

**COUNSELLING WITH ABORIGINAL STREET YOUTH:
AN ABORIGINALIZING NARRATIVE INQUIRY**

by

DANA MARGARET BRUNANSKI

B.A. (Honours), Simon Fraser University, 1997

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF**

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Counselling Psychology)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

August 2009

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ABSTRACT

Aboriginal youth are vastly over-represented in the Canadian street youth population. This increased risk of street involvement is one of the many social and health inequalities experienced by Aboriginal people in Canada, and reflects the legacy of colonization, intergenerational effects of residential schools, and contemporary inequities in social determinants of health. Given the challenging and often dangerous circumstances experienced by street youth, it is crucial that research address effective interventions, including counselling. The scant research suggests that despite experiencing problems that could be benefited by counselling, most Aboriginal street youth do not access counselling services. This resonates with the research on street youth in general. However, for Aboriginal youth, underutilization of counselling may also reflect a cultural incongruence between Western approaches to counselling and Aboriginal worldviews and experiences. The present study aimed to explore Aboriginal street youths' experiences with counselling, using an Aboriginalizing narrative research methodology. Beginning from the researcher's own location and a grounding in Aboriginal worldviews, this study explored Aboriginal street youths' narratives of counselling, contextualizing these narratives in their lives on the streets and the larger sociocultural narratives in which they live. In-depth interviews were conducted with 4 youth aged 18-24 who were transitioning off the street and had experiences with counselling. Holistic storying included multiple readings of the interviews from different perspectives, with the resulting 4 narratives consisting primarily of the youth's own words, linked with connecting comments informed by the multiple readings. The narratives were considered for potential lessons for counsellors and other clinicians. A key lesson was the importance of cultural connection for these youth: being disconnected from their Aboriginal culture played a role in their journeys to the street, and

cultural reconnection played a role in their healing and eventual exit from the street. Other key lessons include attending to the importance of the relationship and meeting youth where they are at. Given the lack of research on counselling with this marginalized youth population, this study is a starting point in understanding the experiences of street-involved Aboriginal youth with counsellors, and in creating more effective and culturally sensitive clinical interventions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	viii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Rationale.....	1
The Research Problem.....	3
Aboriginal People in Canada.....	3
Street Youth.....	5
Definitions.....	6
Demographics.....	7
Antecedents to street-involvement.....	8
Consequences of street-involvement.....	10
Pathways to, through, and off the street.....	12
Coping and resiliency.....	14
Research Purpose and Questions.....	14
CHAPTER TWO: THE LITERATURE REVIEW.....	15
Counselling with Aboriginal Street Youth.....	15
Counselling with Aboriginal Youth.....	17
Counselling with Street Youth.....	21
Service Utilization.....	21
Characteristics of Youth Accessing Services.....	22
Street Youth's Experience of Counselling and Other Services.....	24
Clinical Trials on Interventions with Street Youth.....	26
Summary of Literature on Counselling with Street Youth.....	27
The Therapeutic Relationship.....	27
Personal Characteristics of the Counsellor.....	27
Service Delivery Approaches.....	28
Implications for Counselling with Aboriginal Street Youth.....	29
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY.....	31
Rationale for Methodology.....	31
Overview of Methodology.....	32
Epistemologies.....	32

Aboriginal Epistemologies.....	32
Narrative Epistemologies.....	33
Resonances Between Aboriginal and Narrative Epistemologies.....	34
Narrative Research.....	35
Aboriginalizing Narrative Research.....	36
Beginning with my Location.....	36
Importance of Process: Doing Things “In a Good Way”.....	38
Grounding my Analysis in Aboriginal Worldviews.....	41
Procedures.....	42
Sample.....	42
Recruitment.....	43
Data Collection.....	44
Youth Interviews.....	44
Journal.....	45
Data Analysis.....	45
Transcription.....	45
“Immersion in Aboriginal Worldviews”: Decolonizing my Mind.....	45
Storying.....	46
Sharing my Lessons.....	49
Ethical Issues: “Doing Things in a Good Way”.....	49
Avoiding Exploitation of Vulnerable Groups.....	50
Informed Consent.....	50
Avoiding Harm.....	51
Multiple Relationships.....	52
Confidentiality and Anonymity.....	53
Considerations for Research with Aboriginal Peoples.....	53
Criteria for Trustworthiness.....	55
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS.....	58
My Research Journey.....	58
A Long Road from Conception to Completion.....	58
Journeys in Aboriginalizing Methodologies.....	61
The Youth’s Stories.....	68
Casper.....	68
Courtney.....	98
Maxine.....	135

Rose.....	159
My Story: Lessons for Counselling Practice	183
Context of Their Lives	183
Personal Resilience	183
Cultural Disconnection	184
Troubled Childhoods	185
Life on the Street.....	186
Referral to Counselling.....	187
Engagement.....	188
Culture and Engagement.....	188
The Importance of the Therapeutic Relationship.....	192
Genuine caring.....	193
Really listening.	194
Confidentiality.	195
Self-disclosure.....	195
Being unshockable.....	196
Taking their ‘shit.’	198
Meeting Youth Where They Are At	199
Outreach.....	199
Empowerment.....	201
Letting youth share and process at their own pace.	202
Being chill.....	203
Going outside the counselling role.	204
Healing Elements in Counselling.....	208
Culture as Healing.....	208
Healing and Learning Through the Relationship.....	209
Venting and Emotional Expression	210
Becoming More Directive.....	210
Promoting Self-awareness and Self-understanding	212
Resourcing	214
Brief Interventions	214
Termination.....	215
Service Delivery Contexts	217
Youth Workers as Counsellors	217
Importance of Consistency	218

Counsellors’ Reputation Among Street Youth	219
Counsellor Self-care.....	219
The Future.....	220
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	222
Addressing Aboriginality in Counselling.....	223
The Importance of the Therapeutic Relationship.....	226
Meeting Youth Where They Are At	228
Suggestions for Future Research	230
Concluding Thoughts.....	232
REFERENCES	234
APPENDICES	247
Appendix A: Recruitment Poster	247
Appendix B: Youth Information Sheet.....	248
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form	249
Appendix D: Interview Protocol.....	253
Appendix E: Ethics Certificate	254
Appendix F: Counsellors’ Engagement Status	255

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis reflects a long journey and there are many people who have contributed to shaping my path and destination. I want to especially thank my participants for their courage and eloquence in sharing their stories of their lives on the streets and their experiences with counsellors. Without them there would be no thesis. I also want to thank the many Aboriginal street youth I have had the privilege to work with since 1997, including my current clients. They taught me nearly everything I know about how to work with them and how to help them. They also inspired me to do this research, to try to bring Aboriginal street youth's voices into the academic conversations about them. This commitment to empowering youth voice was also fueled by my many professional colleagues who have supported and guided me over the years, especially Kathy Snowden and the staff at Odyssey II Substance Abuse Services for Youth and Families. I want to thank them, as well as many colleagues from different agencies with whom I have crossed paths and shared youth over the past 12 years. I hope they find this thesis both validating and illuminating.

Once coming to the academy, my work was influenced by numerous professors and students. I want to thank especially my committee: Dr. Rod McCormick, Dr. Elizabeth Saewyc, and Dr. Marla Buchanan. I was supported beyond my expectations, and want to thank them for creating the space for me to produce a thesis that I am proud of. I also want to thank the students, staff, and faculty involved in indigenous health research through NEAR (Network Environments for Aboriginal Health Research) and the UBC House of Learning, including Dr. Peter Cole and Dr. Joseph Gone, who were my teachers in the 2007 Summer Institute on Indigeneity, and Alannah Young, who supported me in exploring my own indigenous identity. I

also want to thank my fellow students in the Counselling Psychology department, especially Robb, Billy, and the women of SWIC.

My research was supported by numerous organizations. I want to thank the agencies that helped with recruitment of participants for my research, including Urban Native Youth Association, Directions Youth Services Centre, Broadway Youth Resource Centre, Watari Youth Community and Family Service, the Federation of British Columbia Youth in Care Networks, and Covenant House Vancouver. I want to thank the organizations that provided me with financial support for my studies over the past 4 years: Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Network Environments for Aboriginal Health Research (Canadian Institute for Health Research), West Coast Energy, Stigma and Resiliency Among Vulnerable Youth Consortium, and The University of British Columbia, Faculty of Education, Office of Graduate Programs and Research, and Faculty of Graduate Studies. I would also like to thank Vancouver Coastal Health for hiring me into a position which allows me to enact the lessons from my thesis, and for supporting me in completing my thesis while working full-time.

I want to thank my family and friends for believing in me and supporting me through this process. I am lucky to have all of my immediate family living in Vancouver, and they have endured a lot as I struggled through this process. Friends can be chosen family, and I especially want to thank my good friends Sean and Kerry for their love as well as technical support above and beyond the call of duty. Finally, I want to thank my dancing girls and my dancing boys, especially Alex, for providing much needed fun, laughter, inspiration, and stress relief through my research process.

I dedicate this thesis to indigenous youth everywhere, whose resilience and hope continually inspire me, and who I know will be among the future leaders in our community and the world.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Rationale

Like all research, the story of this research begins with the researcher's story. In order to understand why a particular researcher thinks it is important to invest time and energy into a particular research project at a particular time, and how they choose to frame and study that question, one has to understand "who they are and where they are from" and the journey that brought them to this place. As Aboriginal¹ researchers Kathy Absolon and Cam Willett (2004) state: "identifying, at the outset, the location from which the voice of the researcher emanates is an Aboriginal way of ensuring that those who study, write, and participate in knowledge creation are accountable for their own positionality" (p. 97). My journey to a Master's thesis focused on Aboriginal street youth begins with my own experience growing up in North America the late 20th century as eldest of three daughters in "white" middle-class family in a large Canadian city, as an ethnic hybrid, with Métis, Czech, Hungarian, British and Danish ancestors. The journey continued through being: an acting-out teenager deciding after an encounter with counselling that she wanted to help other kids like herself; an undergraduate psychology student becoming politicized through women's studies, feminism, and anti-oppression politics; a young woman coming out as bisexual and negotiating another hybrid identity; a street youth worker on Vancouver's downtown eastside realizing that much of what she learned in university was largely irrelevant for making the difference she wanted to make; an addiction counsellor in a grassroots community agency attempting to "meet youth where they are at" and learning from them how to be a "good counsellor"; and a woman engaged in personal growth and self-awareness, including explorations of her Aboriginality. I brought these experiences to my Master's program and eventually focused my research on counselling with Aboriginal street

¹ Aboriginal is intended to refer to all indigenous people of North America, including First Nations, Métis, Inuit, American Indian, and Alaska Native.

youth. Many Aboriginal youth have been my teachers in this journey, and I am continually inspired by their strength, resilience, and resistance. This inspiration fires my commitment to engage in research that makes a difference for Aboriginal street youth, by providing a forum to them to tell their stories of counselling and listening carefully in these stories for lessons for counsellors.

The United Nations estimates that there are ten million street youth across the globe. Most of the world's street youth live in developing countries where poverty, war, HIV/AIDS, and other large scale social issues put many people, including children and youth, at risk of homelessness and street-involvement. But there are also youth living on the streets of the richest nations in the world, including Canada, where there is an estimated 150,000 homeless youth (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). Indigenous youth make up a large proportion of the world's street youth; likewise, Aboriginal youth are vastly overrepresented in the Canadian street youth population. A recent survey of 762 street-involved youth in British Columbia found that Aboriginal youth made up 54% of street youth (Smith et al., 2007; 67% in Vancouver), and that this is an increase from 37% in a similar study undertaken in 2000 (McCreary Centre Society [MCS], 2001). Similarly but less spectacularly, a large-scale Canadian epidemiological study in seven urban centres found an increase in the proportion of Aboriginal street youth from 28% in 1999 to 36% in 2003 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). In contrast, only 9% percent of all public school students in British Columbia identify as Aboriginal (Ministry of Education, 2005). This increased risk of street involvement is one of the many social and health inequalities experienced by Aboriginal people in Canada (and indigenous peoples around the world), and reflects the legacy of colonization, intergenerational effects of residential schools, and contemporary inequities in social determinants of health. Given the challenging and often

dangerous circumstances experienced by street youth, it is crucial that research address effective interventions, including counselling.

There is very little research specifically focused on Aboriginal street youth, and none that I could find specifically on counselling interventions. One author in an unpublished doctoral dissertation commented on the “remarkable void in research on issues specific to Aboriginal street youth” (Gilchrist, 1995, p. 13), and this seems not to have improved much in the past nearly 15 years. The enormity of this gap made it very difficult for me to narrow my research question to one that was manageable for a Master’s thesis. Given that there is no research on counselling with Aboriginal street youth, I chose to begin with the voices of the youth themselves, with their stories about experiences with counselling, using an Aboriginalizing narrative methodology.

The Research Problem

Aboriginal People in Canada

There is such a diversity among Aboriginal people that lumping them “together under generic terms like ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘indigenous’ [is] profoundly misleading” (Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait, 2000, p. 607). In Canada, there are almost 600 bands speaking 58 dialects of 11 distinct language groups (Kirmayer et al., 2000). A universal “Aboriginal culture” does not exist, although some authors argue that certain themes cut across Aboriginal cultures, such as “sharing, cooperation, being, the group and extended family, noninterference, harmony with nature, a time orientation toward living in the present, preferences for explanation of natural phenomena according to the supernatural, and a deep respect for elders” (Garrett & Garrett, 1994, p. 2). In addition to the diversity of Aboriginal cultures, there are also many different experiences of cultural and community connectedness. Some Aboriginal people in Canada live on reserves, but many live off-reserve, and almost half live in urban centres (Statistics Canada, 2001). Many are

second- or third-generation urban dwellers. Many have mixed blood, with ancestry from various Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures. There are many different experiences of being Aboriginal in Canada; however, most research focuses on reserve-based Aboriginals (Young, 2003). Aboriginal people also vary in their level of acculturation, that is, how connected they are to their Aboriginal culture, pan-Aboriginal cultures, and mainstream Canadian culture (Garrett & Pinchette, 2000), and cultural disconnection is a widespread legacy of colonial practices that systematically attempted to destroy Aboriginal culture.

This legacy of colonization is one common factor that Aboriginal people share. Starting with the first contact with Europeans in the 16th century, Aboriginal people have experienced cultural genocide. A few examples include decimation by infectious disease and warfare resulting in a population reduction of an estimated 90% since first contact, the outlawing and active suppression of Aboriginal language and cultural traditions, settler occupation of traditional Aboriginal land and the eventual relegation of Aboriginal people to reserves, and the removal of Aboriginal children from their homes to government-mandated church-run residential schools where they were stripped of their culture and often subjected to emotional, physical and sexual abuse (Kirmayer et al., 2000; Waldram, Herring & Young, 1995). This genocide is not just historical – it continues with discrimination and institutionalized oppression of Aboriginal people in contemporary Canadian society (Waller et al., 2003). This has resulted in problems such as widespread poverty, low educational achievement, high unemployment, prevalent family dysfunction and child abuse, high rates of substance abuse, suicide rates 3-6 times the national average, and incarceration rates over five times the national average (Kirmayer, Simpson, & Cargo, 2003). Aboriginal people also suffer from health problems such diabetes, tuberculosis, and heart disease at much higher rates than other Canadians (Kirmayer et al., 2003), and have a life expectancy almost 7 years shorter than Canadians in general (Treasury Board of Canada

Secretariat, 2005). Prevalent homelessness is another legacy of colonization, and is reflected in the overrepresentation of Aboriginals among the homeless, including homeless youth. However, it is important to remember that Aboriginal people have resisted colonization from the beginning, and continue to resist. Given the systematic cultural genocide that has been enacted in this country, it is a testament to the strength of Aboriginal cultures and communities that they/we continue to survive and thrive. While the problems that exist today cannot be denied, it is important to remember this strength and resilience.

Street Youth

There is a growing body of research on street youth, focusing primarily on describing characteristics of street youth, antecedents to becoming street-involved, and consequences of street life. There is also a growing body of literature looking at pathways on, through, and off the street, and at resiliency and coping among street youth. However, it is difficult to determine how this research applies to Aboriginal street youth. Most of the literature on street youth does not include race/ethnicity in its analysis, and most studies do not include many Aboriginal youth in their samples². As was stated in the introduction, there was very little research I could find that focused specifically on Aboriginal street youth. The two studies that were most relevant were a critical ethnography on the experiences of Aboriginal street youth (Gilchrist, 1995) and a community-based population health survey looking at Aboriginal street youth's health (Saewyc et al., 2008). The critical ethnography was intended to explore Aboriginal street youth's entry to the street, survival strategies, service utilization, and recommendations for services and service delivery, and to contextualize their experience "within the colonial structural environment" (Gilchrist, 1995, p. 33). Gilchrist (1995) concluded that "Aboriginal street youth run to the

² This may reflect the fact that most research on street youth is conducted in the U.S.A., where Aboriginal youth seem to be a much smaller proportion of the total street youth population, with large scale studies finding 3-14% Aboriginal youth among U.S. street youth populations (Cauce, 2000; Johnson, Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2005; Robert, Pauze, & Fournier, 2005).

streets for many of the same reasons as any other street youth, and once they get there their methods of survival are also somewhat the same as those of many runaways. Their cultural backgrounds, history, and structural conditions at point of origin are, however, different from non-Aboriginal street youth” (p. ii). The community-based population health survey examined on life experiences, risk and protective factors, and health issues among marginalized and street-involved Aboriginal youth in British Columbia, and contextualized the findings through a series of community discussions. Similar to Gilchrist, Saewyc and colleagues (2008) found that the experiences, risk and protective factors, and health issues of Aboriginal street youth are not that different than that of non-Aboriginal youth, however, understanding this experience requires understanding the history and context of Aboriginal peoples, including the legacy of colonization.

Definitions.

Definitions of street youth vary across researchers, from restricting samples to youth who are sleeping outside or in shelters to including youth who live at home but participate frequently in street life. Researchers often use the term “runaway youth” or “homeless youth,” sometimes interchangeably with “street youth.” When I refer to street youth, I mean youth who are homeless, in shelters, “couch-surfing,” or otherwise precariously housed, and/or who have significant involvement in the culture and economy of street life. These youth range from “curb kids” who hang out on the street to homeless youth who are entrenched in street life. Similarly, Saewyc and colleagues (2008) surveyed “young people who are involved in a street lifestyle,” (p. 10) and Baron (2003) defined street youth as “youth who have run away or been expelled from their homes and/or spend some or all of their time in various public places” (p. 22). Other research studies cited in this literature review have used definitions ranging from “no place of shelter and is in need of services and shelter where he or she can receive supervision and care”

(Slesnick et al., 2007, p. 1240), “no stable residence, had no viable home to return to, and were not physically in the custody of the state” (Cauce & Morgan, 1994, p. 32), and “spent at least two consecutive nights away from home without parent’s or guardian’s permission if under age 17 or been told to leave home” (Solorio et al., 2006, p. 383). The age of street youth (versus street adult) is also subject to different opinions. I believe that the movement from street youth to street adult is partially a matter of identification and lifestyle, but I would include people into their mid twenties. The agencies where I worked served youth up to age 24, and most street youth services in Vancouver serve up to age 21 or 24. The studies cited above included youth age 14-22 (Slesnick et al., 2007), 13-21 (Cauce & Morgan, 1994), and 12-20 (Solorio et al., 2006). These varying definitions, combined with difference sampling strategies, including shelter-based youth, youth recruited through drop-in centres and other street youth service, and youth recruited through natural “street” site, make it difficult to compare studies of street youth.

Demographics.

Demographic estimates vary depending on a number of issues including the definition of “street youth” in the study, the way the sample was recruited, and the characteristics of the larger local community. Most samples find slightly more male street youth, for example, 63% of the youth in the Canadian surveillance study were male, however, other studies have found a gender balance (e.g. Smith et al., 2007), and one researcher suggested that when both street and service sites are used for recruitment (reflecting a wider range of street youth than studies that recruit only through service sites), samples are more likely to find an equal number of boys and girls (Mervyn, 2006). Ethnic minority youth seem to be overrepresented as well, although in the U.S.A. most of the ethnic minority youth in the samples are Hispanic and African-American. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning youth also seem to be overrepresented, with only 76% of

British Columbia's male and 42% of female street youth stating they were 100% heterosexual (Smith et al., 2007), compared to 89% of males and 82% of female youth in school (MCS, 2004).

Antecedents to street-involvement.

The research paints a picture in which many or most street youth come from troubled childhoods, including neglect, physical abuse and sexual abuse (Cauce, 2000). The research describes individual risk factors for homelessness and street-involvement, such as family dysfunction, childhood trauma, living in government care, disconnection from school, discrimination (based on race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc), mental illness, and substance abuse, as well as community level risk factors such as high rates of poverty, substance abuse, unemployment, lack of recreation facilities, and gang violence. But the research is not available to determine whether and how these same risk factors for homelessness are operating for Aboriginal street youth. There is research on risk factors for other problem behaviours among Aboriginal youth, such as substance abuse, suicidality, violence, and health concerns, which suggests "a disparity between ethnic groups on dimensions of risk behaviors" (Thompson, Kost, & Pollio, 2003, p. 297).

Aboriginal youth are exposed to these risk factors for street involvement at a higher rate than non Aboriginal youth, which may begin to explain their overrepresentation on the street. This over-exposure to risk among Aboriginal youth can only be understood in the context of the legacy of colonization. An example of the relationship between a risk factor and the legacy of colonization is the risk factor of living in government care. One study found that homeless youth were twice as likely as a control group of youth with similar family problems to have been placed in "a substitute environment" (Robert, Pauze, & Fournier, 2005, p. 225). Aboriginal youth are taken into government care at a much higher rate than other youth. For example, 49% of the youth in the care of the Ministry and 42% of youth in custody with the Justice system are

Aboriginal (Government of British Columbia, 2006). As Gilchrist (1995) argues: “many alienating factors ... originate from mainstream care-giving institutions such as foster parents, adoptive parents, and detention centres (p. 228).

Community risk factors play a role in homelessness among youth, and I believe that these factors are significant for Aboriginal youth, given the legacy of colonization on Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal youth are more likely to grow up in communities struggling with problems including poverty, substance abuse, unemployment, and gang violence. In speaking about children and youth growing up in an American inner city, one author writes that these youth:

experienced a unique pattern of trauma exposure as a consequence of community violence, which was defined as *compounded community trauma*: multiple traumatic events both in the home and outside of the home (on the streets and at school) throughout development. ... Compared with other types of traumatic events, community violence creates an environment of constant danger, more similar to a war without an end (Horowitz, McKay & Marshall, 2005, p. 356).

Many Aboriginal youth are subjected to such compounded community trauma. For example, Aboriginal street youth in Winnipeg describe experiences growing up in the inner city, including widespread poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, violence, and lack of recreation facilities (Brown et al., 2005). Community risk factors have been associated with Aboriginal youth’s self-destructive and illegal behaviours (Clarke, 2002).

A risk factor not discussed in the literature of street youth that applies to Aboriginal street youth is cultural disconnection, that is, being disconnected from their Aboriginal culture. For example, several studies have examined the relationship between cultural disconnection and substance abuse among Aboriginal youth (Cameron, 1999; Hawkins, Cummins, & Marlatt, 2004; Kulis, Napoli, & Marsiglia, 2002; Oetting, 1993; Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, Washeinko, Walter, & Dyer, 1996). Strong identification with an Aboriginal culture has been found to be a

protective factor against substance abuse among Aboriginal youth (Kulis et al., 2002). As discussed below, Gilchrist (1995) sees cultural disconnection as central to the problems experienced by Aboriginal street youth. This resonates with my experience, although I have also met many Aboriginal street youth who are strongly connected to their Aboriginal culture, to urban Aboriginal communities, and to “where they are from.”

Consequences of street-involvement.

The realities of street life mean that for many youth “leaving a dysfunctional family situation [is] akin to going from the frying pan into the fire” (Cauce, 2000, p. 328). Many street youth are subjected to physical and sexual victimization on the street and through involvement with high risk subsistence activities such as sex work and drug trafficking (Baron, 2003; Stewart et al., 2004). Aboriginal youth may be more involved in these high risk activities with one study finding that they were more likely to be drug dealing (Thompson et al., 2003), and others reporting overrepresentation in the sex trade (Farley, Lynne, & Cotton, 1995; Save the Children Canada, 2000). Street youth are also more likely to suffer from a variety of physical and mental health concerns. What little research that exists on Aboriginal street youth suggests that they may be among the worst off of all street youth, with more suicide attempts (MCS, 2005), higher rates of drug abuse (Thompson et al., 2003), and much higher rates of Chlamydia (Shields et al., 2004) and HIV (Miller et al., 2006). However, Saewyc and colleagues (2008) reported few differences between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal street-involved youth in their survey.

Given that mental health and addictions are issues that counsellors normally deal with, an examination of the rates of mental health and addiction problems³ among street youth is relevant to framing this research problem. Research has found a highly increased risk of mental health disorders amongst street youth, reflected in one study’s finding that street youth were seventeen

³ Mental health issues and addictions issues have also been considered as risk factors for youth homelessness, although they may be a consequence of homelessness and/or a consequence of similar risk factors as homelessness.

times more likely to be diagnosed with a DSM disorder than non-street youth (Whitbeck, Johnson, Hoyt & Cauce, 2004). Street youth are also at greater risk of suicidality, with 36% of females and 18% of males in Vancouver reporting that they had attempted suicide in the past year, compared to 9% of females and 4% of males in school (MCS, 2001). Aboriginal street youth report similar rates of suicidality, with 30% of girls and 18% of males reporting a suicide attempt in the past year (Saewyc et al., 2008), compared to 12% of Aboriginal youth in school (MCS, 2005). Substance abuse is also widespread among street youth. In Vancouver, 79% of street youth report having used marijuana more than 100 times, 30% have injected a drug, and over half consider themselves to have an addiction problem (MCS, 2002). This is much higher than in the school-based sample, which found that 8% report that they have used marijuana more than 100 times in their lives and only 1% had ever injected an illegal drug (MCS, 2004). In the Midwest U.S.A., 60% of street youth in a large sample met lifetime criteria for substance abuse disorder and 48% met the criteria in the past 12 months (Johnson et al., 2005). For 85% of these youth, the substance misuse began concurrent or after first running away, which goes against the theory that the youth leave because they want to “party” (Johnson et al., 2005). Numerous studies have found that (non-street) Aboriginal youth are at higher risk of substance abuse than non-Aboriginal youth (Beauvais, Jumper-Thurman, Helm, Plested, & Burnside, 2004; Cameron, 1999; Plunkett & Mitchell, 2000), and one study found that Aboriginal youth runaways reported the highest proportion of drug use of all ethnic groups (Thompson et al., 2003). However, findings from a recent study suggest that Aboriginal street youth may have similar substance use rates as other street youth, and may actually be less likely to be using hard drugs (Saewyc et al., 2008).

Pathways to, through, and off the street.

Several researchers have considered pathways to, through, and off the street. In an interview-based study of 98 street youth and 42 service providers in three Canadian cities, Karabanow (2006) discussed his findings on “becoming a street kid” using the concept of street life as a “career.” He discusses pre-entry conditions including the common pathway of “running away from traumatic experiences” (Karabanow, 2006, p. 52), and the less common pathways of “running towards” (p. 52) the perceived freedom and excitement of street life (which is sometimes glorified in popular media such as hip-hop music videos). He presents a number of stages in a street life career, including contemplation, entering, building identity and disengagement / exiting. In the contemplation stage, the youth considers “running” to the street and may begin “testing” this plan by hanging out on the street and gaining (often inaccurate) information about street life and street services. In the “entering” stage, the youth has increasing exposure and acculturation to street culture, including development of a “street tribe,” increasing involvement in “deviant” activities such as substance abuse and crime and becoming familiar with the continuum of available services. However, “at the same time that youth exist on the street, they are also connected to other elements of mainstream culture. It is a grave misnomer to depict street youth culture as an isolated entity; instead it exists within ‘domains of complementarity’ amongst family, school, and service providers” (Karabanow, 2006, p. 61). In the “building identity” stage, youth develop an identity that creates meaning of their life on the street. Karabanow (2006) states that “the majority of youth on the street acknowledge their own involvement and agency in where they have ended up and in constructing new identities such as ‘homeless’, ‘punk’, or ‘gangster’” (p. 63). Furthermore, he states that street youth “seek out services that reinforce their constructed self-image” (Karabanow, 2006, p. 64). Finally, in the “disengagement / exiting” stage, the harsh realities of street life lead most youth to begin to

become disenchanted, and to consider and attempt to exit street life. This can lead to increasing use of services and connections with people from “mainstream culture” such as friends and family, and shifts from a primary identity as a “street youth.” He states that “disengagement, like engagement, deals with attitudes and perceptions” (p. 70).

Similarly, Auerswald and Eyre (2002) proposed a life cycle approach to youth homelessness. They proposed a series of stages including first on the street, initiation to the street, stasis, disequilibrium, extrication, and recidivism. They suggested that “a life cycle model suggests the steps required for extrication. To leave the street, a youth must reverse the process of initiation by finding a niche in the mainstream economy, achieving a mainstream identity, forming ties with healthy peers, and leading a less substance-dependent existence” (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002, p. 1509). They further suggested that “street youth who are most open to intervention are those who are in transitional states” (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002, p. 1497), that is, those in the stages “first on the street” and “disequilibrium.”

Exiting is a process that often involves cycles on and off the street, and street youth need lots of supports, from emergency shelters and transitional housing, to mental health and addiction treatment, to employment programs, education, and jobs. While street youth need many supports in addition to counselling, I think that counsellors do have an important role to play. Given their histories of trauma, mental health issues, low self-esteem, and other issues that counselling often deals with, it seems that street youth could benefit from counselling as one part of a continuum of services. As stated a recent report on street youth in Vancouver: “While youth highlighted shelter, food and employment as most needed in their community, the data provided also suggests many have unmet mental health needs, therefore a focus on the specialist mental health and emotional needs of this population is vital” (Smith et al., 2007, p. 48).

Coping and resiliency.

More recently, researchers have begun to focus on strengths and resiliency among street youth. While street youth certainly experience many problems both before and after becoming street-involved, they also show incredible strengths and resiliency. For example, Bender and colleagues (2007) explored the strengths of homeless street youth and found that youth discussed their strengths in terms of developing ‘street smarts,’ personal strengths, coping skills, and external resources. Likewise, Kidd and Davidson (2007) entitle their study of strength and resilience “You have to adapt because you have no other choice.”

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of my research was to contribute to the knowledge of “what works” in counselling with Aboriginal street youth. I wanted to create practice-informing knowledge that is grounded in a contextual understanding of lived experience of Aboriginal street youth. To this end, my research explored Aboriginal street youth’s experiences with counselling using an Aboriginalizing narrative methodology. My research was organized around four research questions: (1) What are the narratives that Aboriginal street youth construct about counselling? (2) How do these narratives fit into their larger life stories of being Aboriginal youth, becoming street-involved, negotiating life on the street, and attempting to exit the street? (3) How do these narratives reflect larger socio-cultural contexts and narratives, and how do the youth resist these narratives? (4) What can we learn from these narratives for counselling practice with Aboriginal street youth?

CHAPTER TWO: THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Counselling with Aboriginal Street Youth

There is very little research on the experiences of Aboriginal street youth, and no research I could find on counselling. Saewyc and colleagues (2008) found that despite experiencing issues that could potentially be helped by counselling, only 36% of marginalized and street-involved Aboriginal youth sought help from an addictions counsellor and 31% from a mental health worker. Furthermore, youth reported that these professionals were less helpful than youth workers and outreach workers. Eighty-two percent of youth reported finding youth workers and outreach workers helpful, compared to 58% for addictions counsellors and 45% for mental health workers. Regarding counselling, Gilchrist (1995) concluded that:

through insufficient resources and services, ignorance of their background, and non-recognition (in treatment and counselling) of their racial and cultural marginalization, Aboriginal street youth are rendered transparent. More specifically, they enter the doors of street services with enormous long-term problems related to cultural identity and community dislocation, trauma from racism and abuse, and the need for continuity in their lives, and then they leave in the same way. They have no opportunity to deal with the real issues in their lives – no one understands (p. 244).

This is a harsh assessment, and hopefully things have improved slightly over the almost 15 years that have passed since Gilchrist collected her data in the early 1990s, but I think that her conclusions still reflect the experience of many Aboriginal street youth.

However, there is an increasing acknowledgement of the importance of culture in counselling, as well as increasing public awareness about Aboriginal issues in Canada. Creating effective and culturally relevant services for Aboriginal youth is on the agenda of many social service agencies and levels of government. For example, the British Columbia Ministry of Child and Family Development has set up Regional Aboriginal Planning Committees that are seeking best practices for working for Aboriginal youth, including mental health counselling. Similarly,

the Ministry of Health is seeking best practices in addictions counselling and other health services for Aboriginal youth. There are more services for Aboriginal youth, and more of these services are being delivered by Aboriginal agencies. Hopefully this means that more youth are having the experience of being understood and being able to deal with the real issues in their life. Hopefully my conclusions will not be as harsh as Gilchrist's – or as those of Dr. Joseph Gone. He is an Aboriginal psychologist who taught a course entitled "therapy as colonization" in which he argued that psychotherapy *cannot* be made culturally relevant for Aboriginal people, due to irreconcilable differences between Western and Aboriginal worldviews, therefore as psychologists should focus our energy elsewhere (Gone, personal communication, July 2007, see also Gone, 2008). While I agree that counsellors and systems are not doing a very good job at serving Aboriginal street youth, I see many examples of counsellors and programs that I believe are making a difference, and I believe that counselling can be beneficial for Aboriginal street youth. While counselling does pose an "ideological danger of implicit Western cultural proselytization" (Gone, 2008, p. 310) and can ask people to "adjust to the unjust" (Hook, 2003) by suggesting individualistic solutions to social problems, ultimately I believe that it can also serve the agenda of resistance, since I believe that individual healing and community healing are inextricably intertwined.

Given the extreme paucity of research on my topic, I must extend my literature review to related bodies of literature, such as counselling with Aboriginal youth and counselling with street youth (both of which are extremely limited bodies of literature themselves). Most of the general research on street youth does not consider race or ethnicity in its analysis, and most of the research on Aboriginal youth does not consider the experience of street-involvement or homelessness. It is hard to know whether the research in either of these areas is applicable to Aboriginal street youth. As Gilchrist (1995) commented: "from all of these accounts one must

attempt to glean information that offers insight into the lives of Aboriginal youth who are living on the urban streets” (p. 26). Furthermore, much of the research suffers from Western ethnocentrism, since most academic researchers are not Aboriginal, and research on Aboriginal people has often served the agenda of colonization, reifying stereotypes and justifying unjust practices. Research findings such as those discussed in this literature review must be considered for their cultural relevance to assess their ability to give us insight into the lives of these youth.

Counselling with Aboriginal Youth

There is very little research on counselling with Aboriginal youth and most studies focus on school counselling or career counselling. This literature review will draw on that small body of research, as well as research on cross-cultural counselling, counselling with Aboriginal adults, and counselling implications suggested in theoretical papers and general research studies of Aboriginal people.

Since most counsellors are not Aboriginal people, counselling with Aboriginal youth is most often cross-cultural counselling. There is a body of research focused on cross-cultural counselling that describes low rates of accessing counselling and cultural barriers for ethnic minority clients of many Western counselling approaches. For example, an early (and oft quoted) study of cross-cultural counselling found that Native clients had 50% dropout rate after the first counselling session, compared to 30% for “Anglo-Americans” (Sue & Sue, 1977). Another study looked at the mismatch between the counselling needs of Aboriginal students and available school counselling services, finding that while the youth reported a number of issues that they would like counselling support with, 82% felt that they would not be welcomed by the school counsellor (Dolan, 1995). Culturally-modified counselling approaches have been developed and evaluated for a variety of ethnic minority clients, including Aboriginal people,

and a recent meta-analysis supported a “moderately strong benefit of culturally adapted interventions” (Griner & Smith, 2006, p. 531).

Early researchers into counselling with Aboriginal clients talked about cultural differences between Aboriginal and Western cultures that create barriers for counselling, such as different meanings of nonverbal communication, silence, anger and questions (Darou, 1987). Darou (1987) concluded that “the Non-Natives knowledge of true versus idealized Native culture will increase the likelihood of success” (p. 39). Likewise, Laframboise (1990) concluded that it is crucial for counsellors to use culturally sensitive mental health approaches that maintain American Indian values (Laframboise, 1990). Herring (1992) recommended that counsellors become a presence in the native community; emphasize positive values of native culture; develop nonverbal communication skills adapted to Aboriginal cultures; be “nondirective and flexible”; and don’t rely on individual counselling approaches. In contradiction, an early study of counselling with Aboriginal youth found that Aboriginal students rated directive and cultural/experimental styles of counselling more highly than a non-directive, “facilitative” counselling style (Dauphinais, Dauphinais, & Rowe, 1981). In general, the literature on counselling with Aboriginal adults and youth is fraught with contradictions such as this. These inconsistencies could be in part due to the differences among Aboriginal cultures as well as in individuals’ levels of acculturation and life experiences, as discussed in the introduction. Recent research on Aboriginal people, including studies of counselling, is more likely to take this diversity into account. The inconsistencies also reflect the cultural insensitivity of some of the research (Waldram, 2004).

Underlining the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and experiences, a recent narrative study of Aboriginal adults’ experience with non-Aboriginal counsellors found that “the defining characteristic of a successful counselling experience was expressed as the capacity of the

counselling relationship to increase each client's clarification of how Aboriginality is meaningfully and uniquely understood" (Howell-Jones, 2006, p. 1). An implication of this finding is that Aboriginality ought to be addressed in counselling, though the counsellor should not assume to know what that will mean to the client. Another implication is that counsellors can assist clients in exploring their Aboriginality. Several researchers have considered the role of traditional healing in counselling with Aboriginal people, either in session, or through supporting the client to access traditional healing (Wyrostok & Paulson, 2000; see also McCormick, 1996). Finally, another recent study of 13 American Indians who participated in 17 counselling sessions with Euro-American counsellors found that the most salient factor was "counsellor trustworthiness, which was increased by counsellor empathy, genuineness, concern, self-disclosure, and slow pace of problem identification" (Lokken & Twohey, 2004, p 320). This is aligned with general counselling literature on the importance of the therapeutic relationship (e.g. Ackerman et al., 2001).

In terms of research specific to youth counselling, Wetsit (1999) summarized the literature on counselling with Aboriginal students. She addressed the importance of developing cross-cultural competencies for working with Aboriginal youth, including "(1) awareness of diversity in beliefs and attitudes (e.g. need to move from being unaware to being aware of personal and other cultural values), (2) knowledge (e.g. need to understand the ... sociopolitical system and its impact on other cultural groups), and skills (e.g. ability to interpret and respond to a wide range of verbal and nonverbal communication" (Wetsit, 1999, p. 188). She states that effective counselling strategies with Aboriginal youth include establishing trust and rapport at "individual, school, and general systems levels" (Wetsit, 1999, p. 189), using individual- and culturally-appropriate counselling styles, maintaining confidentiality, and "dealing with the

environmental factors of racism and prejudice are essential elements in a counsellor's knowledge base" (Wetsit, 1999, p. 195).

There is also support for the importance of working with families when counselling with Aboriginal youth. Aboriginal people often have strong family connections, and "'family' is typically defined as a complex web of relationships that includes relations by blood, clan, tribe, and formal and informal adoption" (Waller et al., 2003, p. 82). Many authors speak to the importance of family counselling with Aboriginal youth; for example, one study compared culturally-enhanced treatment models with and without family intervention component for drug and alcohol treatment for Aboriginal youth, and reported that preliminary results show some success with both models, with some advantages for the family intervention model (Boyd-Bell, 2003).

This body of research has implications for counselling with Aboriginal street youth, however it is difficult to determine how the experience of street involvement intersects with Aboriginality (along with all of the other vectors of identity these youth embody) to influence the process of counselling. From this literature, it appears that cross-cultural counselling competence is crucial in working with Aboriginal youth. This includes an awareness of cultural issues, including how one's own culture shapes one's beliefs, and a willingness to learn about other cultures. It also includes knowledge including diversity of Aboriginal cultures and experiences, the differing levels of acculturation, traditional healing practices and resources, and the sociopolitical context including the legacy of colonization and current prejudice and discrimination faced by Aboriginal peoples in Canada. It includes an understanding of cultural dislocation and a willingness to address issues of Aboriginal identity in the counselling process. Finally, cross-cultural competence includes skills, including the ability to build trust in cross-cultural counselling relationships, the ability to interpret verbal and nonverbal behaviour, the

ability to use culturally-modified counselling approaches, and the ability to address Aboriginality in counselling. In addition to cross-cultural counselling competence, the literature on counselling with Aboriginal youth also points to the importance of family counselling with this population, and the importance of counsellors (and agencies) being visible in the Aboriginal community.

Counselling with Street Youth

Service Utilization

There are some studies reporting service utilization rates in large samples of street youth, few of which consider their data in terms of race/ethnicity. In general, low rates of service use are documented among street youth, with the most commonly used services being drop-in centres and shelters. Unfortunately, most of these studies do not look at outpatient mental health or addictions counselling as a separate category. One study of 762 street-involved youth in British Columbia (including 54% Aboriginal youth), found that 29% of the youth had accessed alcohol and drug services (Smith et al., 2007); similarly, findings from the analysis of the Aboriginal respondents in this sample report that 30% used these services (Saewyc et al., 2008). However, this includes residential detox and treatment, as well as outpatient counselling. A survey of 229 street youth recruited from street and service-based sites in San Francisco found that 21% of youth reported using drug-related services (Carlson, Sugano, Millstein & Auerswald, 2006), though like the Vancouver study, they don't report what kind of drug-related services are included in this category. A Hollywood-based survey of 296 youth from both street and service-based sites found that only 10% had accessed A&D services, and 9% had accessed mental health services (De Rosa et al., 1999). These researchers found some differences in service use mediated by gender and ethnicity (but their sample included only Latino and African American youth). They also discussed barriers to service utilization reported by street youth, such as

restrictive rules, concerns about confidentiality and reporting, and negative interactions with frontline staff (De Rosa et al., 1999).

Thus, a picture emerges of low rates of street youth accessing counselling, reflecting one researcher's assertion that "the general consensus is that runaway youth are difficult to engage and maintain in therapy" (Slesnick, Meade & Tonigan, 2001, p. 21). However, a few qualitative studies with youth who have successfully exited the street suggest that counselling services may be a more frequently used resource among youth who successfully exit (compared to youth who are currently street-involved). A meaningful relationship with a caring, supportive adult has been found to be a major factor in exiting the street (Kidd, 2003; Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis, & Nackerud, 2000; Mervyn, 2006). As Mervyn (2006) concludes in her video ethnography with homeless youth who had exited the street (which included two Aboriginal youth among the four participants): "youth need relationships with caring, supportive, healthy adults in their life with whom they feel they have meaningful relationships. They need those relationships to be non-judgmental, stable, consistent, nurturing, and defined with clear boundaries. They need to feel they are 'not just a file on a desk' to someone" (p. 89). While Mervyn (2006) is referring to relationships with any adults, not just counsellors, it seems that many youth experience these meaningful relationships with counsellors and other professional helpers. For example, one study using in-depth interviews with 12 former street youth found that all but one youth mentioned professional helpers among important formal and informal helpers that assisted them in "navigating the troubled waters of their adolescence to make successful developmental transitions into young adulthood" (Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis, & Nackerud, 2000, p. 381).

Characteristics of Youth Accessing Services

Moving beyond mere service utilization, some quantitative studies look at the characteristics of youth who access counselling, such as their stage of street-involvement

(Carlson et al, 2006), substance use (Slesnick, 2001; Slesnick et al., 2001), level of emotional distress or mental health symptoms (Buckner & Bassuk, 1997; Solorio et al., 2006), family of origin factors (Berdahl et al., 2005), and street experiences (Berdahl et al., 2005, p. 145). One study of 40 street youth found that youth and mental health professionals had very different perspectives on the problems associated with homelessness, highlighting a large “gap between homeless youth who tend to focus on subsistence and relationships, and mental health workers who tend to focus on psychological/psychiatric issues, substance abuse, and past trauma as primary targets of intervention” (Fisher, Florsheim & Sheetz, 2005, p. 401). While only 5% of the youth stated that they had talked to a mental health professional about their most serious problems, 49% said they would be willing to talk to one, and another 15% said they might be willing (Fisher et al., 2005).

However, most of these studies do not consider race/ethnicity in their analysis. One bivariate and multivariate logistic regression analysis examining first mental health service use among homeless youth looked at race/ethnicity in a mediating variable, and stated that “the racial-ethnic gap in first mental health intervention for abused youth indicates that this sub-group is not receiving services that are available to other homeless youth. Our findings suggest that homelessness does not homogenize racial/ethnic differences in first mental health service utilization” (Berdahl et al., 2005, p. 145). Unfortunately, the authors do not report on the number of Aboriginal youth in the sample (in fact, all they say is that their sample includes 40% “nonwhite minorities”). Another bivariate and multivariate logistic analysis reports an ethnically diverse sample of 688 homeless adolescents, and state that they are including ethnicity in their analysis; however it seems they didn’t find race/ethnicity to be a major factor emerging from the analysis, since they don’t speak about it in their results or discussion (Solorio et al., 2006).

Qualitative studies also point to other characteristics of street youth that impact their use of services, such as readiness to accept help (Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis & Nackerud, 2000), personal crises or disequilibrium (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002), and connection to street youth culture (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002; Ensign & Gittelsohn, 1998; Kidd, Miner, Walker, & Davidson, 2007; Martijn, & Sharpe, 2006). However, most of these samples also suffer from lack of ethnic diversity in sampling and an absence of culture as a lens of analysis.

