religious beliefs, and personal style (i.e., clothing, body piercing). Additionally, changes in family structure such as divorce, remarriage, or the death of a parent may influence youth to leave home prematurely (Hyde, 2005).

Youth who are "thrown out" by their guardians typically have higher levels of assertiveness and chronic problem behaviours such as getting into trouble with the law, school difficulties, and acting out in the home or the community (Zide & Cherry, 1992). Robert, Pauze, and Fournier (2005) found that 89% of youth were taken into care because of behavioural problems. However, among those, 62% reported being treated violently by their caregivers. Substance use and mental health issues have also been linked to problematic behaviours in youth (Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004).

Youth from marginalized single-parent homes, large families, and low-income families are considered the most vulnerable street youth, often found as victims of exploitation and manipulation. Many families from these groups simply cannot afford to look after adolescent children. It is possible these youth may be at increased risk of feeling isolated and alienated from others due to issues related to poverty and abandonment (Zide & Cherry, 1992).

A large population of youth in foster care become street-involved. Many of these individuals have experienced unstable living arrangements, lacking a sense of attachment or belonging (Garmezy, 1993). Osterling and Hines (2006) found that foster youth who have transitioned out of the child welfare system were at high risk for homelessness, low educational attainment, and health-related problems.

There is a considerable amount of research on protective and risk factors focused at the individual, familial, and environmental levels (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Unger, 2005; Brooks, 1994; Everall, Altrow, & Paulson, 2006). Protective factors are identified as those that mediate life stressors such as positive self-concept, healthy peer/family relationships, and involvement in extracurricular activities. Personal factors including cognitive functioning, positive disposition, and activity level are thought to buffer the effects of negative life events. Families that are characterized by warmth, support, and cohesiveness can help individuals

overcome stressful situations. Sources of external support may include the school setting or positive role models in the community (Garmezy, 1993). Many street-involved youth lack strong family connections and are often not attending school or participating in healthy extracurricular activities, which leads one to question what other protective factors assist them to overcome stressful life events.

A host of personal and environmental risk factors commonly threaten healthy development. The literature indicates that temperament, sensory-motor deficits, attention disorders, and decreased self-esteem are personal risks, whereas family conflict, rejection by peers, and low socioeconomic status are considered environmental risks (Middlemiss, 2005; Ungar, 2004). It is likely that youth with poor coping strategies are at increased risk of being negatively affected by difficult life situations; however, some youth who are faced with multiple risk factors in their lives may not be negatively affected (Ungar, 2004).

The risk factors associated with street life are extremely alarming. Sexual exploitation and violent victimization are sober realities for many of the youth. The struggle to find food and shelter, threats to safety, crime, mental health problems, addictions, and suicide are all negative outcomes (Kidd, 2003). Due to a limited network of social supports, youth are at an increased risk of social isolation and alienation (Boydell, Goering, & Morrell-Bellai, 2000). Furthermore, youth are often marginalized by discriminatory actions and the social stigma associated with homelessness (Kidd, 2007). There is no doubt that the risks involved with a homeless lifestyle can create high levels of stress for youth. It was unclear at the beginning of this study whether homeless youth living in northern communities would face additional challenges.

NORTHERN COMMUNITIES

There is a lack of awareness and understanding about the daily struggles of northern Canadians. Some characteristics specific to Canada's north include remote geographical areas, harsh climate, a small population base, and inadequate access to services (Qullit Nunavut Status of Women Council [QNSWC], 2007). Northern communities are also challenged by numerous social concerns. Issues of addiction, domestic violence, poverty, and intergenerational trauma are some of the challenges faced by community members. Unfortunately, services and resources are often lacking in these communities, and residents may be required to travel for medical care and social services. The lack of social support networks can compromise individuals' physical, emotional, intellectual, and psychological well-being (Brannen, Emberly, & McGrath, 2009; QNSWC, 2007).

In looking for research specific to homelessness in the North, the QNSWC (2007) conducted a large-scale study on women's experiences of homelessness in Nunavut. Several issues relating to homelessness and living in the North were identified, including limited housing and employment opportunities and a high cost of living. Due to extreme weather conditions, homelessness is not highly visible in the communities. Many women who were homeless in this study engaged

in survival sex as a way to live. Additional barriers that women in the North may face include a lack of emotional and financial support, abuse, low wages, and limited social services. Practitioners are concerned about how these social problems affect the well-being of children and youth living in these isolated communities.

