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“Home and Native Land”: Aboriginal Young Women and Homelessness in the City

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Abstract

The homelessness of Aboriginal young women takes place in the historical context of lost homes and lost homelands. This article focuses on homeless Aboriginal women in the city of Edmonton and explores their perception of this experience. Involving nine young women who were interviewed over a two year period, researchers further investigated the historical profiles of their families and their attempts to transition out of homelessness. Part of a larger study of the homeless experience of eighteen girls and young women in Edmonton, this article breaks out data that focuses on the experience of Aboriginal participants and contextualizes their discourse in light of enforced home loss in western Canada. While their experience overlaps with the non-Aboriginal participants in our study we also find significant cultural and historically located differences.

Preface

Bre describes herself, at 8 years old, as losing everything in an accidental house fire; her family lost the new house that represented a new beginning in their community. Life before the fire was difficult; sometimes the family lived in the city of Edmonton; sometimes they returned to live in their home community. During that time her extended family experienced numerous deaths and serious accidents. Bre and her brother found an older brother in an attempted hanging in their house; unable to get him down, Bre stayed behind while her brother ran to get their parents. Considered haunted by the family, at this same house Bre acquired a “guardian” who helped her many times. Bre's dad, a regular crack user, wasn't really involved in their lives; her mom had a serious drinking problem and some of her uncle's were abusive. Nevertheless, Bre describes her troubles as beginning after the fire, as she puts it: “And ever since our house burned down we've been kinda homeless — my whole family.”

Following the fire, Bre lived in over-crowded housing with her grandmother who had thirteen children of her own

and, most of them now adults had many grandchildren living with her. The provincial child welfare department, eventually, removed all the children due to overcrowding; Bre was placed initially with an uncle and then in a foster home. At thirteen she was sent from the foster home to live with an aunt, described by Bre as abusive, before finally settling in Edmonton with one of her older brothers who she knew cared for her. However, even there tension with his girlfriend affected her; with up to thirteen relatives living in a four bedroom house it was crowded there as well. When her brother's girlfriend kicked her mother out of that house after a house party and a fight under the influence of alcohol Bre, now 17, also left. She joined her younger brother living homeless “on the street;” her mother, now staying in a low rent downtown hotel with Bre's uncle, could be found in the same milieu.

Background

Traditionally, Aboriginal families in central Alberta, where this study took place, found home on the land and in culturally patterned relationships of reciprocity, learning, ceremony and knowledge; these interacting factors served as interconnection with each other and with all beings found in their environment. Home was found on the land and its life-ways; the basis of identity was found in family and community as based in culture, language and nation. Following the signing of Treaty 6, in 1876 and Treaty 8 in 1899, many Métis and other native peoples took script payments offered, while First Nations people in central and northern Alberta, began to be settled on reserves rather than, for most part, living in seasonal and flexible interrelated groups depending on hunting, trapping and gathering, strategies carried out across traditional lands. The need for permission from the Indian agent in the form of a pass to leave reserves greatly restricted strategies available for making a living at home and also mandated that First Nations people locate home only on reserves. Western authorities often labeled these homes as “unsafe,” as sites of disease, of ignorance, and thus, viewed as a “threat” to non-Aboriginal populations. This rhetoric was one justification behind the enforced movement of children from home to residential schools, where household skills aimed at “cleanliness” and Western gender roles were stressed, as part of the overall effort of assimilation that kept children separate from both their relatives and the larger society (Forsyth, 2005).

At the same time, for those who attended residential schools, locating home, was often a difficult process. Raised in tightly regimented mission schools, many children had little contact with their own families and communities; returning to reserve communities at the end of their “schooling” was often a culturally confusing and stressful experience for both returning

youth and their relatives (RCAP, 1996). The autonomy sapping lifestyle lived in these institutions was described by one survivor as a process of “domestication” diminishing the autonomy enhancing values and responsibilities of traditional lifestyles (Standing Committee, 2005). The result of frequent physical, sexual, mental and emotional abuses, including being told repeatedly that their families, as savages, were shamefully uncivilized, ensured that many former students felt isolated or “homeless at home.” The social consequences of this institutionalization process led to deficits in parenting and relationship models; self-doubt, shame and anger and, too often, internalized perpetuation of abuse cycles maintained this historical process inter-generationally (Morrisette, 1994). At the same time, government agents, missionaries, medical personnel and RCMP were busy establishing places of safety and security rooted in their own vision of “Indians,” images that included a determination to isolate, plow under, stamp out the “wildness” of native places, home and landscapes (McCallum, 2005; Ruttan, 2005).