Street Youth's Experience of Counselling and Other Services

There are a number of qualitative studies looking at street youth's experience with counselling and other services, most from the perspective of street youth and a couple from the perspective of street youth service providers. Most studies are of street youth's experiences of general social and health services, and the only three I found dealing specifically with counselling came from Australia⁴. French, Reardon & Smith (2003) used grounded theory to examine "what factors affect the engagement of at-risk youth at mental health services?" (p. 531) through interviews with 13 participants who had recently been referred to a mental health service (most were attending). They created a model including "the importance of considering the young person and their multifarious life-experiences; the attractiveness and accessibility of the service; and the follow-up offered by the service provider" (French et al., 2003, p. 529). Dixon and Lloyd (2005) did qualitative interview-based study with 19 homeless youth who accessed a mental health service located in a multi-service centre in Melbourne, Australia, asking questions about the youth's experience of accessing counselling in this mental health service, their pathways to and from the service, and how well it is meeting their needs. Positive aspects mentioned by the youth include the non-judgmental, respectful counsellors, a nondirective approach, anonymity, and getting useful/practical strategies; negative aspects include having to

⁴ Which highlights the question of differences between Canadian, Australian, and American contexts for street youth.

repeat their story, the counselling room itself, low availability of the counsellor (by appointment only), and not connecting with the counsellor. Finally, Darbyshire, Muir-Cochrane, Fereday, Jureidini, & Drummond (2006) looked at the perceptions of ten homeless young people with mental health problems in Adelaide, Australia. Detrimental aspects of mental health services included labeling, drive-by assessment, lack of explanations, lack of personal control, lack of coordination between services; whereas, positive aspects included feeling like they mattered, people who actually listened, having a non-judgmental approach, trust and respect. In addition to characteristics of the street youth, these studies also shed light on beneficial and detrimental counsellor characteristics and service delivery approaches, as well as agency- and continuum of care-level service delivery issues which play a role in street youth's experience of counselling. However, most of these samples also suffer from lack of ethnic diversity and an absence of culture as a lens of analysis, in addition to being situated outside of a Canadian sociocultural context, so it is difficult to determine how they might apply to Aboriginal street youth in Canada.

There may also be information to be gleaned from studies that look at street youth's experiences of other kinds of services, including drop-in services (Thompson et al., 2006), shelter services (Karabanow, 2004; Karabanow & Rains, 1997; Pollio, Thompson, Tobias, Reid, & Spitznagel, 2006) and health care (Ensign, 1998; Ensign & Gittelsohn, 1998). A few qualitative studies have focused on or included the perspective of youth workers (Kidd et al., 2007; Kreuger, Evans, Korsmo, Stanley, & Wilder, 2005). One narrative study of 15 seasoned street youth workers (Kidd et al., 2007) concluded that:

Working with homeless youth involves being able to be highly versatile, recognizing the youths' diverse circumstances and tailoring means of engagement and expectations in ways that recognize the unique challenges of homelessness and the pasts that put them on the streets. To connect the worker needs to listen, value, not judge, respect, and like youths who have experienced very little of any of these things. Trust is built on these connections, and the youths are drawn to that rare experience of trust which serves as a platform for effective work. As one worker put it, they must be a 'mind boggling' figure

in the kid's life. Along with workers having to adjust their understandings of the counselling process to reflect the realities of homeless clients, including definition of and responsibility for change, there must be an underlying belief that these kids deserve to be helped and can benefit from help to have better and healthier lives (p. 29).

Findings from these studies may be applicable to understand personal characteristics of workers and aspects of service delivery (from counsellor to agency to continuum of care) that may also apply to counselling services. They also reflect the importance of social context; for example, Kidd, Miner, Walker & Davidson (2007) stated that “all of those interviewed situated their counselling efforts in a social context, ranging from coworkers, to agency policy/structure, to larger society” (p. 22). One study examining the “system-of-care for homeless youth” in Los Angeles country through interviews with service providers discussed “barriers to a comprehensive service delivery system” (Brooks, Milburn, Rotheram-Borus, & Witkin, 2004, p. 448) including lack of funding and gaps in the continuum of care and lack of coordination and networking between services. The issues are illuminated further in a macro-scale level of analysis is explored in a study of 156 homeless youth in Ottawa looking at “care and lives of homeless youth in neoliberal times in Canada” (Klodawsky, Anbry & Farrell, 2007).

Clinical Trials on Interventions with Street Youth

Finally, there are a small number of clinical trials underway with street youth, comparing various treatment-as-usual conditions (shelter services, drop-in centre case management services) to different experimental treatments (which reflect the research discussed above), including intensive case management (Cauce & Morgan, 1994), ecologically based family therapy (Slesnick & Prestopnik, 2005; see also Slesnick, 2001), a community reinforcement and case management approach (Slesnick et al., 2007; Slesnick, Kang, Bonomi, & Prestopnik, 2008) and a brief feedback and motivational intervention (Peterson, Baer, Wells, Ginzler, & Garrett; 2006, see also Baer, Peterson, & Wells, 2004). These treatments seem to have promising preliminary

results. Most of these include race and gender in their analysis; however, only the community reinforcement approach study had a sizeable Aboriginal youth presence (13%).

Summary of Literature on Counselling with Street Youth

The Therapeutic Relationship

Research on services with street youth supports the importance of the therapeutic relationship (Darbyshire et al., 2006; Dixon & Lloyd, 2005; Fisher et al., 2005; French et al., 2003; Macknee & Mervyn, 2002; Mervyn, 2006; Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004). This is aligned with general counselling research which supports the value of the therapeutic relationship; for example, Lambert and Barley (2001) found that 30% of the variance in outcome is due to relationship variables, while 40% is due to factors unique to the individual and the client's environment, and only 15% is attributable to techniques. An APA Division 29 Task Force agrees that "the therapy relationship ... makes substantial and consistent contributions to psychotherapy outcome independent of the specific type of treatment" (Ackerman et al., 2001, p. 495).

Personal Characteristics of the Counsellor

Given this support for the importance of the therapeutic relationship, it is not surprising that a number of personal characteristics of counsellors are gaining support as important for engaging street youth in counselling. Counsellors who are "effective" are caring (Darbyshire et al., 2006; Karabanow & Rains, 1997; Kurtz et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 2006); respectful (Darbyshire et al., 2006; Dixon & Lloyd, 2005; Kidd, Miner, Walker & Davidson, 2007; Thompson et al., 2006); trustworthy (Kurtz et al., 2000; Kidd et al., 2007; Thompson et al., 2006); good listeners (Darbyshire et al., 2006; Dixon & Lloyd, 2005; French et al., 2003; Karabanow & Rains, 1997; Kurtz et al., 2000); consistent (Kurtz et al., 2000; Kidd et al., 2007);

have clear boundaries (Kurtz et al., 2000), and are knowledgeable about street youth lives and culture (Kidd et al., 2007; Thompson et al., 2006).

Service Delivery Approaches

Likewise, there is some support for a number of aspects of service delivery (at several levels). Counselling approaches that have growing support in the literature include meeting the youth where they are at (Darbyshire et al., 2006; Dixon & Lloyd, 2005; Fisher et al., 2005; French et al., 2003; Kidd et al., 2007; Slesnick et al., 2007); case management (Cauce & Morgan, 1994; Darbyshire et al., 2006; Slesnick et al., 2007; Slesnick et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2006); ecologically based family therapy (Slesnick & Prestopnik, 2005), and a community reinforcement and case management approach (Slesnick et al., 2007; Slesnick et al., 2008). Several other counselling approaches also have beginning support in the literature including strength-based counselling (Kidd, 2003), providing concrete assistance, (Kurtz et al., 2000), interpersonal skills building (Kurtz et al., 2000), and engaging in assertive follow-up (French et al., 2003).

Agency-level service delivery approaches that have support in the literature include the importance of youth-specific service (French et al., 2003), a positive agency culture (Karabanow, 2004; Karabanow & Rains, 1997; Kidd et al., 2007), low staff turnover (Brooks, Milburn, Rotheram-Borus, & Witkin, 2004), flexibility (Karabanow & Rains, 1997; Kidd et al., 2007; Thompson et al., 2006), and accessible services, (Aviles & Helrich, 2004; Dixon & Lloyd, 2005; Ensign & Gittelsohn, 1998; French et al., 2003; Thompson et al., 2006), including outreach services (French et al., 2003).

In terms of the continuum of care for street youth, there is support for the co-location of multiple services (Dixon & Lloyd, 2005), and the importance of strong connections between different health and social services for street youth (Brooks, Milburn, Rotheram-Borus, &

Witkin, 2004; Dixon & Lloyd, 2005; Slesnick et al., 2007). The comprehensiveness of the continuum of care is also crucially important (Brooks, Milburn, Rotheram-Borus, & Witkin, 2004; with agreement from most of the authors cited in this proposal).

Finally, the sociopolitical context of services for homeless youth is also important to consider (Klodawsky, Aubry, & Farrell, 2007). For example, the lack of universal healthcare in the USA has a huge impact on homeless youth's access to services, unlike Canada, Australia, and most of Europe where there is a basic level of health services available to all. For Aboriginal youth in Canada, the devolution of social services into Aboriginal control, as is happening within British Columbia's Ministry of Children and Family Development, has an tremendous impact on youth's access to services – hopefully for the better in the long run, but with bumps along the way as communities and agencies build capacity and create models for working with Aboriginal youth “in a good way”.

Implications for Counselling with Aboriginal Street Youth

So what is there to “glean” from these bodies of literature related to counselling with Aboriginal youth and counselling with street youth that might be relevant for counselling with Aboriginal street youth? From the literature on counselling with Aboriginal youth, it seems clear that cross-cultural counselling competence is crucial in working with Aboriginal street youth, including specialized knowledge about the culture and experiences of Aboriginal street youth, and the ability to work with Aboriginal street youth in the context of their families and communities. As Gilchrist (1995) suggests, issues of “cultural identity and community dislocation, [and] trauma from racism and abuse” (p. 244) should be addressed by counsellors. From the literature of counselling with street youth it appears that there are multiple levels of influence that could impact the engagement of Aboriginal street youth in counselling, including personal characteristics of the youth, street youth culture, personal characteristics of the

counsellor, the counsellor's style of service delivery, and agency and continuum of care level service delivery issues, and larger sociocultural contexts⁵. Both literatures speak to the importance of the therapeutic relationship, and counsellor characteristics such as being respectful, trustworthy, good listeners, and knowledgeable about the contexts and experience of their client's lives. Likewise, both speak to influences at the service delivery, cultures, and sociopolitical context. My proposed research hopes to examine the experiences of Aboriginal street youth with counselling inside the diverse contexts of their lives.

⁵ This is arguably true for counselling with any population.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Rationale for Methodology

Most research on Aboriginal people has been conducted through a Western worldview and embedded in Western colonial practices. Much of this “research through imperial eyes” (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) has been harmful for Aboriginal/Indigenous peoples, “proving” deficiencies and justifying racist and colonialist beliefs and practices. Thus, according to Dr. Peter Cole, an Aboriginal professor who taught that “Aboriginalizing methodologies” and “shape-shifting research” can help to foreground Aboriginal philosophies, knowings, methodologies and protocols” (personal communication, July 2007). Thus, grounding my research with Aboriginal street youth in an Aboriginalizing methodology is highly appropriate.

Narrative research is a Western tradition, but seems amenable to Aboriginalizing, given resonances in Aboriginal and narrative worldviews, and the flexibility of narrative research methodologies (there is no one form of narrative research). Story-telling is a part of many Aboriginal cultural traditions (Archibald, 2008), and narrative research’s holistic emphasis is aligned with many Aboriginal worldviews. Narrative research privileges the voice of the storyteller, which is aligned with Aboriginal researchers who advocate beginning with the voices of Aboriginal people themselves. Furthermore, *critical* narrative research privileges the voices of participants, yet also has the potential for situating their narratives within larger contextual narratives. This is important, since, as Absolon and Willett (2004) argue: “Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers today who tackle any facet of Indigenous study must have a critical analysis of colonialism” (p. 120). Narrative inquiry seems to allow for the construction of knowledge that is contextualized, while still honouring human agency and facilitating the empowerment of the voices of the participants, which is aligned with Aboriginal perspectives.

Despite these resonances, it is worth pondering the question of whether it is even possible to Aboriginalize a Western research methodology and create research that truly benefits Aboriginal peoples? Perhaps, as Audre Lorde (1984) suggested, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Certainly, there are deep differences between Western and Aboriginal worldviews that may mean that integration is impossible (Cole, personal communication, July 2007; Duran, 2006; Gone, personal communication, July 2007), and even well-grounded, well-intentioned research can be used in service of the colonial project. This is a question I have pondered many times through this research journey.

Overview of Methodology

Epistemologies

Aboriginal Epistemologies

As discussed in the introduction, there are many Aboriginal cultures, so to speak as if there is *an* Aboriginal worldview is misleading, however, there are some commonalities that seem to underlie all Aboriginal worldviews. I am using Aboriginalizing in its verb form to reflect the reality that many North American Aboriginal languages are made up primarily of verbs, unlike Indo-European languages, which are primarily nouns. This difference in languaging reflects a difference in worldview, with indigenous worldviews allowing for more flux and change, since everything is languaged in action, unlike Western worldviews which tend to look for truths fixed for eternity. As Absolon and Willett (2004) state: “indigenous knowledge and culture is dynamic – ever flowing, adaptable, and fluid” (p. 111). This is reflected in the use of circles rather than lines, interconnections rather than dualities, and the importance of the “truth”-teller’s location. From my experience and reading, Indigenous worldviews emphasize the interconnectedness of all things, with deep respect for all beings, human, animal, nature, and spirit. In a study with elders and counsellors about counselling with Aboriginal people, one

Elder-counsellor participant spoke about this interconnectedness: “understanding relationality – how everything is related, how everything is connected. It’s not an individualistic worldview. It’s very collective and very connected to one’s surroundings and to the environment” (Wihak & Price, 2006). Coming from interconnectedness is a different way of looking at things than a linear, individualistic Western worldview. It also underlines the importance placed on respecting all beings, since we are all interconnected, thus doing things “in a good way” is crucial to Aboriginalizing research: (Cole, 2002). As Absolon and Willett (2004) argue: “Aboriginal research methodologies are as much about process as they are about product” (p. 107). Finally, as stated already, given the history and legacy of colonization, critical analysis is a key part of the epistemologies underlying contemporary Aboriginal methodologies and analyses.

Narrative Epistemologies

Critical narrative research is grounded in social constructivist and critical foundations. Social constructionism is founded on the belief that “all claims to knowledge, truth, objectivity or insight are founded within communities of meaning making” (Gergen, 2001, p. 2). Social constructionists argue that culture has a huge impact on how people view the world, in that what we consider to be *true* is “based on an enormous array of culturally and historically specific constructions” (Gergen, Lightfoot & Sydow, 2004, p. 390). People have agency to make meanings within these constraints, to create new narratives, and to unlearn our cultural conditioning, to a degree, but ultimately the meaning that we make is limited by the meanings available to us. Taking it one step further, critical researchers believe “in a constructed lived experience that is mediated by power relations within social and historical contexts (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 130), as well as having an intention to engage in research that makes a difference in the world. Critical narrative research privileges the voices of participants, yet also has the potential for situating their narratives within larger contextual narratives. Narrative researchers do not

believe in objectivity, but rather in the existence of multiple situated realities within social and structural conditions. Research findings are not seen as “objective truth,” but rather one possible narrative, as Chase (2005) states: “*any* narrative as an *instance* of the possible relationships between a narrator’s active construction of self, on the one hand, and the social, cultural, and historical circumstances that enable and constrain that narrative, on the other. ... From this perspective, any narrative is significant because it embodies – and gives us insight into – what is possible and intelligible within a special social context” (p. 667). Furthermore, narrative researchers recognize researchers are also creating narratives, thus reflexivity is crucial to and inevitable for narrative research (Arvay, 2003). Narrative researchers consider questions of “voice, authenticity, interpretive authority, and representation” (Chase, 2005, p. 655)

Resonances Between Aboriginal and Narrative Epistemologies

Both Aboriginal and narrative epistemologies question a Western positivist view of objective truth. Both see truth as subjective, contextual, and mutable. The interconnectedness central to Aboriginal epistemologies resonates with a narrative understanding of individual’s life story as existing inside larger contextual narratives. Narrative researchers would agree with Absolon and Willett’s (2004) statement that “neutrality and objectivity do not exist in research, since all research is conducted and observed through human epistemological lenses” (p. 97). Thus, both Aboriginal and narrative epistemologies lead to questions of representation, interpretation, and location (Absolon & Willett, 2004) or reflexivity (Arvay, 2003) in the research process. They also foreground questions of ethics in research. Narrative researchers’ concern for the co-construction of meaning and with power in the research relationship fits with Aboriginal researchers’ emphasis on the process of the research inquiry rather than merely the product.

Narrative Research

While there are many forms of narrative research, all narrative research shares a focus on the stories people tell and the way the stories are told. Chase (2005) argues that most narrative researchers share several analytics lenses. They see narratives as a “distinctive form of discourse” (p. 656) in which people engage in making meaning through story-telling. The stories people tell are “enabled and constrained by a range of social resources and circumstances” (p. 657), and every time they tell a story they are performing the “self, experience, and reality” (p. 657) in a “socially situated interactive performance” (p. 657) such as the research interview. These lenses apply to the researcher’s stories as well as the participants, underlining the importance of representation and reflexivity in most narrative research.

Reissman (1993) talks about five levels of representation in the research process. Starting with all of the primary experiences that might be possible to represent, the first level is *attending*, since we make conscious and unconscious choices about what to attend to, such as through our choice of research topics and sampling criteria. The next level is *telling*, “the performance of a personal narrative” (p. 9) by this participant with her/his unique life experiences and contexts, at this moment in time, in this interview with this particular researcher. Next is *transcribing*, since there are many interpretive decisions to be made in the transformation of spoken language into written text. *Analyzing* is the fourth level of representation, in which “the analyst creates a meta-story about what happened by telling what the interview narratives signify, editing and reshaping what was told, and turning it into a hybrid story, a ‘false document’” (p. 13). Analysis can, of course, vary in the degree to which it depends on the words of the participants, and narrative researchers lean towards analysis that involves “configural patterns of interpretation and a part-to-whole logic of argumentation” (Hoshmand, 2005, 181). Many narrative researchers focus on holistic contextualized interpretations and consider the

meaning that people make in their stories through the content and the structure of the narratives. Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) present a typology of narrative research by considering whether it takes a holistic or categorical approach, and whether it focuses on content or structure, while recognizing that many narrative researchers use a combination of the four resulting types. *Reading* is the final level of representation in which other people read the researcher's words and engage in their own interpretive process, which may lead them to conclusions that the researcher never intended.

Given these multiple levels of representation, any form of representation is necessarily limited; "meaning is ambiguous because it arises out of a process of interaction between people: self, teller, listener and recorder, analyst, and reader" (Reissman, 1993, p. 15). Narrative researchers engage in reflexivity to track and document their representation process at each level of analysis, as Arvay (2003) writes: "bring reflexive means exploring how my personal experiences shape my understanding of my co-investigators and how viewing issues from multiple perspectives affects our understandings of the phenomenon under study" (p. 163). Critical narrative research also considers the power relations inherent in all aspects of human life, including the production of knowledge through research.

Aboriginalizing Narrative Research

Beginning with my Location

Absolon and Willett (2004) argue that location is one of the most fundamental principles of Aboriginal research methodology, and we should "begin by putting ourselves forward" (p. 98). They argue that given all the harmful research that has been done "on" Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal peoples, location is crucial for getting consent from the community you want to research "with," as well as the audiences for your research, so that they can assess your connection to the topic. While location and reflexivity have resonances, location is a much more

radical concept than is seen in most Western narrative research, in which stating one's gender, race, class, sexuality, and professional background is usually considered sufficient in a journal article – although there are many examples of reflexivity in qualitative research that much more extensive. Absolon and Willett (2004) state that “location is about relationships to land, language, spiritual, cosmological, political, economical, environmental, and social elements in one's life” (Absolon & Willett, 2004, p. 98). Location is about “who you are and where you come from,” which includes your ancestors and your upbringing. According to one elder I heard speak recently, locating oneself requires telling a bit about the first ten or so years of your life, since these years are formative in the development of a person's worldview (Oleman, personal communication, October 2007).

I am woman with Métis ancestry on my mother's side, although as child I would have said “part-Indian” and my grandma always says she was a “halfbreed” until the Canadian government decided she was Métis in 1982. My Aboriginal ancestors were Cree women and men from the Orkney Islands of north Scotland, who came together in the 1700s around Hudson's Bay settlements such as Norway House and York Factory, then moved to the Red River settlements in Manitoba, and eventually to central Saskatchewan, around Prince Albert. Like many people with Aboriginal ancestry, I grew up largely disconnected from any Aboriginal cultures (although I used to think that was because I was not “Indian enough,” rather than understanding it as part of the legacy of colonization). I grew up in a white Canadian suburb of Edmonton, and was indoctrinated in a Western worldview, although I was also exposed to an Aboriginal worldview through my Métis extended family in Saskatchewan. I always knew that I was “part-Indian,” and as a child knew that this was “something to be proud of” – though the fact that people told me this made me suspect that there was something not quite right about it. As a young feminist, when I began to locate myself in research, I identified as a white woman, and it's

true that I have white skin privilege (although my colouring is dark enough that people often question my ancestry). I talked about having some native ancestry, but didn't feel that it was enough to count, especially since I felt I had no connection to Aboriginal culture. It wasn't until I read *Halfbreed* by Maria Campbell (1973) in my early twenties that I saw how "Métis" my mom's family is. Then I left the academic world and began working with youth. Through two years in a lifeskills and pre-employment program, a year as a street outreach worker, and six years as an addictions counsellors, I worked with many Aboriginal street youth. I gradually began identifying more often as an Aboriginal person, and the Aboriginal youth often correctly guessed that I have Aboriginal ancestry. Through my work with them I began to connect more with my own Aboriginality. I began asking more questions of my family, trying to find out about my ancestry, learning about Aboriginal cultures and histories, and participating in smudges and talking circles through my work. This journey continued through the process of writing this thesis proposal. I did not anticipate that academia would be a place where I would be supported to explore this part of my identity, and connect with Aboriginal communities, but that is what happened.

Importance of Process: Doing Things "In a Good Way"

Cole (2007) suggests that the "methodology" section is an intended practice/protocol for putting one's nose into other people's business, for doing things "in a good way. The process of the research project is as important as the product (Absolon & Willett, 2004), thus what is called "ethics" from a Western worldview has more emphasis in Aboriginalizing methodologies.

Ethics is more than just getting ethics approval from the UBC Behavioural Ethics Review Board, since as Cole (2004) writes:

what coyote is trying to say says raven is that ethics reviews
are about ethical review boards
full stop end of conversation they are not about being ethical (p. 7).

Ethical issues will be discussed in detail below, although the discussion of these issues in a self-contained section called “ethics” could suggest that “doing things in a good way” is secondary to the methodology, rather than foundational. Cole (2002) suggests that the format of a traditional research proposal is steeped in a Western worldview, and that Aboriginalizing methodologies may lead to a completely different way of writing:

the idea of a chapter is anathema to who I am as an indigenous person
implies western order and format as “the” legitimate shapers of discourse
the universe being ordered into rationally constructed geometries
precluding enthalpy to be the prescribed means of navigating
rather than say entropy devalidating our own symbolic sense of ourselves
perceptions of our perceptions making us take up the tools of the settlers (p. 448).

Cole (personal communication, July 2007) wrote his doctoral dissertation as a “canoe journey” using poetic language as in the quotes above, rather than using traditional academic prose organized into traditional academic chapters and sections. This allowed “doing things in a good way” to be woven into all aspects of the research. While my thesis is organized in a traditional academic format, I hope that I have had some success at weaving issues of “doing things in a good way” throughout this document.

Another implication of the importance of process in Aboriginalizing methodologies is the value placed on collaborative research practices. According to Cole (personal communication, July 2007), part of Aboriginalizing methodologies is about co-creating participatory ways of knowing in which the researchers and the community collaborate, and in which the community is the primary beneficiary of the research. He (and many others) recommends seeking permission to do one’s research, in a respectful way that shows an understanding of cultural protocols. He advocates that “the community has collective control over their intellectual and cultural property, including dissemination (what, by whom, in what formats/genres)” (class notes, 2007). Given that this is a Master’s thesis, this research project was not be as participatory as I would have

liked, although there were collaborative aspects, including providing an opportunity for participants to provide feedback on their narratives. I am also committed that “the community” of Aboriginal street youth will benefit from this research, by not merely allowing it to sit on a library shelf as a bound thesis, but sharing it with a number of audiences including Aboriginal communities, researchers, counsellors and other Aboriginal street youth,

However, while I received positive responses from many Aboriginal people, including youth, who I have talked to about my research, the creation of the thesis has been an individual, not a community-based, endeavor. I was also unsure of how to seek permission “from the community” in an urban Aboriginal context. Most writing on Aboriginalizing methodologies seems to assume that the researcher is working in a contained Aboriginal community, such as might be found on a reserve. In an urban context there is no one single chief and council from whom to seek permission to do research, and it’s unclear which “community” would have collective control of the intellectual property emerging from this research. In the process of developing my research proposal I received letters of support for my research ideas from two urban Aboriginal agencies that focus on at-risk and street-involved youth, and several Aboriginal agencies agreed to be sites of recruitment for this research, but this does not constitute “permission from the community.” However, I think that this is an area of research that is highly relevant to Aboriginal culture and community, and relevance is one of NEARBC⁶’s criteria for conducting research with Aboriginal peoples, after Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991). Aboriginal homelessness is a legacy of colonization, and addressing this issue is very important, since youth are the future of the community. At the Aboriginal Homelessness Research Forum in Vancouver in November 2006, a focus group on youth issues identified “service delivery to Aboriginal street youth” as the top research priority, and research on counselling with Aboriginal street

⁶ Network Environments for Aboriginal Health Research BC (www.nearbc.ca).

youth fits into this priority. While counselling is traditionally a mainstream Western institution, perhaps it can be made culturally sensitive and relevant to urban Aboriginal youth, and it is crucial that we find ways to make it so.

Grounding my Analysis in Aboriginal Worldviews

In this research I attempted to ground my analysis in Aboriginal worldviews. As discussed in the section on Aboriginal epistemologies, narrative epistemologies have many similarities with Aboriginal epistemologies, including a holistic interconnected emphasis. I chose to begin my analysis with holistic engagement with each participant's story in alignment with many Aboriginal researchers' conviction that stories be considered holistically. As Aboriginal professor Fyre Jean Graveline (2000) argues, I don't want to add to

Hundreds of journal pages
hand-tabulated
Dissected into relevant themes
Subjective data committed to linear form
Decontextualized from their life narratives
Partial stories clipped and coded (p. 363).

My analysis of the stories my participants told about counselling was not separate from the larger stories they tell about their lives. My analysis was also be grounded in an interconnected worldview, considering the multiple influences on the narratives Aboriginal street youth construct about counselling. This included a "critical analysis of colonialism and an understanding of Western scientific research as a mechanism of colonization" (Absolon and Willett, 2004, p. 120). The collaborative aspects of my data analysis are also aligned with an Aboriginal emphasis on the process of research and the importance of respect.

I was also reflexive about the influence of Western worldviews on my analysis. As someone who did not grow up steeped in an Aboriginal culture, grounding my analysis in Aboriginal worldviews was not necessarily an easy task. For example, the ways that narrative

researchers understand the stories people tell reflect Western worldviews, for example, viewing narratives as an expression of “self” and “identity” (Chase, 2005), rather than, perhaps, “community” and “collectivity” and “relationality,” and seeing narratives are organized temporally rather than episodically (Reissman, 1993). As Cole (2002) writes:

the ideas of beginningmiddleend genesis exodus revelation *testa corpus coda*
are ways of linearly encoding a western vision of the world
ways of encrypting experience so that little by little we are all molded
into believing unthinkingly that there are beginnings middles ends
believing that experience can be diagrammed graphed morphed thus (p. 449).

These are assumptions that come naturally to me given my Western upbringing, and so I continued to “decolonize” my mind and seek teachings about Aboriginal worldviews throughout this research journey. As Absolon and Willett state: “We must know our own Indigenous epistemologies, genealogies, traditions, and cultures. The origins of our roots are there for us to learn. Our ancestors call to be remembered and recovered into our present. Cultural traditions, ceremonies, stories, songs, dances, and rituals are our responsibility to learn” (p. 121).

Procedures

Sample

Interview participants were 4 self-identified Aboriginal women (Carrier, Squamish, Blackfoot, and Mi’kmaq). Two of the participants were aged 18 at the time of the interview, the others were 20 and 24 (sampling range was 16-24). All participants met the sampling criteria defined in advance: able to understand English, willing to participate in the research process, had been street-involved for at least one year, were exiting or had exited the street, and who had had at least four counselling sessions with a mental health or addictions counsellor. Street involvement was defined as being homeless, in shelters, “couch-surfing,” or otherwise precariously housed and/or spending most of one’s time involved in the culture and economy of

street life. Exiting or exited was defined as 6 months stable housing, and minimal involvement in self-destructive and/or criminal activities.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through agencies serving Aboriginal youth and/or street-involved youth in Vancouver, British Columbia. Aboriginal communities and street youth service providers are understandably cautious about granting researchers access to “their youth,” so the fact that I was “known” facilitated my access to participants for this study. I have worked with street youth in Vancouver for 12 years, and have a large network of contacts and a good reputation in the community. My approach included telephone calls, and follow-up emails or meetings in person, including with a group of youth and staff at a treatment centre. I explained my research and asked if they would let potential participants know about my research through personal conversations and posting my recruitment notice (see Appendix A). Five agencies formally agreed to be sites of recruitment and provided letters of agreement, as required by UBC ethics, although these were not the only agencies through which the participants heard about the study. Youth may also have heard about the research through word of mouth from another participant, although this was not specifically requested of participants and there was no incentive for doing so. Participants were invited to contact me directly if they are interested in participating. I screened each youth when they first contacted me to ensure that they met the criteria, and explained the nature of the study. They were offered a \$30 honorarium for their participation in the research interview, and an additional \$20 for participation in the feedback session. If they were interested in participating, I emailed them an information sheet (see Appendix B) and the informed consent form (see Appendix C).

Data Collection

Youth Interviews

In-depth, conversation-style interviews were conducted with each participant. The interviews began with a preamble about the research and establishment of informed consent. I reviewed the informed consent form and obtained their signature. Then I asked a “grand tour” question, inviting them to tell their story about their experiences of counselling through their journey in and out of street involvement. Each youth told the story in their own way, some chronological, some starting with the most impactful experience in counselling. I used active listening and probes that placed “the collection of narrative accounts at the center stage” (Murray, 2003, p. 101), and included such questions as “what happened next?” and “do you remember anything else about that?” I used a flexible interview protocol to probe certain issues when they did not arise spontaneously (Appendix D). I wanted to elicit specific information relevant to my research question, such as specific parts of the story of the counselling relationship, their connection to their Aboriginal culture, etc., but I wanted these to be secondary to the story they chose to tell. Thus, the interview probes were used for expansion when the topics come up spontaneously in the interview, or as follow-up questions after the youth has finishing telling their story. At the end of the interview, participants chose a pseudonym. They were also reminded of the invitation to provide feedback on the story once written, and asked for their preferred method of contact to elicit this feedback. I let them know I would be in touch with an update within one month.

Interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the participants, and all chose to hold the interview at a youth centre or program. Interviews lasted from 1 hour 20 minutes to 2 hours long, and were digitally recorded. Reflections on the interview were written in my journal upon completing each interview.

Journal

I began a reflexive journal before I begin dialoguing with participants, journaling everything I thought I knew about counselling with Aboriginal street youth. I continued to journal through the process of data collection, analysis, and writing. This included field notes after each interview, insights and reflections, analytic decisions, consideration of how my location was influencing my interpretations, and reflection on my own personal process in the research.

Data Analysis

Transcription

As discussed in the section on narrative research, transcription is part of the interpretive process (Reissman, 1993; see also Lapadat & Lindsey, 1999). The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. I listened to the interviews while reading the written transcripts to assure the accuracy of the transcription as well as noting multiple aspects of speech such as tone of voice, laughter, pauses, and other aspects.

“Immersion in Aboriginal Worldviews”: Decolonizing my Mind

Throughout the process of my data analysis, I attempted to maintain immersion in the data simultaneously with “immersion in Aboriginal worldviews” as a method of decolonizing my mind and Aboriginalizing my analysis, the stories I was writing, and the conclusions I was drawing. Every day that I immersed myself in my data I also immersed myself in Aboriginal worldviews in some way, including continuing with my cultural reconnection through attending events and ceremonies, maintaining my spiritual practice, spending time with elders and other Aboriginal people, plus a lot of reading. I read books of traditional Aboriginal stories from across Turtle Island, seeking books that had been created “in a good way” (Bloomfield, 1993; Bruchac, 1991; Culleton, 1985; Erdoes & Ortiz, 1984; Erdoes & Ortiz, 1998; Reid & Bringhurst,

1984; Wright, 1996; Wyss, 2005). I also read books of writing primarily by Aboriginal people on a variety of issues including Aboriginal women's issues (Allen, 1986; Anderson & Lawrence, 2003; Fife, 1993; Mankiller, 2004; Mihesuah, 2003), Aboriginal mental health and healing (Duran, 2006; Kirmayer & Valaskakis, 2009; Waldram, 2004; Waldram, 2008; Witko, 2006), methodology (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Archibald, 2008), cultural teachings (Lane, Bopp, Bopp, Brown & elders, 1984; Sams and Carson, 1988), and decolonization (Wilson and Yellow Bird, 2005). While most of these books are not cited anywhere else in this thesis, and I'm not even certain I have listed them all, I am indebted to these and other authors for their help in the ongoing decolonization of my mind. I am also thankful to the ancestors, for passing stories and knowledge down through the generations so that someone could share this traditional knowledge with someone else who respectfully wrote it down, allowing me to learn "from my ancestors who left the stories behind for us to hear" (Chi'XapKaid, 2005, p. 129).

Storying

My intention was always to present the youth's stories holistically and in their own voice, while also accounting for my own location as the researcher. In alignment with Aboriginal worldviews, I wanted to respect the voice of the story-teller, present the stories of counsellors inside holistic life stories, and represent the story-telling relationship within the story (Archibald, 2008). As will be discussed in Chapter 4, finding a method to fulfill this vision when confronted with transcripts ranging from 56 to 76 pages was daunting, and many writers' ideas have influenced the way I ultimately created the stories. My primary guide was a series of articles by narrative researcher Coralie McCormack (2000a, 2000b) which provided a framework for going "from interview transcript to interpretative story":

1. Viewing the interview transcript through multiple lenses, which involves the following:
 - immersing oneself in the transcript through a process of *active listening*;

- identifying the *narrative processes* used by the storyteller;
 - paying attention to the *language* of the text;
 - acknowledging the *context* in which the text was produced; and
 - identifying *moments* in the text where something unexpected is happening.
2. Developing interpretive stories using the views highlighted through the multiple lenses (McCormack, 2000a, p. 285).

Following McCormack loosely, I viewed each transcript through these lenses, journaling throughout my listenings and readings. I listened to each interview three times, while reading along with the transcript for two of these listenings, checking for accuracy of transcription, noting tone of voice and other aspects of speech, and marking my supporting utterances (e.g. yeah, right, um) that did not interrupt the flow of speech. Then I read for narrative processes, identifying the stories in the original transcript, as well as other aspects of interview such as theorizing, and I eventually created a chronological narrative. I included my supportive utterances in brackets within the chronological narrative, creating a document with long monologues in some parts of the story and more back and forth in others. Then I read the transcript for language. From this reading, words and phrases stood out, and I created several versions of each transcript with words highlighted in different colours: structural features (e.g. ums and ahs, you knows), self and relationships (use of I, you, he, they, we), and words related to my research questions, including how they spoke about Aboriginal cultures and being Aboriginal. Then I did the reading for context, including the context of the interview in which the story was co-constructed and the larger social context in which the story was lived, including the legacy of colonization. Finally, I read for moments, including moments in Aboriginal identity. In some ways, all the readings were simultaneous, or at least, I had insights that related to other lenses as I was looking through each lens. Given that interconnectedness has been a lens for this entire research project, perhaps it's not surprising that this was my experience.

I began the development of my interpretive story by re-reading the chronological narrative and all journal notes related to the interview. Then I went back to the chronological narrative and began to smooth the youth's words, for example, removing uhs and ahs and deleting repeated words and false starts. I began to write comments connecting the youth's words, attempting to reflect the back and forth in the interview in the back and forth of the participant's words and mine in the story. Stories appearing as long monologues in the narratives were stories the youth told with little probing from me, whereas, when I was playing a more active role in the dialogue I included more connecting comments in that part of that narrative. Then I re-read all my listening and reading notes, and began to add insights from my notes to my connecting comments on the chronological narrative, gradually crafting my final connecting comments. As I worked through creating my comments, I looked back many times at the original interview transcript, to see what the context of a comment was and what had I said to elicit it, in order to include the co-construction of the story during the interview in my connecting comments.

The results of this storying was a chronologically organized narrative for each youth, comprised primarily of their own words, connected with comments from me that bridged between stories, shared the co-construction of the story during the interview, and reflected my own reactions to the stories. Finally, these stories were shared with participants for feedback. The stories were emailed to the participants (who I had been updating regularly on my progress since the interviews) with instructions to considering the following questions: Was this the story you thought you were telling me? Is there anything you want to change, add, or remove? Are you ok with how I introduced you in beginning of the story? If not, how would you like to be introduced? All 4 participants approved of their stories, with only a few small clarifications of details (mostly asked for by me, not volunteered by them, such as "how old were you when?). I

also asked them if they would like to choose pseudonyms for the counsellors. Two participants choose their own counsellor pseudonyms, two asked that I do so.

Sharing my Lessons

After completing all four stories, I undertook to represent the lessons I was learning from them. First I re-read the youth's stories, my journal, and all listening and reading notes, and wrote a list of lessons I thought I had learned. Then I printed these documents, using five different colours of paper, one for my journal and one for each youth. Then I cut and sorted my reflections on my living room floor, then continued sorting on my computer, eventually coming to the lessons presented in my results.

Ethical Issues: “Doing Things in a Good Way”

As I hope I have already emphasized, ethics are central to Aboriginalizing methodologies. “Doing things in a good way” means more than just adhering to the guidelines of ethical review boards, although many of the issues discussed in this section address the requirements of the ethical approval that I received from the University of British Columbia Behavioural Ethics Review Board in order to conduct this research (see Ethics Certificate in Appendix E . Ethical guidelines for research with Aboriginal peoples have been developed resulting in documents such as the *CIHR Guidelines for Health Research involving Aboriginal People* (Canadian Institute for Health Research [CIHR], 2007). While these guidelines are not binding, and constitute a higher ethical standard than required by standard ethical codes, I am aspiring to adhere to these guidelines in order to carry out ethical and culturally competent research. In Aboriginal research “doing things in a good way” is central to the methodology. These guidelines consider ethical issues on a community level, as well as protecting individual research participants. Protecting individuals tends to be the focus of Western codes of research

ethics, or, more cynically – and perhaps more realistically – protecting researchers, since, as Cole (2004) states:

mm those in positions of power to enact ethical policies
are precisely the one who are committed to the status quo
committed to ensuring that ethics is defined
so that academic colonization and cognitive imperialism
remain acceptable practices against first nations people (p. 9-10).

I will begin by discussing some more conventional ethical issues that arose in my research, and then speak to some considerations for research with Aboriginal peoples.

Avoiding Exploitation of Vulnerable Groups

When doing research with vulnerable populations such as Aboriginal street youth, it is important to consider the potentially exploitive nature of the research enterprise. This is particularly important given that academic researchers have often re-colonized Aboriginal people in the research process, and I didn't want to repeat this in this research. It is crucial to “attend to issues of difference and power with the participants and community” (Suzuki et al., 2005, p. 209). As an academic researcher I have significantly more social power than an Aboriginal street youth. As a former street youth counsellor, I also have a degree of relational power based my reputation and previous interactions and relationships with these youth. These power imbalances were considered in all ethical decision making in the research process.

Informed Consent

Consent for participation in this research was negotiating ongoingly with all participants. Research objectives and procedures were clearly communicated to participants at the beginning of the research project, and they had the opportunity to withdraw their participation in this research at any point until they approved their final narrative. Participants received a copy of the informed consent by email before the interview, and this form was reviewed at the beginning of

the interview, giving an opportunity for the youth to ask questions. The honorarium was given to participants at the beginning of the interview to minimize the possible coercion to continue the interview that could be experienced by waiting to give the honorarium at the end. Although some of the youth participants were under the age of 19, parental consent was not sought. Given that street youth are often estranged from their families and many are in government care, parental consent can be a barrier for underage youth participating in research such as this. Furthermore, participation in this research project had a much lower chance of harm than many of the decisions that street youth already make autonomously from their parents. A number of “emancipated minors,” and site precedents including adolescents’ right to consent to medical treatment and guidelines stating that abused and neglected adolescents can always consent alone to participation in research (assuming the risk of harm is low) (Brooks-Gunn & Rotheram-Borus, 1994; Ensign & Bell, 2004; Meade & Slesnick, 2002).

Avoiding Harm

While the focus on the interviews was experiences with counselling, my conversations with the youth included explorations of sensitive topics given the traumatic life experiences involved in becoming a street youth and surviving life on the street. In my role as a research interviewer, I did not delve into the details or emotions of these stories; however, they still came up and I was prepared for the possibility that a participant might become distressed in an interview. If this had happened, I would have helped the participant contain themselves, helped them create a safety plan if needed (including offering crisis and counselling resources), and renegotiated consent to continue the interview. Participants were also assured at the beginning of the interview that they could stop at any time if they became distressed or did not want to continue. At the end of the interview, all participants were given a list of resources, and told to

take care of themselves since sharing stories such as this can trigger emotions hours or days after the interview is complete.

Multiple Relationships

As researcher working in my area of professional practice I wondered if I would deal with multiple relationships in this research process. I know many Aboriginal street youth and former street youth in Vancouver, and some could have responded to my recruitment efforts. While I knew I would not interview my own former counselling clients, I was open to the possibility that I might interview youth that I had a pre-existing relationship with, and this did happen. One of the youth who volunteered to participate was a participant in another research project I had been involved with. When she contacted me, I explained the possible conflict and told her I would have to talk to my supervisor and get back to her. We decided that because my former relationship with her was also in my role as a researcher, it was ethical to invite her to be a participant.

Another area where I dealt with multiple relationships, at least in my head, was with some of the counsellors in the stories. As someone who has worked with street youth in Vancouver over the past 12 years and was recruiting youth in Vancouver, I knew that it was likely that some of the counsellors my participants shared about would be people that I know personally, and this turned out to be true. Perhaps this is more of an analytic issue, since knowing them couldn't help but influence how I heard the youths' stories of them (and this is something I journalled about), but it also seems like an ethical issue. Certainly, ensuring the youth's confidentiality requires that I do not disclose their presence in a story to any of the counsellors I know (or could meet in the future), but I also feel an ethical obligation to be cognizant of how the story I heard about them could colour my interactions with them in the future.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality was promised to all participants, and limits to confidentiality (such as reporting suicidality) were explained while obtaining informed consent. Confidentiality was maintained by keeping all data securely stored. Notes, audio-tapes and transcripts were identified only by code number, and identifying information such as names were changed. All study documents were kept in locked filing cabinets and on password protected computers. The names and consent forms of participants were kept separately from interview notes, audio-tapes, and transcripts.

In presenting holistic stories of members of a small community, it is possible that a participant's anonymity could be compromised, although only people who know them well would be able to identify them. This risk was explained to participants and they had final approval of the story that was presented.

Considerations for Research with Aboriginal Peoples

Respect is essential to Aboriginalizing research methodologies. As stated in the NEARBC website, "respect is demonstrated toward Aboriginal Peoples' cultures and communities by valuing their diverse knowledge of health matters and toward health science knowledge that contributes to Aboriginal community health and wellness" (citing Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). My qualitative approach valued the knowledge of Aboriginal street youth about their own experiences in counselling. The youth were given the opportunity to give feedback and approval of their personal narratives. I observed proper cultural protocols in approaching community member and participants for interviews, including telling them "who I am and where I come from" and offering a gift (honorarium) to participants. Participants have also been offered a copy of the completed thesis, and will be invited to attend any community presentations of the findings. The theoretical and contextual framework of this study

incorporated knowledge from research on Aboriginal issues by Aboriginal peoples, and the methodology including “immersion in Aboriginal worldviews,” which are aligned with CIHR’s guideline that “a researcher should understand and respect Aboriginal world views” (Article 1).

Ethical codes for research with Aboriginal people stress the importance of collaborative research practices. For example, the CIHR guidelines talk about the community’s jurisdiction over the conduct of research (Article 2) and the importance of participatory-research approaches (Article 3). As a small Master’s thesis this is not a participatory research project with a formal Aboriginal community partner, however, the development of this research proposal was greatly impacted by conversations with Aboriginal youth and service providers about my research ideas. Included in these conversations was advice on ethical protocols, such as recruitment procedures and appropriate honorarium amounts. The interviews were intended to be collaborative, as they are relatively unstructured, allowing the youth to determine what is most important about their experience with counsellors, rather than just responding to a researcher’s questions. Youth also collaborated in the analysis through providing feedback and approval on their narratives.