RESEARCHER CONTEXT

The first author began looking at research with street-involved youth based on her work at a youth homeless shelter in Edmonton. Through this work she had an opportunity to meet many young people and hear their stories of survival. Through these experiences, she became aware of and sensitive to the numerous social barriers that homeless youth face, such as access to health care, social services, and affordable housing. Not only were these young people marginalized and often stigmatized by society, many were alienated and isolated from their families. The researcher was drawn to the stories the youth shared and became curious about what it was that kept them going in life. She was intrigued by their abilities to survive, as many of the youth had encountered many hardships at young ages. Approaching their situation from a strength-based approach, it appeared that many of the youth at the shelter showed resilience, and so began her process of looking at research on resiliency and how it fit for street-involved youth.

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Youth living on the streets are vulnerable to a multitude of risks, creating a greater need for prevention and intervention programs that work to enhance positive transitions off the streets. A common assumption is the bleak outlook for high-risk adolescents, and research often focuses on the pathology of these individuals (Kidd, 2003). More attention toward the strengths of high-risk youth is critical because there is evidence that some children raised in negative environments develop into well-functioning adults (Prevatt, 2003). Information regarding additional challenges for homeless youth living in northern areas because of the geographical and climatic context also required exploration.

The purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to understand the experiences of youth living in the North who are homeless, and (b) to discover the personal qualities and external resources that help them survive living on the streets. The intent was to gain a deeper understanding of homelessness within the youth population by exploring the personal experiences of street-involved youth through the meanings they attached to their stories. The principal research question posed was: What are the experiences of street-involved youth living in north-central, British Columbia? Secondary questions included: What specific challenges do youth face in being street-involved in this geographical context? What resources, both personal and community-based, assist them in living without a permanent home? A qualitative approach involving narrative inquiry was chosen to help answer these questions.

<div align="center">METHOD</div>

Narrative Inquiry

The process of this inquiry was grounded in social epistemology, in that knowledge is considered to be time and culture specific, constructed through social processes (Gergen, 2001). Working within a social constructionist framework, a narrative approach was chosen as it advocates for pluralism, relativism, and subjectivity. This choice of method portrays individual realities, and provides a means of understanding the identity, lifestyle, and historical world of individuals (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). The researcher is invited to become immersed in the process, integrating the self as the instrument of research (Firestone, 1987; Josselson & Lieblich, 2003). This allows for collaboration, relationships, and ongoing self-reflection.

Narrative research focuses on the meanings individuals attach to their experiences through the stories they share (Moen, 2006). People are natural storytellers, revealing their identities and personalities to others through narrative accounts. Meaningful and significant life experiences are organized into stories based on values, past experiences, and present knowledge (Garro & Mattingly, 2000; Moen, 2006). These stories provide coherence and continuity to one's experience, restoring connection and unity (Lieblich et al., 1998). Individuals can make sense of life events, including difficult transitions or trauma, by sharing their experiences in a narrative form (Riessman, 1993). The exploration of inner, subjective experiences reveals past actions and how individuals understand those actions, capturing both the individual and the context (Lieblich et al., 1998; Moen, 2006; Riessman, 1993).

Storytelling can increase awareness, promote self-discovery, and assign new meaning to experience (Lieblich et al., 1998; Moen, 2006). There is an inevitable gap between lived experiences and how those experiences are communicated to others, suggesting that meaning shifts in the process of interactions (Riessman, 1993). Often the audience and context influence how the story is told (Lieblich et al., 1998; Moen, 2006). Stories naturally contain a beginning, middle, and end, yet the meaning or form of a narrative can be completely altered depending on where an individual begins and ends the story (Lieblich et al., 1998; Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000; Riessman, 1993). The participant and researcher work together to co-construct an accurate interpretation of the individual's life through re-storying (Barton, 2004). A multitude of voices are present within an individual's story as the written form of a narrative is shared with a larger audience and becomes relevant in different contexts, making it open to several interpretations (Moen, 2006).

In narrative analysis, representations of experience are expressed through dialogue, text, interaction, and interpretation. Yet, as Riessman (1993) points out, all forms of representation are limited as there is no direct access to primary experience. Reconstructions of the past are selective and varied because individuals exclude experiences that do not fit with the current identities they wish to present. Moen (2006) identifies three recurring issues in narrative research: (a)

the relationship between the researcher and the participants, (b) the movement of story into text, and (c) the interpretive nature of research. The transparency and authenticity conveyed by the researcher is the primary instrument in creating research that is of quality and rigor.

The Research Process and Participants

The criteria for participation in the research included individuals between the ages of 16 and 29 who were street-involved for a minimum of two months. During the initial stage of data collection, the age criterion for the study was extended to be inclusive of the population that accessed the youth drop-in centre where the interviews were being carried out, but it became evident that youth at the upper age limit were more interested in participating and in providing a retrospective view of homelessness. The study was open to youth who voluntarily agreed to participate in the research study and to have the interview audiotape-recorded. After ethics approval was granted by the local university research ethics board, several emergency shelters and youth drop-in centres were contacted about the study. Introductory letters, consent forms, and sample interview questions were submitted to all interested agencies. Community advisors who worked directly with street-involved youth offered suggestions about appropriate recruitment strategies and ethical considerations.

