Retelling Stories of Resilience as a Counterplot to Homelessness: A Narrative Approach in the Context of Intensive Team-Based Housing Support Services

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Abstract

This paper describes the use of narrative practices in the context of a Housing First program operated by the Saskatoon Crisis Intervention Service to help people in the process of overcoming homelessness tell their stories in ways that make them stronger. Housing First is an evidence-based intervention that offers immediate provision of permanent housing and wrap-around supports to individuals with persistent mental illness and other complicating co-morbidities who are experiencing homelessness. The paper arises from my reflections on learning whilst on social work practicum.

Through participating in the narrative practice, people overcoming homelessness richly described their knowledge, skills, and abilities in getting through difficult times. This was effective in helping people to reacquaint themselves with a sense of purpose in life, while the audiences gave greater authentication and acknowledgement to people's hopes and dreams for the future. This revealed that I could work more effectively by supporting people's own initiatives rather than attempting to "fix" problems. What stood out the most was how the presenting problems were so closely correlated to larger and often oppressive social discourses. The linking of lives through shared purposes contributes to a collective voice that can amplify social issues and reverberate outward on a larger scale in the pursuit of social justice.

Keywords:

Narrative practice; homelessness; social work; sense of place.

Introduction

This paper describes the innovative use of narrative practices in the context of a Housing First program operated by Saskatoon Crisis Intervention Service in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Participants living in rental housing and supported harm reduction housing were offered the opportunity to partake in this practicum project and four people accepted the offer. Additional participants with lived experience of homelessness as well as professionals working in the field were also recruited. Candidates were enthusiastic about the opportunity to share their personal stories of hard-earned knowledge and resilience. They were also hopeful that, in sharing responses to hardship, they might alleviate the anguish of others.

The experience of homelessness can make one feel invisible and can erode self-perception. Disruptions to intimate relationships with others, including family members, friends, pets, and neighbours, can further compound feelings of detachment. This can "create the sense of being a ghostly nonperson, absent and silent in the world of others" (Gillis, Dickerson, & Hanson, 2010, p.72). Narrative therapists would distinguish these as thin descriptions of people who have lived otherwise rich and fulfilling lives (Monk, Winslade, Crocket, & Epston, 1996). This paper argues that Housing First is not only the antidote to homelessness but also an ideal opportunity to help people make sense of their experiences and begin reclaiming parts of their life that may have become less visible during homelessness. Using the narrative metaphor, the procurement of housing can be seen as a tangible opening to re-author problem-ridden stories as a counterplot to homelessness.

Direct service providers working on Housing First teams need to listen carefully for stories of hope that have become overshadowed by homelessness. Even in stories of hardship and despair we can listen for ways in which the person is resisting, healing, or taking steps to take care of others (Combs & Freedman, 2009). Making these values more visible can help people to reacquaint themselves with a sense of purpose and to externalize or see themselves outside of the problems caused by homelessness rather than as a "homeless person with problems."

Rationale for the Practice Project

People in recovery from homelessness have often endured significant trauma including neglect, physical and sexual abuse, violence, combat-related trauma, and accidents or disasters (Hopper, Bassuk, & Olivet, 2009). The experience of homelessness itself can be very traumatic. Providing safe and affordable housing to people who are homeless can alleviate the stress associated with living on the street. This in turn can open up time and space for personal reflection. During this time, direct service providers can listen for opportunities and invitations to provide support, including help with access to counselling. Unfortunately, access to mainstream counselling can be cumbersome and fail to meet the needs of people who have been homeless. Intake processes for

mainstream counselling services often are aimed at determining "therapy readiness" and often preclude people with serious mental illness or active substance use. Many mental health counselling services do not "meet people where they are at" and do not align well with models of harm reduction. Serious mental illness, active substance use, as well as long waitlists, fee for service, and lack of transportation are some of the barriers to counselling experienced by this population.

In the absence of readily available mainstream counselling, I was curious about the ways in which direct service providers on Housing First teams could facilitate therapeutic conversations. To be clear, these therapeutic conversations are not intended to replace conventional therapy. Rather, the ideas discussed here are intended to bridge the gap for those who are seeking professional counselling but for a number of reasons cannot access it. I was also interested in how Housing First providers might tailor therapeutic approaches to optimize and work in tandem with the biopsychosocial supports already being offered by the team, thereby enhancing the depth of Housing First services. I chose narrative therapy because of its non-pathologizing stance and commitment to social justice.