Finally, it is a central tenant of Aboriginalizing methodologies that the community be the primary beneficiary of the research, as stated in the CIHR guidelines: “research should be of benefit to the community as well as to the researcher” (Article 9). Furthermore, as a practitioner, it is important to me that this thesis contributes knowledge that is useful in practice, in addition to creating knowledge for the sake of the research enterprise or to meet the requirement for my Master’s. Resonant with this commitment to praxis-oriented research, I intend to share my research in practical ways that benefit the participants or the population the participants are from. I will present my findings in various formats, for different audiences such as street youth, counsellors, street youth workers, academics, social service administrators, and government officials. My commitment to research that benefits the community will be honoured. I have

already presented preliminary findings from this research at two international psychology conferences (Brunanski, 2008a, Brunanski, 2008b) and several graduate student gatherings (Brunanski, 2008c; Brunanski, 2009a; Brunanski, 2009b). Furthermore, I have already been using some of these lessons in my own counselling practice with hard-to-engage Aboriginal youth, as well as sharing them with colleagues.

Criteria for Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is qualitative researchers' version of validity in quantitative research. It is the question of how we know the findings are "true." Given that the Aboriginal and narrative epistemologies underlying my methodology question Western assumptions of objective "truth," the question of whether to "trust" my findings becomes more difficult to answer. After an almost fruitless search for articles on trustworthiness or validity in Aboriginal research methodologies, I sent an email to Peter Cole asking about Aboriginal perspectives on "trustworthiness, and this was his response:

I think that in terms of trustworthiness that there is no certainty when it comes to dealing with people esp people in crisis situations there are so many variables which themselves are fluctuating with the changing microcontexts science incl social science has this idea of the 'experiment' being reproducible with similar if not identical results it is not so easy to fit people into formulas to assume that people work always in predictable ways (Cole, personal communication, January 2008).

He went on to say that there are not many Aboriginal researchers writing about issues on trustworthiness in research "at least they are not thinking in those terms" (Cole, personal communication, January 2008). Finally, he suggested that:

you have the frameworks from the articles you read in class and from those frameworks you can build your own ideas about validity rigor trustworthiness (Cole, personal communication, January 2008).

Trusting my teacher, I will share some emerging ideas on Aboriginalizing trustworthiness as guides for the reader to judge my research.

“Doing things in a good way” is central to Aboriginalizing research, thus part of the trustworthiness of the research could be the degree to which the knowledge creation process was respectful. How can research practices that exploit people lead to trustworthy findings? As discussed, many attempts have been made to do this research “in a good way,” to be respectful, collaborative, honouring of Aboriginal worldviews, and committed to research that benefits the community. In another email about Aboriginalizing methodologies, Cole suggested one way of judging the trustworthiness of research would be asking: “are the results written in a way so that a ‘typical’ Aboriginal elder will understand what is going on? are the results something that you could talk about while picking berries or fishing or looking for roots for basket weaving?” (personal communication, March 2008). While I think these are results you could discuss while picking berries, I’m not sure this thesis is written in such a way that an elder, or a street youth, could understand them. As an academic thesis, this document is written for a particular audience, and I am committed to creating formats for sharing my results that are understandable to a range of possible audiences.

Absolon and Willett (2004) suggest that “location equals contextual validation,” arguing that: “When researching Aboriginal knowledge and Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal elders and communities expect researchers to foster a knowledge creation process that accounts for many variables, including epistemological, cultural, colonial, historical, and contemporary contexts of both the researched and the researcher” (p. 123). Thus, one criterion for trustworthiness could be how well I have accounted for my own location in my research. I have been keeping a journal since the beginning of this process, and have included writings about my location and journey in several places in this document. I hope I have shared sufficiently about who I am and where I

come from for readers to judge for themselves how my location informs my conclusions, and how those conclusion might transfer to their own location.

Absolon and Willett's (2005) mention of the "many variables" that Aboriginal elders and communities expect research to account suggests another form of validity, which perhaps could be called *ecological validity*, that is, the degree to which the research is contextualized within a dynamic, holistic, and interconnected Aboriginal worldview. This includes the degree to which the research takes culture and socio-historical context into account, so could also be called a form of cultural validity. It also includes the degree to which the youth's stories are presented in their own words – a criteria which relates to qualitative researchers' notion of "thick description," that is, presenting many examples of the participant's own voices thus allowing the reader to assess the researcher's conclusions and come to their own (Hoshmand, 2005; Morrow, 2005). I believe a strength of this research is its ecological validity.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

My Research Journey

A Long Road from Conception to Completion

This research has taken me on a long journey, down many roads I didn't know I would take, and through many struggles as well as moments of profound learning. I started my Master's degree almost 4 years ago, and began developing this thesis from the beginning. I can see the evolution of my research questions and methodologies through proposals for three different methodology courses and numerous scholarship applications. I came back to university knowing that I would do qualitative research on counselling with street-involved youth, and as I came to understand that I was going to focus on Aboriginal youth, I went on a parallel journey of examining my own Aboriginality. I knew that in order to do research with Aboriginal street youth "in a good way," I needed to seek more teachings about Aboriginal cultures and histories and continue to engage in my own personal journey of cultural reconnection.

My learning has been incredible, and I have been privileged to have some amazing teachers. My thinking on Aboriginalizing methodology was deeply impacted by my participation in two classes in a two week "institute on indigeneity" in the summer of 2007. It was also deeply impacted by my work as a research assistant on two projects relating to Aboriginal street youth. The first was a photo engagement project looking at service gaps for Aboriginal street youth in the South Fraser region of Greater Vancouver in the spring of 2007. The second was a community-based population health survey of Aboriginal street-involved youth in British Columbia, with Aboriginal community consultation guiding the analysis and reporting (Saewyc et al., 2009). I was involved with this project for a year and a half beginning in July 2007. My thinking was also deeply impacted by my participation in events and ceremonies at the UBC

First Nations House of Learning, the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre, and other community spaces. Through a process during which I often felt like my head was overflowing with ideas and possibilities, I developed a proposal which I defended in February 2008. Ethical approval in hand, I began recruitment in May 2008 and despite slower progress recruiting than I had hoped, I had interviewed enough youth by July 2008. So why is it that I am defending my thesis a year later?

The answer lies in the lessons from my research. There are not enough counsellors with the skills and willingness to work with these often very challenging clients, particularly those of us with Aboriginal ancestry. I finished my practicum in child and youth mental health in April 2008, and began recruiting participants in May 2008. I did not intend to begin working for about 6 months, knowing the work it was going to take to complete this project. But by July 2008 I had a job offer as a mental health clinician with hard-to-engage Aboriginal youth. It was a perfect position, plus they were willing to wait two months while I went on an already planned trip to Europe, for 2 weeks of conferencing in Germany, then 5 weeks in Prague, Czech Republic, a city that I have been in love with since 1995. How could I say no?

As I arrived in Prague in August 2008, ready to begin my analysis, I got some interesting news from a participant. A young man I had interviewed in June emailed me to withdraw from the study. He told me that he had been claiming to be Aboriginal for the past 6 years after befriending some “First Nations drag queens” while in the midst of his journey through the street. He shared that he had recently come to realize how this lie was limiting his healing, and his recent involvement in a Christian church given him the strength to “end the façade.” He apologized and offered to return the honorarium. In my journal I wrote: “I admire his courage in admitting such a big lie, and in supporting the integrity of my research by not contributing false data. Although I am fascinated to know what caused him to claim a false, further marginalized

identity. Perhaps he found more community there? A sense of belonging that is missing from many urban modern western cultures” (Journal, August 11, 2008). There is no way of knowing if my speculations have any truth, although it suggests some interesting questions about the nature of identity and belonging.

I began my analysis in Prague, and then attempted to continue once I started working fulltime in September 2008. Adjusting to working fulltime after over 2 years as a fulltime student was difficult in itself, and my thesis sat untouched for a couple of months, although I could see myself enacting the lessons I had already learned with my new clients: “I am using everything I have learned so far in my research process as I attempt to engage with these youth, so far all young girls who could be my participants a few years ago” (Journal, October 27, 2008). Besides not having a lot of time to work on my thesis, I was also nervous about getting overwhelmed by thinking about counselling with Aboriginal street youth, given the similarities between my clinical work and my research topic. I wrote in my journal: “I think I am a bit scared of getting back into my analysis because of how similar my clients seem to my participants. How will I have emotional boundaries? How will I not bring my work home when what I am writing about at home is the same as what I am doing at work and when I am wondering how my clients would tell the story of me a few years from now? As the counsellor they were forced to see? As one who made a difference? As someone pleasant but irrelevant? Will I be second-guessing myself all the time if I am counselling as I write about counselling? Or will it enhance my practice? And how will my practice impact my analysis? Will I be writing my clients’ stories into the participants’ stories, and vice versa? I can’t help but think that it will be all good in the end, that counselling as I complete my thesis will enrich my analysis and writing, and that writing about counselling will help my practice. But how will I survive?” (Journal, October 27, 2008).

I didn't. While I continued to combine work and thesis for 6 more months, my self-care deteriorated. Furthermore, because my methodology required "immersion in the data," I found myself feeling like I was starting over again and again, as I wrote in my journal: "I just looked over my narrative analysis of Casper, and realized that I need to start the immersion process yet again, for the third time" (Journal, November 25, 2008). After I failed to meet the initial deadline my employer had agreed to (this job required a Master's, after all), I negotiated some whole weeks off to work on it. While I had more success with a whole week to focus, the progress was still slow, which I felt especially bad about telling my participants, who I had been updating regularly, as I wrote: "I need to email the girls again. I hate that I keep saying 'soon,' and then having to say 'later'" (Journal, January 30, 2009). What I was learning from my participant's stories continued to have a positive impact on my work, and I found "myself at work talking about what I am learning from my research" (Journal, February 7, 2009). I believe that being an active counsellor while engaging in my analysis deepened and enriched my storying and the lessons I drew from the youth's stories, but my fears about becoming overwhelmed were also coming true: "I am deep in data immersion, and it is hard to not think about my clients a lot, as well as my participants. It is fulfilling but consuming, and I'm not sure how well I am taking care of myself" (Journal, February 20, 2009). Eventually it became clear that I was never going to finish this way. So I took 2 months off to complete, and here I am. A word of advice: don't try to complete a thesis, particularly a qualitative thesis that requires immersion in the data, while working fulltime. Although there has been amazing synergy in the parallels between my work and thesis, it was overwhelming, and ultimately impossible.

Journeys in Aboriginalizing Methodologies

When I wrote my proposal I knew that I want to look at the youth's stories holistically as well as considering "themes" across the interviews, with a emphasis on implications for

counselling practice. This is ultimately what I have done, however, my methods of storying and drawing lessons have transformed through this research journey. My methodology I proposed in February 2008 used Leiblich and colleagues (1998) as a guide for creating the youth's stories, proposing a holistic content analysis for each participant. At my proposal defense, my committee and I discussed concerns that this method was too analytic and not holistic enough – not Aboriginalizing enough – and I ultimately took another direction. Although it increased the risk of identifiability, I wanted to present the youth's stories in their entirety and in their own words as much as possible. In the months after the defense and through my recruitment and interviewing I read about methodology, seeking practical suggestions for how to turn my long interview transcripts into coherent narratives. Eventually I came across two articles by Coralie McCormack (2000a, 2000b) that provided me with a guide. McCormack described a method which involved multiple readings of the transcript through different lenses, and then using the insights highlighted through these readings to develop an interpretive story. What she was describing was not that different from other critical narrative research methodologies I had encountered (e.g. Arvay, 2003), what was different was the level of detail in her description of the process of a “daunting task. Faced with page upon page of interview transcripts, how do we construct ... *a meaningful story*” (McCormack, 2000a, p. 282, emphasis in original).

At the same time, I continued to seek Aboriginal teachings, hoping for a synergistic influence, as I had planned in my journal: “I will read read read about indigenous and other story-telling. I will read indigenous stories, look at art, participate in cultural events, learn songs. Meanwhile I will conduct my interviews and have them transcribed, then begin to listen/read them, immersing myself in the data, while still reading as described above (I'll have to give it a name. Reading indigeneity?) I will go through a creative process and something will emerge, the ‘holistic story based on their interview’ that I wrote about in my proposal. I don't know what it

will look like in the end, but I have some idea of how I am starting.” (Journal, May 20, 2008).

The name that I ultimately gave this aspect of my methodology was “Immersion in Aboriginal Worldviews”: decolonizing my mind.

After hearing Graham Smith speak at a meeting of Aboriginal graduate students I wrote in my journal “the idea of seeing western and indigenous as binaries is a western way of thinking ... maybe it’s a western idea that a worldview has to be ‘coherent’ and not contradictory, when it seems more to me that if I am standing in an interconnected dynamic holistic worldview then I can incorporate many contradictory threads” (Journal, May 20, 2008). Being reminded of this was helpful in creating a methodology that is ultimately a fusion of multiple influences on my thinking. As I wrote in my journal 6 months later, “as my blood and identity are hybrid, so are my teachers, so is my ‘way’ as a researcher. I am placing indigenous worldviews at the centre of this research, since it is research with indigenous people, but I am also informed by feminism, postmodernism, ‘post’-colonial theory, and many theories of psychology and counselling. I can use these, and then try to be aware of when I am using them, as part of decolonizing my mind.” (Journal, November 25, 2008).

I began my work with the interviews using McCormack as a guide and focusing first on Casper’s story. Reflections and insights flowed out of my pen as I “actively” listened to Casper’s interview, sitting in a park overlooking a view of “the city of a thousand spires.” Then I began the narrative reading and started to struggle, as I wrote in my journal: “I find myself resisting the method of story analysis I am using. Orientation, abstract, what happened, evaluation, coda, theorizing, augmentation. I don’t want to chop up her story into these bits” (Journal, August 21, 2008). Eventually I chose not to “chop up” the stories, although I did read for these “bits” in each story within each interview. In October, when I came back to Casper’s interview, I was able to complete the multiple readings and filled pages and pages with notes as each new lenses

highlight different aspects of the story and what could be learned from it. These reflections informed the writing of their stories as well as forming the basis for the lessons I am sharing.

Meanwhile, my immersion in Aboriginal worldviews continued. When I was in Prague I read “Aboriginal research and theory every morning before I work on the data analysis” (Journal, August 21, 2008). With little access to Aboriginal culture in the Czech Republic⁷, I had brought some books with me, and also found a new book called *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* (Green, 2007) at one of the conference in Germany, attracted to the familiarity of the Métis beadwork on the cover. Back in Vancouver at my new job, my active work with the interviews was set aside for a couple of months, but my Aboriginal reading continued, and I resumed my participation in cultural activities. I wrote in my journal: “Today I read a story with this repeated refrain: ‘All the while, I kept singing and dancing, and learning more from my ancestors who left the stories behind for us to hear, and trying to remember all that I could’ (Chi’XapKaid, 2005, p. 129). This is part of what I have been doing. Developing as an indigenous researcher means singing and dancing and learning the stories, spending time with elders, participating in ceremonies, reclaiming this part of my cultural heritage that I seem so drawn to ... Maybe I need to trust more that when I am reading and singing and dancing I am absorbing something that will come out in my analysis, that it will allow me to see things from the indigenous worldview I talk about in my methodology. Do I need to journal every insight for my audit trail? I have been on such a personal journey around indigeneity through the course of this research, some of which I have documented through papers, memos, and this journal, but most of which has transformed me without a written record. Living life, not writing life” (Journal, November 25, 2008)

⁷ Unless you count Europeans who enact Aboriginal life (often as they see it portrayed in old western movies), which I had heard there were many of in the Czech Republic. I actually met one at a pub one night last summer, and was surprised to discover that he had a fairly good grasp of the impact of colonization and the situation of contemporary Aboriginal peoples, and could even name a bunch of Aboriginal fiction writers that I didn’t know.

One of the places that my quest for Aboriginal stories and teachings about nature led me was to books. As I considered what to read, I realized how my journey of decolonizing my mind had impacted the way I was choosing books, since it had impacted the way I evaluate the “trustworthiness” or “validity” of knowledge. For example, I wanted to know about the author’s location – who they were and where they were from. I wanted to know that written accounts of traditional stories had been created “in a good way” and that I was not reading sacred knowledge stolen by a colonialist researcher. I wrote in my journal, “I want to place indigenous voices first in my analysis. Does that mean I need to go back and identify which of my sources are indigenous people? But what if I can’t find out? In most mainstream articles the authors don’t locate themselves. So how do I validate their knowledge?” (Journal, November 25, 2008).

My immersion in Aboriginal worldviews had an impact on my multiple readings of the interview transcripts. For example, in the language readings I read for how the youth spoke about their Aboriginal identities, cultures and communities; in the context readings I read for the impact of colonization, including cultural (dis)connection, and I considered questions such as “what are the ways in which these girls subscribe to Aboriginal ways of understanding, to Aboriginal ‘cultural fictions’?” and “Where do they resist mainstream fictions, engage in acts of personal decolonization?” (Journal, November 25, 2008). I also tried to read for relationality and the interconnectedness of all things, as I wrote about reading Rose’s transcript: “I know I am looking from interconnectedness, for example, the web of the street youth centre that supported her.” (Journal, January 9, 2009). Focusing on the interconnectedness of elements in their stories also helped me become aware of the importance of parts of the story that had not been told. I became exceedingly aware of how the story they told of their journey through the street may have been a different story if it had been landmarked by something other than experiences with

counsellors, how the events that are “foregrounded in a particular telling of a story depend on what is asked for, the purpose of the story, the point of the story” (Journal, February 1, 2009).

I thought about how I would Aboriginalize the writing of the youth’s stories and my own story, wondering about writing in “indigenous styles. I’m not even sure what I mean when I say that. Will I write as a conversation between Coyote and Raven or other animals?” (Journal, May 20, 2008). I wrote several times in my journal about ways I could use stories with animal characters to represent my findings, such as “maybe I could come up with an animal to represent each youth” (Journal, January 9, 2009) or maybe I could write “a story of journey, overcoming obstacles, giving back to community ... using animals. I could write one that included references to all of the learning I got from the youth. Have an animal go on a journey, meet other animals who help the youth in ways that represent my learnings, and then eventually heal and give back” (Journal, April 5, 2009). This last idea excited me enough that I wrote a possible introduction to the story, then put it aside to complete the youth’s stories and my own.

Another learning from my cultural immersion was “that indigenous knowledge comes from the observation of plants and animal, so using natural metaphors is an indigenous way of sharing knowledge” (Journal, November 25, 2008). Although I probably spent more time “in the bush” as a child than most Canadian kids, I have always lived in a city of over a million people, and my journaling continued with this lament: “What do I know of plants and animals, living in the modern world, so disconnected from nature?” Natural metaphors do not come as easily to me as if I had grown up closer to nature, or if I had grown up more culturally connected and had more exposure to Aboriginal story-tellers. I wondered if I could find natural metaphors by asking my family members who grew up more connected (to nature if not culture), such as my mother: “My mom received a lot of teachings about nature, so maybe she can help me. Maybe she can read the stories and suggest natural metaphors, suggest plant and animal journeys that reflect the

youth's stories." As I worked on the storying of the interviews, I started to identify threads in the stories and wrote about "finding a natural metaphor that means the same as weaving" (Journal, January 25, 2009).

Ultimately, I did not do any of these things. Raven and Coyote do not speak in these pages. The need to finish, the need to graduate and go back to my job, mean that many of my thoughts on Aboriginalizing methodologies remain only ideas at this point. Like many of my ideas and insight through this research journey, many of my ideas on Aboriginalizing will have to be enacted in the future, and I can only hope that my readers and my ancestors forgive all of the ways that I have surely re-colonized rather than de-colonized through this research, ways that perhaps will become apparent to me later in my journey. As one of my supervisors is known to say "the best thesis is a done thesis" and this is the thesis that I have done. Perhaps it is more that I have to forgive myself, let go of all that I did not do. And take comfort in the fact that my participants loved the way that I presented their stories. Maxine said that she "was impressed at how I maintained her words" (Journal, May 27, 2009). Casper "thought the story was a good representation of her story and the interview she gave ... She said she especially liked the way it ended, with her lessons about counselling, since this is, after all, research about counselling" (Journal, May 28, 2008). Courtney talked about how when I emailed her the story, "she was a little apprehensive, 'cause she didn't know what it would be, or if it would be interesting. She said she read through the whole thing in one sitting, enthralled. She said she liked my connecting comments, how they created intrigue and continuity in the story. She also liked how I inserted my own reactions. She liked knowing what I was thinking" (Journal, May 28, 2009). Finally, Rose liked that I had "used so much of her own words, and said that she could hear herself talking when she read the story" (Journal, June 15, 2009).

My understanding of my location has also been impacted through my research journey, as I explored my identity as an “Aboriginal researcher.” As I wrote in my journal, “something I find myself struggling with in my own self-identity and therefore my identity as an indigenous researcher is that I am not only Cree Métis, and I want to be connected to these ancestors as well. Chi’XapKaid (2005) writes ‘if we failed to remember our ancestors, our freedom would be somebody’s freedom, not our own. Our destiny, the destiny of someone else. Our ancestors will not even be able to recognize us on the other side: we would have changed so much’ (p. 128). I want not only to remember my Cree ancestors, but all of my ancestors.” (Journal, November 25, 2008). I feel more integrated that I did when I wrote those words, more comfortable in the hybridity of my multiple identities. Who I am and where I am from remains the same, but my understanding of my location has changed over the years, and how I talk about my identity has transformed over my lifetime. As Absolon and Willet (2004) remind me: “we each locate ourselves differently at various points in our lives. As our recovery from colonization progresses, we speak about our past and present experiences with more awareness, understanding, and knowledge, and we revise the stories of our lives” (p. 112). As my research journey ends, my life of journey of finding and honouring all of my ancestors will continue.

The Youth’s Stories

Casper

Casper is an 18 year old Blackfoot woman who lives in Vancouver in a transitional housing program for street-involved youth. She grew up the Fraser Valley, in suburban and rural areas outside of Vancouver. She is a middle child with two brothers and a sister. Casper’s mother and father separated when she was 4 years old and she hasn’t seen her father since. Casper started her story of street-involvement with a story of child abuse, and a mother’s attempts to soothe her distressed daughter with drugs.

When I was about 7 years old something happened to me. And it took place for a long period of time. About 7 years. And it had a really big effect on me and I was really lost and hurt and confused and angry. So when I was 12 I started having sleeping problems and I told my mother about it. My sleeping problems were really bad, so at first she started giving me weed to go to sleep, so I would smoke it and go to sleep. But after a few months it didn't work and she started giving me pills and I didn't know what they were. After a while, I went out looking and my addiction grew into something that I never thought it would be. I didn't know what I wanted, but I knew that I wanted something. So I tried everything and I couldn't find it again. I never did. In that process came more addiction and then I started stealing from my mother and not going to school and being in and out of the drunk tank and jail, getting charged for assault and theft. It kind of down spiraled from there. When I was 13 I got kicked out of my mom's house.

Casper didn't say much more about her childhood, though it's clear from her stories of healing that she grew up in a very damaging environment. She and her siblings were "in and out of foster homes a lot" from the time she was 11. When I asked if she grew up knowing much about her Aboriginal culture and traditions, Casper said "nothing at all." She only recently learned that her father is Blackfoot, and she's "heard he's from Montana." Her mother is also Aboriginal, but was adopted, so does not know where she's from. Casper's only connection to Aboriginal culture was in a First Nations class at school.

There was a First Nations class at school, in elementary school, but it was just a lunchtime thing where we got together and talked. It wasn't really anything that I learned from.

Casper didn't actually think much about being Aboriginal until she went to her first foster home. It was the first time she remembers experiencing racism.

I never knew it was an issue until I was about 11, when we first went into our first foster home for 6 months. They treated us really differently. There were other kids there with different

backgrounds and they would go out and leave us home while they went out to some game or to dinner or to a movie or to the park even. I remember just always being home and them going out and them coming home with toys and stuff and it was horrible. And they made us go to Church and even there you would get treated differently.

One other thing that Casper shared about herself as a child is that she was very shy, and this caused her problems at school.

It was just really horrible as a kid because I was so shy and teachers hated it. So they humiliated me in front of the whole class. I remember in elementary school my teacher asked me a question, and I'd start balling 'cause he'd make me answer and I didn't want to talk. And this one time with my gym teacher, I wouldn't talk so he made me run laps. I got a really bad cramp and I was crying and I was running and he was running beside me, screaming at me like, "When are you going to talk? You're going to keep running! Keep running!" It was horrible.

By the age of 13, Casper had been kicked out of her house and was on the street.

I was couch surfing; I was mostly on the street. I wasn't working. I doing not so good things

When she was 14, Casper told someone at school about the abuse she had been experiencing for the past 7 years. For the first time, someone told Casper that what she was experiencing was not normal. That person also reported the abuse to the Ministry.

When it was happening, I thought it was normal. But when I talked to somebody at school, that's when they had reported it and said it wasn't normal. And I was like, "well okay then." Then I had this huge statement that I had to write, and a whole bunch of people were coming in and asking me to what extent it had happened and how long did it go on for and blah blah blah?

At this time in her life, Casper wasn't sharing her feelings with anyone, and one time that she shared with her siblings while under the influence only seemed to isolate her more.

No one at all. But I was under the influence one time and I was with my brother and my sister, and I tried to harm myself. And that's when I told them what was wrong and why I wanted to do that. And then after that everyone in my family just kind of pushed me away and didn't really want to be with me anymore.

After she disclosed the abuse, Casper was sent to an art therapist. It was her first experience with a counsellor, and it "didn't really go over well." Casper says she doesn't remember anyone suggesting counselling before this time, which surprised me, since she had been in care for three years and street-involved for over a year. But even though Casper hadn't been actively seeking counselling, she recognized that she needed help.

I was really confused. I didn't know what I wanted, so somebody had referred me. I knew that I needed it because I was real angry and I kept isolating myself and I just buried myself in drugs and I just became like a nobody. And I was having major suicidal thoughts at that point in time.

Casper only saw Darryl once, and did not feel comfortable talking to him about the abuse.

He already had the statement, but he wanted to hear it. I'm like, "Well, you can read it. It's right there." All I remember is I was really uncomfortable because I was talking to him about this. Well I was supposed to, but I never did. And it was a male. At that point in my life I was having major issues with men. So it didn't go anywhere.

When I asked Casper if there was anything Darryl could have done to make her feel more comfortable, she suggested that he could have slowed down. He could have told her his intentions, taught her some coping skills, and been patient about asking her to share her story.

I don't know. It would have been cool if he told me his intentions on what he wanted to help me with or maybe help me get some ideas on how I could deal with it. Not just jump into a really sensitive area right away.

Casper told Darryl she would return, but she never did. She laughed as she said that it was easier than trying to communicate that she not coming back.

No, I said I was coming back. I just never did. It's easier that way.

Casper was left with a very negative impression of counsellors.

I didn't want to go see them ever again.

But she still needed help, and when her grandma suggested that she go to treatment, Casper was more than willing.

I remember my grandma coming down and my mom and my dad and I can't remember what happened, but they put both me and my sister into the same treatment centre. I think it was through some worker at school. I was really happy 'cause I think at that point I was just dying and screaming for help and nobody was hearing me. So when they said, "This is the best thing for you right now," it sounded really good.

Casper was 14 when she went to treatment for the first time. It was an 8 month co-ed Aboriginal youth addictions treatment centre. When I asked her about her first impressions of the place, my heart went out to her as she talked about how happy she was to simply have her basic needs met.

My first impression was the location was kind of scary because it was beside an old residential school. So, it was kind of intimidating when I got there, but the feeling once you got inside of the building, I really liked it. It was warm, I had a bed, I had food, and I didn't have to worry at all about where I was going to sleep and stuff like that. I was just really happy about that.

There were “a whole bunch of workers” at the centre, so someone was available 24/7 if Casper wanted to talk. I asked if she felt safe and comfortable with any workers in particular. A wide smile spread across her face as she said, “I can tell you about one.” This began the story of Tim, Casper’s main counsellor at the treatment centre, and someone who is still one of the primary supports in her life. What struck Casper most about Tim was that he never got angry at her and he treated her like an equal.

The one thing that stands out is he never got mad at me. Like if we would go out to the field and smoke, ‘cause you weren’t allowed to smoke there, he would never get mad. Whenever something was wrong and I acted out, he wasn’t like, “You did this and you did something wrong.” He was more like, “Well, what’s wrong? Why are you acting out in this way?” He would just talk to us like we were people and not like we were kids with major behaviour issues. He treated us like equals. That’s why I really connected to him. ‘Cause it wasn’t like I was above him or below him. It was like I was on the same level as him.

Tim came to the centre when Casper had already been there for a couple of months. His attitude of respect spread throughout the program, especially since he quickly became a lead facilitator.

The whole program changed because of him. Because other staff were treating us not good. Like I remember it was wintertime and I can’t remember what we were doing, but we weren’t being good and we wanted to go outside and they were like, “If you want to go outside, you can go outside.” And they locked us out for hours and it was snowing and it was cold and we were locked outside. It was really, really bad. But when Tim got there, things changed. The workers started being more civil and being more respectable to the youth. And he moved up really fast.

Casper told one story that exemplifies how Tim treated her with respect, like a person capable of making choices and living with the consequences of those choices.

I was a big rebel and he always had electronics that he brought in and I remember me and my friend stole something from his little fanny pack one time. He knew it was gone and he knew that it was us. We were only supposed to take it for a little while, but then it grew into two days, and then into this whole big week thing and he finally came to the youth and he said, “Well, whoever has it I would like it back. If you could just put it on the table or something I won’t have to know it’s you.” And so we put it back. Then we were outside smoking, and he said, “I know you guys took it. I’m not mad at you.” I was expecting him to scream at me or something. He’s like, “In life you’re going to make decisions and you’re going to make choices and you’re going to suffer the consequences, whether those consequences be good or bad.” And I remember looking at him, “So, you’re going to let me do anything and suffer the consequences?” And he said, “Yeah, I’m just not going to get mad at you. You know I’ll be there for you, if you’re hurt and if you need someone to talk to, but I’m never going to get mad at you.” So, basically, the thing that I really liked about him is he let us do whatever we wanted, and we suffered the consequences whether that be good or bad.

Being treated like a person capable of making choices created space for Casper to feel more independent and responsible for herself and her actions. She laughed as she shared how, since Tim didn’t get the police to bring them back from their illicit trip to the store like the other workers had, she and the other youth went back to the centre on their own. What else were they going to do?

He just made me feel really independent and like I had to think for myself. Because there were other workers, they had you so tightly on a leash you couldn’t do anything. You couldn’t say anything. And we didn’t really learn that way. But when Tim came it was different. Because

we had so much freedom and so much choices. I remember we'd take off to the store all the time and we weren't allowed outside a certain perimeter. They would call the cops and lock us in our rooms, but Tim would just let us go and he wouldn't come looking for us. And no one's looking for us, "well what do we do?" It's like, "well, we might as well go back." And then we'd get back and he's like, "How was it? You get beat up? You get robbed? You get hurt?" and we're like, "No." And he's like, "Welcome back. Are you hungry?" It was just weird.

The look on Casper's face as she shared these last words led me to comment, "It looks like maybe it was a bit confusing. Did you wonder what's up with this guy?"

I always did. He was always humble. He was always at peace. Every time I was with him I just felt so safe, I felt so calm and like nothing was wrong. Because he told me one time, "You know Casper, you can make a situation as bad as you want it. Like if this happened to you, you can dwell on it and live in the past, or you can move forward and not really look at the past, but try and heal from the past and look towards tomorrow." Because he told me a couple of his stories and how he got through them. He said that the mind was the most powerful thing 'cause you can make the situation as difficult as you want it to.

Being able to tap the power of her mind to cope with situations and emotions is something Casper learned from Tim, but it was a lesson that unfolded over time.

He taught me that over a period of time. It took a long time, because I was really angry and I was stuck in one place for a long time.

At the treatment centre Casper began to share her story with Tim, and to acknowledge her pain. This was the first time she had shared like this with another person.

We talked about what happened. Why I was using so much. Because when it was happening, I thought it was normal. It happened for so long, it just became something that I

thought was a part of life, but it wasn't and I was told it was very wrong and then I started acknowledging that I was hurt and angry and lost and confused about a lot of things.

I asked Casper if Tim was Aboriginal, and when she answered yes, I began to ask if any of his teaching was about Aboriginal cultures and traditions. She interrupted me after the word 'teaching' and shared how "Tim definitely was a big turning point for that," given that she had grown up with little connection to her culture.

Yeah, he built a sweat lodge one time. And he brought us to many spirit baths. He told us about the medicines. He knew a lot. A lot of the other workers at the treatment centre didn't know anything. I mean, I remember them teaching us simple things like self esteem, stuff like that, but nothing about tradition or culture or anything like that. But when Tim came that's when we started learning a lot. It was awesome 'cause as a as a younger kid I didn't like being Aboriginal.

I asked Casper what else she remembered about the treatment centre, and she shared that there was school during the day and workshops in the evening, although she couldn't remember anything in particular. It was a long time ago, and from a time in her life that Casper doesn't remember well, nor does she particularly want to remember.

Well, there's been three different treatment centres so I can't really remember. And the thing is I think before my addiction my mind just kinda blocks the past out. So I can't really remember, even two years ago. (*Dana: Do you feel like you don't have a very good memory?*) No. Well maybe. I think that I do and it's just, I don't want to think about that because it was a really bad time in my life.

After 8 months, Casper graduated from treatment, but unfortunately her addiction and street-involvement were not over.

It made a difference but after I graduated and went back home, it was difficult 'cause things were the same. I went back out for about two more years and then I went back to treatment, here in Vancouver. And then I graduated, and then I went back out for a year. And then this last time I went back and I graduated and I've now been clean for 14 months. So, it took three times.

After treatment, Casper went to live with her mom for the first time in years. Her mom promised to get clean too, but she didn't. It was only days before Casper relapsed in this environment, and eventually she was kicked out and on the street again.

I hadn't lived there in a long time. But she was in her own addiction and she said that if I was going to be clean, she would get clean too. Because my mother, she kind of started everyone's addiction. My older brother, my older sister and then me. So she said she would get clean, but she never did. So I kind of fell back with them. My mom and I fought a lot, so I was in and out of home a lot. With boyfriends at the time, with friends. On the streets again.

When I asked how her life compared to before she went to treatment, Casper was clear that "it was worse." She doesn't remember anyone suggesting she see a counsellor during this time, but she did continue to talk to Tim. He lived in the same community and she dropped by his house once or twice a week. He even became her foster parent for a couple of months.

I still spoke to Tim. I always went to his house, for a meal or a place to stay for the night or a shower. I remember there was a time there where he knew things were wrong so he took me in for a while, but I really fucked that up. He knew my mom was completely fucked, and I hated the foster homes. And that's why he took me in. I was really desperate one time and I was just tired of being hung over and tired of being tired. I was like, "Hey, Tim, what do you think about fostering?" He's like, "I've thought about it." And at that point he took in me and another kid, a guy who graduated just after I did from treatment.

Tim provided her a taste of a “normal life”, which was unsettling for someone who had never experienced that before. Casper wonders now why she couldn’t accept what Tim was offering.

It was a normal life. I don’t know why I chose to not do good. I don't know, it’s so different. Like you don’t experience love or affection or care or anything like that and then you’re here in this home where you’re fed and you’re cared for and you’re spoken to like a human being and it was just really different and uncomfortable. And Tim asked me what was wrong all the time. And I was like, “this is weird.” Because it was just like we were sitting down to dinner or something and I remember at foster homes, they would eat and then we would eat, just me and my sister and my brother. They ate as a family and we watched them. I think at the time I was really uncomfortable. I don't know. I was really cold growing up. I didn’t care about anything or anybody. And when I lived with him I felt warm and I felt like life was going to be okay. He gave me everything that I needed. I just didn’t take it. I was still using and he didn’t want me using there and I wasn’t going to school and I didn’t have a job. And yet he gave me everything I needed to get stable and to live a good life. He even introduced me to other kids my age and other families. But I don't know what happened. I just, I wasn’t done yet, I don’t think.

Casper feels like she “fucked that up,” but fortunately her and Tim were able to work it out and he continued to be a major support in her life. Casper talked about how Tim has always been there for her unconditionally and how she understands now how much he really cares about her and wishes he could have helped her more.

Like I said, he’s never been mad at me. And I just found out recently that he wasn’t mad at me, he was sad and disappointed. ‘Cause he told me that he’s never really connected with any other youth the way he has with me. He kinda let me in. So when he sees me fucking up all the time, it really hurts him. And he wonders what he could have done differently for me to stay on.

But like, “you couldn’t have done nothing. You did everything you could and everything was perfect at that time. I just wasn’t ready Tim.” And he kind of understands that now. Because I never knew he felt guilty for my life and the way my life was going, like, “You had nothing to do with it. If anything, you were the only light that was shining in.” I hit rock bottom and then he’s forgiven me and I’ve forgiven him and I’m just trying to do better and he knows that I’m doing better now. We used to see each other a lot but now we see each other probably once a month ‘cause his work schedule and my life just kind of collide.

After Casper left Tim’s house, she was back out on the street, couch-surfing, and at her mom’s. Eventually, one of her teachers, noticing her obvious distress, suggested she check out a nearby centre for at-risk and homeless youth. I couldn’t help being shocked that Casper hadn’t been referred to this centre, or somewhere, earlier, since this was almost two years after she had left treatment, and she had been street-involved the entire time.

My teacher had told me about it ‘cause she noticed that I tried to come to school, but I was always hungry or tired or something. So she knew something was going on. So she gave me this little pamphlet for the centre. It was a place you could have a meal, you could shower, you could get some clothes, you could do some laundry. So I found out about that place and then I started talking one on one to this lady and she was really cool.

Seeing her distress, Shannon took the time to focus on Casper as soon as she came into the centre, providing emotional support and trying to find out what Casper needed. Quickly realizing the urgency of the Casper’ situation, Shannon helped her get into a treatment centre within a month of that first meeting. Going to treatment was Casper’s idea, but Shannon made it a reality for her.

Well, I came in and I was really sad. I was teary-eyed and she came up to me and she knew that something was wrong, so she dropped everything and just took my hand and took me

into the room and I remember she gave me a teddy bear. I still have him today. And she just let me cry for a little bit and listened to me and asked me what was wrong, what was going on in my life. She cared and her intentions were good. She asked me if I needed anything else. It's like, "I could use a cigarette right now." So she went and bought me a couple of packs. She said "do you need bus tickets? Can you go anywhere?" I'm like, "I have nowhere to go." And that's when she realized that she had to help me really fast and she did. I think this one time she even said "I get off work at this time, I'll leave the car unlocked and you can come, spend the night at my house or however long you need to." I'm like, "no." I think she was a major turning point in my life. She did research on treatment centres for Aboriginal youth and I remember on a daily basis, she would come back to me at school because they were right next door to each other and she would update me on what she found and she'd print applications and help me fill them out and send them off. So she was really cool and she's the one that got me into treatment in Vancouver.

Casper continued to talk to Shannon regularly in the month before she went to treatment, and I asked her if there were any other conversations that made a difference.

Not really. She was a go-getter so she was really busy all the time 'cause there was many youth in and out of there. We'd be talking and we'd get interrupted 'cause one of the youth needed something and so I realized that she'd done her job and I just had to wait. Then she had drove me to the Greyhound I think. And I got picked up from the youth worker in Vancouver.

Casper was 16 when she went back to treatment. She went to another co-ed Aboriginal youth addictions treatment centre, this time for four months, and she really liked the family feeling of the program.

It was like the first treatment centre, but a bit better. None of the youth workers were like the other ones that didn't treat us good or got mad at us. It was a family-based place and when I got there, there was just about something that I liked. Something I hadn't felt before.

Like the first treatment centre, Casper could talk to anyone she wanted, but again, someone stood out. Like Tim, Terry was caring and respectful, though Casper could sense that he was holding himself back from getting too attached.

His name is Terry. He looked a lot like my father. I hadn't seen my father since I was four, but I remember and when I seen Terry I was like, "Whoa. He looks like my dad, a lot." And he was a good guy. I was his favourite. We would sneak out of the centre and take the car and he'd take me to Starbuck's or something. He was like Tim. He let us do whatever we wanted. Except he was a little bit more cold. He wouldn't let himself get attached. You could tell that he was refraining himself from getting too attached.

When I asked what impact his detachment had, she said it hurt, and then she shared a dream she had about him and her mom. This is the first of three dreams Casper shared as part of her story.

It kind of hurt. 'Cause I really liked him. I had this one dream that my mom and him were together and they were getting into this car and I was at the house and I remember looking at them and they were together and I don't know what I was thinking, but I had that weird dream.

Building on lessons she had received from Tim, Terry taught Casper more about embracing her emotions and thinking before acting. He also helped her discover that she came to treatment not only to quit drugs, but to learn how to create a different life, since she didn't know what life was like without addiction as an escape from abuse and neglect.

Terry told me that I just have to deal and I had to accept it and not deny it, and not hide from it. I remember when I was angry or something, Terry would be happy and I was confused as to why he was so happy. But he said "I'm happy because you can feel. You should be grateful that you can feel now. Because in your addiction I'm sure you never let yourself feel. And if you did you probably don't remember it." So something that I learned from him is to be grateful that

I can think and I can feel and I can make decisions, not compulsively. He's like, "Before you do anything, Casper, I want you to think about it." I was like, "Think about what?" He's like, "Why did you come here?" and I was like, "I came here 'cause I wanted to quit drugs." He's like, "Why else did you come here?" I was like, "Um" He's like, "A part of you is wanting something. You don't know what it is." And I was like, "No, I don't know what it is." And he's like, "Well, that's the good part. If you want something and you don't know what it is, you're brave enough to come here to Vancouver. You don't know anybody. You moved away from your family. You don't know what you're looking for, but you're willing to try to find it." And that's what he told me he thought was good. 'Cause I was young, I didn't know what I wanted. I just knew I didn't want to do drugs anymore. He helped me find out why I was really there. Because I wanted a different life. I wanted to learn about life 'cause I obviously didn't know anything and the only thing I did know was using. And there was so much abuse and neglect I just wanted to get away. And when I heard about the treatment centre, I wanted to give it a try. I was like, "Well, what's there to lose? There's nothing to lose if I go there."

Another thing that Casper learned this time in treatment was the value of living "in today." This lesson came through watching the staff and noticing that they always seemed to be doing whatever needed to be done right now.

I think at that time the thing that I learned most was just to live in today and not to think about tomorrow, not to think about yesterday. Just to live in today. Because I remember looking at the staff and they were always doing what they needed to do right now and... I don't know. I learned just by watching. Because they were so normal, I was just really amazed and just kind of watched and observed and kind of interpreted it to my understanding.

Terry left his job at the centre the day Casper graduated. He moved away, and she has not seen him since. Casper went to live with a foster home on a small reserve outside Vancouver.

Her foster mother was a non-Aboriginal woman and Casper chuckled as she described her as a “single, old lady.” Casper liked her well enough, but she got in with “the wrong crowd” and started using substances again. She moved from the foster home to an independent living program, and after being evicted for partying Casper moved back to her mom’s, this time with her boyfriend Tony. By this time she was 17.

The foster home was okay. I mean, it was pretty good because she was a good lady and I could talk to her and she was really, really smart and she listened to me and gave me good advice. But then I fell in with the wrong crowd and started using again. And then I got introduced into this Independent Living program and I had my own place for half a year. I had a boyfriend at the time and I got kicked out ‘cause you have your own little suite and I was partying and stuff. So after I was there I went to go live with my mother again with my boyfriend.

Casper and Tony were using substances together, and eventually the relationship became abusive. This pushed Casper deeper into her addiction than she had ever been.

We were together for about a year and things were really good, but then we started really heavily using together. After about a year and a half he started abusing me. And then I fell really deep into my addiction. He never did, but I really I hated physical abuse ‘cause as a child, it happened so much to me, so when he did that, I was really broken. I got really deep into my addiction again and got into more harder drugs. Then we moved in with his parents. And then they got evicted, so me and Tony were back at my mother’s place. We were just basically couch surfing at that time. I remember Tim was always picking up our stuff and picking up us and taking us somewhere else. It was pretty crazy at that time.

Casper never told Tim about the abuse in her relationship. She didn’t want to disappoint him and she couldn’t leave her relationship at that time. Her puzzled tone when she said “I don’t

know why, don't ask me why" seemed to reflect how stuck she felt at the time. She was also worried Tim might do something to protect her.

I never told Tim what Tony was doing. My mother was mad, my sister was mad, and my brothers. But I never told Tim. It came to my thoughts once, but I was like, "no." I couldn't. I didn't want to hurt Tim. And I couldn't leave Tony. I couldn't. I don't know why? Don't ask me why. I couldn't leave him. So, I never told Tim. And I knew that Tim would probably have done something. 'Cause he's been a lot of people. He's just a person with a lot of power.

Although Casper didn't tell Tim, eventually she did tell another counsellor about the abuse in her relationship. Elaine was the First Nations worker in Casper's alternative school program and Casper saw her regularly for about a year.

This time there is this counsellor at school. Her name is Elaine and she was really, really helpful. 'Cause she knew how messed up my mom was and I told her about my boyfriend and my experience with her was pretty good.

Casper's sister was seeing Elaine, and Casper laughed at she shared how Elaine probably knew some pretty bad stuff about her, since her siblings were often targets of her anger.

My sister was seeing her. My sister was talking about Elaine and then my sister introduced me to her and Elaine was like, "Oh hi, Casper. I've heard so much about you." I'm like, "Oh, yeah? By who?" She's like, "Your sister." I go, "Oh." I was kind of pissed off, but then I was like, well, I pissed off my sister all the time so she probably talks about me a lot, about what I do to her. 'Cause, like I said, I was really angry, so I lashed out on my brothers and sisters a lot.

When I asked Casper if she wanted counselling at that time, her answer was a definitive yes.