The researcher spent several afternoons at a drop-in centre, so the youth could speak with her in person to receive more information about the study. Some interested youth approached her because they heard about the study through a friend or a staff member at the drop-in centre. Other individuals contacted the researcher by telephone to get more information about the study and to arrange an interview.

In order to protect the youth and ensure their ability to give consent, an informal screening for mental health and substance use issues was completed with all of the potential participants to assess for recent hospitalizations, passive or active suicidal ideation, or possible intoxication. As part of the initial screening, participants were asked: "Have you been hospitalized for any mental health concerns in the last month? Have you attempted suicide in the last month?" It is likely that many of the youth living on the streets are exposed to alcohol and drugs, and some may use substances on a regular basis. Individuals who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs or who exhibit suicidal ideation may not be able to give valid informed consent and would not have been allowed to participate due to their vulnerability. Based on her experiences working in youth mental health and addictions, the researcher assessed whether the youth appeared to be under the influence. No youth exhibiting suicidal ideation approached the researcher during recruitment.

To ensure the participants' confidentiality and anonymity, all of the research interviews were carried out in a private office at a local youth drop-in centre. Informed consent was presented to the participants at a level they could understand and was revisited throughout the research process. The participants received an information letter outlining the nature of the research study along with the risks

and benefits associated with participating in the study. It was made explicit that participation was voluntary and that the youth could withdraw at any time. The information on the consent form was verbally explained to the participants to ensure they understood what they were giving consent to, and to be sensitive to any literacy difficulties that the youth may have had. The participants were given an opportunity to ask questions about the study. Both verbal and written consent were obtained prior to each interview.

The individual interviews, unstructured and conversational, ranged from 25 to 75 minutes and were recorded. Keeping in line with narrative inquiry, broad, open-ended questions were asked based on the goal of giving the youth space to allow their stories to naturally unfold. Additional notes were taken at the end of each interview based on the researcher's observations during the conversations and included in a reflexive journal. The researcher's reflexive journal was used to record her thoughts about the interview process as well as key ideas that stood out for her. Her concern for the participants' safety resulted in her offering a list of additional support services based on the emotional content of some of the conversations. At the completion of each interview, time was taken to debrief with the participants to ensure they were in a safe emotional place before leaving.

Eight youth (4 male, 4 female) between the ages of 20 and 27 who were or had previously been street-involved for a minimum of two months volunteered to participate in the research. This included individuals who accessed emergency shelters, slept in any public place, couch surfed, or temporarily resided in transitional housing. The study attracted an older youth population, providing a retrospective description of their homeless experiences. Due to the nature of the sensitive topics disclosed in the interviews and the small street community, only broad descriptions of the participants were included to protect their anonymity. Demographic information was not collected from the youth to help build trust and preserve anonymity. Identifying characteristics, including names and locations, were not included in the findings.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed as close to verbatim as possible, and the analysis was carried out in three phases based on the narrative approach developed by Lieblich et al. (1998). In Phase 1, a holistic-content analysis was used to present each life story as a whole, providing an in-depth understanding of the youth in the context of his or her world. To form a holistic picture of the youths' experiences as presented in their interviews, the transcripts were read several times looking for global impressions. The main ideas and phrases from the transcriptions that were the most relevant to the principal research question were colour coded, grouped, rearranged, and organized to provide a cohesive representation of each youth's life story. The stories were written in the first person, and care was taken to remove or change any identifying information that would compromise the anonymity of the participants, including specific names, locations, and sensitive information.

As part of the co-constructive process in narrative analysis, the youth were invited to actively participate in the research by offering feedback about the presentation of their stories. Two youth agreed to meet for follow-up interviews. Minor revisions were made to the content and sequence of their life stories based on their feedback. To present the stories, a key phrase or word that was representative of the story was selected by the researcher or the participants as the title of their story.

In Phase 2, a categorical-content analysis was used with the narratives from the first stage of analysis by selecting parts of the story out of the whole, looking for patterns or themes across the stories. Phrases or selections that conveyed meaning about the experiences of being street-involved in the North were colour coded and grouped conceptually. These categories were used to answer the secondary research questions. A few broad categories were defined, with narrower themes assigned to each relevant category. The categories and themes represented the integration of the participants' words and the first author's interpretations of their experiences. A category was named when selections from seven or more of the participants' stories were included in the themes found within the categories.

In Phase 3, a meta-analysis was carried out to identify patterns or connections across all of the participants' stories. The metathemes were drawn from all of the data and the strongest statements were selected to highlight significant meanings and patterns among the stories (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997). The metathemes represented the broader issues that emerged in the study.