The following steps were taken to complete Part One of my practicum:

- Seek out people who were homeless and are now housed who are struggling with similar predicaments in life to one another;
- Invite them to participate in sharing their knowledge, skills, and abilities in getting through difficult times;
- Create questions rooted in narrative therapy that would help them to richly describe that which sustains them in life;
- Collect these stories and collaborate with the participant author to make edits for readability;
- Seek out others who are in the process of overcoming similar life challenges to listen to these stories as an outsider audience. Consider inviting professionals in the field to join as outsider witnesses (when appropriate);
- Guided by narrative lines of inquiry, ask the outsider audience to respond to the stories. Ask the outsider audience to pay particular attention to any personal resonance they had with the story (e.g., "*What struck a chord with you personally?");*
- Collect the de-identified responses from the outsider audience (no identifying names in any of the writing) and bring them back to be read aloud to the author of the original shared account (provide hard copies); and
- Discuss what significance hearing these audience responses to their stories has had and what new possibilities it creates for them moving forward.

Ethics

As this project was undertaken through fieldwork practicum no formal ethics approval was sought, in consultation with the Social Work Graduate Studies Coordinator. However, reflecting the ethical stance of social work it was decided to obtain written consent from the participants in the community narrative practice portion of the fieldwork. Interestingly, I found that the process of obtaining written consent for the community narrative component didn't fit well with the narrative approach. The field practicum consent form states that the person will be receiving counselling. This somewhat contradicted the spirit of the work I had proposed which was much more about consulting participants on their lived experience and not on the assumption that they were seeking counselling. The narrative approach was more akin to "therapeutic anthropology" than counselling in the traditional use of the word. The field practicum consent form did not suit my purposes, but I used it nonetheless to ensure that I was upholding the ethical standards outlined by the Faculty of Social Work. An honorarium of tobacco was given to each participant at the completion of their initial interview. The tobacco was not intended to incentivize participation in the project but rather as an acknowledgment of their contribution to it. Tobacco was chosen because of its cultural and ceremonial significance to Indigenous people who made up the majority of participants in the practice project.

Literature Review

Narrative Therapy

Narrative therapy is comprised of different ways of thinking about and understanding people's relationships to problems. According to Morgan (2000), narrative therapy is

> a respectful, non-blaming approach to counselling and community work, which centers people as the experts in their own lives. It views problems as separate from people and assumes people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to reduce the influence of the problems in their lives (p. 2).

Narrative practices are collaborative conversations with individuals, groups, and communities that assume people don't need or want to be "fixed." Narrative therapy relies on people's innate competencies, skills, knowledges, and abilities to reduce the influence of problems in their lives. Thus, much of narrative therapy is concerned with drawing out people's preferred ways of living and thickening stories that support those constructs of identity (White, 2007). Problems are seen as stories that can be re-authored as opposed to "truths" that make up one's core self. Some of the central tenets of narrative therapy include centring people as experts in their own lives, maintaining a stance of curiosity, seeing problems as outside of people, and listening for the absent but implicit (Morgan, 2000).

Narrative Therapy and Housing First

Narrative therapy and Housing First share common theoretical beliefs that uphold individuality and human rights. Housing First is an evidence-based intervention that offers immediate provision of permanent housing and wrap-around supports to individuals with persistent mental illness and other complicating co-morbidities who are experiencing homelessness. Housing First adheres to the principles of immediate access to housing with no readiness conditions, consumer choice and self-determination, a recovery orientation (including harm reduction), individually tailored supports, and community reintegration (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2020).

According to Tsemberis (2010), Housing First is rooted in the belief that "housing is a basic human right rather than something people with mental illness have to earn or prove they deserve by being in treatment" (p.18). This is in contrast to outdated approaches to homelessness in which people need to prove they are "housing ready." Housing First encourages individual choice in how supports are received and services are tailored to meet individual needs (Gaetz, Scott, & Gulliver, 2013). As such, it aligns with narrative practices that value self-determination and assert that no one is in a position to be an expert on someone else's life.

A literature review of narrative therapy and homelessness resulted in articles on narrative practices alongside youth and families living in homeless shelters (Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009; Hartman, Little, & Unger, 2008). A subsequent search of narrative therapy and Housing First literature yielded one article by Williams and Baumgartner (2014). The authors describe the implementation of narrative practices by the Rain City Assertive Community Treatment team in British Columbia as part of a demonstration project carried out by the Mental Health Commission of Canada. The article suggests narrative practices are a respectful and socially just approach to working with people who have experienced trauma in the context of homelessness, highlighting narrative therapy and Housing First as congruent models.