I wanted to. I needed to. I was just wanting to talk to somebody. And I was really shy back then. I just went into her office and sat there and she came in and she said, “Hi there Casper.” I said “Hi.” She said, “Are you hungry?” I was like, “Yeah.” So she gave me some food and we started talking. She said, “How’s your day going?” And then it just kind of led from there.

Casper found Elaine easy to talk to because she truly listened and then respected Casper’s confidentiality. This allowed Casper to begin to open up. Casper laughed, perhaps in amazement, as she shared that Elaine sometimes even remembered more than she did.

She was calm and she never became distracted. Kids would be knocking at the door and her phone would be ringing and she would just sit there, just watching and listening to me, asking me if I needed anything. And then this one time I was holding myself from crying and she’s like, “Just cry, Casper.” And she handed me some tissue and I was like, “No.” and she’s like, “Why not?” and I’m like, “I don’t know.” And then after that I just kinda started trusting her ‘cause she never told my mother or anything. She never told anybody anything unless I wanted her to. She just listened. I would say something and she would refer to something I said the previous day, so it’s like, “Well, you were listening. You remember that? I don’t even remember that.”

In time, Casper was able to cry with Elaine. She couldn’t remember any specific stories or conversations, but this was a time in her life when she was using heavily, so perhaps, as she said before, her addiction blocked her memory. Eventually Casper decided to go back to treatment, and this time she initiated her own referral.

I had memorized the number from the previous time. If I can remember the number, it must mean something so. So I called up the manager and was like, “Hi, there.” She’s like, “When are you coming back?” I’m like, “As soon as possible.” She’s like, “Well, I’ve got a bed open in a couple of weeks.” So I was like, “ok.”

Elaine was very supportive of Casper’s plan, and she and a teacher came to Casper’s graduation. They also helped her acknowledge that she was the one who had made this change in her life.

I was all excited. I’m like, “Elaine I’m going to treatment.” And I told my teacher, but they weren’t really involved. I realized after that to be doing all this was pretty cool ‘cause the one who had to do it all was me. I remember working so hard and waiting so long to get somewhere. And I did it. And they helped me acknowledge that like, “Casper you did this all. You wanted it so bad.” It’s taken me a year to get stable after all of that. And it was amazing that they told me “You did it. You wanted it. And you never gave up.”

Casper went back to the treatment centre exactly one year after she had entered the first time.

I went back there and the manager is like, “you came in here about the same time last year,” and I was like, “That’s crazy.”

Although only a year had passed, none of the staff were the same. But once again, Casper had a special connection with one youth counsellor.

His name was Jeremy. He was pretty cool.

When I asked Casper what she liked about Jeremy, she talked about his role in her life as a cultural teacher. Through him she received many teachings about medicines and traditional practices. He also encouraged respect for the gift of life, including seeking one’s purpose for

living. While Tim and Terry were father figures, Jeremy was more like the older brother she never had, since her own older brother was lost to her in his own addiction.

He taught me a lot about medicines and a lot about tradition. He's really committed to taking care of medicines and living traditionally. So he brought me back to living way back in the day. And to be grateful for the things that we have today. 'Cause I'd always whine about the little things and he'd make me appreciate the bigger things, so that the little things never mattered as much. He'd be like, "look at the kids who live in Africa. They have no food, they have no clean water and you're bitching about not getting ice cream or something." And I'm like, "that's really stupid." He's like, "Yeah that is." So he helped me appreciate what I had, what I was working towards, and how easy it could be or how hard it could be. He was kind of like a big brother. The big brother that I never had. 'Cause he wasn't that much older. He helped me realize that living is a gift. For me to be living through all of what I went through, there must be a reason, there must be a purpose. Because I always asked him, "Why Jeremy? Why did this stuff have to happen? And why did this have to happen? And why couldn't have this happen?" He's like, "I don't know, Casper." And then when I graduated, he's like, "You know why that all happened, Casper?" I'm like, "Why?" He's like, "Because the Creator thinks you're strong now. The Creator knows that you're strong enough for you to overcome them and for you to help other youth. So maybe your purpose in life is to give back. To be a youth worker. Because you've been through a lot. And for you to come out on top of all of that you know there's something in you to offer to the world."

Casper understands Jeremy's vision of her purpose, but she still sometimes felt resentful about what she has had to endure, especially when she sees others not appreciating the families they do have. But then she remembers another lesson from Jeremy: each person has their own path.

I think it's pretty understandable but at times I still get pissed off. Because you see other families and you see other people and they're so happy and you don't have that and it's like they're not grateful for their families and they're always fighting and I'm thinking "You should be grateful you even have a family who talk to you and care about you and listen to you because other kids don't have that." But who am I to judge them, right? That's another thing I try not to do is judge people because they have their own reasons and they're on their own path. That's what Jeremy said too. He's like, "In life, Casper, you're going to travel your path and somebody else is going to travel theirs. And sometimes you need to step off your own path to help somebody else. Because by helping somebody else, you'll be helping yourself, too. Because that person's helping you find your voice by helping them." That really made sense.

Casper's speaking slowed as she began her answer my next question about whether she thinks Jeremy is right about her purpose, perhaps revealing her awe at the spiritual significance of her relationship with him. She thinks that what Jeremy says may be true, especially since his vision for her purpose is affirmed in her dream life.

I think that it may be the truth because he was so connected to a spiritual self. It was kind of scary at times. Because I always have this dream and he told me about it before I even had it. I told him one little thing and he told me that he had a dream about me helping people and giving back. This dream I always have I'm this elderly lady and it's way back in the day. I'm dressed in regalia and I'm in this hut thingy and I'm selling jewelry, turquoise and silver and beads and stuff, but I'm speaking this language that I don't know. And I still have this dream to this day. A lot. I don't know what it means. And then the other night I had a dream that I was a bear. And I was protecting these other little animals. It was so weird.

Casper learned a lot about Aboriginal culture and tradition from Jeremy, and cultural connection has continued to be an important part of her life and recovery.

He always used to tell me about these Yuwipi ceremonies that he would do and I was like, “Yeah, right. You’re full of shit.” He’s like, “there’s this little guy and he climbs to the top of the sweat and drops into the bucket of water that they have inside of the sweat.” And I was like, “Yeah, right.” And then he tells me about this big guy who comes in and it feels like the ground’s shaking and he has a really deep voice. But I went to this one Yuwipi ceremony recently and that really kind of changed my outlook on things. Because of the spirits that came. Something where I could hear them, but I couldn’t see them. It was really weird. It was a healing ceremony where we were asking the spirits to come in and help a couple of people who had cancer. I also do spirit baths, sweats and smudging. I was supposed to go Sun Dance but I’m still just having a hard time in my recovery, especially now. And there was this canoe journey that I needed to select for and I missed that too. But when the time’s right, I’ll go.

Casper only recently found out that her father is Blackfoot. This was a somewhat a random discovery, although since she began reconnecting to Aboriginal culture and traditions at the first treatment centre, Casper was determined to find out who she was and where she was from.

It was just random. But I did want to find out because when I first went to treatment they asked, “Where are you from?” I’m like, “I don’t know.” At that moment I was determined to find out where I was from and who I am ‘cause, as I’m sure you know, if you don’t know where you’re from, it’s a bad thing. It’s not the goodest feeling. I remember at school when I was younger my teacher would ask me about what I knew about me and I didn’t know anything and he knew a lot more than I did. And for him not to be First Nations to know all that I was kinda embarrassed. And it was like, “you asshole.”

Casper graduated from treatment 14 months ago. At first she went to a recovery house, but she didn't stay there long. She felt like she was done treatment, and wanted to just live her life.

I just I felt like I was done. I was done treatment. I was good. I'm going to live my life now.

She lived in safe-houses and respite homes for a couple of months until she moved into her current home. Casper likes the combination of independence and support in the transitional housing program for street-involved youth where she lives.

I needed it. I needed support. I couldn't do my own place on my own. I was terrified. I was clean. I was sober. I was finding out who I was and what I wanted and I was alone and I didn't want to be alone. 'Cause an addict in recovery alone is in bad company.

Since leaving treatment Casper has been seeing Marlo, an outreach abuse counsellor. She saw a poster for the counselling program in the bathroom at the treatment centre, and after she graduated, Casper called to make an appointment.

They had this poster in the bathroom. It said if you've been abused they offer support. So, I had an orientation with her and that went really good and we've been together since.

Casper had made a decision that she was ready to talk about her past. She had recognized that dealing with her childhood abuse was crucial to creating a healthy life for herself.

I knew that I was ready 'cause I was really thinking about it when I was treatment. "Why do I act this way? And why do I act out? And why was I using?" And I realized that was the main core of everything. Like the issues with men, the issues with abuse. What happened for that period of time in my life was the core issues to why I was doing everything. So the poster caught my eye because I knew what it was. I just, I need help understanding and accepting because there

are still times when I get really angry. I don't want to accept it and I just want to forget about it. Because it happened for so long, it's all I can remember. I don't have any other memories. My sister and my brother would be like, "Hey Casper remember this time." And I would just break down crying. And they're like, "Why are you crying?" It's like, "I can't remember." And it's like, "why?" It's not until recently that I told my older sister about what happened. She couldn't stop crying. My mother couldn't stop crying. They kind of built a deeper understanding as to why I was the way I was, why I am the way I am. So they're kind of more sensitive with me. They're more understanding.

The fact that Marlo specialized in working with people who had been abused made Casper feel more comfortable, and for the first time in her life, Casper told someone the story of what had happened to her as a child. Sharing her secret and having Marlo assure her that it was not her fault took a huge weight off Casper's shoulders.

The first session she told me what her role was. I had told no one about what happened when I was a little kid. But when it came to her, her title was to help abused people, so I just kind of let go. I told her everything what happened. Because I think the worst part about that was that I was the only one who knew. Nobody else did. And I was embarrassed and I was ashamed and she's just dealt with lots of youth so her knowing that there's a lot of youth that that happened to made me feel more comfortable. And she's like, "There's nothing to be embarrassed about. There's nothing to be ashamed about. And you shouldn't feel guilty for anything. I just want to tell you that right now." So that kind of felt like a big lift off the shoulders, just that. She took that off.

Casper has been seeing Marlo once or twice a week for the past year. Marlo picks her up, and they do whatever Casper feels like at the time. Like most of her other counsellors, Casper referred to Marlo in familial terms, this time as a mother figure.

She comes to me. We'll just drive and talk or something. 'Cause her role can be whatever I make of it. So, what I made her is kind of my escape from living life in addiction, trying to live in a recovery life and life away from life basically. We'll do whatever I want to do. She'll be the only escape route to have fun and to just let go, 'cause with her knowing what she knows, I can just be me and not be uncomfortable with it. And so we'll just have the funnest time. 'Cause in Vancouver she's the only woman who really knows me. And she's kind of like a mother figure now. But she kind of pisses me off sometimes. We have our little fights.

Whatever the venue or activity, most of what Casper and Marlo do is talk. Casper finds this helpful, since it gives her a place to vent with someone who knows her story.

It makes me feel relieved because, like I said, I'm not the only one who knows. Now she knows and if something happens, she'll know where my head space is at.

Marlo is not Aboriginal, but she is very supportive of the role of Aboriginal culture and tradition in Casper's life and healing journey.

She's really open-minded. When I tell her things about what I do, she's just really amazed and interested and grateful how it's helping me. She says, "I'm glad you found your way and I'm glad you found your culture and tradition."

Marlo has been teaching Casper to accept that the abuse was not her fault and to cope with her feelings about what happened in healthier ways. She has also been helping Casper explore who she is, what she likes, and what makes her feel good.

The one thing I am really grateful for that she really kinda had to pound it into me over and over and over again was that it wasn't my fault and there's nothing that I could do to change it, except she said, "the only thing that you can change is the way you feel about it and think about it and deal with it." 'Cause she's like, "Well, obviously you're angry about it. Why don't you turn that anger into something else, like determination to heal from it and to deal with it in a

healthier way, instead of using and instead of being angry all the time.” She’s really helped me find who I am, like, “what do you like Casper?” I’m like, “I don’t know.” So we found out more about that and she helped me develop who I am and find out what I like and what I find therapeutic and helpful towards me. ‘Cause before she came I had no idea who I was or what I wanted. She’s kind of given me the words and showed me what I can do.

Casper has been having a hard time in her recovery and this is something that she and Marlo talk about a lot. Like other counsellors before her, Marlo is helping Casper to embrace her feelings and try to understand where they are coming from. She is also helping her learn how to set the emotional tone for her day.

She listens to why I want to use. It’s like, “Why do I want to use right now? Because I’m feeling things I’ve never felt before and I don’t know how to deal with them.” So she’s helping me get familiar as to how to deal with them. She’s like, “Casper, you’re going to have bad days and you’re going to have good days. You gotta accept the bad days. You’ve gotta be okay with the bad days.” And I’m like, “Yeah, but sometimes it gets really bad.” She’s like, “Yeah, you gotta be okay with that.” I’m like, “Why?” And she’s like, “If you think it’s the end of the world, then it will be. But if you make it that, if you’re having a bad day it’s okay, then things are going to be okay. Because not every day’s going to be perfect, Casper.” I’m like, “Yeah.” She really helps me recognize how I’m feeling right now and to not push it away. Because just like Jeremy, she’s like, “I’m glad you can feel and I’m glad you are going through this. It’s good to know that you’re a human being.” I’m like, “Yeah, it is.” ‘Cause she’s like, “You are. You’re living. And you need to feel.” And then she helped me think of how to process things like, “Okay, why am I feeling angry today? Or why am I feeling sad? Or why I’m feeling happy, let’s not lose sight of that.” Or when we want do something, she’s like, “What do you want to do? What are you in the mood for?” It’ll be from just walking and talking to her and venting or going to a movie or going

to dinner and having a very good time. It changes. Just like my mood changes every day. I have to accept whatever comes. But then she started saying “Casper, you can make your day what you want. You can wake up in the morning, saying you’re going to have a good day today. You can set the tone.” I’m like, “Yeah.” Or to wake up in the morning to be grateful for something very simple can make your day a lot more pleasant.

I asked Casper to tell me more about how Marlo helped her connect with what she is feeling right now, and she talked about a series of questions that Marlo sometimes asks.

Well, sometimes when I’m really quiet, she’ll go, “What are you thinking about?” And I’ll tell her. And she’ll go, “How does that make you feel?” And then she’s like, “Well, what do you think about how you feel?” She just goes on and on and on. It gets really confusing sometimes. It’s like she helps me get in touch with right now, which was something that I’d been shown, but I haven’t really practiced to acquire it, but she’s really cool like that.

Casper also talked about what she is learning through her relationship with Marlo, in particular through having conflict and resolving it. Casper laughed as she shared that most of their fights have been because Marlo seems more and more like a parent.

I think that our relationship went from a good friend to someone who nags at me all the time to do things and she gets mad at me sometimes and for me that doesn’t work. So I told her, “if this relationship’s going to work you’re going to have to back in from somewhere else ‘cause what you’re doing right now isn’t really working.” So, we’re both learning from each other, which is really, really good but I think the number one thing that really helps is communication. Like, “Marlo, you said this and made me feel this way, could you not do that and try something else.” Because I don’t know how many fights we’ve had, but it’s been mostly about you’re turning into my parent, rather than my friend and I’m angry at you for that.

Casper began having conflict with Marlo as she began to feel safe in the relationship.

As our relationship progressed, I just got really sensitive and angry and just kind of blew up on her and walked away. I guess I felt safe. That's why. I knew that she would always be there. So I felt safe getting angry and letting my emotions go. Because she would always be there.

The first time Casper walked out on Marlo was about two months into their relationship. They were at a restaurant and Casper was feeling shy to order. Marlo "nagged" her to choose, and Casper got up to leave, but Marlo stopped her, and they were able to process the incident.

We were eating at a restaurant, or we were trying to. She was like, "Well, what do you want?" and I'm like, "I don't know." Because I was so shy. And then the waiter comes over and says like, "What do you want?" And she's like, "Well, what do you want?" Like the teachers used to do, she was just nagging at me to talk and I was too shy. I looked at her and I just got up and started to walk. And she's like, "Where are you going?" And then I told her the issues with people making me talk and that I was shy. And she's like, "I'm so sorry. I should have understood what was happening but I didn't." I have to tell her sensitive areas. It's not like she intentionally meant to do that. But she had no idea. That wasn't her fault.

Many fights have been about whether Casper is meeting her commitments, including a recent fight after she missed an appointment with her social worker. Afterwards Casper didn't talk to Marlo for two weeks.

I was really messing up when I first got here and I wasn't coming home. She was like, "Casper, you've got to be responsible if you want to keep your home, you have to follow the rules and go home and go to school and make your appointments." And this last time I missed my appointment with my social worker, I was stressed and I wasn't sleeping the night before. I fell asleep at my friend's place. I woke 15 minutes before I had to be at this meeting and I'm an hour and a half away. So I called her and I called him and nobody was answering so I left a

message. She called me the next week on Monday. I'm like, "Hello?" And she's like, "You didn't make that appointment. What's the matter with you?" And I was like, "Whoa." She just kinda blew up on me, "it's your responsibility and you could have made it down." I was like, "by the time I made it there, he would have been leaving the office. Get off my back. I made a mistake." She was screaming at me and so I just hung up on her. We weren't talking for two weeks.

Marlo was persistent in trying to reconnect with Casper after the fight, and she used multiple technologies in her attempts.

She was diligent in trying to get a hold of me on Facebook and my cell phone and through the housing program. I wasn't returning her calls anywhere, 'cause I was so mad at her.

Casper finally succumbed and responded to Marlo. She said she knew all along that she would talk to Marlo again, and she also recognized she was isolating herself from her supports and that was risky for her sobriety and wellbeing. When they met, Casper and Marlo talked about their fight, processing what happened in a way that strengthened their relationship.

I was isolating myself from everybody else. I was having a hard time staying clean. And I felt that my disconnection from everybody was making things worse. Because I see a doctor here and I hadn't seen him in a while. And I was constantly in my room and things were going bad. I just need to talk to somebody. And then on Facebook she's like, "Let me know if you're okay. Just text me and say I'm okay. I just want to know you're okay and you're safe." I'm like, "okay. I'm okay." And then she's like, "Well, can you call me?" So, I called her and we worked it out from there. When we met up the first thing she said was, "Are you okay?" I'm like, "Yeah." Then she kinda went into how I was feeling that day and then she went back to, "Why did you hang up on me?" And then I told her how she made me feel when she was screaming at me and yelling at me and bitching at me. I'm like, "Don't do that. My mother does that. You're not my

fucking mother.” And she’s like, “Well, I care about you. And what I did was wrong and I’m sorry and I’ll try not to do that. Because I was really worried about you. I was worried you were okay.” When she doesn’t hear from me she gets really worried that I might have fallen off or something happened. And then she apologized. She’s like, “I’m sorry Casper. I blew up at you. I was screaming at you. I shouldn’t have done that.” And I apologized. And we said, “Well, what can we do if something like this shall happen again?” And just kind of put it under the bridge. When we first met, I was always hanging up on her and I was always ditching her. And she didn’t really appreciate that, so I kind of got out of the routine of doing that. But after that last incident I hung up her, she tweaked. She was like, “I thought we were doing good and I thought you were doing good by not hanging up on me and not blowing me off like that.” So things do take practice. But I’m doing way better than before.

These experiences of processing conflict with Marlo are providing huge learning for Casper about how to be in a healthy relationship.

We get into little fights and we talk about it after. ‘Cause I don’t do that with many people. If something happens, we never talk about it. We just kind of shove it under the carpet and then there’s this really big blow up and all these things come loose and they come out. But with her, it’s always taken care of right away. Which is really healthy. So she’s teaching me a lot more than she knows, and more than she’s intentionally trying to do. She’s teaching me good morals and respect and communication. And she doesn’t know any of this, but I’m just picking it up along the way because it’s such a healthy relationship.

When I asked Casper what her current goals were for counselling, she was uncertain at first, but then shared that she wanted to put more of what she is learning into action in her life.

I think my goal is to actually put into action what I say I’m going to. Because I’ll tell her all the time what I want to do, but sometimes I never do it.

Her story told up to the present, I asked Casper what she thought counsellors could learn from your story. After thoughtful hesitation, Casper talked about the importance of being allowed to find her own answers rather than being told what to do.

I know counsellors are there to listen and to help you, but what is help? I think that help is listening and not necessarily them telling me what's wrong or what I could do, but helping me find my own solution. To help me put the pieces together. Because I found that that was what Marlo was doing and that was the most beneficial way. For her to help me find my own voice and my own answers, because she told me that there's answers. All of my answers are within myself. I just need to find it. And she was there to help me. So I think that was the biggest message was that she wasn't going to give me the answers. Because if you have some people who are telling you this is what is wrong with you and this is why you act that way and it's like, "well I need to figure that out. Who are you? You don't even know me. But you can help me."

Casper also advocated that counsellors be patient and let the youth set the pace of counselling.

What hasn't worked was pushing something. I think just waiting and being prepared for whatever may come. Because many times Marlo has said "oh I was waiting for that." She already knew, but she didn't push, she didn't ask, and she didn't say anything. She just waited and let me start it off. For her to know and not say anything, I really respected her after that. She knew what she was doing and it was working for me. And that's when I realized, I think I'm going to keep her.

Courtney

Courtney is a 24 year woman from the Squamish Nation who has lived in Vancouver and outlying suburbs for her entire life. She currently lives in Vancouver with her 6 year old daughter, works in the social service industry, and is studying to be a counsellor. Her mother

was a young woman with substance abuse issues, and Courtney spent her early years living with her grandma and aunties on her “home reserve” in a suburb of Vancouver. She began her story of street involvement with this story of connection to her Squamish culture and community.

Originally, for the first 5 to 8 years of my life, I grew up in an Aboriginal setting on a reserve, very connected into my community and into my culture at a young age. (*Dana: Was that with your mom?*) Not with my mom. With my grandma - her mom - and my aunties and whatnot. My mom hasn't lived on reserve since she was 13, wouldn't go back since then.

Courtney had some contact with her father, but she didn't know he was her dad until shortly before he died of alcohol-related illnesses.

He was sort of involved in my life when I was younger. He didn't have custody of me. He had no rights to me. He wasn't even supposed to have visitations. But my mom would let him see me when she wanted to do something or she wanted a sitter or whatever. So he would see me, but I didn't know he was my dad. I didn't know until he passed away when I was nine. He finally told me right before, but I didn't know who he was really.

Watching her father die from alcohol was not the only way that substance abuse impacted her life, leading her to stay away from substances, even during her years on the street.

I watched them destroy my family. They killed my dad. They destroyed my mom and my relationship, my sisters' are screwed. They're still screwed. I had no interest in it. To me it was more dangerous than what I was doing on the street.

Courtney lost her connection to her culture and community when she was taken into the care of the Ministry during grade 3. She was moved off her reserve into a non-Aboriginal foster home and sent for the first time to a non-Aboriginal school. This was a big adjustment and the beginning of “behavioural issues” for a child who just wanted someone to “create a path” for her.

I kind of lost of that piece because I went into care and I was not on an Aboriginal team, because there wasn't such a thing. It was just starting to come into play when I was 10 and 11. And the fact that I don't necessarily look Aboriginal, they felt like they could place me wherever they wanted to, which was whatever was going to give me the placement the fastest. And get me out of wherever I was. However, when the social worker would meet with the new foster parent or group home, they would then disclose that I was Aboriginal. And a lot of time there was a lot of hesitation about actually wanting me because, well, one, they don't know about Aboriginal culture, two, there's more stereotypes, three, I'm probably going to be harder to manage. There was a whole package that came with me. Not just "hey I'm a kid and here I am in your house, try and support me and create a path for me." And so a lot of times I felt out of place. Especially the first placement, because I was taken from my reserve, where I knew everyone, and would run around to everyone's and be like, "What's up?" I was in a very Aboriginal orientated school, so going to a non-Aboriginal school was a big adjustment. And I think that is where behavioural issues started to come out with me. Like right away.

Courtney describes two possible roads that could have been taken by the Ministry. One road, advocated for her band and elders, would have kept her on her reserve. The other road led off the reserve, and this was the road most taken. While she was eventually placed in some Aboriginal homes, none were permanent, and by the time she was 11, Courtney had lived in nearly a dozen homes.

So I guess it was after the first year they started to place me in more Aboriginal placements. I was a little bit older but I always had a voice and I was a very opinionated child. And still a very opinionated person. My band and my elders were fighting to get me back on to reserve. Whereas my social worker was saying that it's not the best setting because they felt that I could be raised better off-reserve because there's a lot of stereotypes about reserves. There's a

lot of addictions, there's a lot of abuse and so they didn't necessarily view it as a safe placement to put me back into. Even though there was options there. Also because my mom lived off reserve they viewed it as a better option. They kind of had two roads to go and so they tended to go with the other one. And so I got bumped around to a lot of placements because nobody really wanted me. Or I didn't really want them. And so by the time I was 11 I'd already been in 10 or 12 different placements. And 23 elementary schools. So I was a little bit frustrated.

However, Courtney did have some good placements, and those were ones that supported her in connecting with her Aboriginal community and with other resources. One resource that was important to her when she was 10 and 11 years old was a hospital-based psychiatric day program. In this program, four women worked with small groups of youth around behavioural issues such as anger management and self-harm.

There were some good placements. They were good because they put supports in place for me. They would take me to different events on the reserve because they felt more comfortable doing that. And they hooked me up with a day program that was pretty intensive. Instead of going to school from 9 to 3, you went there. As you were doing your academic work, in between there was different group therapy sessions and what not. I had a couple of placements that actually followed through on that, which was kind of helpful because they started to show why I was so angry and why I was taking it out. Not on other people, but mostly on myself.

In addition to the group therapy, the program included weekly individual sessions with a counsellor. Courtney did not connect with the counsellor who was assigned to her, but she did connect with another counsellor. This was her first experience with counselling.

You met once a week one on one with somebody. I didn't have the best relationship with her because I didn't really feel like she understood me. She kind of thought I was playing the system, whereas the lady who worked with self-harm, me and her connected right away. And she

had a really big interest in me. I think it was the first time that I actually could tell somebody what was going on and why I was acting the way I was acting.

I asked her what allowed her to open up to Lexie, and Courtney talked about feeling safe and like she had some power in the situation.

I think she felt safe. And when I say safe I mean she created an environment that was welcoming and it didn't feel like she was there because she had to be there. It wasn't having a conversation with her because I had to. And there was lots of times we didn't even communicate. She would just sit there the whole entire time and we would colour or I'd write something and then she'd read it and she would encourage me to do it and tell me that I was good at it. And so it just felt like it was an okay situation. Not one where it was being written down in a file or it was being passed along to the next person. Although I'm sure they did communicate. But that wasn't the purpose of it. It wasn't to gain information to give to somebody else. Or for somebody else to tell me what I'm doing wrong, or what I should be doing instead. It was an opportunity where I got to direct what was happening, instead of being directed what to do. She never told me what she wanted me to do or change – and by the end of it I would come up with what I needed to change. And so that I felt, I don't know, it was just a really good experience.

Lexie had to be very patient to engage Courtney in counselling. Her frequent moves had taught her that it was not safe to connect to people, since they would soon be gone. Courtney laughed as she shared how she ended up staying at the day program longer than she expected, perhaps at this twist of fate that allowed her to connect with Lexie, despite her walls.

It took a really, really, really long time because I have the biggest walls in the universe. Lexie had to continuously come to me, not just ask me once. She had to ask me three or four times a day. And after being there for six months, I think, I finally had a conversation with her. It took a really long time 'cause I figured I could just avoid everybody until they moved me again.

Because I figured I wouldn't be there long enough to actually make a connection. And if I did, it wouldn't really matter 'cause I'd just be gone anyways. I was very defensive, but I ended up being there longer than predicted. It wasn't a bad thing. I think it was the first time I actually opened up to somebody.

I asked Courtney whether her positive experience with Lexie left her more open to counselling in the future. Perhaps it would have, but Courtney said that she actually felt less open to connecting after she lost the connection to Lexie and the day program, when she was once again moved to a new placement, this time in a different suburb.

I don't know if I really understood what a counsellor was, or thought that the opportunity would come up again at that point in time. I think when I left I actually put up more walls than I had before because it was like my Switzerland ground, my neutral safe ground or whatever. So when I thought it was taken away from me... even though it wasn't, I had a voice, I could have asked to go back, or find another option, but I didn't. But it wasn't really my responsibility. Yeah, I think I put up more walls, and I actually formed a negative opinion because I didn't accomplish everything I could have or wanted to at that point. But nobody asked me, so I didn't know. I was just angry at everyone.

Courtney's voice became indignant as she shared this move led her to spend her first night on the street at the age of 11.

I got probably the worst placement I ever could have possibly had in my whole entire life. I was there maybe a week and a half and I left. I was 11. That was the first night I spent on the streets. Spent probably a week there. They didn't bother looking for me. They didn't really care.

I asked her if she knew anyone on the street before she ran away.

I didn't really know people but I knew people. I had a lot of street involvement for the past year, a lot of street exposure. So I knew people, but I wasn't really connected to anybody or had really friends. But it didn't take very long. I was little and cute. So, the week after I'd been on the streets, I came into Van. Because there wasn't anything in the suburb and there wasn't very many young people there and the drop-ins that I went to, most of the kids were from Vancouver anyways. It was kind of like I filtered in with them.

In Vancouver, 11 year old Courtney met a 21 year old man would become her boyfriend for the next 6 years. Her usually quick pace of speech slowed as she introduced this major character in her story, perhaps foreshadowing the tale of abuse and exploitation that began with him and with deciding that the streets was where she "fit in."

It was my second night in Van when I got picked up by my now ex-boyfriend. So I kinda got connected into a pretty influential crew in Vancouver at a very young age. And I didn't really think that I needed anybody else. I kinda just decided that this was where I fit in and so that was the area I was going to go.

I asked Courtney about her connection to services at this time, and she talked about slipping through cracks based on geography and age.

In Van, when you're that young there isn't any services at all. Every time you go you gotta lie and try and make them believe you're 13 or you're just on your own. My social worker couldn't find me because I was in Vancouver and they didn't come into Vancouver to look. They put out some notice I was missing or whatever. But they didn't come and look.

But Courtney was also noticed by outreach workers who were concerned that she was being recruited into something that she did not really understand. One worker who tried to help her was Jack. He worked out of a street youth drop-in and shelter, and he knew her new "crew."

The outreach workers in on the East Side noticed me right away. Because I was new and I was little and I was young and I didn't really know what I'd gotten myself into, or I don't know if I really got myself into it, what I was taken in to. So the outreach workers had a really close eye on me pretty much from the beginning of coming into Van, whereas in the suburb I hadn't really been noticed at all. They were continuously catching me when they could and suggesting different options or trying to get more information. I made a connection with one of them actually. He was pretty cool. But he was only cool because he knew a lot of the people that I was hanging out with and they all knew him so it was kinda like, "okay well if all my boys trust him then he can't be that bad." He pulled a lot of strings and got me into a lot of different places and tried to get me off the street because he knew more of what I was getting into than I did. He made quite a few phone calls on my behalf to try and figure out who I really was and where I really belonged and who was looking for me.

I asked Courtney if Jack was able to get past her walls.

Not really. I think I was playing him more than he was actually helping me. I learned manipulation tactics at a very young age. (*Dana: What do you mean?*). Just getting my basic needs met. If I wanted a bed to sleep in that night, he'd find me one. And if I wanted a meal, he'd get me one. If I wanted new clothes, he'd get me them. If I wanted a shower, he'd give me it. It's like I played him for what I wanted to get my needs met when I wanted them met. But when he wanted me to do something for him, I wouldn't do it.

But even if she had wanted to connect with Jack, she never had the opportunity to talk to him alone. Her boyfriend never let her out of his sight.

I don't think I ever talked to him by myself. It's probably because I wasn't allowed to by my boyfriend. I wasn't allowed out of his sight. So, I didn't really talk to him so much.

After about six weeks on the street, Courtney was picked up and taken to an assessment home, to determine whether she would be a good fit in a particular foster home for street-involved youth. Even though she was already hardened by experience and intrigued by the streets, she thinks that home might have been a good fit for her, if she had not been forced to see “this old guy.”

Eventually, I finally got picked up by the cops. My social worker sent them out and I got switched back to my home suburb office. Which wasn't bad, but it wasn't good. At that point I'd already been exposed to so much and so much was intriguing, that any placement they put me in wasn't the same. I was already, I don't know if hardened is the right word, but I would say hardened. It didn't matter how much time people spent with me or spent trying to communicate with me or show me that there was different options. I didn't hear it, it never even touched me, I don't think. The foster home that they had wanted to put me in had worked quite a few times with street-involved youth, but she hadn't had somebody as young as me before with the exposure that I'd had and so the Ministry put me in a seven day placement to do an assessment to figure out where I was at and what was going on and whatnot. And to see if I'd be a good fit with her. And I probably would have been if I'd given her a chance. But I never did. Because I was mad that they had sent me to this old guy.

“This old guy” was Chris, a mental health counsellor. Courtney sounded infuriated as she told the story of being taken to see him without prior consent or even knowledge on her part, and then she laughed as she talked about how she seemed to scare him.

My social worker sent me to the mental health people because I had street exposure, so I must have a lot of issues. It was the day after they picked me up that they took me to him, and I'm sooo glad they asked me if I wanted to go. They didn't ask me, there was no decision making. They didn't even tell me we were going there or what we were doing, or what I was

supposed to do. You've gotta kinda tell a child what's expected of them. But they didn't tell me anything. And I got some old guy who was horrible and I was... still to this day I don't trust guys. I really didn't trust them then because of where I'd come from. So setting me up with some old guy in some office was not the most brilliant idea in the universe. I really think I scared the old guy. I was pretty thugged out. I had all my gang colours on. It was pretty known that I was running with a pretty well known gang at that point in time. He was kind of intimidated by me.

In this first session, Chris shared with Courtney some of his thoughts on her situation. While his interpretations may have been accurate, they were not well received. Feeling exposed by a stranger terrified Courtney, and she reacted with anger, destroying his office. As she told this story, Courtney laughed frequently, seemingly at the audacity of her young self.

He wouldn't have made me mad if he hadn't of pretended to know so much about me. Like he was reading things not in his own file, but from my file with the Ministry, comparing situations or feelings. I think it made me mad because they're actually really accurate. I didn't like the fact that this person, who I have no idea who he is, got what I was feeling when I hadn't even said anything. I was really mad that he'd already formed an opinion, although the opinion was very right, so I kind of flew off the rack and destroyed his office. I wasn't angry. It wasn't like I was purposefully... no, I was purposefully trying to do it, but it was because I wanted him to shut up. And he wouldn't shut up. He just kept saying them over and over, and they were true but I had never told, I never said anything. It didn't make me angry, it scared me. And I didn't like that. I didn't like somebody else knowing. I must have asked him or swore at him a thousand times to shut up and he wouldn't shut up. It made me really mad. If you ask me now, I would say he was psychoanalyzing me, but then, I wouldn't have known that. I was just mad. Like, "how did he know? And who told him? When I find out who told him, they're going to be really sorry."

Courtney continued to laugh as she told how her social worker got her to reluctantly return for a second session with Chris. She agreed to return, but refused to participate.

I said “there was no way in fucking hell I was going back. You couldn’t make me go back. You could pick me up and you could carry me, I’d just walk out the door, there was no way I was staying. Uh uh, no way, no how.” We finally agreed that I’d go but I wasn’t saying shit, I wasn’t hearing anything that he was saying, so it was going to be a waste of time. The next two times my social worker sat beside me. I didn’t say anything and he talked all he wanted to, but I didn’t listen. And after the third session, he said the same thing, “I can’t make her say anything. I can’t make her communicate with me. And you can bring her here but it’s a kind of a waste of my time and a waste of her time.”

This experience strengthened Courtney’s resistance to counselling and she swore she would never share her feelings again. It also left her with the sense that there was something wrong with her, since the system seemed unable to help her.

It was so horrible. I was so angry. There was no way that anybody was ever going to make me communicate again or I was ever going to let anybody know what I was feeling again because I didn’t like it at all. It reaffirmed that counselling was the dumbest thing in the universe. And that it couldn’t help me because I was unhelpable or something. I think that was my motto. I was unhelpable and the system wasn’t designed for people like me. I was this random person placed in the middle of the system, like a project that people were interested in because “wow, this child is so young and is already so jaded.” And I had very good opinions about the world and people and I had no issues with telling people what I thought about them on the spot.

As soon as she was out of the secured assessment home and able to leave more easily, Courtney ran back to the streets, back to the “safety” of her crew.

After they finished my assessment, they placed me with this other lady. I probably stayed two or three days before I took off again, because it wasn't a lock down facility. The door was open and I walked out. I went back to my crew. It was the only place I felt safe. It took them a lot longer to come and get me. They knew where I was at this point in time. It wasn't like this was a secret. But it took them about nine months. I didn't get a placement again until I was twelve.

Indignation came into her voice again as Courtney shared how long it took for the Ministry to come for her again, and then only to place her with her permissive and neglectful mother. Since she was never placed “anywhere that mattered,” Courtney continued “chilling on the streets” and avoiding services.

When I was twelve, the only reason they got me was because they gave custody back to my mom. So I was back at home. But at my mom's house I didn't have any rules and nobody paid attention to me, so I was right back out the door. They would come and pick me up, but they never really put me anywhere that mattered. Because I was too young for a group home placement, and most foster placements won't want me once they heard about my file at that point in time. So they didn't really know what to do with me, so I think that's why they kind of left me. I was just chilling on the streets. I didn't go home unless I had to, unless some cop car picked me up. When I was thirteen, it was like there was nothing else in my life but the street. I avoided everyone. I avoided all services. I avoided all outreach. I avoided everyone because it was too risky. And I was too busy.

However, Courtney stayed connected to school though out her street involvement.

I always went to school. I never missed a day of school. School was my safety thing. I went to one particular school most of the time because I liked it. Everyone at school was always interested in me but they never really knew what was going on. I don't really think anyone really communicated with me in any way, so they didn't really know anything about me. I was just a

weird kid that showed up every once in a while that was cute and got really good marks, but nobody knew why.

When I asked Courtney if she had any connection with her Aboriginal culture and community during this period of her life her “no” was quick and definitive.

Not really. No. I didn't. I didn't want another label. I didn't want another stereotype. I figured I'd spent the last how many years being passed off as non-Aboriginal. That it's one less statistic to overcome. And a lot less challenges and barriers. Although the same challenges and barriers were present. Also, going in between foster homes and my mom's house, my mom doesn't identify as Aboriginal. She's never practiced. She won't go on reserve. And she would get really mad when I identified. So I think it was a combination of not wanting to out myself to everybody else so there's a whole pile of more things. But also my own family doesn't want to acknowledge the fact that they're Native. I didn't start using it until it was beneficial to me. Then it was like, “hey yeah I am Native.” “What? I never knew that.” “Well, I am.” And until I got to the point where I needed to create grounding and stability in my life. Then it made sense to go back.

I asked Courtney if she made a decision at some point to stop identifying as Aboriginal. She told a story of an argument with her boyfriend in which she made a conscious choice to keep that part of her identity to herself.

I was in the middle of an argument with my boyfriend. He made some comment and it really upset me, and I went to snap back that “I am Native” or something like that. I went to make a comeback and I stopped myself before anything had even come out of my mouth. Even though it was there, I should have said it, I didn't. I don't even remember the whole conversation but I remember at that point is when I stopped identifying or putting it out there unless it was somebody I knew from before. I never said anything. I never told anyone.

Courtney did hang out at one Aboriginal youth centre in a suburb, and she disclosed her Aboriginality to Jenna, the youth worker who ran the centre. But then she let herself blend in with the many non-Aboriginal youth who also accessed the centre.

There was Aboriginal focus or whatever but the majority of youth who were there weren't Aboriginal because it was the only youth drop-in that area. Jenna had more than 86 case files when I was on her file. One person trying to do all of it. It was crazy. Really crazy. She knew I was Aboriginal, but she never pushed it on me. She never asked me why I didn't identify. I don't think very many of us at that point in time were identifying. But she knew I was because when she did the intake form, I thought it would be beneficial to me to use that.

Although Courtney largely avoided services and connections with service providers, Jenna is one worker who persisted in trying to help her and eventually got through some of her walls.

I've known Jenna since I was 12. I've known Jenna for a long time. She would show up and get my ass out of bed, making sure I went to school. All the time. She'd show up with my ex's, pick me up out of the situation. He'd be all up in her face, oh it was horrible, but she'd do it. For some reason she saw potential.

It was hard to contain my horror and disbelief as Courtney shared what happened next. Two years into her street involvement she was placed in the "care" of her abusive boyfriend.

When I was 13, the Ministry decided to give custody to my boyfriend because that's where I was. And every time they put me somewhere I just went back. Yet they knew like ... yeah. So, it was kind of a fucked up situation. I mean by that time he already had a criminal record the length of two arms. There was no way they would have placed anybody else with him but because I was hard to manage, nobody wanted me and I wouldn't stay, they felt it was an

easier route out. At least, that's what my social worker told me at the time. I didn't like that social worker.

I asked if she was involved in the decision.

No. Nobody asked me. If they'd asked me I would have said I didn't want to.

Then I asked if her boyfriend was involved in the decision.

Yeah. He went to the social worker. Because he was concerned about the amount of cop involvement, picking me up and taking me back, questioning me of who I was with and what I was doing and where I was staying. There was too much Ministry involvement for his liking. I'd already been with him for two years, but in those two years it was already an extremely abusive relationship. Not just with power or emotional, but there was a lot of physical abuse and I think he was more concerned about that aspect of it. If the Ministry gave him custody then he would have complete control. And he wouldn't be in jeopardy of losing me or having me taken away. He knew where I was and what I was doing every minute. So I think that's why he wanted it. 'Cause it gave him that upper hand that he didn't quite have.

Courtney lived for two years with her boyfriend having this "upper hand." Finally he beat her so badly that she was hospitalized for two weeks and removed from his care. She was placed in a group home, and for the moment, did not want to run back to the streets. She wanted help.

It continued like that for a couple of years until there was a pretty serious report that went in. I was in the hospital for two weeks. Then the Ministry took me out of his care and placed me in some group home that was specifically for hard to manage kids and runaways and so all the windows were bolted down and that made it a lot harder to leave. But at that point I didn't really want to. I was looking for a way out, but I needed somebody to show me what that way out was. I didn't know. By that point all I knew was street life. All I knew was gang life. All I knew was what I did and what kind of identity I created for myself. And so I must have asked 50 times in a

month to find somebody who could tell me what to do or show me how to fix what it is I've created. I just wanted somebody that I could just say what was going on and that maybe they'd have some brilliant idea of how to fix it. And the Ministry just kept slapping it down because they had bad experiences with me and counsellors.

Given how bad her last experience with a counsellor had been, I wondered what allowed her to be willing to try again. Courtney spoke slowly and thoughtfully as she shared her desire for change. I was moved by her words.

Wanting to... wanting to like me. Wanting ... wanting more ... wanting a life. Wanting ... wanting to be alive. I guess. And change. I think I wanted change. Mostly.

Then I asked "And you knew, even though that old guy hadn't be useful, you had some idea that a counsellor might be useful if what you wanted was change and to like yourself. Where do you think you got that idea?"

Maybe. I don't know. I don't know where I got it. I don't know if I even really believed it. But, it had to be better than what everything else was. It's kind of like hitting rock bottom and you're like, "okay, there is no where else to go but up." You can't really go down anymore. So, if it already sucks, then I'm already down here. You can't really knock me down much farther. So might as well just try. There was a lot going on and I didn't like myself very much and I knew that. By that time I'd already been working the sex trade for three years. Been in a crappy relationship. Been cutting since I was 8. And it all increased in the last couple of months by so much and I was so overwhelmed. I really didn't like the person that I was, and I knew that. And I knew that was a dangerous road to be walking on because I didn't like the way that it made me feel. And I didn't realize that until I was away from him.

It was a window of opportunity, but it didn't stay open long. The indignation rose again in Courtney's voice as she describes being frustrated in her attempts to find help.

Yeah so the window was open and then it didn't really matter what I said, nobody really heard me. It was really frustrating because, I don't know, in my head even now I still think it could have been an opportunity out. Because I ended up right back in the exact same spot for years to come, right? The window of opportunity was open, right? He didn't have custody and so the window was open and it was an opportunity to take advantage of it. And the window didn't stay open very long because I got shut down every step of the way. It's like when somebody is struggling with addiction and they come to you and they're like, "Okay I want to go to treatment." You've got to find that bed. It doesn't matter how hard. You've got to find it right then because that window's open for what? Five minutes until they walk out of the door again, right? And so when they let me walk out the door, that window was gone because they wouldn't hear what I was saying. It was very frustrating. So I went right back to the same situation. The group home didn't miss me; the social worker didn't try and find me. I don't even think I knew who my social worker was at that point in time because they changed so much.

So Courtney went back to the street, but the window didn't close completely. She was more open to services than she had been before, and fortunately, Jack was still an outreach worker. When he suggested that she meet Elizabeth, an outreach mental health counsellor who worked specifically with street-involved youth, Courtney was open to the suggestion.

I was right back in the same situation, but I started accessing more services and checking out ones I hadn't seen or heard of before. I was older now and I had more opportunities. But, I was very iffy about them. And when I went back, Jack, he was the outreach worker before, he was still there. I was having a conversation with him, well, I wasn't really having a conversation, I was more like balling my eyes out, which doesn't happen often for me because I still don't cry. I didn't really share anything with him because he was a guy. Just the objective of trying to explain what it was that I wanted was really complicated. But he suggested talking to Elizabeth.