In all three phases of analysis, the second author, in her role as supervisor, reviewed the work as an impartial source and offered suggestions based on her expertise in narrative research. The participants' stories were compared to the transcripts to verify that the youths' voices were portrayed. Minor revisions were made to the organization and structure of the stories. Further suggestions were offered for the removal of identifying information while maintaining the essence of the stories.

Evaluative Criteria

The interpretive and evolving nature of studying the human realm of experience presents difficulties in establishing quality and authenticity in qualitative research. Lincoln (1995) proposes a set of criteria, premised on honesty, fairness, and justice, to enhance the trustworthiness and rigour of qualitative studies. These criteria are viewed as relational, fluid, and emerging. Value is given to the quality of the researcher-participant relationship with emphasis on mutual learning and the open sharing of knowledge. The evaluative criteria used for this study include authenticity, voice, reciprocity, sacredness, and reflexivity.

The reflexive journal kept by the researcher as a requirement of narrative inquiry was used as an ongoing self-evaluation of personal influence, intentions, and biases as well as a record of questions that arose as she worked through the analysis. Ongoing self-exploration and reflection were paramount to the research process because they allowed the researcher to attach meaning to her experiences. As the researcher referred back to previous entries, she was able to gain clarity and perspective, which allowed for new understandings to emerge. The criterion

of sacredness was met in the profound concern and respect demonstrated toward the participants and their stories.

Polkinghorne (2007) identified four sources that may threaten the validity of storied texts in narrative inquiry: (a) the limits of language to express meaning, (b) reflections of meaning that are out of one's awareness, (c) resistance from individuals to reveal the meanings of their experiences, and (d) the co-construction of storied texts between the researcher and participant that are not transparent. In order to work toward ameliorating the effects of these sources, the researcher made the process transparent (a) by locating herself in the research, (b) through ongoing reflections and detailed documentation in her research journal, and (c) through the use of her counselling experience with youth in terms of rapport building and engagement to help facilitate understanding.

<div align="center">RESULTS</div>

From Phase 1 of the analysis, eight stories resulted that provided a co-construction of the experiences of the street-involved youth participants and the analysis of those experiences. The stories were titled *Willing, Struggling and Unsure, Alone, Not Giving Up, Motivation, Nothing But Me, I Refuse To Be A Victim,* and *Wisdom.*

In Phase 2, 26 themes emerged from the data that were organized into five main categories. These categories were titled *Life Before the Streets*, *Challenges Associated with Street Life*, *Supports*, *Personal Qualities*, and *Moving On*. The themes found within the categories are described in Table 1 and are titled with participants' quotes that were most representative of each theme. In Phase 3, three metathemes were interpreted from the narratives: *Trauma, Coping,* and *The Essence of Living*. These three metathemes summarize the findings that, in each story, trauma could be defined as the event with various forms of coping used by the participants for survival; yet there was something else, an essence that kept them going and searching for ways to cope.

Life Before the Streets

> I didn't leave my dad's house because I was a rebelling teen; I was getting abused. My father had a problem with alcohol so it was hard to deal with. I'd get beat up for coming home 15 minutes late, so after awhile I had enough. (Motivation)

This category included environmental and contextual factors that had significance for the youth during their childhoods. The effects of trauma, parental instability, and being raised in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development were revealed in the stories. The participants discussed early experiences of trauma that included neglect and physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. Often, the abusers were the participants' primary caregivers, including biological or step parents, but also members of the extended family. Many of the youth recalled their parents being absent or unable to provide care for them, most often due to addictions, but also because of single-parent homes or health concerns. Parental addictions were often related to early experiences of trauma or abandonment for

the participants. Chaotic or unstable home environments forced some of the youth into Ministry care for protection, while for others it encouraged them to turn to the streets as a safer alternative.

> I was in care until I was 12 years old, so I stayed in different group homes. I don't remember much because I blacked out a lot of my childhood … it was different at that group home because they treated me like a human being. (Not Giving Up)

The theme of Ministry care included the participants' experiences in foster care and group homes. Issues of safety, peer influence, and instability were discussed by the youth who were in care of the Ministry. In group homes, threats to safety included being a victim to bullying, being assaulted by other residents, and having negative experiences with staff, including the use of aggression and intimidation tactics. Feelings of uncertainty and instability were expressed by those who had several placements or extended care agreements or were transferred to several group homes over the course of their involvement with the Ministry.