Most cities in western Canada are situated on lands used traditionally by Aboriginal peoples. The current location of Edmonton is at the site of a river-bend widening in the Saskatchewan River valley used as a camping place for centuries and later as the third site of the HBC's Edmonton House. In the first half of the twentieth century, some Aboriginal peoples in central and northern Alberta lived in and around the economic centres that developed at traditional places and fur posts. For others, the signing of Treaties 6 & 8 led to settlement on reserves for First Nations peoples and in rural villages and later specified settlements for Métis communities. Following WWII, partially related to returning Aboriginal veterans along with population increase, Aboriginal people began to move into urban areas with greater frequency, often going back and forth between cities and their home communities. Increasingly, women, who through marriage could no longer live on their reserves due to loss of status under the Indian Act, settled in the urban centre of Edmonton. This demographic shift parallels a national trend: half of all Aboriginal people in Canada now live in urban centres, with women holding a slightly larger portion rather than men (Peters, 2005).

Today, the nature of home, in urban Aboriginal spaces located on formerly native homelands, is a dynamic process. While mainstream services are available, both these programs and daily interaction with the mainstream community are all too often affected by racism and judgments on culture that perpetuate stereotypes and colonial dynamics (Alfred, 2009; Cooke & Belanger, 2006). At the same time, across urban spaces, community connections and family networks are maintained; churches and Aboriginal organizations provide

social, spiritual and service centres. In many ways, comfort, safety, and Indigenous networking continues to develop in this reoccupied place/homeland. Issues of privilege, and socioeconomic dynamics in urban contexts, are actively contested by Aboriginal peoples. However, whether we look at conditions on reserves, in rural communities or in urban centres, inadequate, overcrowded and environmentally unsafe housing associated with poverty and often powerlessness is central to the experience of dispossession that accompanies many Aboriginal peoples in Canada, including that of homeless young women (UNICEF, 2009).

Aboriginal youth

Canada has a higher poverty rate than many other industrialized countries (OECD, 2008). Pertinent to this study, is the fact that rates are exceptionally high for female headed families and for Aboriginal people (Raphael, 2009); half of Canada's Aboriginal children live below the poverty line (Bennett & Blackstock, 2007; UNICEF, 2009). In Canadian urban centres (over 100 000), fifty percent of Aboriginal children live in low-income housing as compared to 21.5% of non-Aboriginal children (UNICEF, 2009). Poverty, along with poor quality housing (CMHC, 2003), underlies health and wellness disparities at all ages and in all populations. Critically however, Aboriginal children and youth face increased social and familial vulnerability rooted in the cumulative effects of historical oppression, ongoing structural, health and social inequities and threats to cultural continuity (Adelson, 2005; Kirmayer, Brass & Tait, 2000) in spite of the cultural and relational strengths available. The Canadian Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples concluded in 2003 that: "Aboriginal youth living in urban areas face major disadvantages in comparison with other Canadian youth when measured against every social and economic indicator" (p. 86). As Blackstock (2009) notes, Aboriginal children and youth are marked by experiences of social exclusion, discrimination and oppression; systemic dynamics that remain unexamined.

The Aboriginal youth population (under 25) in Canada is currently growing at a rapid rate and at fifty percent represents a much higher proportion of the total population than for any other group in Canada (Townsend & Wernick, 2008; Beaujot & Kerr, 2007). Currently, Aboriginal youth as a group become parents earlier and have higher fertility rates than other Canadian youth (Beaujot & Kerr, 2007). Elders, First Nations, Métis and Inuit leaders point out the potential in this growing youth population; at the same time, to access this potential, Bennett and Blackstock (2007) remind us that "housing for Aboriginal youth is needed to ensure their health and ability to participate as productive members of society" (p. 6).

Many Aboriginal youth are uprooted repeatedly throughout their childhoods, influenced by difficulty paying rents, poor quality housing and placement in child welfare care (Berman, Alvernaz Mulcahy, Edmunds, Haldenby and Lopez, 2009; Baskin, 2007; Clatworthy, 2008). Other socioeconomic factors affecting urban Aboriginal housing stability include low incomes, the racism of some landlords, social disruption as a result of family conflict related to overcrowding and addictions, and to the continuing search for more acceptable and affordable accommodation. Frequent moves and school changes disrupt children's school performance in ways that may perpetuate poverty (Clatworthy, 2008). Aboriginal youth describe a cyclical pattern; removal from home, returning from foster care if their parent/guardian complies with demands for often culturally irrelevant treatment or parenting programs; re-placed if parents "fail to accede;" placement in other relatives homes if they prove "difficult" in care, often followed by group custody if their parents or relatives, in the eyes of social service agencies, resist required programming or "slack off" in any way (Baskin, 2007).