Courtney only had to cross the street to meet Elizabeth. She laughed as she shared how her ambivalence about counselling seemed to paralyze her, making her unable to cross the street. Eventually it was Elizabeth who crossed the street, which surprised Courtney and increased her sense of safety.

You know it was right across the street. It's not even like I had to go very far. But it took me a really long time to cross the street. It was really intimidating because I figured that if I started talking I wouldn't stop. Everything would just come out and I'd be completely exposed and completely vulnerable and I didn't want to be like that. I wanted to maybe share one thing. And maybe that would make me feel better. So I must have called her five or six times. And the worst part was we didn't have to go into the office. We were going for coffee. I couldn't cross the street to actually communicate with her, so it was really frustrating. So, instead she crossed the street and she just showed up at the street youth drop-in and I was like, "Holy Crap, you came out of your office and you actually found me." She didn't even have to figure out who I was, she just picked me out of the crowd. And so it kind of made it a little less intimidating. I mean, I probably should have been the one to make the first step, but it felt kind of comforting that she did. And I did make the first step, I called! It kinda showed a different side. It's like, "okay here's somebody who might be able to be willing to step outside of the box and meet me a little bit more where I'm at, if I'm willing to meet her."

Courtney described a very casual first session, in which Elizabeth shared about herself more than she expected Courtney to share. This created enough safety for Courtney to some of her story. She was intrigued that Elizabeth did not seem scared by her story.

We were going for coffee, but we ended up getting slurpees instead because I was already really hyperactive. And I figured a slurpee would take me longer to finish than coffee would so I might not run away quite as fast. We went and got slurpees and we were walking and we stopped

at the park, but we didn't actually talk about anything. She told me more about her. Who she is and what she's doing and how she knew Jack and how she's connected with the street youth drop-in. It was kind of neat to see her share a little bit about her before she expected me to share anything about me because as much as I wanted to, I wasn't so much into that idea at all. So knowing a little bit about her, let me want to share a little bit with her. So that first day I just told her where I came from: "Well I grew up in the care system. I came into the streets when I was 11. I've been with the same guy since then." Nothing too detailed but enough so that she had an idea of who I was. And she wasn't scared off, so it kind of intrigued me.

I asked Courtney how she knew that Elizabeth wasn't scared. She talked about Elizabeth's nonchalant reaction to her sharing, compared to the "sympathy" she often got from others.

Because she didn't show any reaction and she didn't do that stupid sympathetic thing that makes me so mad. Empathy is real. Sympathy is not real and it made me really frustrated when people were sympathetic. It's like, "Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that. But I can't even imagine." It's like, "Okay, well you can imagine because you see it every day. I'm standing in front of you, so it's not that hard to imagine. I'm standing right here." When you can actually consider putting yourself in the other person's shoes, or understand where they're coming from, it's so much more real. And so she didn't try any of that and she didn't do that, "Oh, I'm so sorry. Oh, that must have been so hard." That would have made me really mad.

Trying to scare Elizabeth with her story is part of what kept Courtney coming back for counselling.

It was neat because I didn't scare her. So then my objective was to see how much it would take to scare her. Because I decided that she couldn't be anywhere near as strong as I was, so I was going to be able to scare her with the stories that I had to tell. But I didn't. I met with

her once a week for the whole year and I wasn't able to scare her. It kind of frustrated me, but it was what kept me coming back, which may not have been the best reason, but it kept me communicating.

In the first few sessions, Courtney and Elizabeth made a lot of plans, trying to increase the safety in Courtney's life. For Courtney, this also felt like a safe way to avoid really communicating.

We made a lot of plans. Mostly safety plans. Plans like what I was going to do with my ex. What I was going to do to make me not hate me. What I was going to do about cutting. Plans related to different options I could do instead. Like why don't I try writing it down. I told her that was bullshit because it didn't work. We ended up using a red jiffy marker. Anyways it worked for a while, but not for a very long time. It was an interesting idea that I hadn't thought of myself. I mean the plan was a good idea, but the plan wasn't effective until I actually could figure out why, what made me cut, why I was doing it. They weren't very detailed conversations. I'd walk into the room, I'd be like, "okay do you know what? I'm a cutter. How do you like that?" Then she was like, "Okay." And I'm like, "Damn it, you're supposed to get upset. You're supposed to show some kind of reaction." She's like, "I did, I said okay. Do you want to talk about it?" I'm like, "no." "Do you want to make a plan?" "What's a plan?" "Well, it's a plan." "What's a plan? You've got to explain it." And then she explained it. "Okay, that sounds cool, let's do that." Because it kind of avoided the topic of talking about it more.

Making safety plans was a "good connecting tool" because it felt less vulnerable to Courtney that talking about how and why she did what she did. It gave her a sense of control and safety, although she realizes now that she was not avoiding communicating as much as she thought.

It was a good connecting tool. Because I think in the end it gave her an idea of what I'd already tried, and what I was willing to try. What parts I was willing to share, what parts I wasn't, before she actually got to the part where I had to. I get that now. Then, I thought was a great distracting tool. It was fabulous. I thought I was totally in control of the situation, that I was avoiding having to communicate in any sort of way. But apparently it was more her plan than mine.

Courtney saw Elizabeth every week for a year, and one accomplishment was that after seven years of regular cutting, she was able to stop, at least for that year.

In the year that I was seeing her I don't think I cut once because there was somebody else holding me accountable. It was the first question out of her mouth every time I walked in the office. It was like, fuck, I never wanted to say yes, so it was my motivation was to say no. And at that point it didn't really matter to me because it meant that it was a year that I didn't, so I mean eventually I had to learn how to figure out my own ways but it was it was good motivation.

One of the most powerful things Courtney got from counselling with Elizabeth was learning to like herself. I asked her to expand on how that happened.

There were a lot of things I felt better about, by the end of the year I didn't hate myself. Actually, I thought I was a pretty interesting person who one day had a really neat story to tell that may help somebody else at some point in time. We broke down everything I didn't like about me. She had this really big thing for lists, she made me write this list of everything I didn't like about myself, and then write a list about everything I liked about myself. Everything I didn't like about myself was about 3 pages long, and everything I liked about myself was 3 things. By the time when I left her I think three quarters of the things I didn't like about myself were on my 'I like about myself' list. I still have them! I think that experience was really

powerful because I think that the main reason I wanted to talk to somebody was I didn't like who I was.

I was curious to know how she and Elizabeth moved things from the 'What I don't like About Myself' list to the 'What I like About Myself' list.

It's about being able to see it as an experience, being able to learn from it. A lot of things on my What I don't like were things that I regretted, or that I felt bad about, or that I felt I had control of but I didn't. So it was about learning that, or realizing that I don't have to regret something I did. Looking at why I did it: "okay, was it for survival? Okay, what was the reason or motivation behind it?" I guess breaking things down and looking at them like that, it wasn't as bad or didn't make me not like me as much. It's like, "this is where I came from. This is what is going to make me who I'm going to be or who I am right now." And taking ownership.

I asked Courtney if she ever talked about being Aboriginal with Elizabeth, or if it was on either of her lists. She said "No, never even identified it at all" and that she didn't think Elizabeth even knew she was Aboriginal. She didn't want another label to overcome.

Elizabeth altered her perspective on counsellors, but Courtney eventually became frustrated with her inability to implement change, and this frustration led her to quit counselling.

She kinda changed my perspective of counsellors. I still wasn't sure that they were great, or even necessarily safe, but I didn't hate them anymore and wasn't going to try to avoid them. In a lot of ways she showed me a lot of different options and just really helped me see me and figure out what I want. The frustration I had with myself was for the fact that I couldn't implement them, or as easily as I wanted to. I wanted it to change right then, and it doesn't. So I think that's where my hesitation still came into play: "Okay, well counsellors are great. But, then you gotta go and do all the work. All by yourself out there. And you've got to implement it and never happens as fast as you want it to or the way you want it to. And it may take you 20,000

times. But we didn't think about that when we were in the session. We did not say it was going to take 20,000 times of trying." So there was still a lot of hesitancy. I was interested but I wasn't sure, I couldn't figure out how to take what we were doing there and implement it outside, so it was frustrating. And it made me question "is there even a point? Yeah, it makes me feel better, but when I walk out the door, I feel crappy all over again. So why feel good for an hour to feel crappy for the next I don't know however many hours are in six days until you walk back in the door for an hour again" So I stopped going.

Courtney talked about how taking down her walls to feel safe enough to share for an hour in counselling actually made her feel less safe in her life on the street.

I felt less safe because when I got in the office I could take my wall down, but when I left I couldn't put it back up as soon as I walked out the door. It's like having to start all over from the beginning and try to build it all back up, then to have to tear it all back down again, when you walk in the door. It was frustrating. I felt constant turmoil trying to build this thing and keep my layer of safety and not be vulnerable because you can't be vulnerable out on the street and in life.

When I asked her, Courtney said she never brought this issue up with Elizabeth. She also did not tell Elizabeth that she was quitting counselling. Elizabeth was assertive in her efforts to re-engage Courtney, but Courtney couldn't see the point in going back and talking more.

I just stopped showing up. I hadn't quite learned that form of communication yet. She'd show up and talk to me at drop-in or whatever, she'd even show up at midnight and be like, "You! Why aren't you coming to see me?" I'm like, "Yeah. I can't right now." And she was like, "All right. But you know I haven't moved." I'm like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Gotchya." But she was still there. It was neat to know that there was somebody actually encouraging me to come back. But I couldn't. It's not like I didn't want to see her anymore. I just didn't have a reason for not wanting to go back other than I just didn't want to. I didn't want it to come off that I was mad or

frustrated with her because I wasn't. I was mad and frustrated with the fact that I couldn't figure out how to implement it in general. And I didn't want to communicate that because I felt like, "okay I've been doing this for a year. I should have an idea of how to take it from here to out there, but I don't, so I'm just going to be frustrated about it." And I needed to think. I think it was something I needed to figure out by myself. I mean we could have sat there and talked about it, but what would have been the point? I still wouldn't have had the answer at the end of the time and I still would have been frustrated when I walked out the door. I needed not to be frustrated because my frustration was clouding anything else.

Despite Elizabeth's persistence, Courtney did not go back to counselling. The next year when Elizabeth left the position it was an adjustment for Courtney. But she actually found it easier to keep her walls up on the street when Elizabeth wasn't around reminding her of another possible self. Courtney did not seek out another counsellor, since she saw herself as unwilling to change. Stepping out of the safety of her known world on the street was still too terrifying.

Other than running into her at random places coming right at me, I didn't really see her. And then the following year she went back to school, so she wasn't there anymore. It was frustrating but it didn't change my opinion in any way because I'd already left. She didn't leave me, so it was okay. And she told me two or three months before she actually left, so I had the opportunity to go back in and close it, but I didn't want to. It was a bit of an adjustment because I got used to her finding me. But it was really easy to put my wall back up when she was gone because then I didn't feel like I was being two different people. And after she left I didn't really have a need or a want to talk to anybody because I decided I'd done as much as I could do on me, and as much as I could do in my situation at that point in time. I felt kinda hypocritical. I wanted to do all these things and be this person, but I'm unwilling to change my situation. So it seemed pointless to find somebody new, to build a new relationship, to try and trust them, and

then not do anything. It made me really mad but at the same time there wasn't really a way out of my situation at that point in time that I could see it because it was the only life I knew. It was my safety blanket. It was something that I knew I was good at. And if I wanted to be this new person that Elizabeth made me see, like "What if it didn't work? What if I couldn't do it? What if I didn't like it?" Every once in a while I would take a step out of it and try, and then be like, "Yeah, no, no, no, that's way too risky" and step right back into it. So I just continued the next year being this person that I didn't really like, but I liked me, I just didn't like what I was doing. But I was okay because it was a new experience, I learned that. I didn't need to beat myself up so much, I just needed to figure out how to get out of my situation, but I didn't.

A few months after Elizabeth left, Courtney experienced another violent assault, which prompted her to once again seek counselling. In contrast to her usually flowing story-telling style, as she began this particular story, she stuttered and laughed nervously, seeming to be unsure of where to begin, perhaps apprehensive about revisiting this incident of extreme violence. We paused in the interview, me asking if she needed to take a break and validating that she had shared a lot already, to which she laughed, "we're on the easy years." Then she told this horrifying tale.

It wasn't too long after Elizabeth left that we were at this big Halloween party. I got in a fight with my boyfriend and it was pretty bad, but it was the first time I think I ever stood up to him, really. I don't think I ever stood up to him before that. I didn't think I had the ground to. Until that point I thought I deserved the relationship that I was in, it was just part of me and so I'd become accustomed to it. At first it kinda startled him and then it made him really mad that I stood up to him. And I didn't really, I did and I didn't. I stood up to him vocally. I didn't stand up to him physically in any sort of way, other than the fact that I wouldn't do what he wanted me to do, because I didn't want to. "You can't just keep ordering me around all the time." I was

getting really frustrated, so I stood up and I left, I actually walked out of the house. This is where my fear of mimes comes from. Anyways, I left and I walked out of the house and I walked down the back alley because I didn't think nothing of it right? It's just part of my normal routine. "I'm not scared about walking down any alleys. I'm a tough little chick, right? I'll take ya out. It's all good." Anyways I ended up getting jumped and gang raped by his boys that he sent after me.

And they were dressed like mimes. They were wearing normal clothes but they had the black and white face paint on, and I related it to mimes and I don't like them. I knew when I walked out of the house, I wasn't walking out into a good situation, but I wasn't really... And so I went back because I didn't really know what else to do. Well, that night I didn't really have a choice.

A couple of days later, another outreach worker was to be the catalyst for Courtney to connect with a counsellor. Seeing she was "black and blue," the worker pushed her to share what had happened, and eventually Courtney broke down. Then the worker found Courtney a counsellor who specialized in sexual assault, but would not pressure her to press charges.

Two days later I was at the street-youth drop-in and one of the staff there confronted me and asked what had happened. I didn't really want to communicate with her in any sort of way, so she let it drop. Then she came and found me on outreach that night. She pushed and pushed and pushed and pushed and pushed and pushed, which I wasn't very happy about at the time. She drilled me over and over and over and wouldn't let me leave until she had some sort of answer out of me. But I wasn't giving any sort of answer. She wanted to know because all these people had all these ideas of what was going on but they didn't really know. But she thought she had an idea or whatever, and so she pushed. Finally I broke down and I screamed at her "Fine, you want to know oh, oh, oh, ah!" And when I broke down I was this little slobbering mess, which was so fabulous. I looked so pretty with my makeup running everywhere, in the middle of freaking Granville Street, bawling my eyes out. It was so stupid. But I wasn't upset about what happened,

I was upset that she pushed so much. But later on I really appreciated that she did, because otherwise I would have probably just walked away and did something stupid. But I didn't. Instead I just cried. A stupid thing, but whatever, crying is good, it's a release. Anyways I can tell people, but I'll never actually implement that. She wanted me to call a rape crisis centre but I didn't want anything to do with them. I didn't want to make a report because I knew exactly who it was and it was just going to bring retaliation on to me. So she hooked me up with this lady named Abby who works specifically in the area of sexual assaults. It was kinda a different experience, it was an opportunity to just walk in the door and say where I was coming from and what I was feeling and not worry about somebody pushing a police report on me. But also, it's something she hears every day.

Since workers always seemed to be suggesting counselling to Courtney, I wondered if she was open to the suggestion at this point.

I was pretty open to it, but at the same time, I was pretty hardened. It wasn't my first time, it won't be my last time. But for some reason that day it was just bothering me and I think it was bothering me because the amount that she had pushed me or whatever. And so it was a neat opportunity to just walk in the door with somebody I'd never met. Somebody who'll I'll probably never ever see again, just lay it all out on the table and walk out the door.

Courtney laughed as she shared with me how she walked into Abby's office and spilled her guts. Abby just listened, and Courtney felt better.

I think I kinda shocked her. Because I walked in the door and I was like, "I don't tell people anything. I don't share shit with anyone. And you know what, I'm cool. I don't really need to be here. But I am here and I don't really know why, but for some reason I came here. So this is how it is. Best of luck." I spilled my guts, and she just listened. I didn't really give her the opportunity to communicate at all, because I didn't want her to. And I think she kind of knew if

she interrupted me I was done, I wasn't going to say anything else. It was really great because I didn't have to wait for her. I didn't have to stop. I didn't have to explain anything. I just like, "dahdahdah, okay, bye." I actually felt really good when I walked out the door, but at the same time I was like, "holy fuck, I can't believe I just did that. But I feel a lot better."

One thing that stood out for Courtney is that Abby did not take notes during the session, but she still remembered Courtney's story when Courtney returned a second time.

I thought it was interesting that she didn't write anything down. But when I came back she knew exactly where I was, so she was able to just retain and just write it all out after. Counsellors always write things down. Or they read something first and it's like, "why can't you read that before I get in the office. Can't you just make me think you actually remember me?"

Courtney attended the second session at Abby's request. Although she was intrigued, she chose not to continue with counselling. She still didn't see the point of talking more.

Abby called the street-youth drop-in centre looking for me and asked me to come back in because I was so detached, I had no emotions. But I'd already balled my eyes out for three days. So it was really more like exhaustion. I think that's part of the reason why I just spilled my guts to her completely was 'cause I was so tired. I really didn't care, I was so freakin' tired. So I went back and that time we had a little bit more of a conversation. She was interesting, a really neat woman, who I thought I could actually learn a lot from. She kind of intrigued me, in a way. I could have gone back more times if I wanted to, but I didn't want to keep talking about the same thing. I just needed to get it out and then it was out and it was done with. So I didn't go back.

But Courtney did start to implement some of the changes she had begun to vision with Elizabeth, using tools she had learned from different people along the way. When she found herself pregnant, she left her boyfriend and went to a safehouse. Her life was good for six

months until her boyfriend located her, and reasserted control over her life through another violent assault.

It was pretty close after that I found out I was pregnant and I left my ex. I'd just turned seventeen. I got into a safe house, I stayed there 6 months. I was doing really good. I was really far out of everything. I hadn't really talked to anybody, but I was starting to implement more of the tools that I'd gotten from people. And so it wasn't so bad, but then my ex found out where I was. I didn't tell him. He had people following me and they told him that they seen me out there. Him and his boys came out to the house, and jumped me. I had a miscarriage at six months.

Courtney spent three weeks in the hospital, but refused to see the hospital counsellor. Instead, on the day that she was released, she went to see Abby for a third time. She believed that talking to Abby would be more useful than talking to a stranger, and she was not disappointed. Abby already knew so much about her, and Courtney knew that Abby would be as enraged as she was about what had happened to her.

Everyone at the hospital was going on and on, the social worker at the hospital was back in with the Ministry telling them where I am, what's going on and trying to get me back in. They kept trying to make me see this stupid counsellor at the hospital and I wasn't talking to some stupid ass counsellor at the hospital. If I was going to communicate with anybody, then I was going to communicate with somebody that I felt was going to be useful. Somebody that already fucking well knows everything about me. I had forgot I wasn't going to see Abby again, and she already knew so much about me it felt just add on to it. But I also knew that she'd be angry and that's what I wanted. This person at the hospital wasn't angry about nothing. I wanted somebody else to be as angry as I was. So I called her, and the same day I got out, I went to her. And she was angry, so it was good. We had a good little anger team together.

The conversation strengthened Courtney's resolve that she deserved better. She sees it as "the starting point" for her exit from the streets.

That time we actually had a really long conversation. It was more about the fact that I was so sick and tired of the same fucking shit, and sick and tired of being treated like crap, and that I really don't deserve it. And the fact that, before, it was only about me, but at that point in time it wasn't about me anymore. It was about keeping somebody else, the potential of somebody else safe, and I couldn't do it. So I couldn't be in this situation anymore. I had to get out of it and that was the starting point. It was a useful conversation. She was very different than Elizabeth. Elizabeth listened a lot but I did pretty much most of the talking, whereas Abby listens but she also adds a lot into it. And I think at that point in time I really needed to hear somebody else tell me that I'm going to be dead if I keep doing this. I really needed to hear somebody else say it and she did and so it was a really useful conversation, a lot more so than I thought it would have been. It wasn't an easy process, but that was the starting point of the process of getting out.

Although she did not go back to see Abby or anyone else, she began the process of extracting herself from the street. She quit the gang and the sex trade. All that remained tying her to street life was her boyfriend, and some lingering hope that things could work out with him.

It still took me a really long time to get everything straight but I didn't talk to anybody throughout the process because I felt I needed to do it by myself. I couldn't have somebody else directing me, it had to be me. First I needed to get out of the gang before I could get out of my relationship because there's a lot more power and control there, and just because I stayed away for six months didn't mean that I was out of it in any sort of way. And so you know what? A lot of the boys actually had a lot of respect when I came back and said I can't do this anymore. Because a lot of them knew what had happened and a lot of them were really pissed about it. And so I didn't get as bad a beating as I thought I was going to get. But it was still pretty bad.

But it was easier to leave that than to anything else. So I wasn't working in the sex trade, I wasn't in a gang, I was still with my ex though. Because I thought for some reason that maybe I could control that situation a little bit more. I hadn't quite realized that it was all tied in together. I thought maybe I could somehow influence his anger, but I apparently I couldn't. At all.

I asked Courtney if other service providers ever suggested that she access counselling during this time. She said it was suggested "all the time" by two youth workers in particular, one of whom was Jenna from the Aboriginal youth centre. Sometimes these suggestions felt like pressure, but Courtney also learned from other people's stories the importance of finding a counsellor that fits for you.

It was hard because Jenna I have a lot of respect for, and she's taught me so much. She stood by me so much, I have a really hard time telling her off or telling her I wasn't interested or that I didn't think it was a good idea. And the other youth worker was trying to be a counsellor and I'm trying to tell her that counselling sucks. It wasn't the best situation. A lot of times I felt really pressured when I felt like I needed it to be my decision. I needed to get to that point on my own. But at the same time they had good stories and bad stories of their own to tell. It was neat to feel like I wasn't the only person who thought some counsellors were fucked up and some were really good. It just depends on who you get. You really have to find a counsellor that you mesh well with. If you do, great things can happen. And if it's somebody you don't mesh with, then you really just gotta cut it and move to the next one and try. And you have to be open to trying more than once. It's like trying to ride a bike – you fall down, but you gotta get back up and try it again. Right? Otherwise, you're never going to learn. And you always have training wheels.

Just before she turned 18, Courtney found out she was pregnant again. Her boyfriend was in jail, so it was a prime opportunity to leave him, and leave the streets for good.

I came off the streets at the end of being 17, when I finally left my ex. I knew that I was pregnant again, and I got off the streets 'cause I wasn't going to make the same mistakes twice. He was in jail, so it was easier to make the transition. I didn't need to do it with a transition house. I've always just been extremely independent. I just needed to have the opportunity.

There were a few months left in the school year, and Courtney began to hang out in the First Nations classroom. She was intrigued, and became curious to reconnect with her own Aboriginality. Jenna was there waiting to guide her, and eventually Courtney's cultural reconnection led her back to live on her home reserve, after being away for more than ten years.

I came off the streets in March and school finished in June. I started hanging out in the First Nations classroom at school because I didn't really know where else to go. It was intriguing. It was neat, but most of the kids in the class were Cree. It kind of intrigued me to go find out, so I actually asked Jenna, "tell me about my culture. You know what they were saying at school today? They're talking about this." And she's like, "ah dude I've been trying to tell you for so long." I'm like, "You never said nothing." She's like, "okay, well I was just waiting for you to come to me." So it was kinda neat. But then I wanted to learn as much as I could. So I moved back on reserve, and stayed for quite a while, until I was 21.

Wanting to create a positive environment for her daughter was a central motivation for Courtney in her cultural reconnection. She didn't realize how much personal benefit it would bring.

I didn't really start connecting back into my culture until I had my daughter, but it was more about trying to find grounding and creating stability for her and I didn't realize how much it was going to benefit me in any sort of way. Going back to my reserve and connecting in with my elders and being at the friendship centre and I was working at the Aboriginal youth centre. It was all around me and it was inspiring in a way. It gave me something to be proud of. Proud of

who I am and where I come from. And able to pass that on to somebody else, rather than losing it because you're too scared to say.

Courtney never went back out on the street, but she struggled to create stability for herself and her daughter. Eventually she decided to move into a supported transitional housing program for street-involved youth, in order to learn “structure and accountability.”

I never went back out, but I was constantly running, constantly moving, constantly never really settling down or creating any sort of stability. I didn't want that for my daughter, because that's what I had. So I had to figure out how to create something different because I didn't know anything different. I knew how to get a house, I knew how to get a job, I knew how to pay bills, but I didn't know how to create stability. I didn't know how to take away the chaos and drama. We were fine for the first little while, but when my ex got out that was pretty much when we started moving. We moved seven times in a year. I figured the program would teach me some kind of structure and accountability and whatnot. I stayed six months, then I left because the first stage program was not for me. I'm way more independent than that, and I don't do well with that much structure. Then I went back to the second stage program and I stayed for a year.

Staff in the program pressured Courtney to see a counsellor, but she saw no point in seeing the on-site drug and alcohol counsellor since addiction was not one of her issues, and so, like she had in the past, she stubbornly resisted.

Oh my god, they tried to make me go so many times. They tried to discharge me and suspend me if I didn't. I refused though. The thing is the program has only one counsellor and it is a drug and alcohol counsellor. They don't believe that anybody can come from a background of the streets without getting involved in drugs and alcohol at some point in time, so that's why they have a drug and alcohol counsellor. They feel it's the most beneficial. But it's not very good or beneficial when you don't come from that background. I didn't see the purpose when I don't

do drugs and I don't drink. It didn't make any sense to me. I'm like, "Why would I go and see this person when this person doesn't apply to me? Find somebody that applies to me and maybe I'll consider going, but you can't force me to go."

Courtney also felt little effort was put into figuring out what kind of counsellor might be helpful.

I think they would need to actually put a little bit of effort in and communicate with me and find out what am I willing to do? Have I been seeing anybody before? Would I like to connect back in with one of those people? Would I prefer an Aboriginal counsellor? Ah!! That would have been a really good one for Courtney! They're hard to find, but they are there. I think for me it would have been better focusing on the medicine wheel and stuff. But nope, they didn't like my ideas.

Because it was mandatory, Courtney had one session with a mental health counsellor. Still not someone to have something forced on her, Courtney only talked about the good things in her life, refusing to admit to any problems. The counsellor, perhaps recognizing the disservice in forcing a young adult to access counselling, told the program that Courtney did not have to return.

Counselling was mandatory in the first stage program, so they sent me back over to the place where Elizabeth had worked. I had a lady that was there when Elizabeth was there, but I had never really connected with her. And I was really mad that I was told I had to go. So, after the first session she told them that I didn't need to come back. Because I'm a very good bull-shitter. I'm sure she knew I didn't want to come and I'm sure she knew I probably had lots to talk about, but as far as I was concerned, I was perfectly fine. There wasn't anything bad to talk about and I could tell you all the good things in my life.

Courtney moved out of the transitional housing program about a year ago. She has not accessed counselling again, and she has not gone back to the street. We had reached the end of her story and the interview shifted from story-telling to theorizing as I asked her what lessons might be learned from her story. Her initial answer was thoughtful, with long pauses between each idea.

Be persistent. ... Sometimes you have to push when you really don't want to or it wouldn't be normal to. ... Share. ... Listen and... you're not always a case file. You're not always explained in notes. ... Be prepared. ... Don't be surprised. ... I kind of like counsellors now though. I don't think they're bad anymore. I want to be one, so it can't be that bad.

Curious that someone who had resisted counselling so many times, and hadn't seen a counsellor in eight years, would now want to be a counsellor, I asked Courtney how that shifted for her. She laughed as she told me she had originally wanted to be a social worker, seemingly at the absurdity of the system and her own naivety in thinking she could change it.

I thought I was going to be a social worker. That was a dumb concept. So I decided to be a counsellor instead. Because as a social worker you're like a little ant in this whole entire huge system. You spend your whole entire career burying these little puddles and they constantly get collapsed in on because you run into some sort of red tape or some level that you can't push past. You can't be outspoken and you can't have your own opinion. And you can't put that out there. I thought I would be able to change the system and I finally realized that I can't change the system. The system's not going to change until the system wants to change. So going back and looking at it where's the turning point or where's the starting point? Counsellors.

I asked her what she meant by this statement that counsellors are the starting point.

I see it being like a stepping stone to a new direction, to a new understanding. I think they're a fundamental piece. And I think there needs to be more Aboriginal counsellors. I think

it's huge. With the kids I work with and see now, it's not the social worker that makes the difference, it's the counsellor that makes the difference. Because that is usually the first person to stop to listen. Who doesn't react like a social worker reacts, or like an outreach worker reacts: "Oh god you did what? What the hell did you do that? Nananana."

Courtney believes (as do I) that having someone who will listen without reacting and without trying to fix or change anything can be a powerful healing experience. This belief is also reflected in her answer to my next question, about how she envisions her own approach to counselling with street-involved Aboriginal youth. She describes a counselling approach centered on culture as healing, with a "quiet approach" to listening, as she sees in her elders.

I'm not sure if it's going to work best, but I think I'm going to come about it with a very cultural context background. I'm going to bring in as much culture as I possibly can. And I want to be an example that it's not limited, it's not going to hold you back. It's not something else to put on you. It's not a label. It's something to embrace and be proud of, to recognize. Because I think it's a key grounding piece for me, it doesn't mean it will be for somebody else, but I think that's the approach I'm going to take. And then the more quiet approach, like if you look at our elders. I don't know if you've ever had a conversation with an elder but they don't talk. I mean, they do talk when it's time to, but otherwise they just listen. And they can listen for hours. They'll put on the tea and just play checkers with you for hours while you just talk because you don't want there to be silence. And because you know you have this person's undivided attention. There isn't something else more pressing or you aren't on some sort of time limit. They connect and they understand. They understand the level of oppression and stereotypes or the lack of wanting to acknowledge and what it may be that you're struggling with because of that. So I think I would take more of that approach. More laid back. Not so much office setting, I'm way too ADHD to do an office. But I also find that you can connect better with people not

necessarily in an office. But every once in a while you come across a kid who does want an office because they want something more structured, so then you do it, right?

To which I responded, “Right. You meet people where they’re at.” Courtney had nothing more she wanted to say, so I asked her if I could share some of my reactions to her story. I said, “Like you, I think a lot of the system doesn’t work, especially not for street-involved Aboriginal youth. And counsellors aren’t always very useful. And when you talk about what works for you it affirms for me things that I think work. I do think sometimes that outreach workers, youth workers, people who have more flexible service delivery models, are able to connect better, whereas you get an M.A., they put you in an office.” To which Courtney interjected, “a very weird, awkward office,” and then I went on: “Yes. Even though, I really think that in my masters, I have learned skills that are useful and I want to be able to bring them to people. I’ve learned counselling techniques that have helped me a lot. All sorts of stuff about emotional regulation and grounding and stuff that I didn’t know how to do for myself or teach people before.” These words prompted some final thoughts from Courtney about barriers for Aboriginal youth, and a dialogue on changing the reputation of counsellors among youth and the value of outreach.

I think a lot of times in the Aboriginal culture you’re not encouraged to talk about how you feel and aren’t encouraged to see a counsellor. And you’re turned off of anything institutional. And a lot of times counselling offices are very institutional. And the idea of it is very institutional. So I find that you tend to hold everything inside way more, because that’s the way it’s supposed to be. It’s supposed to stay on reserve or if you need to talk go find an elder to talk to, but if you don’t know an elder you’re kinda screwed. You’re just like, “Aaaaggggh okay.”

“Did you get those messages?”

I totally got those messages and so many of the kids I know today have that same message, we're supposed to just own it. "No, you're not supposed to own it. It's not yours to own. Let it go."

"So somehow getting that message out there as well..."

That a counsellor isn't a negative thing.

"How do you think that message can get out to youth who are out there on the street right now?"

I think by meeting good ones. I think counsellors should join in with outreach teams. How brilliant of an idea would that be?! It totally would be!

We talked about the few counsellors we've known who've done outreach over the years, then I affirmed her idea that counsellors joining outreach teams is a brilliant idea "Yeah, being out there and meeting youth. Not being some scared person who lives in a box, in a little office and never comes out." She agreed.

Because then you're more likely to pick kids up right away or they're going to make some sort of connection with you. And it may take 10 different outreach trips, but eventually that kid might be willing to have a conversation with you, right? And if they like you, we do everything by word of mouth. You can put up a dozen posters, but we aren't going to come. But if we know somebody who knows you, then the odds are that we're going to give you a shot, right?

Maxine

Maxine is an 18 years woman whose mother is Spanish and father is Carrier First Nation. She moved to Vancouver a year ago to attend an Aboriginal treatment centre, after growing up in the interior of British Columbia. For the past six months, she has lived in a transitional housing program for street-involved youth. Maxine began her story with talking

about being taken into care at the age of 9. She didn't say much else about her childhood, but what she shared paints a picture of a chaotic childhood, including poverty, abuse, and neglect. Maxine's mother struggled with her own mental health and addiction issues and the two were often in conflict. Maxine had three brothers: one around the same age, one a year or so younger, and one who died as an infant when she was 14. As the oldest sister she was a caretaker in her family who she described as "dirt poor and arguing all the time." Her family moved frequently, from house to house, and community to community. Including a couple of foster homes, Maxine named seven different BC interior communities in which she lived in her first 17 years. Her mother left her father when she was 3, and she and her brothers stayed with her mom, a fact about which Maxine whispered, "I don't like that part." Her difficulty adjusting to the loss of her father led to her first experience with a counsellor. She did not like the experience, and she laughed as she remembered what a "stubborn" child she was, actively refusing to engage with the play therapist. This refusal to engage in counselling would continue until she was 15 years old.

I had a first counsellor when I was 3 years old. I hated her. I didn't know at the time but my mom told me that I was seeing her because she had left my dad and I was really attached to my dad. I didn't like her. I didn't talk to her about shit-all. She used to try to ask me to talk to her and I'd sit there and I'd stare at her. I'd glare at her the whole hour. She'd bring me snacks and shit and I wouldn't touch it just 'cause she had it. I don't want your charity. But she tried. She was really nice. She even talked to my brother. He loved her, and I hated her. I used to get mad at him for talking to her: "why would you say anything to her?" I don't even know why. I just know that I hated her. To me, she was just this big bad old lady. Throughout most of my life I hated all my counsellors until more recently, maybe a couple of years ago.

Maxine didn't meet her father again until she was 8 years old and this disconnection also meant a loss of connection with her Carrier family and culture. Unfortunately, when she re-connected with them in later childhood, she was introduced to more drinking and drugging than culture, although she did have some positive experiences.

Well, I had finally met my dad when I was about 8 and that's also when I had my first drink. And that's when I started doing pot. (*Dana: Did you have much exposure to her Carrier culture and traditions?*) Well kind of. Not really though. My dad never taught me any Carrier. The only reason I know the few words that I do is because my uncle taught me them. I moved up there for 3 months when I was 14 but most of what I saw was drunk people. My dad's family is all alcoholics. Every single one of them. It wasn't really a whole lot of culture. Not much anyway. I used to go with my auntie to go fishing and she taught me how to gut fish and to take skins off. But that was so long ago I don't know if I could do it again, without her anyway. It'd be like, "Auntie, help me" Other than that Powwows were the only thing that I knew when I was growing up. I loved going to them. It was so much fun, ridiculously fun.

I asked her what she thought about being Aboriginal when she was a child, and she talked about how she felt when other native people did not recognize her as Aboriginal.

I used to get really self-conscious because of how light I am. It used to make me mad. Like, "fuck off, just because you're dark and whatnot." I knew that I was native and I'd look at my mom and be like, "You bitch. You ruined my skin." Anything I could get mad at my mom for I used to just rage on her, over the smallest things.

When Maxine was 9, she and her brothers were taken into care for the first time. Still stubborn, her resistance to foster care echoes her refusal to engage in play therapy years before. Instead, Maxine and her younger brother ran to the street.

I guess when I first started getting street-involved and stuff was when I started getting into foster care, 'cause I didn't want to be there and I'm a pretty stubborn kid. If I don't want to do something it was pretty hard to get me to do it. My mom had gotten into a car accident. She went literally insane so she went to the insane asylum and my step-dad didn't really care, he only came home to sleep. So after a while the Ministry started getting involved and then we got taken away and we all went into care. Me and younger brother are really rebellious. We didn't want to be there. We made sure that the foster mom knew that. And her house wasn't exactly all that stable either, now thinking about, it's like, "why would you put us there?" So me and my brother used to just tell her that we were going out and sometimes we came home and sometimes we didn't. At that time I was already used to taking care of all my brothers in my house. So I felt like, "I don't need her. I can do it myself."

I asked Maxine what she was getting up to on the street, and she talked about pretending to be twelve in order to hang out with the teens. She talked about using drugs and alcohol, and staying out all night. She talked about being moved to a new foster home, and then another, and then back to her mom's, and another foster home, and so on. As someone who knows what can happen to young girls on the street, I was horrified by how young she was, and I shared this with her. She agreed, her tone revealing compassion for her younger self as she said: "It's pretty hurting a 9 year old going out like that, yeah. Got issues?"

When I got into foster care I was already drinking. I was already being a stoner. So I figured if I'm going to have this horrible time at home then I may as well have a good time while I'm out. So I started lying about my age, saying I was 12, 'cause everyone thought that I was older anyway, and I started going to parties and stuff. Plus I had a lot of older friends that were 16 or 17. I'd go drink with them or whatever and I'd say that I wasn't going home and they'd be like, "fine by us." They didn't care. Now I realize they're not really friends, they're just kind of

there for the fun. And then not too long after, I was not coming home and being stupid and stuff, they moved me to another home. And it just kept going over and over like that. I think I've been in maybe 10 homes or something like that. I moved a lot. Plus I'd move in and out of my mom's house throughout this time too. And she moved a lot, about every 2 or 3 months. And that meant that I moved every 2 or 3 months. She used to get frustrated with me too 'cause I'd be like, "well I'm going out" and she'd be like, "no you're not allowed" and I'd be like, "yeah, watch me." And I'd walk right out the front door. So then she'd get mad at me and kick me out.

Maxine talked about one good friend and her family who supported her during this time, reminding us of the minor role of counsellors in most youths' lives. Since this was an interview focusing on counsellors, it is hard to know how many other people like this friend and her family were important supports in Maxine's life.

Candace was probably the best friend I've ever had in my life. Throughout all my drug use and shit she was the only one that would sit there and make me eat, make me sleep. When I came over I knew that I was going to be well taken care of because her family always took care of me. Her mom knew me so well that I called her mom and I could tell her anything. She was the only one that knew that my dad beat me and raped me and all the different things I've had happen to me throughout my life that I wouldn't tell anyone.

Knowing that youth like her are often pressured to see counsellors, I asked Maxine how she managed to avoid seeing a counsellor until she was 15 years old. She laughed as she described her stubborn refusal.

I refused to. My social workers always wanted me to see counsellors because they thought that I had issues or something. 'Cause if you're going to move that much there's got to be something wrong with you. Plus all my drug and alcohol abuse. But I hated the idea. I didn't want to see one. And then I've seen psychiatrists too. Psychiatrists still bother me though. I just

think it's annoying. "And how do you feel about that?" It's like, "what do you think I felt about it?" But then after a while hearing it each time I'd go see the social worker I was just like, "fine."

When I asked her what finally made her say "fine," Maxine talked about how watching a friend and her family led her to wonder if maybe her life so far hadn't been so "normal."

I think I was just tired of her telling me that I had so many issues that I had to deal with, 'cause I refused to believe that I had issues. To me everything was fine. It's like, "no, there's nothing wrong." I didn't think there was any problems 'cause I grew up doing this. I thought it was normal. But then after a while I was thinking about it. 'Cause I had this one friend and I always used to get so jealous of her 'cause her family seemed so together. They weren't rich but they weren't poor. They were able to buy themselves a house, have a dog and a cat and have nice things. Whereas my family was dirt poor, arguing all the time. Me and my brothers shared our toys because we didn't have enough money for a bunch of things.

I wondered aloud if this awareness had led her to think that counselling might be useful.

Not really. Not at that point. To me the only thing I needed was my booze and my coke.

So 15 year old Maxine reluctantly agreed to go to counselling, and was sent to Evelyn, a mental health counsellor from a "Youth and Family Outreach Program." Maxine laughed, perhaps at her own audacity, as she told the story of her first meeting with the counsellor. Hung-over and peering out of a hoody through sunglasses, Maxine was shockingly frank with Evelyn about her excessive substance abuse. But her sharing didn't "affect anything" because she felt like Evelyn was blown away by her stories and did not know how to respond, although Maxine acknowledged that she did not make it easy for "that poor woman." She recognizes now she hated herself at the time, and presented herself in a way that was intended to push people away. She also hated the idea of talking to someone who was paid to care.

I was very blatantly honest with her. She'd ask me about things "what did I do" and I was like, "well I got drunk, did some E, snorted some coke." And she'd just look at me like, "oh my God." I'd tell her everything, but in a way where it wouldn't affect anything. 'Cause it just blew her away. She just could not believe it. She never knew what to say to me and she never knew how to react to me because if she reacted a certain way then I'd react a different way. The first time we met at a coffee shop. I went by myself and I told her I wanted a coffee 'cause I was hung-over. It was the first thing I told her. She didn't have a lot to say. I think she was speechless or something. She asked me how I was that day, and I was like, "I'm fucking hung over. How do you think I am?" And she was like, "well I don't know." I was like, "well you do now. Can I have that coffee now?" It was awkward. I mean I'm sitting there telling her how hung-over I am. I left once to go barf. Came back. I had my hat, my hoody and my sunglasses and my baggy jeans. I looked like a boy at the time. I don't even know if she knew I was a girl. 'Cause at the time I was just so lost. I just wore anything that covered myself completely. I hated myself. So I just sat there and I was like, "fuck I'm so sick." I'm complaining to her 'cause I thought that was her job. Just to listen to me complain about how bad life was or whatever. I used to think that counsellors were paid to listen. Paid to care. That's what I thought it was. And I hated it. I don't want to talk to someone that doesn't even care about me. Right? And doesn't know what I've been through or whatever. I just hated it. That poor woman, she took a lot of stuff from me.

Although she seemed speechless, Evelyn actually talked a lot during the rest of the first session.

She did most of the talking 'cause I was pretty silent. She was just trying to explain what she was there to do and what she wanted to go over the next while or whatever. And I just sat there and I was like, "uh-huh, uh-huh." I wasn't really listening to be quite honest. I don't even remember what she said.

Given her negative impression of the first session, I asked Maxine what influenced her decision to go back a second time.

I wasn't too sure as to what I was doing 'cause I knew that if I stopped seeing her then my social worker would be on my back again. So I was really kind of contemplating if I was going to go or not and I wasn't sure. It was kind of last minute. I was 20 minutes late. I was like, "whatever." I don't what made me decide to go. I think maybe it was half of me kind of wanting help but at the same time not wanting help, and not wanting my social worker to be harassing me all the time. 'Cause I know that I was depressed all the time. All the time! I hardly ever smiled and I was a really aggressive person. And I was the opposite of what I am now. I really noticed that after I cleaned up. It was like, "oh."

Looking back, Maxine can see that she was hurting, but she was not very open to getting help. She had regular appointments with Evelyn weeks for half a year, but her attendance was sporadic, and she was often drunk or high when she was there. She seemed amazed at the level of verbal abuse that Evelyn took from her, and looking back, Maxine wonders if Evelyn really did care.

I think in that half a year I dished out a lot of shit. I'd get mad at her and I'd call her a "fucking stupid cunt" or whatever the fuck came to mind. And usually I wasn't even sober when I was saying it, so it's like I didn't even know what I was doing. I kind of feel bad for it now when I think of it. It was like, "holy fuck man." And she just sat there and took it. I don't know, if it was me I'd be like, "smack! Shut up!" But that's me. Now that I think about it, maybe she wasn't paid to care. You know, maybe she actually saw something that I didn't in myself at the time. But at the time I didn't think that counsellors were like that.

I asked her relationship with Evelyn progressed, and Maxine described it as bittersweet, largely due to her own apprehension about counselling.

It was kind of bittersweet because sometimes I would be really cooperative, but at the same time I was still really aggressive and apprehensive about what she was doing. So it was really weird. I went to a few sessions sober and she knew that I was sober. ‘Cause she could tell the difference. This one time she was even like, “I like you a lot better when you’re like this.” And I was like, “what the fuck are you talking about?” And then I automatically got mad, right? And she’s like, “well you’re just so much nicer today.” And I was like, “fuck you. I’m fucking miserable.” And she’s like, “well yeah but you act a lot different.” I was like, “what the fuck are you doing” and I kept swearing at her like, “what the hell are you talking about?” And she’s like, “you’re sober.” I was like, “I know. What are you talking about?” So then right after that I had to go out and use ‘cause she made me mad.

When I asked if she remembered anything else about Evelyn, Maxine said, “No. She didn’t really leave a big impression on me.” Eventually she stopped going, finding talking to Evelyn more frustrating than helpful. Perhaps as she was not yet ready to “deal with anything,” as she says, but I can’t help but wonder if there is something different the counsellor could have done.

I was getting so frustrated with just talking about life. It was so depressing. It was like, “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.” I just didn’t want to. I don’t think I was ready to deal with anything at the time. ‘Cause in my head it was normal. It was okay. Everything was fine. Like, “Everything is peachy keen.” Talking just left me feeling more depressed. Like I didn’t have hope at all. So I just stopped. And then Evelyn called my mom. So I had to call her. She’s like, “you’re not coming to any of your sessions.” I was like, “I know. I’m not coming anymore.” She’s like, “Oh? Oh.” I was like, “Yeah. See you around.” Click. My social worker wasn’t happy. I told her “I’m not going to see anybody. I just don’t want to.” But not too long after that is when I ended up having to see Mike.