Table 1
Phase II Analysis

Research Questions	Categories	Themes
Please tell me your story of being street-involved.	Life Before The Streets	Trauma: It Hurt so Much Parental Instability: I Didn't Understand Ministry Care: The Extended Contract
What challenges do you face in being street-involved in this community?	Challenges Associated With Street Life	Survival: Trying to Survive Facing Judgement Safety and Intimidation: It's Unpredictable Mental Health and Addictions: A Vicious Cycle Loneliness: A Dark Lonely Path Limited Experience: It's All I Knew Leaving the Streets: A Lot of Barriers
What resources, both personal and community-based, assist you in living without a permanent home?	Supports	Connection: I Had That One Person Community Resources Passions: Healthy Expressions
	Personal Qualities	Independent: On My Own Motivated: I Wanted Something More Inner Strength: My Strength is Me Respectful: Have It to Receive It Hopeful: Opportunity is Around Responsible: No Excuses Capacity to Learn Street Smarts: I'm Not a Pawn Confident: I Know I Can Empathic Caring: Willing to Help
	Moving On	Stability: Settling Down Education and Employment: Got to Have Goals Reconnection: Back to My Life

Challenges Associated with Street Life

> I had no food, no clothes, and I had support from a few people but after 5:00 they went home and I was still on the streets … people told me to be tough, but it was hard to be tough when you're on the streets by yourself. (Wisdom)

This category included a variety of personal and environmental challenges experienced by the youth while on the streets, including their struggles for survival, safety, and overall health. Every day was a challenge to find the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter. Many of the youth described transient lifestyles where they had to move around in search of resources; this involved relocating to different communities. "I stayed anywhere that I could and I moved from town to town. I used to stay with friends that I would just meet, but I have also slept in the bush, in cubbyholes, and on the streets" (Alone).

The extreme climate was one of the biggest challenges of being street-involved in the North. While sleeping outside during the summer months was described as fun by one of the participants, finding shelter to survive the cold harsh winters was often difficult. Many of the participants couch surfed with friends or family, and others slept at shelters to stay warm and dry. Despite the cold climate, the participants reported sleeping outside when they had no other options. Some slept on the concrete, under stairwells, in the bush, in sheds, outside churches, and in laundromats. Two of the youth described walking the streets at night as a way to warm up and remain safe.

> The winters were hard for me because it was very cold and there was nowhere to go a lot of the time … I've seen people freeze to death on these streets because they had no place to go. It's very extreme. (Wisdom)

The participants also discussed the stereotypes and stigma they faced because of their street status or lifestyle choices. Many of the youth shared experiences of being denied access to education or employment opportunities. Several participants described the ongoing battle as they tried to manage mental health issues, environmental stressors, and their reliance on substances. Substance use was described as a coping strategy to forget past trauma or to escape the current stressors associated with street life.

Some of the participants expressed fear for their safety at shelters, while others perceived walking the streets as more unsafe. Involvement in the drug scene or sex trade increased the risk for violence and intimidation.

> I feel safer in the shelter than roaming the streets. You can get in a lot of trouble saying the wrong thing downtown … I don't want to get in the sex trade because I heard that a few girls went missing last year and their bodies were found. (Willing)

The perceived lack of support from loved ones or professionals led to increased feelings of isolation. Unhealthy relationships with family members or partners plagued by abuse, substance use, or infidelity intensified feelings of loneliness

and the inability to trust others. Some of the youth described entering street life at a time in their lives when they lacked maturity, education, and life experience. Due to their young ages and socioeconomic status, they had limited employment opportunities and supportive housing options.

Some of the participants moved from their home towns to a larger community so they could access resources for food and shelter, which presented further struggles as they had limited knowledge and awareness of the services available or how to locate specific resources. There were additional challenges that made it difficult for the youth to permanently leave street life, such as poverty, limited experience, and minimal resources or supports.

Supports

> There are resources here that have helped me out a lot. I have had people help me with job skills and there are places to have a shower, eat, and get clothes. You just don't get those services in smaller communities. (Motivation)

This category included a range of supports that helped the youth manage difficult experiences as they navigated life on the streets and attempted to permanently exit street life. These supports included positive relationships with others, community resources and services, and the integration of healthy activities. The participants described the positive influence of meaningful relationships with individuals they trusted and who have helped them out. Many relied on friends or their street family for protection, understanding, and comfort while on the streets. Children were also identified as sources of support as some of the participants found the strength and motivation to transition off of the streets so they could be involved in their children's lives. Other supports that were identified by the youth included elders, staff at community agencies, and sometimes strangers.

> I really thought about it and I realized that there were people out there to help me. All I did was ask for help. I had that one person and it was very powerful. One of my Elders helped me get off the streets and I look up to him as a dad now. (Wisdom)

The youth typically relied on emergency services that provided food and shelter. Free meals offered at shelters, various drop-in centres, and churches in the community were the main sources of food for some of the youth. Shelters were accessed for temporary accommodations as well as long-term housing. The youth could access laundry and cooking facilities at various community agencies. Involvement in pro-social activities was integral for those who have transitioned off of the streets.