Aboriginal children in care: Initial homelessness?

In Canada, percentages of Aboriginal children in foster or group home care range from one third to over 40% of the over 60 000 children in care (Farris-Manning & Zandstra in Blackstock, Trocme & Bennett, 2004; Jones & Kruk, 2005; NCSA, 2000). Aboriginal children, despite being similar in overall functioning to non-Aboriginal children reported to child welfare services, are vastly over-represented in care as a result of a focus on the parent and the family socio-economic conditions rather than on the child's behavior and capacity (Blackstock, Trocme, & Bennett, 2004). Further, Aboriginal children are removed more often than non-Aboriginal children for neglect rather than physical or sexual abuse (Blackstock et al, 2004).

Historically, removing children from Aboriginal families destabilized identity (as residential schools were designed to do) and left traumatic scars (Morrisette, 1994). The "60's scoop," which resulted in the placement of great numbers of children for adoption or transfer to long-term foster care with non-Aboriginal families throughout Canada and the United States, continued this process (Blackstock and Trocme, 2005; Sinclair, 2007). Rates of adoption and foster care remain high today, serving as a continuation of assimilationist policies as placement usually results in separating children from family and community, cultural disconnection and painful experiences (Blackstock et al, 2004; Brown, Knol, Prevost-Derbeccker & Andrushko, 2007; Richardson & Nelson, 2007).

Frequent moves while in care increases the risk of behavioral and mental health problems for all children (Rubin, O’Reilly, Luan & Localio); and since frequent moves are the norm for Aboriginal children and youth in foster or group care risk increases as a result. Further, young adults, involved in the system as youth, often find themselves in situations that parallel those experienced by their parents; they face economic and housing challenges including unaffordable rents, poor housing quality and/or homelessness, child welfare involvement with their own children and, as well, a lack of culturally appropriate support programs (Brown, et al, 2007).

Aboriginal youth and homelessness

Aboriginal people as a whole are also over-represented in the homeless population in Edmonton (ranging between 43% and 38% - self-identified) (Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing, 2002, 2008). Aboriginal youth experience a higher risk of becoming homeless as compared to other youth in Canada; they are greatly over-represented in the homeless youth population and the rate of concealed homelessness is high (Baskin, 2007). Youth make up a third of the homeless population in Canada, the proportion of Aboriginal youth in the homeless youth population is uncertain. On the street, they experience high rates of mental health concerns, including depression and conduct disorders (MacNeil, 2008; Whitbeck et al, 2008). Earlier onset and a higher percentage of adolescent substance use disorder (male and female) is reported in some communities, a factor that adds to the other array of risk factors linked to low economic status (Boyd-Ball, 2003; Whitbeck et al, 2008). Given the social and historical factors, Van der Woerd, Cox & McDiarmid (2006) state that Aboriginal female youth are identified as “at increased risk” for specific behavioral, social and health concerns that include aggressive behaviors and the likelihood of contacting STDS and HIV at a younger age (Banister & Begoray, 2006). Poverty places Aboriginal women further in harm’s way as it often “leads to compromises which can perpetuate the risk of contact with child welfare services” (Harris, Russell, & Gockel, 2007, p. 23).

Based on her research with eleven homeless Aboriginal youth, Gilchrist (1995) concludes that reasons offered for the initiation of homelessness and the strategies used to survive cross ethnic backgrounds for all homeless youth. However, Aboriginal homeless youth backgrounds include different cultural, historical and structural factors that lead to differences in entry paths. For example, Aboriginal young women frequently enter from child welfare system and once there report more intense experiences of prejudice by authorities than other homeless youth experience. In an earlier article we reported that of the nine Aboriginal young women in our study,

all but one had family members and caretakers with residential school backgrounds (Ruttan et al, 2008). Aboriginal girls have reported “uprooting as a pervasive and recurrent feature of their lives (Berman et al, 2009, p. 423). For instance, Brown et al (2007) found that several of the Aboriginal youth in their study had a family history of homelessness, that temporary living situations were normative, and that homeless youth had concerns regarding personal safety, a lack of sufficient autonomy and the need for support networks. Cultural connection for homeless Aboriginal youth is a key factor in healing and recovery; disconnection leads to street entrance and reconnection to healing and leaving (Baskin, 2007; Brunanski, 2009; Ruttan et al, 2008).