Maxine's face broke into a wide smile when she introduced Mike as the counsellor that "really made an impression on me." Mike was a drug and alcohol counsellor who Maxine saw weekly for a year, after being mandated to counselling when she was caught smoking weed at school.

Well on 4/20 they caught me using at school. So then I got suspended and because it was an illegal substance they had to call the cops, right? They let me go easy though. My social worker ended up talking them out of it, without making any legal decisions or whatever, if I went to go see a D and A counsellor. So then I agreed because I didn't want to go to jail. It's like, "I have a decision. Okay, I'll go." So I met with him.

Like Evelyn, Maxine met with Mike in a coffee shop.

A coffee shop. Another coffee shop. He always brought me to coffee shops though so it was okay. We always met up at the same coffee shop. It was the closest thing that a small town has to Starbucks. I remember that. It had just opened and everyone was all excited about it.

But her first impression of Mike was very different than of Evelyn. Maxine liked how laid back Mike seemed, and how he didn't force her to share. Having the space to chill over coffees for a few months allowed Maxine to feel comfortable enough to begin to share.

He was really laid back. He was really chill and I really like that because that I like being laid back. I'm a pretty chill person too. He didn't want to talk about anything unless I wanted to talk about it. And sometimes we just sat there talking about our days and sipping on coffee. I really enjoyed it. And then after a few months I finally started getting comfortable with him and we actually started talking about shit. It was really cool 'cause we didn't even talk about nothing too serious unless I brought it up.

Mike also challenged Maxine's belief that counsellors care only because they are paid to care, because of his willingness to go a little out of his way for her.

A few times I needed to get back to my place 'cause my foster mom couldn't come pick me up or whatever and so I'd ask him and he'd give me a ride home. And it was stuff like that. 'Cause if he didn't care he wouldn't give me a ride. He'd be like, "fuck off. Hitch hike or something." If someone cares they'll go that extra little bit. They won't go way out of their way but if they figure they can do something they'll do it.

Feeling comfortable and cared about, Maxine began to open up to Mike, although when she got too emotional she felt the need to leave.

A few times I ended up having to leave because I was crying. He said that I didn't have to talk about it but I kept talking about it. 'Cause I had never talked about it. I started getting really serious and I started getting really emotional. It was like, "I have to go." He's like, "okay." And then I just called him for another appointment. Yeah, he was one of my favorite workers.

After about four months, Mike began to help Maxine address her substance abuse. She laughed as she told how Mike confronted her, perhaps at her own stubbornness that everything was fine.

He was the only worker that ever got me to quit for myself. The only one who actually knew how to get me to do it. 'Cause I needed a big smack in the face before I actually realize how bad something is. At the beginning of every session he'd be like, "did you use? How much did you use? What did you use?" and stuff like that 'cause being a counsellor and stuff, right? So I'd tell him and he'd be like, "why are you still alive?" And one time, I guess he was getting scared for me so he said "okay I want to do something really serious first." I was like, "oh fuck. What?" He said like, "seriously, the way you're going, within the next year or two you're going to either be homeless under a bridge." I was like, "did that." He's like, "well you're going to do it again. Or you're going to be dead." I totally stopped everything and I was like, "nooo, I'm fine." He was like, "nooo, you're not." I was like, "yeah, I am." We argued about that for a

while. And then after our session I was thinking. That really stuck in my head for a long time. And finally I was like, “fuck it. I don’t want to do it anymore.” I called him a few days later and was like, “how do I quit? How do I do that?” ‘Cause I didn’t know how. I was using for so long. I was like, “how do I live without it. I don’t know what to do.” Then I was sober for 3 months.

Mike suggested that she consider residential treatment, but Maxine refused. She was terrified by the idea of living with strangers.

After I sobered up he wanted me to go to a treatment center. And that wasn’t going to happen. It was so funny. I was like, “what?! No!” And he was like, “but there’s this one that I think you’d like.” And I was like, “nooo.” And almost every time he’d try and I just kept saying no. I don’t want to go. (*Dana: Were you tempted?*) I was for a while just because I thought it would help me stay sober and stuff. But I was just so scared to go that I refused to go. (*Dana: What were you scared of?*) People. Mostly people. Just the thought of being around people I that I didn’t know. And in a living situation. It just scared the fuck out of me.

Maxine saw Mike every week for the three months she was clean, and for a while her life was better than she had ever known. But then she relapsed.

I couldn’t do it. So I started again, and I got really bad. I had been clean for about two months and I had gone to Quebec. I came back and I was just doing so good. I was happy all the time. I was giggling and I was just being myself. But then not long after things just went downhill again. I was with my mom and I just fucked up all over again. And Mike could tell the next week ‘cause when I saw him I was back to myself. And he was like, “what happened? You were doing so good.” And I was like, “I don’t know.” I was so close to tears, I was like, “I don’t know what I did. I don’t know why I did it.” It was bad. After I used again that time it just went back and forth like that throughout the whole year. I always kept trying to stay clean but I just couldn’t.

Maxine was surprised that Mike understood when she relapsed. I understand too. How could anyone stay clean when being with family and friends meant being surrounded by free-flowing drugs and alcohol? And Maxine's laughter as she described her attempts to not be triggered in this impossible environment suggests that she understands that now too.

He understood. 'Cause he himself was an addict before. So he didn't really get mad at me or anything like I thought he was going to. I was like, "don't hurt me. I didn't mean to. I swear." And he was like, "If that's what you want to do, I can't stop you. But I can advise you not to and I can help you quit again." And I was like, "I don't know if I can." So I started slowing down 'cause I thought maybe that would help me quit. But really it just wanted me to use more. I'd be sitting there around it and like, "oh, I'm not supposed to have it" and I'd try and look away. But I was around the coke and the meth and the booze every day. So I just tried to not look at it or something. I don't know why but I thought if I don't see it, it wouldn't be there. So I'd be like this [gestured looking away] while I was talking to my mom or something. And like, "yeah, that's great. So how was your day?" And she's over there [pointed away from where she is looking]. 'Cause she was drinking and her boyfriend was a crack-head and all this shit and most of my friends at the time did coke. And then my mom's friend's boyfriend got me into meth and he was always around. So trying to avoid these people is impossible.

Maxine eventually got her own place on a youth agreement, but then circumstances merged with her own poor judgment, creating a situation that would trigger her to move to Vancouver. One night she met a man who became her stalker and triggered a paranoia that had her practically housebound. When her dad's sister offered her a way out, Maxine jumped at the chance.

It was sort of stupid. I had just gotten my own place finally, after forever of trying to. I was on my way home and this car drove by and it kept circling me and finally it stopped and this

guy was screaming at me. I was like, “what the fuck do you want?” He said “do you want to smoke a bowl?” I was like, “yeah.” Not the brightest idea I ever had. I had never seen him before but he knows my brother so that’s how he recognized me I guess. So I got into the car with him and he was smoking up with me and he started asking me a bunch of sexual questions. I wasn’t going to answer them. I was like, “are you fucking kidding dude? Back off.” And so he’s asking me all these questions and finally it’s like, “do you have a boyfriend?” And I was like, “yes.” And he was like, “do you want a fuck buddy?” I was like, “not with you.” So finally the bowl was gone and I was like, “okay I’m going to go now.” And he’s like, “no, no, I got more.” So I sat back down. I was such a dummy. And then finally all his weed was gone so I was like, “okay I’m going to go home now.” And he’s like, “well I can give you a ride.” I was like, “no, I can walk.” ‘Cause I didn’t want him knowing where I lived but then I realized he was in a car and I’m walking. So he knows where I live. And so he starts stalking me and I start getting really paranoid. And it doesn’t help with all the drugs and shit but it got to the point where I wouldn’t go to the door. I wouldn’t go anywhere near the windows. And if I had to I would crawl so that he wouldn’t see me. And the lights were always off. The only places I went were Candace’s house and to meet Mike. I’d take every back road that I knew down there. And I’d do it all the way back up. Then my aunt calls and she asks me how I am and I tell her everything. And she’s like, “oh my god. You can’t live like that. It’s like, “Well, I have been for about a month now.” And so she offers to take me in and two seconds later I’m like, “yeah I’m coming.” So I get rid of all my stuff, start packing, do the whole move bit again. And I end up down here.

Candace’s mom helped her move and Mike supported her plan. When I asked if she and Mike had done any “goodbye stuff,” Maxine said she had “refused to,” but that Mike had wished her well and invited her to call him if she wanted. The counsellor in me who always wonders if the kids who move away are doing ok hoped that she had.

No. I lost his number. I was like, “fuck.” Otherwise I would have probably called him because the first two months I was here I still in my paranoid state.

Mike does not know how well Maxine has been doing over the past year. I wonder if he realized the huge difference he made in Maxine’s life, including perhaps opening her up to accept the help in Vancouver that has facilitated her exit from the street. But while her experience with Mike showed her that there are some good counsellors, she was still apprehensive. She still thought that a lot of counsellors were more frustrating than helpful. For Maxine, a good counsellor is one who helps you “understand what you’re doing and why.”

I was kind of on the border line. I didn’t really know what to think of them. ‘Cause on one hand a lot of them were really stupid and on the other hand there were a handful of good ones. The stupid ones are more frustrating than they help. They’d ask the same questions over and over. It’s like, “I just fucking told you. What else do you want me to say?” Or kind of go over the same things over and over. It’s like a broken record. Whereas the good ones, I felt that they actually cared and they could help me and they didn’t go over the same thing over and over again. Instead they go over different parts of different things and find reasons for why it could have happened. And what you can do to help yourself get over it and stuff. ‘Cause it’s only when you understand what you’re doing and why you’re doing it can you do something about it.

So Maxine moved to a suburb of Vancouver to live with her paternal aunt and grandma, the only two members of Casper’s dad’s family who do not live in their home reserve. For the first couple of months she lived there, Casper was still in a paranoid state, and she was also detoxing.

I walked really fast even though I knew that my grandma couldn’t. Just ‘cause I would get so paranoid about being out, that something was going to happen. So I’d try and walk as fast as I can to get wherever the hell we were going as fast as I could. Even though they were almost

a block behind me, my mom, my grandma and my aunt. I'd turn around and "oh, they're not right behind me." 'Cause my friends would keep up. But my grandma can't. She's got really bad knees and all this stuff. She's in her walker trying to walk fast like, "oh fuck." And then my lights were still always off and my door was always closed and my blinds were always closed. It was always so dark in my room. My music was always on loud. It was pretty crazy. I had nothing to worry about but I worried about it anyway. I was always in my room and I wouldn't talk to anybody and plus I was getting off of all these drugs right. I just stopped completely using everything when I moved. So I was really bad.

I asked Maxine if she had talked to Mike about moving as an opportunity to try to quit using.

No. It was kind of a last minute decision. But I knew as soon as I moved down here that I wasn't going to do drugs or drink anymore. The day I moved I was harsh blitzed on everything though.

Given Maxine's state, her aunt suggested that she get some help. At first Maxine was resistant to the idea, but she eventually agreed. This time it was not because of the outside pressure, but because Maxine knew she needed help.

And then finally my aunt suggested I see a counsellor, I guess she was getting annoyed with me because that's all I did. At first I wasn't willing, but then finally after a while I agreed. I knew that I needed help. I mean, I was stuck in my room all the time. I refused to go anywhere. I mean, there's something wrong.

Maxine's aunt took her to see a drug and alcohol counsellor. Gayle was an Aboriginal woman who helped Maxine a lot, even though Maxine didn't really connect with her very well. She helped Maxine get into treatment, and this would prove to be turning point in Maxine's life.

The first session was really awkward. I didn't know what to say and I didn't know what to talk about. She ended up asking me a series of questions anyway. I was like, "oh." I didn't really like her much. My first impression was that she was grumpy. 'Cause she was getting all frustrated 'cause she couldn't find her stuff and it's just like, "well then maybe you should organize it better. It's not my fault." She was really nice though. She helped me a lot. Well, she helped me get into the treatment centre anyway.

Maxine had always refused when Mike suggested treatment, but his attempts at persuasion seem to have primed her to say yes when Gayle made the same suggestion. Maxine was especially open to Gayle's suggestion of an Aboriginal treatment centre, given her cultural disconnection.

One of the first things she said to me in the second appointment was "you know all the problems that you have right now I can't help you with. But if you went to a treatment or a recovery house they could help you. Have you ever thought of going to treatment?" And I said "well, it's been suggested to me before. I don't know if I really thought about it." And she's like, "well I think maybe you should think about it." And then she's like, "would you be open to it?" And I thought about it for maybe 5 seconds and it's like, "I guess so." Maybe I do need the help if I keep getting told I should go. The first one that she wanted me to go to was in the interior, but then we found out it was just a 7-day program. So it'd take me a day to get up there and I'd spend a week and come back. That would be stupid. Plus on top of that, that's where all my dad's family is and they're all boozers and shit. I don't think it would help much. 'Cause they'd all come see me and then I'd want to go out there and the next thing you know I'd be drunk. And then she offered me the idea of the Aboriginal treatment centre. I thought it would be really cool 'cause it's very native influenced and stuff and that's something I kind of lacked in growing up.

The program Maxine attended was a four month co-ed residential treatment program with a strong Aboriginal cultural component. She says that she enjoyed her time there, although she was frustrated with some of the workshops. When I asked her what was most enjoyable or helpful about the experience, Maxine talked about being reconnected to her Aboriginal culture.

I think it really connected me spiritually to my roots and stuff. We went to sweats. I learned how to smudge. I was in a couple of protests about native stuff. That was fun. I was even on TV. It was like, “wow.” We did drum group too when I was there, so I learned songs. I don’t remember them anymore but I used to. I just really enjoyed doing stuff like that. Oh and then we went to a Powwow. Although I’ve gone to Powwows for a long time.

When I asked Maxine if she had a one-to-one counsellor at the treatment centre, she said “Yeah. I loved her. I still talk to her.” But Maxine didn’t like Francine the first time her met her.

I thought she was grumpy. She was getting frustrated because one of the youth wasn’t doing something and I was like, “oh.” At the time she wasn’t my one-to-one. And then she was talking to me and I was like, “oh my god thank god you’re not my worker.” And I said it out loud. And she’s like, “oh yeah?” And I was like, “fuck. I just totally said the wrong thing.” And I was always so depressed and I was always so down and she’s like, “you know what? I’m going to make you my youth.” I was like, “what?” She’s like, “I’m going to be your one-to-one.” I was like, “what? You can’t do that can you?” She’s like, “all I’ve got to do is ask the head guy.” And so then she did and the next thing I knew she was my one-to-one.

Maxine was surprised when her first impression, developed while observing Francine in her youth worker role, was challenged when Francine put on her counsellor hat. Maxine never would have imagined the first day she met her, that Francine would become like a mother to her.

She surprised me. She was... it was very different from when she was out working with the youth. 'Cause she said, "I don't want to talk about anything that's going to make you too upset. And if we have to deal with something heavy I want it to be way before you go to bed because I don't want you going to bed thinking about it." And she was going over things like what we were going to be doing and I was just really shocked 'cause I thought she would be way harder to work with than that. And over time she became more like a mom to me. We're still really close. I visit her every weekend. And we hang out all the time.

Maxine and I laughed together as she shared the story of their running joke about Francine being Maxine's mother in proven otherwise, a joke that reflects the depth of their relationship.

I remember she was trying to get me to do a lot of paperwork and stuff to help me. But they were workshop papers and stuff. And I was getting so frustrated because I didn't want to do it. I was like, "what are you my mom?" She was like, "yeah." I was like, "no you're not." She's like, "prove it then." I was like, "Fuck. I don't want to go." She knew that I hated getting blood tests, so that means I was never going to get it done. So it's one of our jokes now, that she's my mom until I can prove her wrong but just because I refuse to go and get blood work done. (*Dana: She means a lot to you*). Yeah, well I never got along with my mom. So I always seem to find replacements for her. Right now that's her.

I asked Maxine what kinds of things she talked about with Francine. She talked about sharing some of those painful things Francine didn't want her to talk about before bed, and about learning coping skills for dealing with her life.

Yeah. We did. We talked about a lot of things. We talked about things that had happened to me. Why I use. How I can stay clean when I get out of treatment. Different things I can do for

myself. Every time something happened I used to bottle it up inside and I never talked to anybody. But now I can call people and be like, “this is what’s going on. I need help. Can you help me?” Or write it out. ‘Cause I always wrote but I never really wrote about anything specifically. And now if I don’t want to talk to somebody about it I can at least write it down.

I asked Maxine if she ever cried with Francine, and she shared a powerful story of releasing grief about missing her brother. This was one of the first times she had ever cried with someone, and it felt strange. But it was an important step in learning to express rather than bottle her emotions.

Well with her I did. I remember this one time I missed my brother so much ‘cause I hadn’t seen him in so long. And so then finally, she found him, ‘cause he went missing for a while. I grabbed my pictures of him and I gave them to her so that she could call the cops ‘cause I wouldn’t do it ‘cause I don’t like cops. I don’t trust them. So I let her do it. Anyway, she found this picture of him so she gave it back to me and I saw it and I just started bawling. I could not stop crying and I had this smile on my face when I was crying. And she was like, “are you okay” and I’m like, “yeah I just miss my brother.” She’s like, “well how long has it been since you’ve talked to him?” I was like, “about half a year.” And she’s like, “holy cow.” And then I just kept going on about stories about him and then I kept crying ‘cause I remembered them. It felt weird. I kept looking at her and looking away. It was funny. It’s like, “I’m not crying.”

Maxine didn’t cry during her graduation circle, even though everyone there was in tears at the transformation they saw in her.

At my grad, the way the ceremony goes is that we all sit in the one big circle and we end up talking about how I changed or whatever and stuff. And so Francine got the feather and my grandma had spoken just before her and my grandma’s bawling and everyone’s crying because my grandma made them cry. Because she saw me before I even went into treatment, all in my

room and just so blah. And then at my graduation I was wearing this pink skirt. It's just something my grandma had never seen me in. And so she was gushing about that and then Francine got the feather and she's all crying and like, "I'm sorry. Your grandma made me cry." Then she started talking and then everyone started crying and she started crying again. I'm just sitting there and laughing 'cause everyone's crying. I'm like, "Ha, ha, ha. Yes. I'm not crying" I was laughing at everyone 'cause they were all crying. I almost did though, but I refused to. I don't know why. I just can't cry in front of people. So it was so hard, I'm standing there like, "hurry up."

Maxine has been out of treatment for ten months, but she is still connected to the centre.

I go there every once in a while just to visit because of it's just such a big part of my life now. I was even a mentor there for a while. I really enjoyed it.

She has also kept up some of the cultural and spiritual practices she learned in treatment.

I still smudge every once in a while. When I feel like I need to. That's about it. I haven't gone to a sweat in so long.

Francine is still an important part of Maxine's life, but as something other than a counsellor.

We're still really close. I visit her every weekend. And we hang out all the time. She really acts like my mom though. I went over there the other day and I was sick and she's giving me all these medications and she knew that I didn't have much food here and she started giving me food.

Since leaving the treatment centre, Maxine's counsellor has been Vera, an Aboriginal woman who works as a drug and alcohol counsellor for the same agency that runs the treatment centre. Vera and Maxine began working together when Maxine was at the centre. I asked about

her first impression of Vera, and we laughed as she shared that unlike the grumpiness she put her off about some other counsellors, with Vera she was put off by cheerfulness.

I thought she was too cheerful. She's a really happy outgoing person. I remember looking at her and it was my first week at treatment and it was like, "how can you be so happy right now?" When I feel so bad.

I asked Maxine about the work she and Vera did while she was at the treatment centre, and she talked about a couple of written exercises that she found somewhat useful it making it "a reality that I was going to stop."

I remember I had to write out my last day of using and read it out. And I didn't want to. I didn't want to write it. And then I had to write my goodbye addiction letter. And after I read it I was like, "fuck, it sounds like I'm writing to my boyfriend." I don't really remember it much but I remember it was like, "you took care of me when I needed you to but now I don't. And I don't want to say goodbye but I know that I have to." Stuff like that. And I was getting mad when I was reading it, so then I had to stop reading it.

Since graduating from treatment, Maxine has continued to see Vera regularly.

I see her weekly now. It used to be bi-weekly but I think I need her more now 'cause I've been drinking lately. So that's like, "I might need some more help."

When I asked, Maxine couldn't think of any sessions with Vera that stood out, and she admitted that she is not sure if she is getting the help she needs.

Sometimes I don't really think she's helping me that much. It's like I talk to her and then she just sits there. Like, "you're not helping me right now"

I asked her what kind of help she might want, and it became clear that she herself is not sure.

I don't know. Sometimes I get really confused 'cause I don't really know what I want out of it. But it's like I talk to her and then nothing really gets resolved. So it just kind of sits there. My problems don't go away just by talking to her.

Then, my counsellor hat perhaps dislodging my researcher hat a bit, I tried to explore with Maxine how Vera might be able to help her more, and ended up perhaps putting words in her mouth, though she seems to agree with them: "When you think about counsellors you've had in the past or particular counselling sessions that have been useful, where something did feel resolved... Have you had that experience?"

Um... I can't really think of any.

"But where you're, I mean, 'cause hearing your story, some of, you know, even with the counsellor you saw for a bit where you told the problems and then you ended up in treatment, that's kind of different than just talking about it."

Yeah.

"Or making plans, like with Mike when you got clean. Stuff like that can be helpful. Do you do that kind of stuff now with a counsellor?"

No. No I don't really seem to have a counsellor like that anymore.

"But those counsellors were kind of more like that in the past?"

Yeah. Like Mike. Mike was good. They need someone like him down here.

"Right. And how would you describe him, if you were to tell someone who hires counsellors, 'I want a counsellor that's like this-this-this-and this.' How would you describe that?" This question triggered a longer response from Maxine about the value of gently pushing.

Gentle but at the same time pushes you. But not in a way where you get all mad. Caring, nice, I don't know, that's all that comes to mind really. 'Cause he pushed me but not in a way where I'd get mad at him for doing it.

To which I responded: “Right. Then, is there something you want... ‘cause some counsellors listen a lot and reflect what you say and help you understand yourself. And others are more active and say ‘well maybe we could do this and why don’t we make plans.’” Maxine jumped in to say that she wanted a balance of the two styles.

Maybe something in between that. I like the listening but at the same time I want you to help me.

Our interview almost complete, I asked Maxine if she still thought that counsellors only cared ‘cause they got paid to care. This prompted the story of one more ‘bad’ counsellor.

I still think that about certain ones, like there’s one that I saw recently that I really don’t like. It was suggested to me by a youth worker and it was just like, “okay. I’ll check that out and see what happens.” I started talking to him and after a month or so I got really frustrated with seeing him. I really just don’t think that he has much interest in what he’s doing. He doesn’t really do anything. He just sits there. And you could basically tell him that he sucks balls and all he would do is say “is that how you feel?” It’s like, “dude shut up. Get another job and get out of my face.” You could just tell him anything and he’ll respond the same way and he’ll do the same thing. It’s like he was dead. All he does is sits there and he makes notes while you’re sitting there. I don’t even think they’re notes. I swear to god he’s probably doodling or something. So I just stopped going. It was like, “I don’t like seeing you. You suck ass.” He just doesn’t have any interest in his job anymore. And you can tell. He needs a new career.

Her story complete to the present day, I asked Maxine what lessons counsellors or people who plan counselling programs could learn from her story. She laughed as she gave her first quick response: “don’t hire cheap-asses.” Then she expanded, talking about the importance of genuine caring, patience and persistence in connecting with youth who have good reasons not to trust.

I think when they're going to hire a counsellor, they should look for someone who genuinely cares about their job and wants to help people and is willing to do a lot for that youth. 'Cause sometimes youths just don't think that anyone cares and you have to sometimes really prove to them that you do, because if they're as stubborn as I am they will just almost ignore anything that they can. And they just want to believe what they believe 'cause they think that it's safer to know that nobody cares because that way they can't get hurt. But at the same time it's nice to feel cared about. And sometimes you've got to work really hard [to overcome that belief]. Like that first counsellor, I was calling her whatever I could when I could. Just 'cause I was scared of her. You've got to be prepared for that because if someone has had it the way that I have, then they're not going to believe that anyone cares, because if anyone cares about them then that means they're going to get hurt.

Rose

Rose is a 20 year Mi'kmaw woman living in supported Aboriginal youth housing with her infant daughter. She has lived in Vancouver for the past 4 months, although she also lived here when she was 17. Rose's initial response to my invitation to share her story was to say: "As an Aboriginal youth they didn't connect me right away with Aboriginal services. So I didn't go though counselling for Aboriginals." She shared that she had only had an Aboriginal counsellor once, and he was not the main counsellor in her story. I assured her that I was not looking for her experiences with Aboriginal counsellors, but rather her experiences as an Aboriginal youth interacting with counsellors. Rose grew up in Prince Edward Island until age 11, and then moved to Nova Scotia. She lived with her mother, who is part Mi'kmaq. Her father is full Mi'kmaq, and Rose says that she could qualify for Indian status through him, but he's not in her life: "he wasn't in the picture while I was growing up or anything like that. I've met him maybe five times." When I asked if she grew up with much connection to Aboriginal culture, her

answer was a strong no. Then she went on to share some of her early cultural experiences, as well her observations on some differences in cultural expression in Prince Edward Island (P.E.I.) compared to Nova Scotia.

I've learned a little bit. When I was younger I attended powwows and stuff in my schools, because that's where we used to hold them. When I was in P.E.I. I had knowledge of Aboriginal culture and stuff like that because they're a very cultural province. All cultures are expressed there, and they have a day where we celebrate all of them. Although you would only know about the Aboriginal culture and stuff if you are Aboriginal, or if an Aboriginal person tells you about it. That's how I pretty much was able to get my cultural experience then. When I moved to Nova Scotia, they don't really express culture at all. They're not really diverse or anything like that. There are Aboriginal cultures and places to go, but they're on the islands and not in the mainland at all, so you have to get on a ferry and travel. So they're really not accessible. On the other side they have them on the reserve, but if you're not status you can't go on the reserve. But in Charlottetown you can access the reserve if you're not status, you can own property on the reserve and you can participate in all their festivities and culture if you are not status.

Rose didn't share anything more about her family, her early life experiences, or what led her to eventually leave home, but she did share that at the age of 16 she attempted suicide. This led to her first experience with counselling, and unfortunately it was not positive. Rose did not want to be diagnosed, medicated, and told what to do. She just wanted someone to talk to, and found that this was not available.

I went through a really bad time where I tried to commit suicide. It was because... I had friends and stuff and we were all going through the same thing where we were just in bad situations where we just kind of had low self-esteem and all that. When I went to a counsellor at

the health clinic, they refused me and said they don't do that type of thing. And it's like, "okay it's a health clinic and there are counsellors here, and there are guidance counsellors but they might not do it because they're school counsellors, but you guys are supposed to." And so the first time around they turned me away claiming that they couldn't help me. Second time, they wanted me to call a psychiatrist. I was like, "that doesn't fix anything, that doesn't help me." And then the third time I got one counsellor that was willing to meet me once and after that she left and didn't come back. Then they just went back to the second option which was to call doctors because they didn't want to take me on. I refused to go 'cause I've heard other stories from other people and I was just like, "no, I don't want to do that." I've had friends that went to see a psychiatrist and all they wanted to do was put them on medication or diagnose them or something like that. That's not what I was looking for. I was just looking for someone I could talk to about my problems. And just be like, "okay, I'm stressed and I've had a rough week and I tried to kill myself."

I asked her how she knew this is what she wanted, and she talked about needing to feel safe to share, just wanting to be listened to, and not wanting to be told what to do.

I just kind of know me and when I come to a breaking point I just kind of isolate myself. I'm a person that doesn't like to share, but at the same time I like to talk to people who will act like my friend instead of like a boss. If you're a psychiatrist and somebody says "oh well you put them on medication and sent them to a hospital and diagnosed them, but you didn't really listen to them," then I don't want to talk to you about my problems. Sorry. Also, psychiatrists and the guidance counsellors back home, they file it up in a report and you're supposed to follow the report. And I'm not somebody who likes to be told what to do, at all.

Perhaps her story would have been different if Rose had gotten the help that she wanted. Instead, at the age of 17, she began her "street moment." She quit school, left home, and

traveled across the country. In Vancouver she connected to street youth resources, including shelters, employment programs, and a street youth centre. This is where she met Ben, an Aboriginal counsellor who gave Rose her first good taste of counselling. But she talks about being “connected to them” as well as him, highlighting the importance of people other than counsellors throughout Rose’s story of life on and off the streets. She also talks about work, stating proudly: “I’ve pretty much worked since I was 16.”

Then I dropped out of high school and I actually traveled across Canada. And that’s when my street moment started. When I was not at home, I was kind of sleeping on the streets and in a tent and stuff like that. When I first came to Vancouver I was staying at the under age shelters. I had actually walked into one of the sex trade drop-ins and so they re-directed me to a street youth drop-in centre. And so that kind of helped me ‘cause I got connected to them and to an Aboriginal counsellor and was able to start getting work at drop-ins and just odd jobs and stuff. I did a training program and worked in the kitchen, worked in their food bank and stuff like that. So that helped me. And then I was able to find a place and get set up.

Rose met Ben at a street youth centre one night over food, ping pong, and movies.

The Aboriginal counsellor was also a youth worker so I just kind of met him one night. I walked into the drop-in and got food and played ping pong with them all. We watched movies and we just started talking and then he told me his role and introduced himself. He was like, “hope to see you back.” After that I just came back and we would talk. You could just sit anywhere and we’d just talk about problems or how the week went. You didn’t really have to book an appointment, but you could. It was more of an informal counselling where you could just talk about situations and he’d give you resources or suggestions and stuff. And he was also the type that would talk about his situations and be like, “this is how I got into working” and stuff like that.

Ben's willingness to share about himself was important for Rose to feel safe to share.

I'm not someone that likes to be analyzed. It goes back to the fact where I don't like to talk about my situations. I'm a very private person. And so if they shared about themselves it kind of felt like "okay they're not just analyzing my life." Because I don't like people knowing my life but when people get involved I find it just causes trouble and stuff like that and so, but these were workers and they weren't like people off the street that were causing trouble or anything like that. And so it just got to the point where they could share, I could share too. And it opened me up a little bit more. And so that's what I like the best.

I asked her if Ben brought Aboriginal culture into his work with the youth.

Yeah, he used to do a lot of smudging. And he'd have groups where he'd do a wellness day, where he would only do things in Aboriginal, like working with herbs and stuff and doing the smudges and taking people out to sweats. And he would make Aboriginal art and stuff like that.

Compared to Nova Scotia, Rose found Vancouver a much easier place to access Aboriginal culture, and she took advantage of this availability.

When I got here, I was able to jump back into it and be more involved in it. Vancouver is a very big city. It's very diverse. I was able to be involved in all types of cultures. And that's what I really like about it and that Aboriginal culture is really more expressed here than it is in the east coast. My first smudging was here. My first sweat was here.

However, she found herself not accepted as Aboriginal by some programs and some people, since Rose does not have official Indian status.

When I first moved out here, only certain places would accept me as Aboriginal because I don't have a status card. But the drop-in and the counsellor at that drop-in, once I told them what my tribe was and where I came from, I was accepted as an Aboriginal person. But there were

places for Aboriginal youth that were Aboriginal places that I wasn't accepted to because I didn't have status. Also, when I first came out here there was a lot of racial tendencies. Where if you weren't status they would just be racial towards you as if you're not Aboriginal at all and they would tell you that, they'd call you names, and put you down that you're not as good as status Aboriginal youth. You got a lot of it from non-Aboriginal youth, but you've also got it from Aboriginal youth at the same time.

When Rose was 18 she returned to Nova Scotia, then she again traveled west towards Vancouver. She ended up in Ottawa, where she spent about a year and a half, lost in substance abuse and violent relationships. This is where she met Stephen, who she introduced as her "main counsellor." Rose started seeing Stephen after she had been in Ottawa for about a year and he helped her turn her life around.

My main counsellor was in Ottawa. He is the one that did a lot with me. When I moved from Vancouver I went back to the east coast. I ended up in Ottawa and I was really street-involved. I had addictions problems and abusive relationships and stuff like that. When I got there I automatically went into substance abuse right off the bat. I was there for about maybe three weeks and I was in the gutter. I have never touched hard drugs ever. I used to smoke pot when I was a kid but I stopped smoking it when I was 15 and I haven't smoked it since. And I was usually just a casual drinker but in Ottawa it's a really big party scene. From one end of the street to the next. And I mean it goes right through the whole town. It's just bars and bars and parties and raves and everything else. When I was young I didn't take into the consideration of how hard I could fall into it. I've never experienced going and just self indulging in booze like that before. I was a casual drinker and I mean I drank when I was 16 and 17 too, but it was a couple of beers here or one drink on a special occasion. It was never guzzle a bottle and that's

what it came down to and I got into it too fast. After about a year I started trying to kick it. So I went through a six month or eight month program with a counsellor.

Rose told two stories about her decision to seek counselling. Both are stories of being caught in bad situations and realizing that things are out of control. One is a story of the increasing violence in her relationship; the other is a story of almost killing herself with alcohol.

I was going back and forth between shelters and I was almost booted out of all of them because I was taking alcohol on the premises and everything and they were catching me with it. And then I ended up into a really messy situation with an ex-boyfriend. And when it just got too much where there was too much fighting and there was a lot of abuse, I really couldn't handle it. And at the time I had already made a relationship with my counsellor. So it was just kind of a mutual thing where I walked in and it was just like, "look I can't do it. He's abusing me and I can't take it. I'm having a mental breakdown."

It just came to a point when I got so far in the gutter I ended up with alcohol poisoning one night. It's kind of where it kind of split me and I was just like, "okay, it's time to end this." I kind of flailed everywhere and I didn't know really where I was or what was happening. I just knew something was wrong. When I was drinking, I was drinking three 26 bottles of liquor. And it would be rum and vodka and tequila all at the same time, just a mixture and one night I kind of spazzed out and I just wasn't there. And finally somebody was able to get me up and walking and when we walked, it drained out of my system and I realized "okay I'm just drinking." I went in about two days later and I was just like, "yeah, I need help."

Rose already had a relationship with Stephen because he worked in a multi-service street youth drop-in centre where she went from "about a week after I moved to Ottawa, right up until the day that I left." The counsellors also worked as youth workers in the centre, so Rose had many opportunities to get to know them. Through hanging out, using the employment and

housing programs, and involvement in an advocacy committee, Rose built relationships with many workers. And when she was ready to access counselling, she was allowed to choose from among those “licensed” for counselling, and Stephen is who she felt most comfortable with.

It was pretty cool because I got to pick my own counsellor. At the drop-in they have a counselling system, but only full time youth workers can be licensed as counsellors. I got to pick mine so I was comfortable with the person and stuff. I found that was a huge step because I’m not somebody who likes to share. I’m very closed minded and so it’s hard to break me open and share, so when I got my counsellor it took us a few more weeks and I was able to open up and I started on my relationship and my addictions. I picked him because I liked him a little bit better because I trusted him. I’ve done employment work with him and he’s given me a lot of resources and was helpful. The first time I met him was when I got a job through the employment section, they had a contract to put people to work in the kitchen and be their janitorial staff. I got a full time position of doing that and that’s where I kind of met all the staff through the drop-in. Then from there I started going to some of the programs like their advocacy committee, their employment and housing programs. Then I got so far into a bad place I decided, when I’d been there long enough and I knew the people, it was kind of mutual decision that I will like to maybe get out of here. ‘Cause initially how I had ended up in Ottawa was that I was trying to get back out to Vancouver.

While Rose continued to be supported by many workers at the centre, Stephen was the one who she chose as her counsellor, and he played an important role in her life and recovery. I asked Rose to tell me about the first session with that counsellor. She said that on the day that she went to the drop-in and asked for help he was able to see her immediately.

He took me up right away. It was just pretty basic. He did counselling on usually two days, and so we booked times, worked around my schedule and his schedule. He did an intake

where he took all my information. And signature and write out the confidentiality rules and stuff like that. And we decided to outline what I wanted to talk about and what I needed help with. And then he just kind of left it open, I could share whatever I wanted. If I didn't want to share, we could just sit there and look through books or something. So it was pretty much whatever I needed at the time, when I walked into his office. It was all for me. And so that's what I really liked about it because I even though I trust the person, I don't fully trust the person. And so going back to why I didn't connect when I was first offered to go see a psychiatrist and stuff, I'm really close to myself and personal. And so it really wasn't my thing to share.

That Stephen was able to see Rose immediately when she asked for help reflects the flexibility and accessibility of the counselling program. She was able to get the help she needed, when she needed it. She had access to scheduled appointments as well as additional one-on-one time as needed. As I observed to Rose: "it sounds like he was available more than just every Tuesday at 2 o'clock or something like that. And that was helpful, hey?"

Yeah. A good thing was the one-to-one time. You could do it either in counselling or you could do it on the floor when he was being a youth worker. That was awesome and where he worked in the drop-in, he was available Monday to Friday. So I could have my counselling sessions on a one-to-one basis on the floor. Which is good because I've never had that with a counsellor. I've either had you have to have a booked appointment or you have to have first come, first served.

One of the reasons Rose says she was able to connect with Stephen is that, even though he already knew her well enough to "tell me what I was doing before I did it" when they began the counselling process, he didn't push her. He left things open for her to process at her own pace.

When I walked into his office, he could tell me what I was doing before I did it. He became so aware of the way I acted and stuff, he could tell me when I was being stubborn and when I was going to do something or when I was going to work myself over. Or when I was going to calm down or when I'd get upset. He could pretty much do that right off the bat because he had worked with me for a really long time before beginning counselling. So it just was amazing because he didn't push for me to be open and be like, "okay this is what you should do with your life" or "maybe you should go see doctors" or whatever. He just kinda let me do it at my own pace. Where I've had other counselling, like guidance counsellors and stuff, where it wasn't open for me and I didn't like it because I'm one that I go at my pace. If you don't keep up, I don't care. Other counsellors had wanted me to process before I was willing to process. But he did it at my pace. Like if I needed to switch up times, like half way through when I had kicked the substance abuse and started working again, he literally switched around his whole plans and stuff, just so that I could get a spot in.

The first focus of Rose and Stephen's counselling work was her substance abuse issues. I asked her how they approached that work and what was helpful for her. Rose talked about needing space to just share at the beginning, then gradually beginning work on triggers and relapse prevention, including de-stressing and coping with emotions. Through this process, Rose described how Stephen became a teacher, in addition to a great listener. He was once again able to meet her where she was at, shifting his style to meet her unfolding needs: being open when she needed him to be open and directive when she needed direction.

It was pretty much being able to talk to him. Because knowing him for the past year he could see that I was going into a bad situation. And I was coming in all the time to the drop-in drunk and just blitzed. And so he could see it and just when I was able to tell him my story and stuff, it was just like, "okay well what do you want to do about it. I can't help you if you don't

want to do anything.” And so we kind of did a 12-step recovery only fewer steps. And it was kind of like, “okay well if this is what you want to do, you take it like this” and he’d give me options of how to quit and stuff like that. And he was really surprised because I was able to quit cold turkey. I just needed to talk a lot. So that’s why he kept it open for me was and booked a lot of appointments for me. I just needed to talk. Because I was under a lot of stress and I was so young. And I was just – I had messed up totally. And so he left it open for the first three or four months it was basically just talking. I could come in and just talk talk talk. It was a venting process where I could just be like, “okay well I’ve had a shitty day.” And he’d be like, “okay – do you want to go back and drink?” Or if I had been out and I’ve seen some of my old rowdy friends and hung out with them he’d be like, “Okay, did you drink or do you want to drink?” And I was like, “I would like to have a drink, but I don’t want to right now.” And he was like, “it’s up to you to decide whether you want to, between your urges and reality.” So, we did a lot of talking about cravings and going through withdrawal and triggers. And he taught me a lot about how to deal with it, and how to walk away. And then he started in on the de-stressing because he felt that I left alcoholism and my substance abuse and went on to taking on a lot of workload. And so he didn’t want me like, “okay I’ve got money. I’ve been sober for a month or so, but I’ve been working really hard and I’m under stress and I’ve got a big pay cheque. Let’s go out and blow it.” So he’d check in every pay day to make sure that I was okay and stuff and then we’d have our regular meetings. I’d just share whatever I did during the week, like, “I saved up this much money and I went out to this festival but I didn’t drink.” It was pretty formal sharing. And check in to make sure that I was okay and to see if I had run into triggers. My main thing was stress and he knew that and he started right in on teaching me how to de-stress because I’m one that can get stressed out over really bad at times. And I’ll just go away on my own and isolate. And he didn’t really want me going and isolating. When I went into my relationship he

thought that was going to be a really big trigger, being in the relationship the way that it was, violent and abusive and stuff. He didn't want me to be like, "okay well this is shitty, let's go drink." When I did get into the relationship it was more about my mental state, and how to deal with it mentally and emotionally, but be able to take it away and have a separate issue with my relationship than any other issue, so that I wouldn't be mixing everything into together and being like, "okay well this is too much." He would separate one issue from the other and manage it out that way. And he would teach me how to manage my own issues and how to de-stress those. And he made me come up with a back up plan if I did feel like I was having a trigger. And he kept it opened in a way that if I had fell back in and I had gone and drank, I could meet with him the next day so that I could get help and get resources and stuff like that. Or to talk and see where to go from there. I finally kicked my alcoholism about two months before I found out I was pregnant. That was about a year ago. And I do drink now but I'm back to being a normal drinker where I don't need it excessively, I'm using it in a healthy way. I don't need to go out and have a drink. And I'm perfectly fine with not drinking, not doing anything. Right now I just live for my baby.

Kicking alcoholism was only one step in Rose's journey off the streets. She was still homeless and struggling to make ends meet. And she was still in a violent relationship.

I was able to beat... they helped me beat alcoholism in the first few months. I kinda went off and on with the relationship problems and still being out on the streets and stuff 'cause it took a really long time to get housing. I was going in and out of jobs and with my main employer I was full time but at the same time I wasn't. So it was kind of hard for me to save up money and stuff. And so after I kicked my... they got me to kick my substance abuse and stuff they helped with the relationship violence. And helped me start budgeting and stuff and I was able to get a place

Dealing with the conflict and violence in her relationship was another major focus of counselling, and Stephen was again able to be flexible in meeting her needs. He saw Rose and her boyfriend, both individually and as a couple.

He helped me with my relationship status. That started half way after I had ended drinking. At the time it wasn't too bad. There was a lot of fighting and stuff, but the violence wasn't there. And then I moved in with my boyfriend at the time and it kind of escalated and escalated and at the breaking time of that it was to the point where one of us was going to kill the other. We had lit each other on fire. At times we had taken knives to each other and everything else. At the drop-in they don't do couple counselling, and so when I asked for it, I was the first youth that they were willing to give it to. They gave it to me on a basis that I could have it put in with my one-to-one counselling. And so that worked really good because I was able to get my boyfriend at the time to go get counselling. He was able to come to see what my meetings were like and then realize that he could develop them for himself. He finally decided, "okay this is a trustworthy person. It's working for her. It worked this time and this time." So he started to go see counselling with the same person. It was really good because whatever happened in mine they wouldn't use in his. It was all personal basis, so none of my information got mixed. If I went and I was being counselled on my relationship and I was talking about my relationship and stuff, and say we had a fight and I decided to vent and blame it all on him, he wouldn't take the information and be like, "okay, well I've heard this story." It was just like, "okay, you can vent." And then my boyfriend got his chance with that. Even though he had already seen and heard, he just blew it off, and it was my boyfriend's turn. So that was really good because at the end of the session we just all walked away happy.

I asked Rose to tell me more about the couple sessions, and she described how they would debrief and analyze incidents of violence, and plan for alternatives and exits in the future.

We would have couple's sessions when we tried to hurt each other because that's when it kind of would blow up in our faces and we'd walk away from the fight and be like, "okay we just tried to kill each other. This ain't safe." And we'd go and we'd tell them the whole situation and then he'd be like, "okay well this is a build up from something. What do you think would have caused a blow up like this? From all the stress? You gotta go deeper." And he would get us to think of everything that causes stress that causes us to act out and we would start doing it and we'd tell him in those sessions what was the build up. And he would get us to also explain how we would want to do it differently and he would give us resources on where to go if we needed help. He kind of gave us suggestions of how to walk away from the situation or if we need time for ourselves, where to go. And he would ask us to plan a kind of a fire escape from the relationship. It would be an alternative mode to walk away from a situation and be able to do our time. We'd come back and tell him how it went and stuff. And we'd just practice things like that. And he would keep check-ups on it. And so that worked really well because there was a lot of times where we needed to walk away. At times they would separate us in the drop-in and stuff, if they thought it was too bad. Or they'd give us time outs where one of us would have to leave, go for a walk for a few hours and then come back.

Rose's last comment underlines again how it was not just the support of one counsellor that allowed her to kick her alcoholism, end the violence in her relationship, and get off the streets. It was support from a whole community of workers, and youth, at this multi-service street youth drop-in centre. She agreed when I pointed this out: "it sounds like the whole community was involved in supporting your relationship to stay safe and violent free." Rose agreed.

While I was there I was also allowed to get to know other workers and trust them. And so I was able to get one-to-one worker help from not just one person, but a whole group of workers. Which was pretty good because he's not going to be working 24/7.

Rose continued to stay sober, and she and her boyfriend made progress in reducing the violence in their relationship. Hard-working as always, Rose had two jobs, and was striving to balance self-care in her hectic life. Then she discovered she was pregnant.