Narrative Therapy and Community Work

Recent literature on narrative therapy focuses on its application to community work[1], with narrative approaches being used creatively and increasingly in community contexts (Denborough, 2008b). In these contexts, the focus is less on traditional modes of therapy and more in line with therapeutic responses to collective experiences of hardship (White, 2003). This includes: a focus on linking lives in ways that promote positive identity claims; an emphasis on making people's skills and abilities more available to them; linking people's values, hopes, and dreams to history and culture; and seeking ways to share people's stories with audiences who are struggling with similar issues (Denborough, 2008a). According to White, collective narrative gatherings follow the three phases of definitional ceremonies and rely heavily on the influence of "audiences" (other community members) to generate resonance.

[1] For the purpose of this paper, community can be understood to include any groups or associations of people with shared experience. Groups can include those of geographical association or within other locales such as in-patient hospital settings or homeless shelters.

The basic tenets of community narrative practice include gathering information to create a collective document (the telling), finding an appropriate audience to share the document with (the retelling), then eliciting responses from the audience to the telling, and bringing those messages of resonance back to the initial community (the retelling of the retelling). The opportunity for individuals who have endured hardship to contribute to the alleviation or prevention of other's hardship is a very compelling aspect of community narrative practice (Denborough et al., 2006).

Narrative Practice with Indigenous Communities

According to the 2018 point-in-time homelessness count, 475 people experience homelessness on a given night in Saskatoon. Nearly 86% of those people self-identify as Indigenous and 70% of the total number of those homeless report experiencing violence, including women and children (SHIP, 2018). Métis author Jessie Thistle (2017) states that

> Indigenous homelessness is not defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews. These include: individuals, families and communities isolated from their relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages and identities (p. 6).

Michael White (2003) suggests that narrative practices have the potential to be highly complementary to Indigenous traditions of oral history. In some communities, Indigenous practitioners are evolving narrative practices to meet the specific needs of their community members. According to Akinyela (2002), the collective response and self-determined cultural action inherent to narrative work supports the decolonization of therapeutic practice. Indigenous author Barbara Wingard suggests that narrative therapy is about telling one's story in ways that make them stronger (Wingard, Johnson, & Drahm-Butler, 2015). Justin Butler (2017) expands on these ideas, indicating that narrative practice can counter dominant stories of addiction, poverty, and despair that Indigenous communities have been unfairly recruited into.

Narrative therapy can be drawn upon to thicken subordinate stories of cultural strength and ancestry. In doing so, narrative practices can decolonize dominant discourses that tell a single damaging story. Linking stories through people, place, and time makes stories of ancestry, language, family, and lore more available and helps individuals to become more aware that they are multi-storied (Butler, 2017). By acknowledging people's knowledge, skills, and values, narrative therapy positions people as experts of their own stories.

One component of Indigenous narrative practice that adds significant depth to the definitional ceremony format of narrative therapy is the specific integration of questions with regard to ancestral cultural knowledges. Butler (2017) offers the following line of inquiry;

> What do you think it means to your ancestors that you've carried on this connection to them? If they could say something about this what would it be? In the face of assimilation and residential schools you have managed to keep these cultural connections, what do you think this would mean to your ancestors? What would it mean to them for you to acknowledge your Indigenous identity today? How might your responses to these questions help shape your direction into the future? What does thinking about your grandmother/father and their feelings make possible for you? (p. 24).

As a consequence of assimilation, huge swaths of Indigenous values have not been able to be passed down. However, in the face of enormous adversity, many Indigenous people have carried values, traditions, and knowledges with them. Narrative practice can help draw out subordinate stories of cultural resonance and find ways to help people thicken and richly describe them. Questions such as those listed above highlight subordinate cultural stories and make them more visible and relevant. They can be considered a counterplot to the inter-generational impacts and consequences of assimilation by highlighting the ways in which young people are carrying forth cultural values in meaningful ways.

Conversations that Highlight Land, Identity, and Sense of Place

Many people (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) experiencing homelessness in Saskatoon have moved from rural areas, the far north, and various First Nations across the prairies. These experiences prompted me to look more closely at constructs of "place" in narrative therapy (Trudinger, 2006).