Personal Qualities

> It is my inner strength, my spirit, my *ashay* that keeps me going … I have nothing and I'm pretty much happy with it. As long as I still have me. (Nothing But Me)

This category included several personal qualities the youth viewed as strengths that helped them to manage the challenges associated with being on the streets, including motivation, inner strength, hope, responsibility, and street smarts. Guided by intrinsic and extrinsic factors, the participants were motivated to carry on in life. Intrinsic motivation from within the participants included desires to become a better person, to maintain an optimistic attitude, and to strive for congruence between their values and actions.

Being street smart for the participants involved avoiding dangerous people or situations, using intuition and instinct to make decisions, and being alert and aware of the surroundings. Knowledge of how to survive was gained from individual choices of action and through observations of and interactions with more experienced street-involved people. Several participants identified strengths about themselves, including previous accomplishments with respect to employment, street survival skills, and artistic talents such as writing lyrics or break dancing. Confidence in parenting skills as well as the ability to get along with others was discussed by over half of the youth. Most notably, the participants highlighted their capacities to overcome hardship and create change in their lives.

The theme of empathetic caring addressed the relational aspects of communication, empathy, and the willingness to help others that were expressed by several of the youth. The need to be hopeful was a theme for many of the participants. Despite their bleak circumstances, hope was held by the youth as they described possibilities for the future. They expressed wants, ambitions, expectations, and the belief that the future would improve.

Moving On

> I am looking to settle down with someone. I would like to find a relationship, stability, and a home. I don't want to be on the streets anymore because I am getting old enough to know. (Alone)

The themes in this category covered a range of wants, hopes, and ambitions for the future including economic stability, self-improvement, and connection. The youth discussed growth and change in different areas in their lives that reflected moving on.

The theme of stability addressed issues of sobriety and permanent housing. The participants who currently live on the streets viewed stability as being clean from alcohol or drugs and having their own home. Several youth shared their educational and employment aspirations that included vocational training, post-secondary education, or full-time employment. Some youth discussed concrete plans for the direction of their futures, while others were more in the exploratory phase. One youth planned to work with his (First Nations) Band to get assistance so he could pursue further education, while other participants shared their plans to complete additional education in business and social work.

The theme of reconnection included spiritual and relational aspects. Several participants discussed repairing relationships with family members, most often

through hoped-for reconciliations with siblings and reunification with children. Reconnection was also defined as being involved in the community by helping others.

<div align="center">METATHEMES</div>

Trauma

All of the participants were affected by trauma to varying degrees, whether it was in childhood or later in life. Five of the youth identified childhood trauma as a precipitating factor to street life, while others discussed returning to the streets after experiencing a traumatic event. The long-term effects of trauma included negative self-images, interpersonal problems, including the inability to trust others and remaining in unhealthy or abusive relationships, and unhealthy coping patterns. Past trauma had shaped the participants' belief systems with respect to their understandings of family and relationships, as half of the youth described feelings of hurt and distrust of others based on previous physical or sexual violations. These participants also revealed how early experiences of abuse had influenced their present coping patterns.

Coping

The youth described a range of personal and environmental stressors that were difficult to manage. Both positive and negative coping strategies were used to deal with current life stressors and to manage or escape painful experiences from their pasts. The youth identified positive coping responses such as having an optimistic and hopeful attitude, the integration of healthy activities (music, dance, culture, spirituality, and poetry), and the acceptance of help from others, all of which represent psychological hardiness. Negative coping strategies involved violence, self-harm, crime, isolation, and most often, substance use.

Essence of Living

The participants' drive to keep coping was a powerful element that emerged across the stories, yet the youth were unable to explicitly state what it was that kept them going in life. They recognized something within themselves that willed them to survive despite numerous hardships and setbacks in life. Perceptions of having nothing or of being at their lowest point and thoughts of suicide were presented in some of the stories; however, these participants did not give up or attempt to end their lives. Inner strength, motivation, hope, and love all factored in, yet none of those characteristics alone appeared to truly capture the intrinsic drive that influenced the youth to keep living. It may be something inherent, the essence of living. In every story, trauma could be defined as the event; coping was what kept them alive, but there was something else that kept them finding ways to cope.

DISCUSSION

The subject of homelessness and street involvement with youth is a difficult one. There is such disconnect in writing sentences with the words "homelessness" and "youth" together. This situation calls for increased understanding of preventative steps to take to reduce street involvement and homelessness for youth. The stories shared by the 8 youth reflect information found in the existing literature, but also provide details specific to northern communities and information on the contribution of placement while in Ministry care. Due to the retrospective nature provided by youth at the upper end of the age scale, this study offered rich information on how some of the youth transitioned off the streets. Support and resources from community, in addition to personal strengths, assisted some of the youth to abstain from alcohol and drugs, find employment and stable housing, and ultimately leave the streets.