When I came up pregnant I was kind of through everything, but I was also working two jobs at once that were both full time and so that was my biggest stressful thing and he was working a job that was over full time. We didn't get to see a lot of each other, but at the same time we were still in a stressful situation, so when we did see each other it wasn't a good combination. The main thing that he got us to work on was that we really weren't getting any time for ourselves. That's where everything kind of fell into place was when we started practicing stuff like that. And how to talk to each other instead of fighting and arguing, walking away and then coming back and being like, "okay, you should have done it this way. I don't appreciate that." And at times I was able to do it and at times my boyfriend just didn't understand. 'Cause he's never really dealt with it. And so he wasn't used to that. He was used to if you fight with someone, it's better than to walk away and forget them altogether. But when I ended up pregnant you can't just walk away. It started out we wanted to have a baby and we presumed that we would be together for a significant amount of time. We went through the bad period just before I got pregnant, and so it was especially rough because we were on the break of trying to get our relationship back just as I found out I was pregnant. And that's where we needed a lot of counselling because it was really rough. Finally after so many sessions of counselling we just had to break up and go our separate ways. He'd be a friend; I'd be a friend. We'd be civil, but we couldn't be in each other's lives.

Even when her boyfriend became too old to access the centre, Stephen continued to provide relationship support, and in the process, Rose learned how to counsel herself.

After a while he aged out of the drop-in so he wasn't able to go to any more counselling sessions, and so I was the one that was basically going to all of them. We kind of worked it out so that we were friends and if something happened I was able to bring it to my counsellor and he'd give me advice. Then I'd talk to my boyfriend and be like, "okay this is the deal. This is what we have to do." And so before the counselling ended, my counsellor pretty much taught me how to counsel myself. To bring back information and be resourceful with other people so that I wasn't left out. I didn't know how to deal with things because when I was in the counselling I had my counsellor teach me everything. I didn't need to remember anything. I didn't need to relay anything back. So he pretty much taught me how to counsel my boyfriend so that we could work together on a civil basis and we actually still practice that to this day. That's probably what keeps us still in touch. Especially since he is planning on coming out to Vancouver and being a father.

Being able to transform a violent romantic relationship into a workable co-parenting relationship is an accomplishment that Rose seems very proud of. It also seems important to her that her daughter has a father in her life, perhaps because she knows what it is like to grow up without one.

So when it was all said and done I successfully did what I wanted to. I got out of a bad relationship. Plus I was able to stop fighting with him. We were able to break apart and still be friends and he is now still able to be in my life. We've got to a point where he can be in his daughter's life and know the difference from my life to his life.

One of the things that Stephen did in counselling was to suggest homework assignments.

He'd have us do homework things to benefit ourselves. He'd be like, "Okay. You tell me what you want to do" and I'd be like, "Okay, I want to do these things and I want to do that." And we'd set it up, "okay that's your homework for this week. You go out and you do it for yourself."

Some of this homework was aimed at de-stressing.

He had me write in a journal a lot. Because when I was there I was really good at writing stories and stuff like that. Or I used to help do art programs, so he would get me to do a lot of that. Either paint or sew. They actually got a sewing machine for me and fabric and stuff.

One homework assignment, getting a planner, seems symbolic of Rose's exit from street life, since having a "damn day planner" is part of the straight world, not the street world.

I used to be horrible at organizing myself and I'd come in and I'd just tell stories about the whole week of being so busy and being under stress. And he's like, "Okay, to get rid of your stress, this is what you want to do. You want to organize yourself. Plan out your days. Plan out your events." I was pregnant at the time, I was working and I was volunteering at other drop-ins and stuff. So I was all over the place. And his homework for me was to go and organize myself and I had to go out and get a damn day planner. And he's like "by next week I want to see it filled. Just go out and get one from the dollar store. Fill it out and bring it back to me." And so I brought it back and from then we just started planning everything out. And writing in journals and stuff like that. And that really helped because then I started planning and when I finally got myself back together and knew what I wanted, I wanted to go back home, which is Vancouver for me now. And I was able to do that in the end.

Reflecting on her story, Rose talked about how Stephen's collaborative approach helped her a lot. She appreciated that he shared himself, let her set the pace of her sharing, and didn't assume he knew what she should do or how she should live her life.

I think why he was able to help me the best was he didn't act as if I had a whack of problems and I had to deal with them. He just acted as if, "okay you got problems, so do I." He would tell stories of how his week went and it was more of like, "okay I'm your friend, let's shoot the shit," instead of like, "okay I'm your counsellor, you're the client, tell me what's going on and I'll try to tell you how to fix it or how to live your life." Basically, I got to process my issues, my stress, my way. He was open, but he never asked me to reveal any information that I didn't feel like revealing at the time or be open when I didn't want to. He didn't tell me "okay you should do this my way or it's not going to be done right." It was, "Okay, well you know this problem I have," and he'd be like, "Okay, what do you want to do? It's your life, you've got to live it. You tell me and I'll help you structure it." And that's pretty much how he took on the role was he would help me structure it so that I could manage it myself easily. But he let me come up with my own suggestions and my own solutions instead of telling me what he thinks is right. And I haven't had this with any of my counsellors.

The counselling program lost its funding shortly before Rose left for Vancouver. Fortunately, she had already met her counselling goals, so it was not a devastating loss. There was pride in her voice as she listed off her accomplishments and learnings from counselling.

I ended up leaving for both reasons. When their program ended I was only going one meeting once a month. I was pretty much on my way out. On my final day there he had given me... he had taught me how to counsel other people and counsel myself. He taught me skills to de-stress myself. He had given me resources for my baby and for me and he got me into an advocacy group. And then on the last day he made connections to other counsellors and he was like, "Okay, you can finish out the rest of your counselling with this person. And you can always have one-to-one time with me on the floor. But this program's ending." At the time I was pretty much done with everything I wanted to achieve. I had my housing. I'd gotten over my substance

abuse. I'd fixed my relationship. I had gotten myself a stable job. I had saved up money. I was doing really good. I just was like, "okay, I got everything I needed from you." I knew how to budget and everything. Basically the reason why I saved up a lot of money was because he taught me how to budget. I'm great at managing finances now. I just kinda realized that I didn't really need it anymore because I had everything that I wanted out of it, I had gotten. And if I wanted anymore resources, I could just come and talk to him, or if I was having a bad day there was one-to-one time to vent. On the last official day it was a get together for all his clients. We were having a party, so there was cake and stuff like that.

Although Rose said she was ready to end, I can't help but think about other youth who may have felt the loss more than she did, given where they were at in their lives and counselling processes, and about youth who hadn't yet gotten to a place of readiness for counselling, but who could have benefited from this program in the future. And Rose herself acknowledged that she would have continued to access occasional counselling if it was available.

Probably every couple of months. Because I was really on my way out to begin with. I had finished everything I needed to. I mean, honestly, after it ended I'd probably still be going there and I'd probably be doing one-to-one periodically up until November because in November I age out. So, I'd probably still be going there and stuff. Definitely.

After she finished her story of Stephen, I asked Rose if he had acknowledged her Aboriginality or tried to connect her to Aboriginal resources. Her answer was no.

No. He would encourage... if I had brought it up to him he would have encouraged resources for it. Like if I needed to ask him for an Aboriginal resource, he'd find it for me. He would go into whatever he could to find some for me. Or he'd send me people that would probably have an awareness of where they are. Other than that it wouldn't be really discussed.

Rose was quick to contextualize this omission in terms of the experience of being an Aboriginal youth in Ottawa, a city which seemed to have few Aboriginal services. She says she noticed this while she lived there, having already experienced differences in the accessibility of Aboriginal cultures, communities, and resources in three other provinces of Canada.

Well in Ottawa, Aboriginal youth really aren't acknowledged. They don't have much places for it. And there's really not a lot of Aboriginal youth in Ottawa. So the ones that are there, don't get acknowledged. To a certain degree if you come in and you have your own beliefs, they accept your beliefs. They're yours. But they don't really express it. Because it's not what they're based on. There's a lot of disconnect in the cultures back in the east, especially in Ottawa. It's a lot of French communities, and that's what they base most of their culture on. They don't do anything like sweats or smudges or anything like that. There's no Friendship Centres, nothing like that. There's no resources. Their main population, when it comes to resources and stuff, it's usually pregnant people, French people or street youth. They don't divide it up any wider than that. There's not a lot of diversity in that way.

Aboriginal resources are one of the things Rose sought out when she returned to Vancouver at the age of 20, including Aboriginal youth housing.

When I got back I looked for that right away and getting in with them. I looked for more resources, because they have a lot more here than anywhere else.

Rose said that finds more acceptance as herself as an Aboriginal person in Vancouver now than she did when she was here at age 17.

Since being back I've got into more resources and now I am fully accepted as an Aboriginal person.

I asked Rose if she has a current Aboriginal spiritual practice.

Yes, I do. I haven't been able to go to a sweat since I got pregnant. But, I do smudging. And I do Aboriginal art and stuff like that.

I also asked her if being Aboriginal is important to her, and she strongly affirmed that it is.

Yes. I'm a very cultural person, and so I want to know my culture. Back out east I don't get that, whereas here I can.

Rose had been back in Vancouver for about four months at the time of the interview and she seems to be doing well. She has not accessed counselling in this time, and when I asked her if she thought she might access counselling in the future, she said she would if she needed it.

If I ever needed it, yes. I definitely will not leave it as a question. I would still do everything I've done before and be picky and want to pick my own counsellor and I probably will never ever go see a psychiatrist ever. I'm still totally against that. But counselling yeah, if I ever need it again, I would go.

When I asked her to describe the most important things she would look for in a counsellor, she talked them being open for her to share at her own pace.

Open-mindedness. If they can let me talk when I want to talk. On the first meeting I can tell if I'm going to click with the person or if I'm going to clash with them. That's how I would do it is on instinct. Because I'm not the type that wants to share with anybody on the first thing. And if I go to meet you and the first thing you want me to do is start telling you my whole life story, it's not going to work.

Our conversation then shifted away from her personal stories to considering implications for counselling with Aboriginal street youth. When I asked Rose what lessons she thought counsellors could learn from her story, she was clear in describing what she thinks would work with street youth, drawing both on her own experience and on her experience working in street

youth drop-ins. She said that street youth don't want an authority figure; they want a friendly person that will engage in a real relationship with them, and give them the space to open up at their own pace. She reminded counsellors that "street youth don't talk, they run," so we can't expect them to share immediately.

My main things with my two counsellors that I seen were able to share their stories with me and be open and friendly. The way that they talked, they did it in a professional manner, but they also did it in a friendly manner. And I think that's what you need. I know from working at the drop-in centres, a street youth would rather talk to a street youth and vent and share their whole life story and be like, "okay, well what do I do?" and get help from another street youth, than to go to a psychiatrist or a counsellor. Because they feel that they're just going to be talking to a friend. It's easier to open up to somebody you already know and you know that they're a friend first. Before they're your boss. And that probably won't work with street youth because street youth they don't talk, they run. But that's what they're good at is being on the run. And that doesn't help at all. I've seen a lot of kids that were so confused and they'd rather have one of their friends talk to them than talk to a counsellor or a youth worker, someone of authority, because once they think authority, they think "oh well we're in trouble if we share."

Because of this distrust of authority, Rose advises having a confidentiality policy that is clearly explained to the youth.

I think another thing is confidentiality. If you have a policy set for confidentiality and they have a written copy of it that's another good thing because then they know you're serious and you're not going to just run off and tell other people their story because not a lot of youth get heard and it's mainly because they choose that they don't want to because of who it might be told to.

Both of the counsellors that Rose connected with worked in street youth drop-in centres, a fact that I commented on at this point in the interview: “it’s interesting that both of the counsellors that you saw were people who worked in drop-in centres, where you had a lot of time to be around them before you talked to them one on one, so that would really help. How do you think a counsellor that didn’t work in that kind of model, do you think that they could still connect in some way?” At first she laughed as she considered my question.

It depends on who they’re counselling. Like my counsellors at school, I couldn’t see them counselling street youth. They’d probably lose their mind or be out of a job. But counselling business people, teachers or youth at a school, then yeah that is probably okay.

I laughed with her, and then clarified my question, perhaps revealing my own belief about the futility of using an office-based model with street youth: “So you think an office mode, waiting for people to come for appointments, probably wouldn’t work with most street youth?”

It’s not like they can sit in an office and wait for street youth to come – because street youth just aren’t going to come. But keep it open and not just do a first come first served. But have one-to-one on the floor and appointments. You’re able to get youth more involved, especially if you start off with one-to-one, because that’s how we started off is one-to-one. And that’s more of just a check in, “how are you doing, how has your week been,” stuff like that. Whereas counselling is full session, you go into an office and it’s one-to-one, but it’s more exclusive. Whereas one-to-one isn’t, so that probably would be the best starter point with street youth. And that’s also a great way to tell them “there’s more options for you. There’s counselling and it is just like this.” Because if you do a one-to-one session and you’re like, “well there’s also counselling and this is what it’s like. You’re doing it.” They’re going to be like, “oh this is counselling? This is nothing.” And then they’ll come and talk.

My next question – “what do street youth think of counsellors” – had her laughing before I even finished asking it. Again, I joined in her laughter, anticipating what she was likely to say.

They hate it. Yeah. I'd say every street youth hates it. Because they've probably either gone through bad experiences through hospitals and psychiatrists and being told how to live their life. Most people, especially youth, don't want to be forced to do something. They want to be able to do it all on their own. And certain counsellors you can get that from, and certain counsellors and psychiatrists and doctors, you can't. I have actually been very fortunate. I've heard a lot of things, even about counsellors in drop-ins and resource centres. I've heard some bad stories, but I've actually been very fortunate to have good counsellors.

Finally, we had reached the end, and I asked Rose if she has anything else to say. She said “no I think I got all the good spots.” Then I acknowledged her: “You've been very, very useful. You've said lots of things that I think will teach people something, because I agree with you, I think counsellors don't necessarily do a very good job. But some of them do. And so how do you take what it is that they're doing and try and teach it to more people. Because counsellors, mostly we go into this because we really want to help, right?” My comment prompted some final wise words of advice from Rose.

It's basically person by person. You have to know yourself to be able to counsel somebody else. Because if you don't know yourself, how are you going to deal with a situation. Like if you're a people person, but when you're in a counselling session you're just sitting looking at the person going “yeah, yeah, yeah,” it's not going to work. You've gotta expand yourself. And that's where it's the mix up. Youth in general are hard to deal with. So we can drive you crazy. Time management and self-helping is what you need to deal with that. The counsellors need to take care of themselves before they take care of others. Always. And I don't think that just goes for counselling; that goes for everybody. You gotta take care of yourself

before you take care of others. With youth, whether we're in school or street-involved, we can be a handful.

My Story: Lessons for Counselling Practice

There are many lessons to be learned from these narratives. I was honoured by my participants' openness in sharing their stories and amazed with their ability to describe and theorize about their experiences in counselling. I am profoundly thankful to each of them, as I said during each interview, along with words such as these to Casper: "You said lots of very important things that I think counsellors need to hear." The stories the youth told resonated with my experience of "what works" as well as teaching me some important new lessons.

The lessons I am sharing here were learned from through deep engagement with the youth's stories, given who I am and where I come from. I am asserting no truth in these lessons, and I invite readers to consider the youth's stories for themselves, evaluate my conclusions in the context of my location, and consider whether the lessons that I learned apply in their particular context with each individual youth. It is important to remember the diversity of experiences among Aboriginal street youth. The differences in life stories between these four young women are as important as the similarities, as are the differences in what worked for them in counselling at different places in their stories. It is important for counsellors to remember each person is unique and so no one engagement strategy or treatment plan will work for all youth. Indeed, one of the most important lessons of this research is meeting youth where they are at.

Context of Their Lives

Personal Resilience

I was awed by the incredible strength and resilience of these young women in surviving what they have been through and ultimately building healthier and happier lives for themselves. All of the participants displayed amazing tenacity, a remarkable sense of personal agency, and a

strong desire to be in control of their lives. In one of my initial readings of Maxine's story I wrote: "Stubborn! And independent. Is this true of all of them? Maybe that's part of why they ran to the street instead of enduring the pain of home" (Listening notes February 12, 2009). It is easy to see Aboriginal street youth as victims of childhood neglect and abuse or targets for predators on the street. These are realities that can't be ignored, but like Aboriginal cultures and communities which continue to exist and even thrive despite over 500 years of attempted destruction, these youth are survivors against incredible odds.

Cultural Disconnection

The youth in this study represent four First Nations: Carrier, Squamish, Blackfoot, and Mi'kmaq. They grew up and were street-involved in a variety of settings, from reserves to small towns to urban inner cities. They had a variety of experiences of Aboriginal cultures and communities. Like many people from the diverse Aboriginal cultures across Canada, the participants talked about childhood disconnection from their Aboriginal culture. Courtney is the only participant who grew up in an Aboriginal community, "very connected into my community and culture." She lost that connection at age 8 when she went into care, and by the time she was a teenager on the street she rarely even identified Aboriginal. Maxine, Casper, and Rose grew up with little connection to their Aboriginal cultures, and only began to connect as part of their healing. Maxine grew up with her non-Aboriginal mother, and her only experience of her father and his family seemed to be more about "drunk people" than culture. Like Courtney and Casper, Maxine was placed in numerous non-Aboriginal foster homes, further disconnecting her. Casper knew "nothing at all" about her culture as a child. Her mother had been adopted out of her community, so was disconnected herself, and her father was not in her life. She only recently discovered that she is Blackfoot, and she acknowledged the impact of this disconnection: "if you don't know where you're from ... it's not the goodest feeling." Rose "learned a little bit" about

her culture as a child, especially in Prince Edward Island. But she found little cultural connection in Nova Scotia or Ottawa, and the first time she came to Vancouver she found herself excluded from some Aboriginal resources because she didn't have a status card. As one of the legacies of colonization, this experience of cultural disconnection is a widespread among Aboriginal people.

Troubled Childhoods

The legacy of colonization must also be considered as a context for my participants' troubled childhoods. While the only specific question I asked about childhood was about connection to Aboriginal culture, all of the youth except Rose shared about their childhood, either in explaining how they ended up on the street, or as part of a story of healing. Resonating with my counselling experience and the picture painted in the research literature, my participants reported troubled childhoods, including neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, parental substance abuse, parental mental illness, lack of connection with extended family, poverty, and transience. Their homes judged unsafe, Courtney, Maxine and Casper also experienced being in government care. Perhaps this removed them from whatever real or perceived risks existed at home, and some foster parents did try to "create a path" for them, but being in care led to other risks such as racism and other abuse in foster homes, further disconnection from their culture, and multiple placements. While Rose said little about her childhood or family, the fact that she attempted suicide at 16 and ran away from home at 17 may suggest that she was not getting the support she needed at home. I wrote in my reading notes: "Do I need to know why she left home to understand her experiences of counselling? Isn't it enough to know that youth leave home for a myriad of reasons, and then experience trauma and hardship on the street." However, it's also important to remember that some Aboriginal street youth come from fairly "healthy" families, and it is unknown what the case was for Rose. Regardless, all of the youth seem to have come to the street with trust and attachment issues.

Life on the Street

The participants first became street-involved in different ways at different ages. Nine year old Maxine and 11 year old Courtney ran to the street from foster homes. At 13, Casper got kicked out of her house. And at 17, Rose ran away and travelled across the country, after not getting the help she wanted after a suicide attempt. All of the youth seem to have had some exposure to the street and/or substance misuse before ending up on the street. At first, the street may have seemed safer than whatever they were running from, as well as more intriguing. But again resonating with my experience and the research literature, eventually the realities of street life set in, such as struggling to meet basic needs for food and shelter, experiencing violence on the street and in intimate relationships, and being sexually exploited in the child sex trade. As women, they experienced pregnancy, and for Courtney and Rose, becoming mothers was a key to their successful exit. They also experienced issues with their wellbeing that seem to be common among Aboriginal street youth, such as depression, anxiety, anger management, self-esteem issues, suicidality, self-harm, substance abuse, and paranoia.

While my research focused on counsellors, it is critical to remember the role of other workers and people in their lives, like Jack and Jenna, the youth workers in Courtney's story, and Candace and her mom in Maxine's. All of the youth talk about people other than counsellors as important supports in their stories. I was aware as I created the narratives that because my interview was focused on counsellors, there are other important people who do not show up in the stories. Furthermore, it is impossible to know how important these counsellors are among the many people in these youth's lives, although it does seem that some of them made an important difference. It is also important to remember the role of other services, such as the supportive housing programs that were important in all the youth's stories. The importance of other supports also underlines another common experience in the youths' stories: falling through

cracks in a system of support. There are many places in the youth's stories where I wonder why they hadn't been referred to services including counsellors, for example, I was surprised that Casper's first referral to a counsellor was after her abuse disclosure at age 14, since she had been in and out of care for three years, abusing substances for two years, and street-involved for a year.

Referral to Counselling

The participants found their way to counselling through a variety of referral sources: self, parents, social workers, youth workers, outreach workers, school, housing programs, and street youth drop-ins. They seemed especially open to referrals during crises, such as when Rose gave herself alcohol poisoning as the violence escalated in her relationship, or when Courtney was beaten so badly she ended up in the hospital. Courtney spoke about her hospitalization at age 15 as "a window of opportunity" and she still wonders what might have happened if she hadn't been "shut down every step of the way." However, most often, counselling was not the youth's idea. Many of the referrals required at least strong encouragement from the person referring, and first sessions were often attended with the youth's reluctant agreement at best. Many times, the youth were ambivalent about counselling, needing to share but unable to trust due to their own histories with attachment figures and institutions, and because of stories they heard from other youth about bad experiences with counsellors. Both Maxine and Courtney spoke about being pressured to see counsellors, and Maxine was also mandated to see a counsellor as a diversion from drug charges. While encouraging youth to seek counselling seems useful, it seems that if the suggestion is experienced as pressure this can sometimes make the youth even more resistant to the idea of counselling. On the other hand, Courtney acknowledged that the pressure from Jenna, while hard to deal with, also taught her more about what might be available through counselling and how she might choose a counsellor. Similarly, she now appreciates the pressure from the outreach worker who referred her to Abby. Her advice to the housing program staff that were

pressuring her to see a counsellor is good advice for anyone trying to encourage a youth to seek counselling: “I think they would need to actually put a little bit of effort in and communicate with me and find out what am I willing to do? Have I been seeing anybody before? Would I like to connect back in with one of those people? Would I prefer an Aboriginal counsellor?”

Engagement

My first goal as a counsellor is to engage the client in a counselling relationship with me. In 21 stories of referrals to counsellors as youth⁸, there were five counsellors who clearly did not succeed in engaging the youth into treatment. The rest of the counsellors seem to have been successful in engaging with the youth, although Maxine’s engagement with Evelyn was “bittersweet” given her ambivalence and perhaps, Evelyn’s style. It’s noteworthy that all of the seven Aboriginal counsellors in the stories seem to have successfully engaged the youth. Including Evelyn, nine non-Aboriginal counsellors also seem to have successfully engaged the youth in counselling. (See Appendix F for a listing of the counsellors’ engagement status.)

Culture and Engagement

Before I began interviewing, I created a list in my journal of the things that I thought I knew about counselling with Aboriginal street youth. One of those things was the “importance of exploring cultural identity” (Journal, May 12, 2008). All of the youth talked about cultural connection as an important part of their healing, as I will discuss further in the section on healing elements in counselling. While they did not speak directly about culture in the engagement process, it was likely a factor in their engagement with counsellors. As Courtney talked about, Aboriginal youth may experience particular barriers to engagement with “mainstream” counsellors, including being discouraged from talking about feelings, especially outside of their community, and a distrust of “anything institutional.” Although it is important to remember that

⁸ The only counsellor I am excluding is Susan, the play therapist who Maxine saw when she was 3.

Aboriginal cultures and communities are diverse in their beliefs and practices, many have cultural ways of sharing and dealing with emotions which may be inconsistent with the expectations of mainstream counselling models. Further, given many ways that mainstream institutions have interfered with Aboriginal peoples and communities, often under the guise of “helping,” mistrust of mainstream institutions is common and understandable among Aboriginal people. Counsellors need to anticipate and attempt to address these barriers.

Many of the counsellors that the youth connected to were Aboriginal. Even though there are very few Aboriginal people working in counselling, almost a third of the counsellors in the stories were Aboriginal, including all of the residential treatment counsellors and three outpatient counsellors. All of these were stories of successful engagement of the youth (almost half of all the successful engagements), so perhaps the counsellor being Aboriginal facilitates engagement for Aboriginal youth. Certainly, for Maxine, the fact that the treatment centre she was going to was “native influenced” was attractive, and enhanced her willingness to go to treatment, and perhaps her ability to engage with workers there, including Francine. Likewise, when Courtney talked about wishing that those pressuring her to see a counsellor had spent some time finding out what she might find helpful, she said she would have been more open to seeing an Aboriginal counsellor. She also strongly recommended that “there needs to be more Aboriginal counsellors. I think it’s huge.”

However, this is not to say that non-Aboriginal counsellors cannot engage with Aboriginal street youth, as all of the youth’s stories included positive experiences with non-Aboriginal counsellors. Some of these counsellors were very helpful, even though most did not seem to have even addressed the youth’s Aboriginality. Unfortunately, I did not ask about this directly for each counsellor, and none of the youth volunteered this information as an important part of the story for any non-Aboriginal counsellors, therefore I don’t know whether Evelyn,

Mike, Lexie, Abby, or Elaine addressed the youth's Aboriginality. I don't know whether Shannon did either, however, she did refer Casper to an Aboriginal treatment centre, which may suggest cultural sensitivity. But it's also possible that it was Casper's suggestion, or that Shannon made this decision primarily because Casper had been to an Aboriginal treatment centre before. None of the youth said anything about whether the counsellors they did not engage with addressed their Aboriginality, although it is probably safe to assume that most of them did not.

I did ask a question about whether the counsellor addressed their Aboriginality for three of the non-Aboriginal counsellors. Rose shared that she thought Stephen would have "encouraged resources" or connected her with people if she had asked, but "other than that it wouldn't be really discussed." She talked about how "in Ottawa, Aboriginal youth really aren't acknowledged." Casper shared that Marlo is "really open-minded. When I tell her things about what I do, she's just really amazed and interested and grateful how it's helping me." From these answers, it seems that the most any of the non-Aboriginal counsellors did to address a youth's Aboriginality was to be interested and supportive, like Marlo. Given how much some of these counsellors helped the youth, I can't help but wonder how much more helpful they could have been if they had also addressed the youth's Aboriginality and perhaps facilitated their connection to Aboriginal cultures and communities.

Courtney shared that she did not even think that Elizabeth knew she was Aboriginal, since she was not identifying at that time. Even if Elizabeth had known that Courtney was Aboriginal, Courtney may not have wanted to talk about it, since at that time in her life she felt that passing as non-Aboriginal meant "one less statistic to overcome and a lot less challenges and barriers." Perhaps if a counsellor had tried to facilitate cultural reconnection for Courtney at this point she would have experienced it as pressure, or as someone pushing a sensitive issue. I have known many Aboriginal youth who say they are not interested in connecting with their culture,

as bluntly stated by one of my new clients: “I’m not down with my culture.” As an urban Aboriginal youth who has been in care since early childhood, she has little experience of Aboriginal people other than drug addicts on the downtown eastside and stereotypes in the media and classrooms, so why would she want to be “down with that?” I respect where she is at and don’t push an agenda of cultural reconnection, but I also gently encourage conversations about being Aboriginal. I find opportunities to teach her more about the strengths of Aboriginal communities and cultures as well as fostering an understanding of the legacy of colonization for understanding the disarray in many Aboriginal communities today. Part of how I do this is by sharing pieces of my own journey of understanding my Aboriginality.

The importance of addressing Aboriginality in counselling is one of the biggest lessons I have gained from this research, and have brought into my work with youth. While I have always asked Aboriginal youth about their cultural connection, through this research I have come to the conclusion that cultural (dis)connection is critical to assess and address in counselling, given its role in the creation of the problems Aboriginal street youth experience. When I started my new job, I began to think a lot about assessment, given that I had all new clients and needed to write a whack of mental health assessments. The lessons from this research showed up in my assessments, such as using language like “intergenerational trauma in the context of the legacy of colonization” in my case conceptualizations. I also began to talk to my colleagues about my ideas on culturally sensitive assessment for Aboriginal youth, given that I was co-located with an intake team and a short-term crisis intervention team, both of whom do a lot of assessments. I talked about how it is important to assess cultural connection as part of a holistic mental health assessment. I talked about asking youth questions such as: Where are you from? Are you connected to your culture and home community? Are you interested in connecting? I talked about assessing their understanding of their context, such as the residential school experience in

their family and their knowledge about the role of colonization in the experience of Aboriginal people today. I also had the opportunity to share these ideas with a larger audience in a presentation on “The Medicine Wheel in Practice” at a forum on Aboriginal child and youth mental health (Allen & Brunanski, 2009). One of my key messages was: “Given its role as a protective factor, exploring cultural identity and enhancing cultural connection could and should be a goal of assessment and treatment.”

The Importance of the Therapeutic Relationship

My experience counselling with Aboriginal street youth taught me that engagement can be a very long phase of the counselling relationship, much longer than anything they ever teach in grad school. Many people might say that these youth are “not ready for counselling” and that may even be true, but as someone who believes that counselling has the potential to be helpful, I am unsatisfied with stopping at “she’s not ready.” I have long believed that the relationship is the key to counselling with youth, as I wrote in my list of what I thought I knew: “It is important to take time to build a strong relationship. To be trustworthy, reliable, caring, and have good boundaries. To be assertive in trying to engage the youth, in connecting with them when they have not yet connected, or when they seem to be disconnecting” (Journal, May 12, 2009). This belief seems strongly supported by the youth’s stories.

One of the lessons that Maxine saw in her own story was about how “sometimes you’ve got to work really hard” to prove to youth that you care: “if someone has had it the way that I have, then they’re not going to believe that anyone cares, because if anyone cares about them then that means they’re going to get hurt.” Like Maxine, Courtney experienced many transitions through her childhood and was very reluctant to trust. It took Lexie 6 months before Courtney would even talk to her: “It took a really, really, really long time because I have the biggest walls in the universe ... I figured I could just avoid everybody until they moved me again. Because I

figured I wouldn't be there long enough to actually make a connection. And if I did, it wouldn't really matter 'cause I'd just be gone anyways." Given the cultural disconnection, troubled childhoods, experiences in government care, and other attachment disruptions that these youth often experience, it is not surprising that they have difficulty trusting. Adults have not often been safe and reliable people in their worlds, and therefore, as Rose said: "street youth they don't talk, they run." Counsellors need patience and persistence to engage with these youth. From the youth's stories, some of the lessons I see in how to build trust is through showing genuine caring, really listening, respecting confidentiality, self-disclosing, being unshockable, and taking the youths' 'shit.'

Genuine caring.

Given how hard it is for these youth to trust and to engage in counselling, one of the things that I have long believed makes a difference is genuine caring, and this belief seems well supported in the youth's stories. Indeed, with some of the counsellors, the participants remembered very little about the "interventions"; what they remember is having a relationship with someone who genuinely cared. For Maxine, feeling genuinely cared about by Mike was a key element in her engagement in counselling, since prior to meeting him, she had believed that counsellors only cared because they were "paid to care." One of the lessons she saw in her story was: "I think when they're going to hire a counsellor, they should look for someone who genuinely cares about their job and wants to help people and is willing to do a lot for that youth." Even when a relationship is short-term, feeling genuinely cared about is important for engagement, as Casper described in her first encounter with Shannon, the counsellor who referred her to treatment for her second time: "she dropped everything and just took my hand and took me into the room and I remember she gave me a teddy bear. I still have him today. And she

just let me cry for a little bit and listened to me and asked me what was wrong, what was going on in my life. She cared and her intentions were good.”

Really listening.

Really listening is one of the biggest gifts that I think counsellors can bring to clients. I have often said that part of the power of therapy is having someone’s full attention for an hour, and much of the training and personal work I have done has related to ‘creating myself as a space for people to speak into.’ So it’s interesting that when I look back at my list of what I thought I knew before I began, I did not include the importance of really listening. Maybe I didn’t think of it, because it seems so obvious. Of course it is important that counsellors really listen, indeed, many would argue that listening is the primary thing that counsellors do. But just because it is obvious does not make it less important. Really listening is *really* important for engaging with Aboriginal street youth, perhaps more so than for some other client groups.

Casper said the reason she was able to talk to Elaine was that she really listened: “She was calm and she never became distracted. Kids would be knocking at the door and her phone would be ringing and she would just sit there, just watching and listening to me.” Unfortunately, that is not what Rose found after she attempted suicide and sought counselling through her school. What she wanted was someone to “talk to about my problems,” but all she found was people wanting to analyze and diagnose her. Listening is key to why Courtney thinks that counsellors are “a stepping stone to a new direction. ... Because that is usually the first person to stop to listen. Who doesn’t react like a social worker reacts, or like an outreach worker reacts: ‘Oh god you did what? Why the hell did you do that?’” Really listening is also a key element of Courtney’s vision of her counselling practice with Aboriginal street youth: “the more quiet approach, like if you look at our elders. ... They do talk when it’s time to, but otherwise they just

listen ... and you know you have this person's undivided attention. There isn't something else more pressing or you aren't on some sort of time limit."

Confidentiality.

Confidentiality is another issue that I took for granted, and I didn't include it on my list of what I thought I knew about counselling with Aboriginal street youth. As someone who has worked for years as a counsellor in programs with clear confidentiality policies, perhaps it also seemed too obvious. But I remember working as a street outreach worker, and I know the looseness with which details of street youth's lives are often shared. Certainly, this sharing among workers is usually in an attempt to protect youth, but it leaves them even more distrustful. Therefore confidentiality is very important for engaging Aboriginal street youth in counselling, including clearly explaining the confidentiality policy and the limits to confidentiality. Casper spoke about confidentiality being important for her in trusting Elaine: "I just kinda started trusting her 'cause she never told my mother or anything. She never told anybody anything unless I wanted her to." Rose advocated having a clearly explained confidentiality policy as helpful for street youth feeling safe to share, given their distrust of authority: "If you have a policy set for confidentiality and they have a written copy of it that's another good thing because then they know you're serious and you're not going to just run off and tell other people their story because not a lot of youth get heard and it's mainly because they choose that they don't want to because of who it might be told to."

Self-disclosure.

Self-disclosure was not one of the things I included on my initial list of what I thought I knew about counselling with Aboriginal street youth, even though I have always had a counselling style that was high on a continuum of self-disclosure. Six years working in a program in which I interacted with counselling clients in social recreation activities, including

sleepovers and camping, means that I have done a lot of self-disclosing. My guideline for self-disclosure has always been: “whose needs am I meeting in sharing this?” But from my participant’s stories I began to believe that self-disclosure was more important than I had thought, and is one of the lessons began to impact my work. “Sharing more about myself with my clients” was the first thing I wrote in the list of “things I have done in my work that I think come from what I have learned” (Journal, February 7, 2009). In fact, when I left my job to complete this thesis, my openness was remarked upon by one of my clients in a transition session: “one of the things she likes about me is that I share about myself and my life, because this makes her feel safer to share” (Journal, April 20, 2009).

Courtney found it comforting that Elizabeth shared about herself, and it allowed her to share the broad strokes of her story with Elizabeth in the first session: “It was kind of neat to see her share a little bit about her before she expected me to share anything about me.” Likewise, Stephen sharing “stories of how his week went” and acting like “okay you got problems, so do I” was important for Rose in feeling safe to share, as she said: “if they shared about themselves it kind of felt like ‘okay they’re not just analyzing my life.’” Self-disclosure also includes sharing our beliefs and intentions in the counselling process, as Casper suggested when she named one of the things that Darryl could have done to make feel her more comfortable: “It would have been cool if he told me his intentions on what he wanted to help me with.”

Being unshockable.

Being unshockable is another lesson that I did not identify in my initial list, although again, I have often described myself in that way. Youth could jump out at me from behind a door in the drop-in and I wouldn’t even flinch. They could tell me the most shocking stories, and I would be empathetic, but contain my horror. I have often talked about counselling as emotional labour, in which part of our job is to contain our human reactions to tales of inhumane events,

without becoming too detached. I think that part of how we do this is by knowing the terrain we are working in, including “knowledge of street youth life and culture” and “understanding the context of contemporary Aboriginal cultures and communities, including the legacy of colonization” which are two things I included in my initial list (Journal, May 12, 2008). If we know what to expect, what experiences are common for these youth, then we are less likely to be shocked when we hear a story like Courtney’s of being beaten and gang raped by her boyfriend’s “boys” after she stood up to him at a party. As I counsellor I am able to hear stories like that and contain my reaction, at least in session. This is something I found I was less able to do as a researcher. I noticed myself that every time I got to this point in the story, I would get distracted from my analysis, as I noted in my journal: “It is interesting that this was the point in my typing that I had to get up and walk away ... I handle stories like this all the time, though maybe it is easier in-session than in ‘immersion in the data.’ Every time I come to this point in the story I feel it in my body” (Journal, January 30, 2009)

Aboriginal street youth can be shocking. Maxine laughed as she shared her outrageous presentation in her first meeting with Evelyn. Peering hungover out of her hoody and sunglasses, she was “blatantly honest” with Evelyn: “I’d tell her everything, but in a way where it wouldn’t affect anything. ‘Cause it just blew her away.” Likewise, thugged out and known to be running with an influential gang, Courtney felt that she intimidated “that old guy” (Chris). Four years later, it was the fact that Elizabeth did not seem scared off that intrigued Courtney, and kept her coming back for counselling: “So then my objective was to see how much it would take to scare her. Because I decided that she couldn’t be anywhere near as strong as I was, so I was going to be able to scare her with the stories that I had to tell. ... It was what kept me coming back, which may not have been the best reason, but it kept me communicating.” Being a specialist, especially in the area of sexual trauma, seems also to have been important for

Courtney and Maxine in feeling that Abby and Marlo could handle their stories, as Maxine said: “I had told no one about what happened when I was a little kid. But when it came to her, her title was to help abused people ... and she’s just dealt with lots of youth so her knowing that there’s a lot of youth that that happened to made me feel more comfortable.”

Taking their ‘shit.’

This is another lesson that I had not identified in advance, although it also resonates with my experience and my practice. I have taken lots of ‘shit’ from youth over the years, from being actively ignored to being called names to being reluctantly tolerated because I provided a ride, a meal, or a cigarette. I have sometimes felt like Jack (an outreach worker) in Courtney’s description of her relationship with him: “It’s like I played him for what I wanted to get my needs met when I wanted them met. But when he wanted me to do something for him, I wouldn’t do it.” Of course, there was inherent value in Jack helping Courtney meet her basic needs, especially since she was only 11 years old at the time. But I think allowing youth to ‘use’ us can also be useful in giving us time with the youth to try to engage them in counselling. I do think we have to have boundaries and the youth have to meet us part of the way. But, if for the first few months, or longer with some youth, part of the reason the youth meet with me is because I buy them a \$5 Starbucks Frappacino, that’s ok with me. And if they ‘freak out’ on me and hurl abusive words, I will still be there, although I think it is good role modeling to talk about the impact of those words on me, once the relationship is strong enough to handle it. I have allowed youth to behave badly towards me in ways I would never allow in my personal life, in the hopes of building a relationship with them where perhaps one of the things they can learn is how to stop pushing everyone away with their ‘shit.’

Maxine “dished out a lot of shit” in her sessions with Evelyn, and even though she stopped seeing Evelyn and said “she didn’t really leave a big impression,” it made a difference

for Maxine that Evelyn hung in there with her. She advocated that counsellors have patience: “Sometimes you have to work really hard. ... Like that first counsellor, I was calling her whatever I could when I could. Just ‘cause I was scared of her. You’ve got to be prepared for that.” Casper talked about getting angry at Marlo when she began to feel safe in the relationship: “As our relationship progressed, I just got really sensitive and angry and just kind of blew up on her and walked away. I guess I felt safe. That’s why. I knew that she would always be there.” This demonstrates how sometimes when a youth starts hurling ‘shit’ it might actually mean that the counsellor is getting somewhere in terms of building a relationship, and it would be useful to have the willingness to be patient through the youth’s defenses.

Meeting Youth Where They Are At

In some ways, showing genuine caring, really listening, respecting confidentiality, self-disclosing, being unshockable, and taking the youths’ ‘shit,’ are all ways of meeting youth where they are at, just as meeting youth where they are at is a way attend to the importance of the therapeutic relationship. The lessons I have included under “meeting youth where they are at” include outreach, empowerment, letting youth share and process at their own pace, being chill, and going outside the counselling role.

Outreach.

Another thing that I thought I knew about counselling with Aboriginal street youth that seems to be supported in my research is the importance of outreach: “meeting them where they are at includes outreach counselling, hanging out in youth centres, Aboriginal centres, etc” (Journal, May 12, 2008). I have always worked as an outreach counsellor, or at least in a counselling model with outreach capability as part of engagement. Outreach approaches, from meeting youth in public places like coffee shops to hanging in street youth centres or even on the streets, are important for connecting with Aboriginal street youth. Outreach gives youth an

opportunity to get to know a counsellor in a more casual environment, although this does not mean that the goal is to necessarily eventually get the youth into an office. Outreach is especially important in the engagement phase of a the relationship, but can continue to be important later, especially if a youth dis-engages from the process at some point.

The fact that Elizabeth was an outreach worker was crucial for engaging Courtney in counselling, since Courtney's ambivalence seemed to paralyze her, leaving her unable to cross the street for her first appointment. Instead Elizabeth crossed the street, which helped make it "a little less intimidating, and like, "here's somebody who might be able to be willing to step outside of the box and meet me a little bit more where I'm at, if I'm willing to meet her." When Courtney stopped coming to counselling a year later Elizabeth was assertive in her outreach efforts to re-engage Courtney: "She'd show up and talk to me at drop-in or whatever, she'd even show up at midnight and be like, 'You! Why aren't you coming to see me?'" Despite Elizabeth's persistence, Courtney did not return to her for counselling, although she admitted that it was "frustrating" when Elizabeth left the position the next year: "It was a bit of an adjustment because I got used to her finding me." Shortly after Elizabeth left is when Courtney ended up seeing Abby, and it's possible, perhaps even likely, that Courtney would have gone back to Elizabeth at this point if Elizabeth had still been there. And it's also possible that Abby would have been able to engage Courtney into further counselling if she had been an outreach counsellor. Courtney also had some strong words on the value of outreach as we reflected on lessons from her story at the end of the interview: "I think counsellors should join in with outreach teams. How brilliant of an idea would that be?! It totally would be! ... It may take 10 different outreach trips, but eventually that kid might be willing to have a conversation with you, right?"

Empowerment.

Something I often say to youth is something like “I’m not here to tell you what to do, just to help you figure out what you want and how to get it. You are the expert in your own life.”

Youth empowerment is central to my counselling practice, and was included in the list of what I thought I knew: “meeting them where they are at, working on the goals they identify, not trying to rush them off the street, while still believing that they can make positive change in their life.” (Journal, May 12, 2009). It is a strength-based approach to working with youth. Empowerment is a lesson that was reflected in all of my participant’s stories.

Courtney talked about connecting with Lexie because she felt like she had some power in the situation: “It was an opportunity where I got to direct what was happening, instead of being directed what to do.” Similarly, Rose talked about how Stephen allowed her to be in control in the counselling process, acting “like my friend instead of like a boss.” He didn’t assume he knew what she should do or how she should live her life: “I think why he was able to help me the best was he didn’t act as if I had a whack of problems and I had to deal with them.... Basically, I got to process my issues, my stress, my way. ... He’d be like, ‘Okay, what do you want to do? It’s your life, you’ve got to live it. You tell me and I’ll help you structure it’” Likewise, being treated like an equal and not a “kid with major behaviour issues” was important for Casper in connecting with Tim. He treated her like someone who was capable of making her own decisions and he “never got mad,” even when Casper and another youth stole one of his personal possessions, instead saying, “In life you’re going to make decisions and you’re going to make choices and you’re going to suffer the consequences, whether those consequences be good or bad. ... I’m just not going to get mad at you.” This created space for Casper to feel more independent and responsible: “He just made me feel really independent and like I had to think for myself.”

Empowering youth is central to the lessons that Casper thinks can be learned from her story: “I

know counsellors are there to listen and to help you, but what is help? I think that help is listening and not necessarily them telling me what's wrong or what I could do, but helping me find my own solution."

Letting youth share and process at their own pace.

Another thing I thought I knew about counselling with Aboriginal street youth that seems strongly supported in this research is the importance of "respecting their process" (Journal May 12, 2008). I had learned early in my counselling practice that I needed to wait for youth to be ready to share, especially about sensitive issues, as Rose said, I needed to let them share at their "own pace" I learned that I might be "right" in my conceptualizations, but sharing my thoughts with youth too early can leave them feeling exposed and frightened. While I didn't work in a program that required extensive formal intake assessments, I learned from attempting to connect youth with other counselling programs that this kind of assessment often turns youth off. I had also come to understand that for some youth, being Aboriginal might itself be a sensitive issue.

Mike waited through months of chilling over coffee for Maxine to share: "It was really cool 'cause we didn't even talk about nothing too serious unless I brought it up." Likewise, one reason Rose said she was able to connect with Stephen was because he didn't push her to share. Furthermore, even though he already knew her well enough to "tell me what I was doing before I did it," he didn't push her: "it just was amazing because he didn't push for me to be open and be like, 'okay this is what you should do with your life.' ... He just kinda let me do it at my own pace. ... Other counsellors had wanted me to process before I was willing to process." Similarly, even though Casper had made a decision that she was ready to talk about her past when she decided to start seeing Marlo, being able to process at her own pace has been very important in this work: "many times Marlo has said 'oh I was waiting for that.' She already knew, but she didn't push, she didn't ask, and she didn't say anything. She just waited and let me start it off."