Author Mark Trudinger (2006) asks, "What is the place of 'place' in Narrative Therapy?" (p. 11). His question points to a gap in the exploration of person-in-place in narrative therapy. Trudinger suggests that references to *place* in narrative therapy are most often metaphorical and don't explore how land itself can evoke resonance. Yet landscapes are the backdrop to the stories of our lives, containing thousands of years of collective stories linking people with place through time.

Indigenous narrative practices (Butler, 2017) can help highlight the relationship of land to identity. Anthropologist Keith Basso (1996) writes, "When places are actively sensed, the physical landscape becomes wedded to the landscape of the mind, to the roving imagination, and where the latter may lead is anybody's guess" (p.107). For many Indigenous people who have come to urban centres from other geographic locales, being in the city comes with a loss of connection to "place." Highlighting the relationship between people, place, and the names of places can be highly effective in centering people's values. In this way, revisiting the lost territories of one's life, a metaphor used often in narrative therapy, takes on a much more pragmatic meaning. It implies the revisiting of "self" through actual accounts of place.

Methodology

Context

The criteria for selecting the participants in the narrative practice was as follows: any individual who had experienced chronic homelessness and was now housed and who was actively working with a Housing First program. I want to emphasize a key distinction here that participants in this practice project were not actively homeless. The reason for this falls in line with the notion that without safe and adequate housing, people are merely surviving. According to Iain De Jong, the first piece of work that service providers should set their sights on when working with a person who is homeless is to help them procure housing (De Jong, 2019). Hence the term Housing First. The model I propose here is not designed to work with people who are actively homeless nor is it intended to be a stand-alone model for working with people in shelters. The model I present in this paper is specifically designed to build on and therapeutically optimize the vantage point of becoming housed. If housing is first, this practice project represents what might come second. It is intended to complement and advance the work of already established Housing First teams that are practising with a high degree of fidelity to the model.

Inviting Participants to Join

An explanation of my fieldwork practice project was provided to case management staff at two organizations: Saskatoon Crisis Intervention Service and Lighthouse Supported Living. Staff were asked to identify potential candidates on their caseloads who might be interested in participating. Those who were interested were asked if it would be okay if I followed up with them by phone to discuss in more detail. Follow-up calls were made to the participants to introduce myself and explain the fieldwork in more detail. If the participant decided they wanted to be involved in the fieldwork, arrangements were made to proceed. Due to the limitations and time constraints involved in doing this practice project as part of my graduate work, the participant sample of four (plus additional outsider witnesses) was more than adequate.

Developing the Interview Guide

The interview questions drew heavily on concepts of community narrative practice (Denborough, 2008b; White, 2005, 2007) as I felt it was critical that the interview guide be culturally responsive to Indigenous experiences of homelessness. I also wanted to include a focus on relating to land/place as so many of the people experiencing homelessness in Saskatoon were not originally from this community. I wanted to ensure that questions in the interview guide would prompt people to think about their "responses" to hardship (Yuen, 2009) and not be re-traumatized by them. Narrative practice upholds that people are always responding to hardship, often in ways that are not visible. For example, the experience of despair would suggest that one has a sense of how one wants to be in the world that is not being fulfilled (Freedman & Combs, 2012). White (2004) suggests that people who have suffered the consequences of recurring trauma often lose the sense

of who they are. The aim then is to help them to reacquaint themselves with a sense of purpose, personhood, and what it is they treasure in life (White, 2004). These concepts informed the development of the interview guide with the intention of being culturally responsive, trauma informed, and in the spirit of reconciliation.

Findings

The Interviews (The Tellings)

This section provides excerpts from the participant interviews conducted over the course of six weeks. The names of those interviewed have been changed to protect their identity. The participants had experienced homelessness for an average of seven years prior to their current housing situation. Participant housing type included private market rental housing as well as supported harm-reduction housing. Participants presented with a range of serious mental illness and active substance dependence. All participants were supported by intensive team-based housing and clinical support services. The excerpts have been organized into themes centred on identity reclamation and categorized below according to the theoretical concepts discussed in the previous sections of this paper.