The youth identified several challenges of being street-involved that align with previous literature. The specific challenges of living in northern communities were also illuminated and included fewer resources, limited employment, and a scarcity of affordable housing options. Several of the youth discussed having to move to a larger community to access emergency resources such as shelters and food. These types of services were not available in smaller, isolated communities. This lack of services may be related more to geographical isolation.

A unique aspect of being street-involved in the North was that the youth could sleep in the bush and rely on their survival skills to build shelters and get food. They could eat berries and catch fish to eat; however, being in the bush potentially exposed them to wildlife and the harsh climates. The cold temperatures in the winter months and being outside in the snow or rain made it difficult for the youth to sleep outdoors.

Consistent with previous literature, childhood experiences of trauma and unstable home environments were identified by the youth as contributing factors that led them onto the streets. Traumatic experiences described by the youth resulted from pervasive patterns of neglect and abuse. The long-term effects of childhood trauma were revealed in several ways by the youth, including difficulty in trusting others, unhealthy relationships, and challenging coping strategies.

The participants identified several personal qualities that assisted them in navigating life on the streets. Qualities of inner strength, hope, motivation (Kidd & Davidson, 2007), independence (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, & Nackerud, 2000; Miller, Donahue, Este, & Hofer, 2004), confidence (Boydell et al., 2000), street smarts, and the capacity to learn (Bender et al., 2007; Kidd & Davidson, 2007) were viewed as personal strengths. In addition, the youth believed they had interpersonal skills including empathetic caring for others, the ability to get along with people, and respect for others, which made life on the streets and staying in shelters easier to manage.

Interestingly, all of the youth described periods of stability while being street-involved, which included returning home with family, income assistance, or shared accommodations. They identified several challenges associated with transitioning off the streets, and the ongoing struggle in permanently staying off the streets. According to the literature and the youth of this study, substance use, mental health issues, lack of support, and limited education and employment all factored in as barriers to leaving the streets (Brown & Amundson, 2010).

A significant finding was that some of the participants were not accessing the services that are available. The youth were less likely to seek out services because of problems with staff, suggesting the importance of interpersonal relationships with frontline workers and how those relationships affect the participants' willingness to utilize services they needed. This finding offers support for previous research by Brown and Amundson (2010) that found youth were looking for services to be relationship-based, not goal-oriented.

Connection to others appeared to emerge as the motivating factor for the participants who permanently left the streets. Whether it was guidance from a positive figure or motivation to take care of children, connection to others influenced the youth to make lifestyle changes. Conversely, the negative effects resulting from disconnection were also revealed in some of the participants' stories. For example, some of the youth who were separated from their children turned to the streets or became further involved in their addictions as a way to cope with the loss. Clearly, interpersonal relationships serve both as protective and risk factors, directly influencing coping responses and hardiness for the youth in this study.

Limitations

The participants included in the study were limited to youth living in one geographical area. Because of the small street-involved community in north-central British Columbia, the participants were recruited from a select number of agencies that provide services for street-involved youth. The stories are rich in detail, but of course do not reflect the experiences of all youth living on the streets. This research study attracted an older population of street-involved youth that was limiting in terms of younger youths' experiences, but also added depth to understanding how some youth transition off the streets. The stories of younger youth may be quite different, highlighting unique challenges or developmental pieces that were not captured from those interviewed in this study.

The quality of this research was largely dependent on the skills of the researcher. Her ability to recruit and establish rapport with the participants, along with skills in analyzing and presenting the data, directly affect the research findings. The participants determined the breadth and depth of the personal information they shared in their conversations. The authors understood the collaborative nature of a qualitative research approach and the difficulties in recruiting the participants for a second interview to provide feedback on the interpretations of their stories. Although only 2 of the participants met for follow-up interviews, additional steps

were taken to ensure trustworthiness and rigour in the research findings. Several member checks were completed throughout the initial interviews to clarify meaning and to capture the essence of the youths' stories to the best of the researcher's abilities. New meanings were negotiated through the co-construction of knowledge in conversations with the participants and guidance from the second author, who reviewed the participants' stories and was in agreement with the final groupings of the categories and themes.

[2] Implications for Research

The participants' demographic information was not collected for this research study because the researcher wanted to build trust with the participants and was more interested in a global understanding of their life experiences. Through past experiences of working with street- involved youth, the researcher was aware of the potential barriers that could result from asking identifying questions. The research interviews required her to establish rapport and build trust with the youth in a short time frame, so she chose not to ask questions that could create suspicion or shut down the participants in any way. Although the youth were not asked to share their cultural backgrounds, the majority of them self-identified as being First Nations. This finding aligns with a recent homeless count in central British Columbia that found 66% of the homeless population to be of Aboriginal descent (Community Partners Addressing Homelessness, 2010). Connections between the number of First Nations' youth who are street-involved and the devastating effects of colonization and the residential school legacy may be concluded. This critical discussion is beyond the scope of this study that focused more on personal qualities of survival from individual stories. Based on these findings, it is important that future research be carried out in the North looking specifically at the street-involvement or homeless experiences of First Nations youth and the current and historical context of their situation.