Research Background

This analysis is based on data from a larger study conducted by faculty from the Department of Human Ecology at the University of Alberta and a community research partner, Native Counseling Service of Alberta (NCSA). The larger study addressed the needs of homeless female youth and young women in Edmonton, Alberta and the assets they used to survive while homeless and to make transitions of homelessness (Munro, LaBoucane-Benson & Ruttan, 2007; Munro, LaBoucane-Benson, Ruttan & Cardinal, 2008). These assets were compared to the assets used in the schedules developed by the Search Institute’s 40 Assets for Youth Development model (Scales, Benson, Leffert & Blyth, 2000) and a model of street specific assets developed. The research project was approved by a University of Alberta ethics committee as well as by the ethics review process of the community partner (NCSA). A qualitative approach to the overall research question was used in order to explore the complexity of the experience of homeless young women over time. In the case of the cultural analysis a qualitative approach allows us to interview individuals while exploring issues relevant to their experience of culture and of others responses to their culture and identity, particularly while homeless (Ratner, 1997).

As part of a separate analysis of the data from the nine Aboriginal participants reflected in this article, we looked at how experiences related to residential schools, historical trauma and cultural revitalization affected their journey in an earlier article (Ruttan et al, 2008). We found that the impact of historical trauma (Brave Heart, 2004) was significant and in many ways contributed to youth homelessness. At the same time, the possibility of reconnecting with stories of community and culture in terms of interconnected narratives of both history and futures offered a vision of hope and home to these youth, especially in the context of their goals for their

own children (Ruttan et al, 2008). This article focuses on issues related to where these young women did or did not find home growing up, how they perceived their experience while homeless and where they looked to find homefulness in the context of relations between reserve and urban community and between identity, tradition and contemporary culture.

Sample

Participants in the overall study included eighteen young women suggested by service agencies and other youth as beginning to transition out of homelessness. Purposive sampling was used in order to select informants who meet criteria for appropriateness and expert knowledge on the phenomenon under study (Morse, 1991; Strauss & Corbin, 1998); we hoped to include Aboriginal participants in similar proportions as represented in the actual population. Nine, or half, of the study participants self-identified as Aboriginal including First Nations, Métis and non-status identification; as representative of the region, all but one participant had Cree or Cree/Métis backgrounds; a number had fathers and grandfathers who were of non-Aboriginal backgrounds. Two participants grew up on reserves, several went back and forth from city to the reserve; however, most participants (5) grew up primarily in an urban setting. Participant's ages ranged between nineteen and twenty-six years (av. 22.4) at the start of the interviews, however, they first became homeless at between thirteen and eighteen years of age. Four participants entered quite young (13-14); these young women described themselves as having actually left home much earlier: at three to six years of age. To explain what they meant by this, they gave examples of child welfare apprehension, a mother's death, not getting along with parents or as having parent's who they described as ambivalent about having them in the first place. Foster or group home care was common for all participants as was living on and off with relatives, including relatives other than their parents or grandparents. Self-reported reasons for becoming homeless as adolescents included family tensions and fighting, being tired of their role as a family scapegoat, a parent's death, abuse by parents and/or other relatives, unstable housing, being passed around from relative to relative, aging out of or becoming fed up with foster or group care, relationships with boyfriends and due to losing their place at home in response to their own or others substance abuse. Five of the nine participants had children, and two others mentioned loss through miscarriage; two participants had one or more of their children in child welfare custody at the start of the interviews.

Methods and Data Analysis

Research participants were briefed on the research project and appeared quite motivated to participate; they indicated that they hoped their contribution would help others. After signing

consent forms, they began a process of interviews held as close to bimonthly as possible; the interviews were conducted by a student researcher and took place over a one to two year period. Researchers connected with participants by phone and by leaving messages with friends, relatives and agencies they typically kept in contact with. Interviews addressed their backgrounds, both prior to homelessness and while on the streets, along with their current experience. Due to the overall research focus, the strategies and internal and external assets used to survive and the challenges and rewards participants experienced in attempts to leave homelessness were stressed. Held between May, 2005 and March 2007, the numbers of interviews per participant ranged from three to nine, on average six interviews of fifty to ninety minutes each were conducted with the participants. Interviews took place in coffee shops or fast food restaurants of the participant's choice with a meal or snack provided. Data included demographic data sheets, interview summaries and transcripts, charts made of assets used, timelines and closing summaries. This rich data set was then analyzed for themes and validating data for all participants. Following the larger analysis a separate qualitative analysis of the Aboriginal participants was completed. In this analysis we looked for similarities and differences in experience from the larger population and developed a set of core categories that shed light on their circumstances, and along with review of the literature, led us to the conclusions and theoretical material discussed in this article (McCann & Clark, 2003). The results are presented thematically followed by discussion of the issues involved.