Tellings That Thicken the Strong Story

This section highlights what can be referred to as subordinate "storylines" in the participant interviews. Subordinate stories in narrative therapy refers to stories of hope and strength that are sometimes overshadowed by dominant stories of pain and despair (Morgan, 2000). A key practice of narrative therapy is to help make these subordinate stories of resilience more visible and accessible. This helps people to reacquaint themselves with a sense of who they are and what they stand for. This does not suggest that we minimize the experience of someone's pain. Rather, narrative therapists look for ways in which people have responded to adversity. Once these themes of preferred identity have been acknowledged, they can be expanded upon and described in greater detail. Narrative therapy refers to this process as "thickening" subordinate stories (White, 2007). Indigenous narrative therapy contextualizes this concept as "leading with the strong story" (Wingard et al, 2015). During this practice project I was continually mining for glimpses of resiliency in the stories of pain and hardship I was hearing. In addition to asking people, "How do you hurt?", we can also ask, "In what ways have you resisted?". Questions geared towards people's "hard-won knowledges" help people see that they have valuable insider knowledge that can be shared with others who may be experiencing similar hardship. This can promote a sense of personal agency. These concepts are highlighted in the excerpts below.

Louise[2]: *I think about lots of things to help me. My three children, they have given me grandchildren. I have their pictures on my walls, but I'm not able to be there with them right now. My mother taught me how to cook and clean, and I later got a job as a caretaker. I'm a caretaker of people too. My mother would say, "That's how you show your love, with a smile and a hug" If my mother was here I'd tell her that she was not done teaching me. If she could see how hard I'm trying, she would have a smile on her face. She would be proud of me, but she would tell me I could do better (laughing). We used to wash dishes in a white basin, me and my Mum. I remember my auntie too; I would sit on her kitchen floor and she would comb my long curly hair. I would pull all her cupboards out just sitting there on the floor rearranging the dishes in her cupboards (laughing)…I raised my kids in the same way as my Mum taught me. To be kind to other people. Just don't hate someone. I care about everybody. I learned these things from my Mum.*

In this excerpt we hear the linking of Louise's life to her mother's. Through our conversations together, Louise spoke often of her mother and it was evident that she wanted to live in ways that honoured her. Louise would experience intense emotions during these conversations but afterwards she would reflect on how good it felt to revisit those feelings. Having these conversations seemed to solidify for her that her life had meaning and purpose.

Linking Storylines of Ancestry

Narrative practices can help people to re-author their stories in ways that make them stronger by elevating personal, familial, and ancestral stories in ways that invite and promote strength (Wingard et al., 2015). The linking of lives through shared experience and purpose can also support connectivity in those who may feel isolated. According to Butler (2017), narrative practices can help decolonize identity stories by encouraging people to tell their stories through their own lens.

Naomi: *If my ancestors could see me today it would make them very honoured, and that's another part too, they would see that we still need our Elders, for them to be honoured in those ways. They would tell me to keep on going, going with what I believe in; it is a good way, my ancestors could be telling me things and I just need to listen. I needed to learn that it is okay to trust, I was taught it wasn't okay to trust the white man, but I learned to trust my supports, those people who are going to help me and not be resentful. I'm done with fighting, I'm going to let someone in now. I was busy just surviving and how not to feel hurt. I have a good support system now, I need to remember good things. My granny would be really proud of me; she made me a fancy dress, a shawl dress for dancing; she protected me. I wonder what she was trying to tell me when she gave me that dress. I learned how*

[2] Pseudonyms have been used in all cases.

to do the Crow Hop. The ancestry part is very important; it helps fill in the gaps in my life that are missing. Even in homelessness there are important messages that people can share, they have a lot of valuable information. All these people that helped me along the way, I want to meet them one day and honour them; their teachings, they are my coping mechanisms.

Carl: *An Elder asked me to be his doorman, he taught me how to use the pipe. I chopped wood for the sweat. I learned how to pick the different kind of rocks for the different uses in ceremony. You don't use white rocks because they explode if you put them in the fire. He also taught me about direction, colours, and to bring tobacco and they'll pray for you. If my ancestors would see me today, it would be an honour because they would see me in a better place. They would say, they see me in a better way, that's a good thing and to keep it up – not homeless. Keep it up so that other people who need help in life could see that. They would see I'm doing good and my artwork and culture is helping me with my dignity and leadership of myself.*

What stands out in these excerpts is the acknowledgement of their ancestors. Butler (2017) speaks about the linking of lives from the past into the present and future as being a powerful recognition of collective identity. We can hear this concept lived out in the words of the authors above who, in the face of extraordinary hardship, find perseverance and hope in knowing that their ancestors would be proud of them. Practising in this way allows us to create the perception of an audience of ancestors in the absence of an available one.