A significant theme found in this study was the experiences of street-involved youth who were in care of the Ministry. The perceived lack of safety in group homes influenced some of the youth to move to the streets as a better alternative. Further research is necessary to explore the experiences of children and youth who have been removed from their families and placed in care. The Ministry would benefit from looking at group homes and what is offered for youth in care, focusing on the services available for youth who will be aging out of the system. Research in this area may be useful for preventative measures and policy changes to foster healthier and positive experiences for individuals in care.

An important finding in this study was that some of the youth do not access community services. It would be valuable to look at what kind of supports street-involved youth would find most helpful. In particular, what exactly do they want or need for services and what changes would they like to see with the existing services offered? These are key questions that would give service providers valuable information to improve services so they can better meet the needs of street-involved youth living in the North.

Aspects of psychological hardiness and coping were present in all of the youths' stories. Future research using quantitative measures for coping and hardiness with street-involved youth may be useful for generalizable information. Furthermore, it may be valuable to implement hardiness training programs (Maddi, Kahn, & Maddi, 1998) and measure the effectiveness of hardiness training with street-involved youth.

Implications for Practice and Policy

From these stories, it is clear that street-involved youth are one of the most difficult populations to track and provide services for due to developmental issues in adolescence and young adulthood. Youth strive for autonomy during this life stage and being street-involved is one of the clearest ways to show their autonomy. Prevention strategies including education on the effects of trauma, mental health issues, communication skill building, and support services for parents to better manage difficult behaviours before crises occur may decrease the number of youth leaving home at young ages.

The prevalence of trauma and undiagnosed mental health issues add further complexities to providing support services to street-involved youth. Teasing out complex trauma or Posttraumatic Stress Disorder from other underlying mental health concerns will be important for appropriate counselling interventions and psychiatric services. One of the biggest challenges appears to be that street-involved youth are not accessing long-term support services. Based on what is known about trauma work, it requires a long-term healing process. Street-involved youth may require more time to establish relationships and build trust, so there needs to be long-term, consistent support.

The development of creative strategies to increase awareness about the services available and make connections with the youth may improve their access to services, which is especially relevant for those individuals who are heavily entrenched in street life and disconnected from services. Outreach services such as a mobile van for counselling may be beneficial. Based on the participants' stories, there appears to be a trend for the youth to access emergency services or seek out help in times of crisis, so it may be helpful to have formal support services, including on-site counselling or drug and alcohol support, available at shelters and drop-in centres.

The youth identified several difficulties in transitioning off the streets, which suggests a greater need for more services aimed at that transition and long-term support. Helpers need to find creative strategies to build rapport with the youth to increase motivation and commitment to assist them to leave the streets. Furthermore, having consistent and long-term support staff in the agencies that work directly with street-involved youth may create stability. Limited employment and affordable housing are struggles in the community, so advocacy for more training opportunities and subsidized housing options for youth are necessary.

CONCLUSION

"Even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation … may rise above himself, may grow beyond himself, and by doing so change himself. He may turn a personal tragedy into a triumph" (Frankl, 1984, p. 170). The narratives were powerful representations of the meanings the youth attached to their street experiences; each story was complex, multilayered, and deeply embedded in social processes. By capturing the subjective experiences of the youth who were interviewed, multiple realities were explored. This research contributes to our understanding of street-involved youths' experiences in a northern context, highlighting the personal qualities and supports that assisted them in navigating life on the streets.

Maddi (2002) links hardiness to existential courage, suggesting that hardy attitudes structure how individuals perceive interactions with the world and provide motivation to do difficult things in life. It may be that some of the youth in this study found meaning in stressful situations that motivated them to continue coping with the challenges in life. The participants' inner drive to keep living may also have relevance to Frankl's (1984) description of the essence of existence. He argues that the essence of life is responsibleness. Although the meaning differs from person to person and is constantly changing, every individual is ultimately responsible for his or her life. The participants viewed responsibility as an important personal quality that helped them survive life on the streets; however, this alone does not appear to fully capture the essence of what kept them going.

Connectiveness was significant for all of the youth as they navigated the homeless experience and looked toward the future. Although connection had different meanings for the participants, it appeared to be representative of change and growth. The participants' desires to reconnect with others, with a higher being, or within themselves may have provided them with the motivation to keep going in life, which reflects the humanistic view that people are "beings in the process of becoming" (DeCarvalho, 1991, p. 68) and constantly striving to be connected and whole.

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