Results

Many of our participants indicated that their family was homeless or at least somewhat homeless while they were growing up; several participants mentioned having felt homeless their whole lives. Jackie never knew her dad, but between her four siblings and her mother, she indicated they were all homeless at some time in their lives. Multiple moves were common along with periods of living with extended family members who often took on a variety of flexible family roles. As one participant explained, "Well, me, my mom, my brother, my aunties, my cousins, we all lived in this one house, and my grandpa, he was like my dad ... he filled in the position of my dad." For others multiple moves including those from family to the child welfare system worked less well. One participant described living with her grandma and grandfather for a few years growing up, and then following her mother's death, living first with her aunt, then with her grandparents, then in foster care and group homes, then to live with another aunt and from there she hit the streets; as she describes: she

“liked it best at my grandparent’s place, because of my grandma, who I felt raised me as a child.”

In a way that was different from the non-Aboriginal youth we interviewed, there was a less distinct boundary to homelessness. Many youth went back and forth from siblings, grandmother’s or auntie’s places to periods on the street. Several participants indicated that being at least “somewhat homeless” was not unusual in their community and not something that made them feel different than others. To find shelter many young women told us they, “would just go stay with whatever friends and family would let them.” Many of the Aboriginal young women involved in our study did not see themselves as truly “homeless” or as street people in contrast to the non-Aboriginal participants who, for the most part, accepted this identification. Interestingly, those Aboriginal participants who identified themselves as “street people”, tended to live with street families of mostly white youth rather than looking for places to sleep at relative’s homes.

Another difference from the non-Aboriginal participants was that, several of the young women had other family members living on the street, including parents and siblings. For example, at the time she entered the street, Bre’s mother and brother were living on the street; as well, she got to know several cousins she barely knew while living in the street community. For these families supporting each other economically or in terms of emotional connection while homeless was common; they hung out with each other and did not seek street families. Jackie mentioned how her mom, also on the street, but with more income than she had through E.I. (Employment Insurance), would often meet up with Jackie and her three children, get them something to eat and then give Jackie a break for a little while.

Nevertheless, while homelessness did not necessarily disrupt family ties often severe drug abuse led to estrangement. When drug usage became severe, addictive and continued over time it resulted in loss of trust and a redefinition as unsafe to have around. Youth were then told to leave places with relatives and were estranged, for the time being, from family members who had homes. In general, however, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins homes were usually places available when needed and used as places to clean up, get something to eat, sleep at times and store things; only when drug abuse was severe and the associated behaviors causing serious risk for others were these resources no longer available. At the same time, any indication of trying to do better usually resulted in relatives opening their doors again. For example, after attending a treatment centre due to abuse of crystal meth, Bre went back to her brother’s house; she described herself as happy about it indicating: “they can see that I’m smarter now, my family actually likes me now.” This process

of eventually closing doors due to the perception of danger for others typically occurred later in the addiction process than for the families of non-Aboriginal youth we interviewed. The tolerance of Aboriginal families was higher and doors tended to re-open earlier possibly due to values regarding the importance of the extended family and the significance of helping each other.

Melanie indicated that most of the time she was homeless on the reserve rather than in the city as most of the other young women in our study were. Saying she wasn’t too worried about being homeless there because there was always another aunty or cousin that she could go to. Melanie described many people on her reserve as being in the same situation and, also, that even though they may have had their own house it was often in bad shape resulting in insecure and often unsafe housing. For Melanie while she wasn’t worried about finding a place to stay she wondered if she’d every find a stable home. Later when she began living in a transitional housing project in Edmonton, Melanie, like others, remained worried about other relative’s homelessness, in this case her grandmother:

‘Cause after my grandpa died, my grandma’s been pretty much homeless . . . Like, she’s never really had a steady home since . . . she stays with friends and family . . . Well, she did go into this place about five years ago, but then she got evicted. My brother and cousins moved in and they partied and stuff and she got evicted. I always wanted to help my grandma get her own place.