Conversations that Highlight Land, Identity, and Sense of Place

"Places are as much a part of us as we are a part of them" - Keith Basso (1996, p. xiv).

It was critical that I listen for and draw attention to people's references and relationships to place and land throughout this project. All four of the participants who provided narratives in this practice project are from places other than Saskatoon. Service providers can become too narrowly focused on the assessment and treatment of mental health and addictions issues when first meeting with clients. This can lead to seeing people as a diagnosis and the pathologizing of problems. Creating space for conversations outside of problem areas invites a playfulness to the work and can often result in more robust, three-dimensional depictions of the people we are working with. Conversations rooted in place and land unveil intricate layers of people's lives that otherwise would not have become known. This contributes to *thicker* descriptions of people by refuting single-storied versions of people as "homeless" or "schizophrenic." Through people's stories of person-in-place, we learn that they are from somewhere; they have family and lineage and their lives have been shaped by the places they've lived. This can be very effective in helping practitioners avoid falling into a trap of labelling people according to diagnostic criteria or other

pathology-based classifications. The following excerpts highlight examples of land- and place-based conversations with participants that contribute to identity reclamation.

Louise: *I grew up in Brightsand, Saskatchewan. I have good memories of going up the Brightsand Lake road with my cousins. We'd have to do the chores on the farm, shoveling the pig pen, feeding the animals, and cutting the wood. We'd get our trees from the bushes about 2 miles away from the homestead. When I was bigger I would take kindling to the house; it was a long walk from the cutter to the house. I loved the farm. I'm proud of that life, the farm life; I really enjoyed living that way.*
My dad taught me how to trap. He'd take me on the skidoo; he'd show me how to clasp the wiring, you know, so that the beaver would go through the entrance to its lodge, and you'd get them that way. I'm proud of that; he taught me that, how to trap, mostly beaver. The first time he got me to learn how to do the pelt was on a baby beaver. I put 24 holes in it, but I still made money on it.

Naomi: *I grew up on James Smith, my granny raised me; she raised a lot of her grandchildren. There is a river that goes by there; it's deep. Those are cultural grounds; we used to go camping in the woods, in the pines there the whole summer long. My granny loved doing it; that's how she dealt with us kids. My granny taught us about values; she taught us well about trapping lynx, fox, wolves. We were taught the hard way, always doing chores, hunting and picking blueberries and cranberries to survive. We would always run out of food near the end of the month so we needed to learn these things to survive.*

These excerpts are significant because they stand in stark contrast to perceptions or images commonly associated with homelessness. These accounts are rich with imagery that convey a sense of intimacy and sacredness within the settings they describe. This serves as a form of resistance, a counterplot to otherwise negative or thin descriptions of people who have experienced homelessness.

The Responses (The Retellings)

Guided by narrative lines of inquiry, the narrative process involved inviting an 'outsider' audience to respond to the stories. The outsider audience was asked to pay particular attention to any personal resonance they had with the story. Outsider audiences were people who are in the process of overcoming similar life challenges to listen to these stories as an outsider audience. When appropriate, professionals working in the field were also recruited as outsider witnesses.

In the following section the responses are categorized to coincide with the lines of inquiry that guided the outsider witness interviews – referred to as the retellings. The excerpts below

demonstrate a range of shared experience through themes of culture, ancestry, empathy, inspiration, and hope. The responses were gathered and then read aloud to the original participants in a private setting of the participant's choice. The responses from those with lived experience of homelessness were particularly powerful in conveying a sense of mutuality and a shared yearning for justice. The concept of "transport" (White, 2007) as discussed earlier in this paper is also highlighted in some of the narratives below.

Excerpts from Outsider Witness Responses to Carl

Expressions of Personal Resonance.

Just the way he turned his life around, that really resonated with me, he got that chance from someone to know his culture, that moment…when he said art allowed him to connect with his family, I just really understood what he was saying. When I heard this man's story, I visualized sweat rocks and the four directions; there are certain kinds of rocks you use for doctoring sweats, some use 16 rocks, some use 27. I just pictured doing the oskapawis (helper) work myself; it's hard work, you have to think good thoughts for each rock used, you have to think about that person and pray. Something that sounds so minimal, just taught me so much. And the colours, in Cree they call it wapanahism – cloth, it represents the colours.

I heard so much of my own life and my childhood in this person's story. My mother and father were into drugs and alcohol. When I was 5 years old, my father was sent to prison and I didn't see him again until I was 12. My mother was heavy into alcohol - I was put into foster care, I started living on the street.