In another pattern that was distinct for the Aboriginal participants, multiple deaths in the family and community and the resultant grieving often contributed to homelessness. Our research participants described instances where either they or the people they were staying with returned to their reserve or community for funerals and then stayed longer than they had initially expected to; this process usually meant loss of or change in accommodation in the city. Bre mentioned the death of a three month old nephew, her grandmother and an aunty over a two month period during which she lost her place at her brothers; a few months later two of her cousins died in an alcohol-related quad accident. This constant cycle of deaths, each one triggering memories of earlier deaths and the often unresolved emotions involved, frequently resulted in increasing emotional stress and family tensions which could end up in fights, substance use and some people having to leave.

Most of the young women knew from childhood experiences, and those with children had this perception reinforced, that their homes were not totally private — that their homes could easily be invaded by authorities, typically, child welfare workers and police officers. Historically, Indian agents, missionaries and police officers entered Aboriginal homes pretty much at will. Some of these young women

find this still the case with child welfare, police and housing authorities; they expressed both resentment of and fear regarding this possibility. As Melanie recalled:

When she (daughter) was about six months, well, we were fighting, and he (boyfriend) broke the door down or whatever, and the cops came, and said that if I didn't leave him they'd take my baby away. And from there I wasn't in the right state of mind and I ended up in the [psychiatric] hospital.

After the couple reunited six months later, Melanie remained quite fearful that apartment neighbors would call child welfare authorities as their daughter, now a toddler, was hard to put to sleep and made noise late in the evening. Another participant, Jackie, homeless with three children, reported being constantly on the watch for child welfare authorities. After the birth of her first child and a visit by social workers Tanny assumed they were there not to help but to take the baby and immediately left the city and her housing. Mothers mentioned being fearful regarding the surveillance and home invasion involved in meeting standards for food, cleanliness, relationship stability and abstinence requirements set by social service workers. Participants who were in care as children believe that being in care is especially hard for Aboriginal children; they described their social workers as uncaring and as expressing attitudes that communicate little hope for or interest in Aboriginal children.

Stress in new "Homes"

Those young women who went through periods of homelessness and eventually acquired a place to stay, a "home", indicated that having a home was often stressful, sometimes more so than not having a home. Reasons given included the high costs of rent, the often poor condition of apartments available through either public housing programs or affordable private rental, budgeting and planning given very low incomes, frustration regarding the sharing of responsibilities with partners and/or roommates including housework and childcare, the use of substances by others in the home and the influence of friends and relatives who wanted to stay with them. Melanie indicated that although she and her partner were happy to finally get their own place and are now attending school, they are struggling to make ends meet. For example, she described herself as having to come home from school, then clean up, make dinner, clean that up, and by then she's too tired to do her school work. She said she ended up feeling that she wasn't getting enough support from her boyfriend and found herself feeling angry; as an illustration she mentioned her boyfriend coming home late and then wanting supper, while the next day he was out all day drinking with his cousins who were staying with them, while she did the laundry and childcare.

Being open to relatives who need a place to stay is normative and is something that helped these young women while they were homeless, however, for those with children and now in social housing, this dynamic often caused additional stress. Having relatives stay with them while they are trying to get their feet on the ground can result in tensions in trying to maintain the expectations of social service and housing institutions. Different sleeping schedules for those working and going to school or getting children up for school caused conflict; as well, despite relatives talking about paying for rent or groceries it doesn't always happen. Melanie and other Aboriginal young women involved in this project who were trying to leave homelessness, were using their own limited resources to support family even when they are not living with them, an expected aspect of family relationships but not of social assistance programs. This situation is experienced as impossible, culturally, to explain to child welfare or social assistance workers resulting in additional stress and leading to a repetition of the cycle that they lived themselves, asking people to leave when substance involvement becomes too severe. Melanie pointed out, however, that her perspective changed over time, that even though she was helped this way by relatives herself, she now wants her own space; she no longer feels comfortable at home, or in doing her homework, or raising her daughter without fear with so many people staying at her place.

Aspects of motivation

At the same time, for almost all participants at least some family members were credited with supporting them, with getting them to think about transition, not only in terms of a place to stay but also with support for healing and productive activities. They spoke of family as their motivation for recovery, particularly in terms of respecting ones relationships, roles and responsibilities. For example, two young women spoke about their nephews and their responsibility as aunts as what motivated them to straighten up. While many of their own parents were still struggling, they spoke of the hurt their behavior was causing their grandparents and, importantly, of the needs of their own children. Several young women mentioned wanting to help parents with their own substance abuse or disabling health conditions by moving in with them, however, in this study doing so typically led to disappointment and a return to the street.

Most participants in the larger study, both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal, mentioned the role of spirituality in leading them through survival and on towards leaving homelessness. As examples, the Aboriginal participants mentioned partaking in sweat lodge ceremonies while at treatment centres, remembering and being helped by the "guardians" they had experienced as a child, creating their own ceremonies of

healing, smudging and praying and attending services at a local church which relied on both Roman Catholic and Aboriginal ceremonial practices. Belief and praying were cited as getting one through when they were estranged from their families, “at least you’ll know someone cares.” Dreams and dream visits by relatives who were deceased were also mentioned as meaningful. Explaining her belief that the spirit moves on after death, it returns to the Creator until it is needed again, Tanny, with one of the most disruptive and traumatic backgrounds, went on to say that “our family that pass on can come back when we need them in our dreams ... they come to visit” and that this comforts her.

Finally, programs offered by Aboriginal service agencies and based in Aboriginal culture were preferred. Culturally-based treatment programs were described as key, not only to recovery from addictions, but also to beginning to understand how history continued to influence current situations including their own experiences; these treatment programs and culturally-based programs in the community, now that they were ready for them, blended the role of culture, development and spirituality in opportunities for wellbeing (Ruttan et al, 2008). Aboriginal parenting programs run by Aboriginal service organizations were cited by Jackie and other mothers transitioning from homelessness as programs they not only looked forward to attending but also believed would “actually help” them.

Discussion

Safe and secure homes and home places contribute to health and identity for all people. In Canada, Aboriginal people have a history of lost homes, of dispossession, and of removal from lands integral to cultural safety, with grave consequences for health and identity as a result. This reality cannot be divorced from any discussion of Aboriginal homelessness whether for youth or adults, men or women, urban or reserve settings. Factors involved include the loss of traditional lands, the long term effects of colonization and the Indian Act, the impact of residential schools and child welfare institutions, poverty and the provision of inadequate housing, and the effects of racism in multiple contexts. Repeated uprooting and displacement play a large part as routes to Aboriginal women’s homelessness in western Canada. As the young women in this study experienced, the impact of removal of children from homes, begun with residential schools, continued with the 60’s scoop and the placement of children in foster and adoptive homes across North America continues. This dynamic is evident in the ongoing overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and youth in child welfare custody. For the young women we interviewed, finding a safe place, given loss of home

in family pasts, led to forms of homelessness both as children and as youth.

Poor quality accommodation, poverty and racism all impact stability in housing including, in this case, both as children and later in finding housing in order to transition out of homelessness. In this context, Bennett and Blackstock hold that “poverty is the new colonization” (p. 5); the homelessness of the participants in this study is an aspect of this process. We found, as did Baskin (2007), that structural factors affect Aboriginal homeless youth in ways that vary from other homeless youth. Some degree of homelessness and/or poor quality accommodation is not unusual in the background of the participants in this study; the impact of structural factors is ongoing in their lives as young women; child welfare agencies are perceived as a particular threat both as children and later as parents.

Raphael (2009) notes that, “poverty leads to material and social deprivation and an inability to participate in various societal activities” (p. 8); a dynamic which affects these young women. Stigma and social exclusion, for most of the young women in our study meant that continuing to interact in networks of family and community while on the street, including gangs for some, was the safest approach. For others, more assimilated within the larger society, joining street families of mostly white youths was a preferred route. At the same time, these same youth who, as part of recovery, began to reclaim Aboriginal identity often pointed out the underlying racism in the attitudes of some of their street peers and in their own earlier beliefs. For example, Brittany, who has a non-Aboriginal parent and whose Aboriginal family members live in eastern Canada, described herself as earlier ‘feeling really native, but in a bad way.’ She indicated that she felt “oppressed” her whole life; later, coming out of street life, she referenced what she has learned regarding the importance of native culture to her identity and connection with self, family and other Aboriginal youth as a source of pride and good feelings. Baskin calls for healing approaches which deal with the history of colonization and its impacts along with a focus on strengths (Baskin, 2007). The implications of this study supports that view and suggests programs which take into account the particular experiences of Aboriginal young women, including their strengths, in becoming homeless, while homeless and while in transition are most likely to be effective.