Excerpts from Outsider Witness Responses to Naomi

Reverberations that Link Ancestry and Culture

That woman, she deals with her culture; she's Plains Cree, that's what I am too. I understand and talk my language. English is my second language, when I talk to my sister my tongue is faster in my own language – Cree.

I struggle with addiction too. I was mad at the Creator for a lot of years. I drank every day for a long time when my mother died. I was homeless when my mother died; it was really hard for me and my family; they couldn't take my psychosis and my schizophrenia – they just couldn't handle me, they didn't understand what was happening. I'm trying really hard now and I don't use alcohol as an escape anymore because I'm not mad at the Creator anymore. When I heard this story I thought about my own life. In June I'm going to the Sundance. I'm going to put a flag down, I'll ask the medicine man to pray for me so I don't end up in the psych ward. If I'm with my culture, I stay sober; it's hard being an alcoholic, but I stay sober for my family. I smudge every morning and I pray to the Creator; that's how my Dad brought us up – early in the morning – pray with the sweetgrass. He'd ask the Creator for help and guidance; that's how I want to be too.

Expressions that Convey Transport. Michael White uses the term "transport*"* to describe the experience of being moved on an emotional level, having been witness to another's experience (2007).

> *I feel good after hearing this woman's story. Hearing about how she was brought up, hunting and the pow wow. Hearing about the dress her grandmother made, her regalia; it makes me feel like I'm not lost.*
>
> *I grew up in the north and lived with hunting, trapping, and berry-picking as a child. When I read this I thought, Yes! I did this too, when she was referring to using her imagination with the birds and clouds. I have done this countless times as a child. I found the strong connection to the land very important and found it moving how healing the ceremonies and spiritual connections had been for her.*

Excerpts from Outsider Witness Responses to Louise

Expressions of Personal Resonance.

> *What stands out for me in the woman from Brightsand's account is the immense love that I experienced through her words; of her account of the love her mother had for her children and the pride in living the values for kindness and loving in her family. Her words, If my mother was here I'd tell her that she was not done teaching me, really drew me in. I found myself reflecting on how true this is for me too.*
>
> *My mother was also kind, like I imagine the woman from Brightsand's mother to be – loving and kind with her eye always on the ball of "creating good human beings". I found myself reflecting on my mother's passing in 2013 and how incredibly loving and intimate it was. How my sisters and I were huddled around and on her bed trying to have every ounce of connection we could get before she left this world. There was a completeness in this recollection. A contented completeness. A perfect glimpse into a fully lived moment. Like the woman from Brightsand's recollections of times with her Mum and her Auntie doing dishes, having her hair combed, cleaning out cupboards. Women's intimate connections.*

The Use of Narrative Certificates

One creative and compelling tenet of narrative practice is the use of therapeutic awards and certificates. Certificates of achievement can be used as a mechanism to highlight times in which people have acted in defiance of problems to externalize people's sense of themselves as outside of problems and as a means to sustain and draw attention to therapeutic gains. Narrative certificates of achievement were completed and provided to each participant at the conclusion of this practice project.

The acknowledgments on the certificates were derived from the participants' own thoughts, words, and ideas collected during the project. The intention was to tangibly recognize the efforts being made by the participants to address the problems facing them. Awards or certificates are an effective way to promote personal agency because they are a universal symbol of achievement. People do not need to have completely overcome the issue; even very small gestures towards preferred relationships with problems can be recognized. For this reason, narrative certificates fit well with principles of harm reduction and meeting people where they are at. The certificates were well received by the participants.

Conclusion

This paper describes the innovative use of narrative practices to help people in the process of overcoming homelessness tell their stories in ways that make them stronger. Narrative practices were drawn upon throughout this practice experience to facilitate safe and supportive conversations that would otherwise not have been possible.

Participants overcoming homelessness richly described their knowledge, skills, and abilities in getting through difficult times. This was effective in helping people to reacquaint themselves with a sense of purpose in life. The linking of people's voices through the sharing of de-identified narrative documents resulted in the creation of an audience. These audiences gave greater authentication and acknowledgement to people's hopes and dreams for the future. The linking of lives through shared purposes contributes to a collective voice that can amplify social issues and reverberate outward on a larger scale in the pursuit of social justice. Participants described the opportunity to contribute to the lives of others in this way as a powerful counterplot to despair.

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