Honouring and respecting relationship and connection is a key aspect of life, important to all youth, it is perhaps even more essential to Aboriginal youth as it is a key value, way of seeing the world and an important aspect of resilient identities for Aboriginal individuals, families, and communities (Ruttan et al, 2008). The social and economic factors we have addressed

are key and must be acknowledged. However, as Anderson & Ledogar (2008) report the key for Aboriginal youth, even when all types of negative social factors are at work, is support: parental, peer and community-wide. Having someone significant in your life show they care, who one can talk to and got to in crisis is essential; they suggest that communities can address this need even when parents or peers are not available or helpful. For some this meant support from formerly homeless youth now working in street support agencies. Many of the youth in this study found necessary support from some family members throughout, from a wider circle once they took initial efforts toward health, in a growing interest in spirituality and culture and in activities that engaged their creative talents.

Conclusion

Finding home is haunted by historical factors which mirror the dispossession and relocation that took place in Aboriginal homelands. In that context Aboriginal families have maintained and developed important strengths; they have also been and continue to be affected by many losses including home loss. We found that when we analyzed the Aboriginal participants in our study separately, while they shared many experiences with non-Aboriginal youth, they nevertheless, experienced a number of factors distinctively. Homelessness itself was defined differently as were circuits of moving in and out of family places in both urban and rural or reserve settings. The participants in this study indicated that their homes as children were, at times, unsafe often due to environmental factors including poor quality housing and also due to neglect, sexual abuse, and drinking parties. As a result, they experienced multiple moves including very difficult periods in foster care or group homes. Given that background along with family disruption, grieving and the need to find what seemed like a safer space than where they were was one aspect of moving to the streets for our participants.

We also found that finding home in efforts to transition out of homelessness is difficult; it means beginning to address these issues. Additionally, maintaining that home in the manner expected by agencies that authorize ones continuation in that place is a challenge. Owning a home is not something that most of these young women experienced in their own families and was not a goal for them but, maintaining safe and stable homes in order to raise their children in a good way was. The participants of this study indicated they did not want to continue to be home-lost even if it sometimes meant asking relatives when they threatened the way they were now trying to live to leave; safe places in which to raise their children without interference from what they experienced as non-supportive mainstream agencies was essential to them. Finding ways to

do so was supported by engagement in programming with an Aboriginal focus in ways that mainstream programming could not. At the end of the study, most of the participants were beginning to place themselves in a new understanding of family and community that, despite traumatic backgrounds, allowed for a place to connect with healthier practices and with a deeper understanding of self, spirit and culture.

In a video produced by the second author of this article, Blackfoot Elder Leo Pard says that learning the answer to the question, "Where you come from?" is an essential place to start in dealing with questions of identity and home for Aboriginal youth (Bearpaw Media, 2006). Where you come from connects peoples, relationships and the knowledge of being in place, at home. Homelessness for these young women is an aspect of continuing home loss. However, an aspect of coming out of homelessness and transitioning to successful life roles is found in locating and understanding home spaces, not only personally, but as families and peoples with particular historical and cultural backgrounds (Ruttan et al, 2008). Where you come from is not identical with having a place to stay, but it is an important aspect of understanding that allows for beginning to understand home loss and, for our participants, to move towards homefulness. As these young women have experienced, this issue has become complicated for many Aboriginal youth affecting the balance necessary for secure homes and healthy identities. Youth in our study look for answers in order to move out of homelessness and find homes and enhanced futures for themselves and their families. While there are limitations to this study in terms of sample size, the policy implications of these findings are significant and need to be addressed in future research.

Afterword

Bre, once again at her brother's home at the end of the study, reported that her goal is to work and save money in order to get her own place with her boyfriend. Melanie describes herself as no longer passive and fearful; she indicates that her boyfriend now realizes that they need to think about the future, not just for themselves, but for their daughter; now when they are stressed they often smudge together. While Jackie still struggles with many challenges, she is attending parenting classes at an Aboriginal organization which she finds meaningful. Brittany is active in the positive youth movement in the community through engagement in dance performances. Making a special pair of moccasins that depict her experience of 7 years of homelessness, Phoenix beads her way through the experience as an aspect of healing. Several of the participants are now attending advanced educational programs and, at the same time, continuing the spiritual practices they have reconnected

with during their transition out of homelessness. While still facing many obstacles, many of them systemic, these young women connected identity, re-storied relationships, community support and safety in place, fostering their journey towards homefulness.

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