Not being given the space to process at her own pace is part of what went wrong with Courtney and Chris. He offered her his interpretation of her situation, and while he was right in many ways, his words were not well received. Feeling frightened, exposed, and angry, Courtney “flew off the rack and destroyed his office ... they were true but I had never told, I never said anything. ... It scared me.” This experience strengthened Courtney’s resistance to counselling, and it was almost four more years on the street before she was to connect with Elizabeth, who did allow her the space to share at her own pace.

Letting youth set the pace of counselling in the initial session(s) can be difficult if agency policy requires an extensive intake assessment or when a safety assessment is necessary, for example, after a suicide attempt. Given the importance of letting youth set the pace, going into the first session intent on asking a bunch of questions is often counterproductive to engaging Aboriginal street youth in counselling. I understand the need for assessing safety issues, but if a youth is driven away by questions, has her or his safety really increased? Counsellors and agencies have to find ways to balance (and question) the “need” for assessment with giving the youth space to share and process at their own pace. Elizabeth was able to assess Courtney’s safety and engage her in counselling through safety planning around issues such as self-harm. This didn’t feel as vulnerable for Courtney and also left her feeling in control of the process: “I thought I was totally in control of the situation, that I was avoiding having to communicate in any sort of way. But apparently it was more her plan than mine.” It is one way that a counsellor might be able to be able to balance the need for a safety assessment with not pushing the youth to share.

Being chill.

Although I didn’t include anything about being chill in my initial list of what I thought I knew, for me it was implicit in what I meant by “important to take time to build a strong

relationship” (Journal, May 12, 2008). Hanging out, doing activities, and engaging in more casual conversations are all part of what I do as part of engagement with Aboriginal street youth, and “chill” is a descriptor that youth often use about me. Similarly, Maxine’s first impression of Mike was: “He was really laid back. He was really chill and I really like that because I like being laid back. I’m a pretty chill person too.” Like Maxine, I think I’m a pretty chill person, but being chill is not just about personality, rather, it about being casual. The participants described getting to know a number of the counsellors in a more casual way. Rose met Ben at a street youth centre one night: “I walked into the drop-in and got food and played ping pong with them all. We watched movies and we just started talking and then he told me his role and introduced himself.” She also met Stephen at a street youth centre, and before he was her counsellor she had developed a relationship with him through her involvement in employment, advocacy and housing programs in the centre. Even as a counsellor, he continued to be chill, as she described: “it was more of like, ‘okay I’m your friend, let’s shoot the shit.’” Rose talked about the value of this kind of casual connection, including what she calls “one-to-one on the floor”, in building relationships, demystifying counselling, and ultimately bridging youth to more formal counselling. Counsellors in street youth drop-ins and residential treatment centres often have many opportunities to interact with the youth in a more casual way, but counsellors working in other models can also take casual approach to facilitate engagement, such as Elizabeth and Courtney’s first session walking in the park drinking slurpees, or Mike and Maxine chilling over coffees for months before Maxine began to feel comfortable enough to really share.

Going outside the counselling role.

This has been one of the more challenging lessons for me in this research, because of the ways in which some of the counsellors left their counselling role and developed personal relationships with the youth. I talked about boundaries in what I thought I knew about

counselling with Aboriginal street youth, but what I said was the importance of “good boundaries” (Journal, May 12, 2008). I meant this is the context of belief about “flexibility of service” and “youth friendly service delivery,” so what I meant by “good boundaries” was already a more flexible concept that many counsellors would be comfortable with. But what I heard in the youth’s stories challenged my beliefs. In my journal on June 16, 2008 I wrote that one of the lessons I was learning was about the value of “leaving some ‘professional boundaries’ behind. Going out for coffee, rides home. Maybe even staying in their life beyond the counselling relationship. Like Maxine’s story of her one-to-one, Francine, who is now like her mom. Is that ok? Is this an Aboriginal way to do things? But this counsellor couldn’t do it with all kids, there’s not enough time. So then what?” And this was before I heard the story of Casper and Tim, who became like a father to her. During my first active listening of Casper’s interview on August 14, 2008 I wrote: “I remember the judgment I had of the counsellor who fostered a client [when I was working street outreach]. At the time I was pretty clear that was bad boundaries. Now I am not so sure, especially for Aboriginal youth.” Some of the change in my belief had come because I was young in my career when I was working street outreach. It was that year on the street that taught me much about how to work with these youth, what their lives are like when they are “out there.” But some of my change in belief comes through this research, and my emerging understanding of the role of healers in Aboriginal communities. Most ideas about professional boundaries for counsellors come out of western worldviews, and perhaps Aboriginalizing counselling means thinking differently about some of these “boundaries.”

Some of the things in the stories that might furrow some counsellors’ brows are minor common in many counselling agencies that work with street youth. They are things that I have done often, and have sometimes had to justify to counsellors working in more mainstream models. For example, on their first meeting Shannon gave Maxine a teddy bear and bought her a

couple of packs of smokes. Elizabeth walked in the park with Courtney and Marlo regularly eats in restaurants and does other social activities with Maxine, as her “escape from living life in addiction.” Going outside of his role by her giving a ride home, which I have done many times for clients, was important for Maxine in believing that Mike genuinely cared: “If someone cares they’ll go that extra little bit. They won’t go way out of their way but if they figure they can do something they’ll do it.” Self-disclosure and being chill, which I have already discussed, are also examples of going outside a formal counselling role that I believe are useful in engaging with Aboriginal street youth.

However, there are stories the youth shared that make me more uncomfortable. One example is being connected to youth over the internet. Maxine said that one of the ways that Marlo try to connect with her when Maxine was avoiding her was through Facebook, and this was very effective. Facebook is a social networking site of which I am a member, but the thought of giving client’s access to so many details of my personal life make me nervous. On the other hand, new technologies are so much a part of youth culture, and allow creative ways for counsellors to connect with youth. Ten years ago when I worked as a street outreach worker there was no reliable means of getting a hold of most of the youth, other than leaving messages at youth centres. Today, many street youth have regular access to the internet, so perhaps I should get over my privacy issues and take better advantage of this fact.

Finally, there are things that I have not done, and I don’t think I would ever do, although I can understand the temptation. For example, Maxine said that she was Terry’s favorite: “We would sneak out of the centre and take the car and he’d take me to Starbuck’s or something.” This is one of the things that allowed her to connect with him. While I’ve been in many Starbucks’ with youth, it has not been against my program’s policy. If Terry was sneaking Maxine out, against the policy of the agency, I don’t think this is a good thing. I think it

undermines the overall staff team in a setting like a residential treatment centre or drop-in centre, and I also believe that we should not involve youth in “secrets” about things we are doing with them that we shouldn’t be, because it is too reminiscent of traumatic experiences as well as street ethics. On the other hand, if it was allowed by the program, and Maxine used the phrase “sneak” because she felt special, then it is something I would do and have done frequently. Another example of something I wouldn’t do was shared by Casper about Shannon, who said to her once: “I get off work at this time, I’ll leave the car unlocked and you can come, spend the night at my house or however long you need to.” Casper said no to this offer, and I’m not sure Shannon should have made it. Likewise, Francine and Tim both transitioned from being counsellors to being important personal supports in Maxine and Casper’s life. Maxine said about Francine: “We’re still really close. I visit her every weekend. And we hang out all the time.”

In Casper’s case, Tim even became her foster parent. I have had the urge to bring youth home, and in some cases, I can see how it might even be therapeutic, if I was willing. Maybe what makes me uncomfortable is less about professional boundaries and what is best for the youth, but rather my own sense of safeguarding my personal privacy and self-care. So I’m glad there are lots of examples of counsellors who didn’t do things that cross “my professional boundaries” that were still positive and helpful experiences of counselling. I am also aware that I have always worked in east Vancouver, which, while having many serious gaps in the continuum of services, is still one of the most service-rich areas for street youth in the country. Some of the counsellors were working in small communities where multiple relationships are more common, and where resources are more scarce. I have more options than them in referring youth to other kinds of workers and resources, including housing. And even if it is okay in certain cases for a counselling relationship to morph into a personal relationship, one counsellor can only do that

with a small number of youth over her or his career. However, it seems that it is important for counsellors working with Aboriginal street youth to go outside of a formal counselling role.

Healing Elements in Counselling

Culture as Healing

As I have said, I came to this research believing that encouraging and facilitating (re)connection to culture was important for counselling with Aboriginal youth street youth. Through my research journey, my belief in the healing power of cultural reconnection has grown immensely, both through seeing the role of culture as healing in the youth's stories, and because of personal healing experiences as I have continued in my own cultural reconnection. Cultural disconnection on an individual and community level, in the wake of ongoing efforts at cultural genocide, plays a huge role in creating the problems that Aboriginal street youth experience; therefore, cultural reconnection (again, on an individual and community level, but here I am speaking of the individual) can be a key to healing.

All of the youth talked about (re-)connecting to Aboriginal culture(s) as part of their healing journey. Some of this connection came through Aboriginal counsellors, as Rose with Ben, or Maxine and Casper with counsellors in the treatment centres. Casper said that what she liked most about Jeremy is that "he taught me a lot about medicines and a lot about tradition ... he brought me back to living way back in the day." In addition to teaching about medicines and ceremony, Jeremy encouraged respect and gratitude for the gift of life, including seeking one's purpose for living. He and other Aboriginal counsellors were also role models of values consistent with Aboriginal worldviews. For example, Tim embodied respect, equality, non-interference, and humility in his interactions with Casper. These experiences with counsellors were among the youth's first experience of reconnecting to Aboriginal culture(s), and the beginning of their cultural explorations beyond counselling. Courtney said she might have liked

to have an Aboriginal counsellor when she was being pressured to see a counsellor by her housing program, but this was not offered. Her cultural reconnection, which she describes as “a key grounding piece” for her exit from the street, was not connected to counselling. Like other non-Aboriginal counsellors in all the youth’s stories, Elizabeth and Abby were helpful despite essentially ignoring Courtney’s Aboriginality. It seems likely they could have been even more helpful if they had assessed and addressed the youth’s Aboriginality. As someone who wants to work as a counsellor with Aboriginal street youth, Courtney envisions putting culture at the centre her practice: “I’m not sure if it’s going to work best, but I think I’m going to come about it with a very cultural context background. I’m going to bring in as much culture as I possibly can. And I want to be an example that it’s not limited, it’s not going to hold you back. ... It’s something to embrace and be proud of, to recognize.”

Healing and Learning Through the Relationship

Given the importance of relationship issues in engagement with Aboriginal street youth, it is not surprising that that relationship itself is one of the healing elements in counselling. The experience of feeling cared about and listened to is powerful, especially when young people have experienced little of it in their lives. Given their trust and attachment issues, having a healthy relationship with a counsellor can provide a corrective emotional experience as well as teaching relational skills that can be transferred into life outside of counselling. Learning through the relationship is evident in many of the stories of counsellors, and Casper spoke explicitly about this issue. For example, she shared about resolving conflict in her relationship with Marlo, stating, “she’s teaching me a lot more than she knows, and more than she’s intentionally trying to do. She’s teaching me good morals and respect and communication. And she doesn’t know any of this, but I’m just picking it up along the way because it’s such a healthy relationship.” As a counsellor, I think it’s likely that Marlo knows that this is part of what she is doing, since I said

to Casper in our interview, “I think that that’s part of how counselling works is exactly what you’re saying, having a healthy relationship with someone where you can have conflict and process it and have uncomfortable feelings and deal with them. Because we don’t always learn that. And when you’ve grown up in a really chaotic environment, usually none of your relationships are like that.” Marlo might be as surprised as me at Casper’s ability to understand and articulate this aspect of healing through counselling.

Venting and Emotional Expression

One of the ways that counsellors help is through just listening. All of the youth talked about the healing power of having a safe space to vent and express their emotions. Often, counsellors were among the first people with whom the youth shared their stories and began to acknowledge their pain, as with Casper and Tim. Having a space to sharing about what was going on in day-to-day life was also therapeutic, as Rose said about how Stephen helped her with her substance abuse: “It was pretty much being able to talk to him ... a venting process where I could just be like, ‘okay well I’ve had a shitty day.’” Crying with Francine about missing her brother was one of the first times Maxine had ever cried with anyone, and her tears likely grieved more losses than just her brother. It was a powerful experience: “I could not stop crying and I had this smile on my face ... and she was like, ‘are you okay,’ and I’m like, ‘yeah I just miss my brother,’ ... and then I just kept going on about stories about him and then I kept crying ‘cause I remembered them.” Sometimes, just being there, genuinely caring and really listening, is enough for counselling to be healing.

Becoming More Directive

While being in a healthy relationship that provides a space to share may be therapeutic in itself, the youth also talked about the ways that counsellors helped that were more directive. Once the youth were engaged in the counselling relationship, many of the counsellors became

more directive, for example through teaching skills and confronting youth about self-destructive behaviour, such as when Mike told Maxine that he thought she could be dead if she continued the way she was going. She talked about wanting a counsellor like Mike who balanced listening with being more directive: “gentle but at the same time pushes you. But not in a way where you get all mad.” She said that good counsellors are the ones that do more than just go over the same thing every time, “instead they go over different parts of different things and find reasons for why it could have happened. And what you can do to help yourself get over it and stuff.”

Similarly, Rose talked about how Stephen shifted his style to meet her changing needs, beginning with allowing her space to just vent, moving to work on cravings and triggers, to “de-stressing,” then lifeskills like problem-solving, planning, and budgeting. Meanwhile, he was also providing couples counselling that sounded quite directive: “we’d go and we’d tell them the whole situation ... and he would get us to think of everything that causes stress that causes us to act out ... and he would get us to also explain how we would want to do it differently and he would give us resources on where to go if we needed help ... and he would ask us to plan a kind of a fire escape from the relationship.” Addictions work, emotional regulation, lifeskills and couples counselling are some of the ways that counsellors in these stories were more directive. Trauma counselling, which is a piece of the work Marlo is doing with Casper, is another example. Casper talked about how Marlo had to “pound it into me over and over and over again was that it wasn’t my fault and there’s nothing that I could do to change it, except ... the way you feel about it and think about it and deal with it.”

Teaching skills around emotional regulation is one form of being directive that all of the participants talked about and valued, and is one of the things I thought I knew about counselling with Aboriginal street youth: “the importance of developing coping and emotional regulation skills.” As I shared with Courtney at the end of our interview, some of the most useful

counselling tools I have learned in my Master's relate to emotional regulation. As an addiction counsellor I had always dealt with issues around emotional regulation, since for so many youth it seemed that using substances was their only tool for coping with their emotions. And I could see, partially through its usefulness in my own life, that many of the youth I had worked with could have benefitted from what I was learning. Affirming my belief, all of my participants talked about emotional regulation as something they learned about from counsellors. Stephen worked with Rose around "de-stressing" and Elizabeth did safety planning with Courtney to help her come up with alternatives to cutting for dealing with her emotions. Maxine shared that with Francine she learned new coping skills: "Different things I can do for myself. Every time something happened I used to bottle it up inside ... but now I can call people and be like, 'this is what's going on. I need help. Can you help me?' Or write it out." Likewise, building on lessons from all of her previous successful counselling relationships, understanding and regulating her emotions is one of the things Casper is learning with Marlo: "She really helps me recognize how I'm feeling right now and to not push it away ... And then she helped me think of how to process things like, 'Okay, why am I feeling angry today? Or why am I feeling sad? Or why I'm feeling happy, let's not lose sight of that.'" Teaching skills around emotional regulation and other ways that counsellors were more directive in the stories are forms of counselling that are more familiar to counsellors used to working with easier to engage populations. However, an important difference to remember is the time needed to build a therapeutic relationship with the youth before more formal therapeutic work can be done, and the need to balance being directive with being flexible and meeting the youth where they are at.

Promoting Self-awareness and Self-understanding

This is another lesson that was not included in what I thought I knew about counselling with Aboriginal street youth, but again, perhaps it was too obvious. All counselling is on some

level about promoting self-awareness and self-understanding, and identity is an important issue in adolescence. Indeed, through my Master's program I have realized that promoting self-awareness and self-understanding is a primary goal I have as a counsellor. Reflecting on how the lessons from my research were impacting my counselling practice, I wrote that my broad goals for counselling were to "help them assess themselves, understand themselves, and why they are the way they are. What they might like to change. To understand their identity and who they are" (Maxine listening notes, February 23, 2009). Identity is a major developmental task of adolescence, and as Aboriginal youth disconnected from their cultural identity, may be an even more central issue for Aboriginal street youth.

In the window of opportunity in the wake of Courtney's hospitalization at the age of 15, she "was looking for a way out, but I needed somebody to show me what that way out was. I didn't know. By that point all I knew was street life. All I knew was gang life. All I knew was what I did and what kind of identity I created for myself." While she didn't get the help she wanted immediately, one of the most powerful things Courtney gained with Elizabeth who she connected with a few months later was learning to like herself. She accomplished this through understanding why she had done some of the things she regretted: "I guess breaking things down and looking at them like that, it wasn't as bad or didn't make me not like me as much." While she wasn't able to bring that new self to life until later in her story, it was her work with Elizabeth that allowed her to see "this new person" that she would eventually become. Likewise, Marlo is helping Casper "develop who I am and find out what I like and what I find therapeutic and helpful towards me. 'Cause before she came I had no idea who I was or what I wanted." I think all of the youth would agree with Maxine's words that promoting self-understanding was part of what defines a "good counsellor" because, as she said: "it's only when you understand what you're doing and why you're doing it can you do something about it."

Resourcing

As I said, other workers and supports are very important in the lives of these youth. Some of the connections to these resources come through counsellors, and counsellors in the participants stories' did make these connections, for example, referrals to treatment, connecting youth to sweats and Aboriginal cultural activities, and helping them access employment and housing programs. Sometimes resourcing was the primary help that the counsellor provided, as with Gayle and Shannon's treatment referrals. Resourcing is something I have long thought was important in counselling with Aboriginal street youth, as I wrote in my list of what I thought I knew: "case management: who's doing it? If no-one, maybe it should be the counsellor, and regardless, the team should try to coordinate" (Journal, May 12, 2008). Rose talked several times about how Stephen connected her with resources, such as additional supports for staying sober, places where she could go if the violence in her relationship got out of control, and resources for her baby. When the program ended, he also connected her with other counsellors, although at that point she felt that she was done with counselling. Connecting youth to other resources is important because counselling is only small part of a youth's weekly routine and because the intrapsychic work of counselling is often insufficient for change. These youth need real world change, such as safe housing, sustained employment, and healthier social activities, and counsellors can play a role in connecting youth with these resources.

Brief Interventions

Despite the long time needed to connect with these youth, and that most of the positive experiences with counsellors were longer term, there are three stories of brief interventions that were helpful, even life-changing. Gayle and Shannon provided treatment referrals, and Abby provided crisis response. In all cases, they were responding to the youth's immediate needs and letting them set the pace (which was quick in these cases). As Casper said about Shannon, "she

realized that she had to help me really fast and she did.” For the treatment referrals, the help was more instrumental than emotional or relational, indeed, Maxine didn’t even really like Gayle. For Courtney, it was an opportunity to upload: “it was a neat opportunity to just walk in the door with somebody I’d never met. Somebody who’ll I’ll probably never ever see again, just lay it all out on the table and walk out the door.”

Termination

Of the counselling relationships where there was successful engagement and the counsellor is not still in the youth’s life, most often the counselling relationship ended because the youth moved to a different community (including to go to treatment). Two exceptions are Courtney with Elizabeth and Maxine with Evelyn (although, as I said, this relationship seems to have been only tenuously engaged). Both Courtney and Maxine ended counselling by just stopping coming, as Maxine said about Evelyn: “I said I was coming back. I just never did. It’s easier that way.”

Both talked about how their problems didn’t go away just by talking about them, and how talking about their problems actually made them feel more depressed or unsafe. Maxine quit counselling with Evelyn because “I was getting so frustrated with just talking about life. It was so depressing ... like I didn’t have hope at all.” She thinks maybe she wasn’t “ready to deal with anything at the time. ‘Cause in my head it was normal.” But shortly after ending counselling with Evelyn, Maxine met Mike and began to deal with things, so I can’t help but wonder if there was more Evelyn could have done. Likewise, Courtney’s reason for quitting counselling with Elizabeth, and her hesitation about counselling in general at that point, was her frustration about her inability to implement the change she was visioning: “Okay, well, counsellors are great. But, then you gotta go and do all the work.” She also talked about feeling more vulnerable in her life because of how open she was in the counselling sessions: “I felt less safe because when I got in

the office I could take my wall down, but when I left I couldn't put it back up as soon as I walked out the door. ... I felt constant turmoil trying to build this thing and keep my layer of safety and not be vulnerable because you can't be vulnerable out on the street and in life." For me, this speaks to the importance of a safe container in counselling. Talking about stuff that has been "bottled up" can make people feel worse before they feel better, and counsellors need to be responsible for addressing this issue and helping the youth create strategies for containing the emotional fallout of therapy, especially when they are still in unsafe situations in their lives.

It's clear from the youth's stories that part of the value of counselling is in planting seeds that may develop later in the youth's life. Often, the counsellor who planted the seeds will never know which ones grew. For example, Maxine was very resistant to residential treatment when Mike suggested it, and he has no idea that his insistence seems to have played a role in her being open to treatment when Gayle made the suggestion. It may have also helped that Gayle referred her to an Aboriginal treatment centre, though I don't know if this was something Mike had also suggested. When Courtney was pregnant the first time she spent 6 months in a safehouse, off the street and "doing really good." She didn't talk to a counsellor during this time, but she said "I was starting to implement more of the tools that I'd gotten from people." This reflects how one experience of healing builds on another, as I can also see in Casper's story. The trauma work she is doing with Marlo is only possible because of the foundation built by the other counsellors she encountered on her journey through the street. With each counsellor, her strength and self-knowledge increased, and cultural connection was an important part of this journey.

Bad experience with counsellors can also plant seeds, but in that case, it is more often seeds of resistance to counselling. For example, after Casper's first experience, her opinion of counsellors was "I didn't want to go see them ever again." This points to something I have long believed, that if I can't engage a youth in counselling, at minimum I want to leave them with a

good impression of counselling, a seed representing the possibility of being open to counselling in the future.

Service Delivery Contexts

Counsellors work in agencies which exist inside a sociopolitical context of service delivery in a given community, impacted by municipal, provincial and federal policies, funding decisions, and other issues. The participants had experiences with counsellors working in a range of settings including treatment centres or day programs, street youth centres, outreach programs, and mainstream inpatient clinics. They also accessed service in both rural and urban environments, in different communities across British Columbia, and in Rose's case, across Canada. The contexts in which counsellors work can either facilitate or hinder their ability to work with clients in the ways I have described. There are several issues relating to service delivery that stand out for me as lessons from this research.

Youth Workers as Counsellors

Several of the counsellors were also youth workers, such as the treatment centre and drop-in counsellors, and many of the counsellors who were helpful seemed willing to do 'youth work' in addition to counselling. This is a model I am very familiar with, since as an addiction counsellor I worked in a drop-in where part of my role was running social recreation programs and other groups, playing pool or board games, and going camping. I sometimes found it difficult to balance both roles, as when I had to set boundaries with a client who was acting out in the drop-in. Being 'the enforcer' can be detrimental to the counselling relationship, especially in the early stages, as with Maxine's first impression of Francine as "grumpy" since "she was getting frustrated because one of the youth wasn't doing something." However, Francine was able to overcome this first impression and in general there are great benefits from getting to know clients in a more informal environment, as discussed in the section on engagement. Rose

talked about the value of introducing youth to counselling through “one-to-one time” in the drop-in: “more of just a check in, ‘how are you doing, how has your week been,’ stuff like that. Whereas counselling is full session, you go into an office and it’s one-to-one, but it’s more exclusive. Whereas one-to-one isn’t, so that probably would be the best starter point with street youth. ... Because if you do a one-to-one session and you’re like, ‘well there’s also counselling and this is what it’s like. You’re doing it.’ They’re going to be like, ‘oh this is counselling? This is nothing.’ And then they’ll come and talk.”

Importance of Consistency

Another lesson from the stories for service delivery is about the importance of consistency of workers and programs. While none of the counselling relationship lasted more than about a year, and none of the youth told stories of counselling ending because their counsellor left or because the mandate was short-term, the importance of consistency is still apparent. For Courtney, the fact that Jack was still an outreach worker several years later facilitated her referral to Elizabeth, as she may not have shared her desire for help with him otherwise. And although she had already quit counselling with Elizabeth, it was still “a bit of an adjustment” and it solidified her resistance to counselling: “it seemed pointless to find somebody new, to build a new relationship, to try and trust them, and then not do anything.” Likewise, although Rose felt she was done counselling when the program Stephen worked in lost funding, she admits she would have continued seeing him, and the program ending would have also had an impact on many other youth. Maxine’s relationship with Vera is a good example of consistency built into the service delivery model, since Vera connected with Maxine at the treatment centre, and then was able to follow her into the community.

Counsellors' Reputation Among Street Youth

All of the youth were impacted by things they heard from others about counselling, and Courtney and Rose talked specifically about counsellors' reputation among Aboriginal street youth. That reputation is not good, as Rose stated unequivocally: "They hate it. Yeah. I'd say every street youth hates it." She talked about the role of bad experiences with counsellors in forming this opinion, and how street youth see counsellors as people who will likely tell them what to do. Courtney also talked about how Aboriginal street youth get the message that counselling is a negative thing. When I asked her how she thought youth might hear a different message, she talked about the importance of meeting good counsellors, perhaps through counsellors joining with outreach teams. She also talked about the value of word of mouth among Aboriginal street youth: "we do everything by word of mouth. You can put up a dozen posters, but we aren't going to come. But if we know somebody who knows you, then the odds are that we're going to give you a shot, right?"

Counsellor Self-care

The "importance of self-awareness and self-care for the counsellor" (Journal, May 12, 2009) was a strong belief I had about counselling with Aboriginal street youth when I began this research. I had learned this lesson through experiencing vicarious trauma and burnout in my job as a street outreach worker, and then learning how to take care of myself in my work as an addiction counsellor. I was clear that I needed to have good boundaries and good self-care in order to do this work in a sustainable way, and given the importance of consistency in the lives of the youth, my ability to sustain myself and stay in my job for a longer term was crucial to my ability to help the youth. And this can be stressful work, as Maxine said, "sometimes you've got to work really hard" to engage the youth in counselling, including put up with some of their 'shit' in the process. Then, if you are successful in engaging the youth, you will bear witness to

horrifying (and sometimes triggering) stories that you will have to process for yourself and stand by while youth you care about make choices that seem to endanger their lives. Casper spoke about this with Tim: “when he sees me fucking up all the time, it really hurts him.”. Rose spoke directly about counsellor self-care in her lesson for counsellors: “You’ve gotta expand yourself. And that’s where it’s the mix up. Youth in general are hard to deal with. So we can drive you crazy. ... The counsellors need to take care of themselves before they take care of others. Always. ... With youth, whether we’re in school or street-involved, we can be a handful.”

The Future

All of my participants were at least 6 months off the street at the time of the interview. While Maxine and Casper’s exit was facilitated through residential addiction treatment and Rose and Courtney’s through motherhood, all talked about exiting as a process of disengagement, and it may be that some of them are not done this process. For Courtney, who is the furthest from the street, part of her process has been through giving back as a youth worker with street youth. She wanted to be a social worker, but decided, “that was a dumb concept” and now plans to be a counsellor: “I thought I would be able to change the system and I finally realized that I can’t change the system. The system’s not going to change until the system wants to change. So going back and looking at it where’s the turning point or where’s the starting point? Counsellors.” Casper is also contemplating a future in youth work, as envisioned in her dream of being “this elderly lady ... way back in the day,” and prophesized to her by Jeremy at her last graduation from treatment: “You know why that all happened, Casper? ... The Creator knows that you’re strong enough for you to overcome them and for you to help other youth. So maybe your purpose in life is to give back. To be a youth worker. Because you’ve been through a lot. And for you to come out on top of all of that you know there’s something in you to offer to the world.” It’s possible that I will come across my participants as professional colleagues at some point in the

future, and that makes me glad, because there is great value in having “people who have been there” working with Aboriginal street. And, as Courtney said “having more Aboriginal counsellors out there cause there aren’t any” is something that is very important.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This research examined the experiences of Aboriginal street youth with counsellors using an Aboriginalizing narrative methodology. I believe that a strength of this study is its methodological “bricolage” of Aboriginal, narrative, feminist, participatory, critical and other methodologies, its strong grounding in the researcher’s location or subjectivity, and the primacy of the voices of four incredible young women, who survived and thrived “against all odds” (Smith et al., 2007). Through considering the stories of four young women who had experiences with counsellors during their time on the street, this research offers some suggestions on “what works” in counselling with Aboriginal street youth. Key lessons include addressing Aboriginality in counselling, the importance of the therapeutic relationship, and meeting youth where they are at.

The participants’ experiences in childhood and on the street resonate with the literature on street youth. Most Aboriginal youth come to the street from troubled homes and communities, frequently via government care, and they are often disconnected from their Aboriginal cultures and communities. This disconnection, as well as the chaos and trauma in their childhoods, must be contextualized within the legacy of colonization on Aboriginal peoples. Running to the street is like going “from the frying pan to the fire” (Cauce, 2000, p. 328), and by the time Aboriginal youth who are on the street come in contact with counsellors, they have usually had many experiences that have damaged their ability to trust. They are often reluctant to engage with services, and most clinicians and researchers agree that they are very difficult to engage and maintain in counselling. Given the lack of research on counselling with Aboriginal street youth, this study is a starting point in understanding the experiences of Aboriginal street youth with counsellors, and in creating more effective and culturally sensitive clinical interventions.

Addressing Aboriginality in Counselling

The importance of addressing Aboriginality in counselling is one of the most significant lessons from this research. Cultural disconnection was part of all of the participant's stories of street involvement, and cultural reconnection was part of all their stories of healing. I believe that Aboriginality is critical to assess and address in counselling with Aboriginal street youth, including exploring the client's cultural identity, encouraging and facilitating cultural connections, and cultural resourcing. For Aboriginal counsellors⁹ it may also include utilizing culture as healing within their counselling practice. It is also important that there are more Aboriginal people working as counsellors with Aboriginal street youth, since they are important role models as well as conduits of cultural reconnection.

Both studies of Aboriginal street youth had recommendations that support the importance of culture as healing. Gilchrist (1995) concluded that issues of "cultural identity and community dislocation" (p. 244) should be addressed by counsellors. Saewyc and colleagues (2008) recommended "culturally-specific programming for street-involved youth, and training in cultural safety for youth workers and people who work with youth" (p. 57).

The role of cultural connection in healing has also been supported in other research. Cultural connection has been found to be a protective factor for Aboriginal children and youth against a variety of negative outcomes (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Laframboise, Hoyt, Oliver & Whitbeck, 2006; Kulis, Napoli, & Marsglia, 2002), so enhancing cultural connection could have a positive impact. McCormick (1995) found that Aboriginal people described cultural connection as something that facilitated their healing, including participating in ceremonies and cultural traditions, anchoring self in tradition, having a spiritual practice, and connecting to nature, and he recommended that counsellors can play a role in connecting clients to culture.

⁹ The question of whether non-Aboriginal counsellor can or should utilize Aboriginal culture as healing in their counselling practice is controversial, and beyond the scope of this discussion.

Gone (2006) considered mental health, wellness, and cultural identity for urban Aboriginal people, and made the following recommendations:

1. Consider that psychological difficulties experienced by urban Indian clients are existential in origin and expressive of conflicts in cultural identity. ...
2. Harness the social process of the therapeutic relationship to support distressed urban Indian clients in reconstituting cultural identity as a path to wellness. ...
3. Continuously assess and (re)formulate the cultural identity status of urban Indian clients in the context of therapeutic goals (p. 72-74).

Similarly, Howell-Jones (2006), in a study of Aboriginal adults' experiences with non-Aboriginal counsellors, concluded that a successful counselling relationship was defined by its capacity "to increase each client's clarification of how Aboriginality is meaningfully and uniquely understood" (p. 1). While the participants talked about other aspects of healing, cultural exploration was central to their healing, supporting my theory that the helpful non-Aboriginal counsellors in my participant's stories could have been even more helpful if they had addressed the youth's Aboriginality. Finally, there is a growing body of research on using culture as healing in counselling, such as through using traditional healing in session or supporting clients to access traditional healing (e.g. Kirmayer & Valaskakis, 2009; McCabe, 2008; Twigg & Hengen, 2009; Waldram, 2008; Witko, 2006).

Given the importance of assessing Aboriginality, it is important for counsellors to have knowledge about the nature and development of Aboriginal identity for youth. Researchers have proposed models of cultural identity development that can be useful for counsellors as a guide for exploration. For example, Mihesuah (2003) proposed a model of "indigenous identity development" and talked about identity as central to the well-being of indigenous women: "some of the greatest stressors that Indigenous women face have to do with their appearances and with not knowing their tribe's history and culture, and therefore, their identities as Natives" (p. 81). Winderowd and colleagues (2008) discuss the importance of assessing enculturation, which is

“the process by which an individual learns about and identifies with his or her own cultural roots” (p. 1), and suggest the *American Indian Enculturation Scale* as a “culturally relevant and practical measure of enculturation or traditionality [which is] reliable and valid [with American Indian people] from a variety of tribes across the nation” (p. 11). While I don’t necessarily advocate the use of structured assessment with Aboriginal street youth, the *American Indian Enculturation Scale*, adapted for the local culture as suggested by Winderowd and colleagues, could be useful for counsellors to examine for their own knowledge or to use collaboratively with youth.

Clearly cross-cultural competence is crucial in counselling with Aboriginal street youth, and recently, the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) and others have begun advocating for a move beyond cross-cultural competence or cultural sensitivity to grounding health care practices in cultural safety (Ramsden, 1991). Central to the concept of cultural safety is “analyzing power imbalances, institutional discrimination, colonization and relationships with colonizers, as they apply to health care” (NAHO, 2006). Counselling and psychotherapy come out of western worldviews which includes ways of understanding human behavior, health and wellness. Although I believe that counsellors can help Aboriginal street youth, I continue to wonder if counselling is necessary – perhaps it would be better to look to other solutions such as traditional healing, both at the level of the individual, and at the level of the community. As Gone (2008) argues “the attention of clinically concerned researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to an indigenous ‘patient’ or ‘client’ base ... invites critical analysis of the cultural politics of mental health in Native North America. Such politics emerge at the confluence of culture, power, and postcoloniality” (p. 311). Counsellors working with Aboriginal street youth need to consider how their own worldviews are influencing their conceptualizations of their

client's problems as well as their notions of health and wellness, in an attempt to minimize this "ideological danger of implicit Western cultural proselytization" (Gone, 2008, p. 310).

The Importance of the Therapeutic Relationship

Experiences of instability and trauma in their families, government care, and on the street, may leave Aboriginal street youth with trust and attachment issues that contribute to their resistance to engaging with services including counselling. The importance of taking time to build a strong therapeutic relationship is another significant lesson from this research. Counsellors should be prepared for the possibility that these youth might take a long time and a lot of work to engage in the counselling relationship. Genuine caring, really listening, confidentiality, self-disclosure, being unshockable, and taking their 'shit' are the lessons I saw that could aid in dealing with resistance and building trust. The value of a strong therapeutic relationship is also evident in some lessons about healing elements in counselling, in particular, learning and healing through the relationship. Finally, it is evident in lessons for service delivery including the importance of consistency and the importance of counsellor self-care, since in order to be "available" for a genuine relationship with a client, we must be taking good care of ourselves.

The importance of the therapeutic relationship has broad support from different schools of counselling, and many of the lessons for engagement have resonances with Carl Rogers' necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic change (1957). While the relationship was not always sufficient for therapeutic change for my participants, it was necessary. The small body of literature related to counselling with Aboriginal youth speaks to the importance of the therapeutic relationship. For example, in a study of Aboriginal people's experiences with non-Aboriginal counsellors, Lokken and Twohey (2004) concluded that "counsellor trustworthiness" including caring, respect, listening, genuineness, and self-disclosure, was the most salient factor

for clients in connecting with and feeling helped by the counsellors. Taking time to establish trust with the client is also a key element of culturally safe practice (NAHO, 2006).

There is also support in the research on counselling with street youth for the importance of the therapeutic relationship (Darbyshire et al., 2006; Dixon & Lloyd, 2005; Fisher et al., 2005; French et al., 2003; Macknee & Mervyn, 2002; Mervyn, 2006; Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004). As Slesnick and colleagues (2009) conclude in a recent review of research on interventions with runaway and homeless youth was that “since homeless youth are known to have difficulty developing trust with service providers ... intervention success likely depends upon the development of a trusting relationship” (p. 741), and it takes time to build that trust. Likewise, Mervyn (2006) concludes that: “youth need relationships with caring, supportive, healthy adults in their life with whom they feel they have meaningful relationships. ... They need to feel they are ‘not just a file on a desk’ to someone” (p. 89). Finally, Kidd and Davidson (2007) talked about street youth’s “strong sense of a need for understanding, connection, and support from others” (p.228).

There is support in the literature on counselling with street youth for several of my specific lessons, including genuine caring: (Darbyshire et al., 2006; Karabanow & Rains, 1997; Kurtz et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 2006), really listening (Darbyshire et al., 2006; Dixon & Lloyd, 2005; French et al., 2003; Karabanow & Rains, 1997; Kurtz et al., 2000), and confidentiality (De Rosa et al., 1999). There is also support for the importance of being knowledgeable about street youth lives and culture (Kidd et al., 2007; Thompson et al., 2006) and being non-judgmental (Darbyshire et al., 2006; Kidd et al., 2007; Mervyn, 2006) which are crucial elements of being unshockable. Kidd and colleagues (2007) assertion that those who work with street youth have to be “a ‘mind boggling’ figure in the kid's life” (p. 29) is also aligned with some of my lessons for engagement with Aboriginal street youth: “To connect the

worker needs to listen, value, not judge, respect, and like youths who have experienced very little of any of these things. Trust is built on these connections, and the youths are drawn to that rare experience of trust which serves as a platform for effective work” (p. 29). There is also support for the healing aspect of the relationship, as stated by Darbyshire and colleagues (2006) in a study of homeless youth’s interactions with mental health workers: “when a relationship of mutual trust and respect was established, the strength of this relationship was significant. Young people would not only pursue ongoing treatment for an illness, but could also interact with the healthcare personnel in ways which helped build feelings of self-worth and develop trust in others” (p. 560).

Meeting Youth Where They Are At

The importance of meeting youth where they are at is another significant finding of this research. The counsellors that were helpful met the youth where they were both literally, through doing outreach, and figuratively, through empowering them to direct their own lives, letting them set the pace of counselling, being chill, and going outside the counselling role. Their approach was strength-based and flexible. They just listened when that was what the youth wanted and then became more directive when the youth was ready to work on specific issues such as addictions, trauma, or emotional regulation. The counsellors responded to the youth’s holistic health needs through letting them direct the pace and content of counselling, and by connecting them with resources, such as housing, employment, and in some cases Aboriginal cultural resources.

In terms of counselling with Aboriginal peoples, the research is mixed on whether a more or less directive approach is preferred, but as discussed in Chapter 2, this research is fraught with contradictions, partially due to the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and experiences (Waldram, 2004). However, in a recent publication by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation

looking at Aboriginal healing in Canada, a central conclusion was about “the importance of flexibility and eclecticism in the development of treatment models. There is no singular Aboriginal client, as there is no singular Aboriginal individual.” (Waldram, 2008, p. 4). Being flexible is a way of meeting the client where they are at. Likewise, advocates of cultural safety believe that “culturally safe care empowers people because it reinforces the idea that each person’s knowledge and reality is valid and valuable” (NAHO, 2006).

The importance of meeting youth where they are resonates with most of the literature on counselling with street youth (e.g. Darbyshire et al., 2006; Dixon & Lloyd, 2005; Fisher et al., 2005; French et al., 2003; Kidd et al., 2007; Slesnick et al., 2007). One way of meeting youth where they are at is by being easy to access, and there is research support for the importance of accessibility of services, including co-location of services and outreach (Aviles & Helrich, 2004; Dixon & Lloyd, 2005; Ensign & Gittelsohn, 1998; Fisher et al., 2005; French et al., 2003; Thompson et al., 2006). The youth in Dixon and Lloyd’s (2005) study of homeless youth’s experience of mental health workers talked about the importance of the counsellor letting them go at their own pace, “they like a counsellor to take time to get to know them and build up a relationship before delving deeply into their lives” (p. 28). Similarly, Darbyshire and colleagues (2006) found that some of the detrimental aspects of mental health services identified by homeless youth attempting to access mental health services included labeling, drive-by assessment, lack of explanations, and lack of personal control. Another study found that youth and mental health professionals had very different perspectives on the problems associated with homelessness, (Fisher, Florsheim & Sheetz, 2005, p. 401). Focusing on issues that are most salient to youth, such as “subsistence and relationships”, rather than those often targeted by mental health workers, such as “psychiatric symptoms, substance abuse, and past trauma” may allow counsellors to engage youth in counselling, and perhaps eventually work on these issues.

In addition, there may be particular times or circumstances when “when where they are at” is more open to referrals to counselling or to working on deeper issues. For example, research, including this study, suggests that street youth may be particular open to counselling services during the times of crisis or transition (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002; Karabanow, 2008). Connecting youth with resources to meet their holistic needs also has support in the literature of counselling with street youth through evidence on the effectiveness of case management, a primary aspect of which is connecting youth with resources (Cauce & Morgan, 1994; Darbyshire et al., 2006; Slesnick et al., 2007; Slesnick, Kang, Bonomi, & Prestopnik, 2008; Thompson et al., 2006).

Holistic health is more aligned with Aboriginal worldviews than western healthcare’s tendency to compartmentalize health and health care provision. As Twigg and Hengen (2009) argue: “the mainstream approach to the provision of mental health services may also view the mental health issue as a single, isolated one, failing to place it in the context of the entire life of the client including his/her stage of development and place in the community. This linear, isolating approach to mental health is at odds with the traditional First Nations approach with its focus on the Medicine Wheel and the belief that physical and mental health are the result of leading a balanced life (Twigg & Hengen, 2009, p. 11). Culturally safe counselling means being respectful of a client’s culture, thus placing holistic and interconnected Aboriginal notions of health and wellness at the centre of counselling with Aboriginal street youth is “doing things in a good way.”

Suggestions for Future Research

As a qualitative study based in worldviews that see truth as local and situated, this research study is not attempting to present findings that can be generalized to all Aboriginal street youth, although I believe there are lessons that are transferable beyond these four youth. Given that there is no other research that I know of focused specifically on counselling with

Aboriginal street youth, this research leaves me with a multitude of unanswered questions, only a few of which I will discuss here. Given role of research in the colonial enterprise, and the marginalization of Aboriginal street youth, I believe that any research with Aboriginal street youth must be done “in a good way.”

While there is a growing body of research on counselling with Aboriginal people, with much of the newer work being done by Aboriginal researchers (e.g. Kirmayer & Valaskakis, 2009; Waldram, 2008; Witko, 2006), there is a significant lack of research on counselling with Aboriginal youth, and none with Aboriginal street youth. A key finding of the present study is about the importance of culture in understanding mental health and healing. Cultural disconnection is one of the legacies of colonization that seems to be a significant risk factor for Aboriginal youth. More research is needed on the role of cultural connection as a protective factor, including as an early intervention, as well as the role of cultural reconnection in healing. Research on how counsellors might play a role in this reconnection, through integrating traditional healing into their counselling practice, exploring and encouraging cultural connection, or other methods, would also be illuminating, including research that focuses on how non-Aboriginal counsellors can assist Aboriginal youth in cultural reconnection. Research that focused on youth’s resistance to cultural connection would also be useful in understanding and addressing this issue.

The value of the therapeutic relationship has enormous support in the counselling literature, including with Aboriginal youth and street youth. Future research could examine in more depth the nature and development of therapeutic relationships between counsellors and Aboriginal street youth. It seems that more casual approaches work well for engaging Aboriginal street youth in counselling, therefore it would be valuable to investigate aspects of the therapeutic relationship that depart from the comfortable boundaries of mainstream counselling

professionalism, such as the role of self-disclosure, being chill, going outside the counselling role, and balancing the dual roles of youth worker and counsellor. As a counsellor researching Aboriginal street youth's experience with counsellors, I often found myself putting myself in the counsellors' position as I engaged with the stories. I wondered how they balanced these personal and professional boundaries. I wondered how much they were consciously aware of the ways they were engaging the youth and assisting in their healing, such as the healing Casper is receiving from being in a "healthy relationship" with Marlo. Thus, research that looked at counselling with Aboriginal street youth by researching with counselling dyads would be intriguing. It would also be a form of action research, in that the process of reflecting on the therapeutic relationship could be transformative.

Meeting youth where they are at is a principle for working with street youth that has wide support both in the research literature and among practitioners. Future research could consider the various manifestations of this principle, from outreach counselling to strength-based practices, looking at the assortment of ways that counsellors can meet youth where they are at, as well as their usefulness with diverse youth in a range of situations. Given that part of meeting youth where they are at is literally hanging out with them in youth centres and on the street, ethnographic research that examines counselling with Aboriginal street youth in these settings would also be enlightening. The context of street youth culture is important to meeting youth where they are at, thus addressing the reputation of counsellors among street youth is also a worthy focus of research. One way to research this question would be using participatory action methodologies within a particular community of street youth.

Concluding Thoughts

This research has attempted to understand the experiences of some street-involved Aboriginal youth with counsellors, and to consider the implications of their stories for creating

more effective and culturally sensitive counselling interventions. Understanding how counsellors can better work with Aboriginal street youth has the potential to vastly improve the delivery of this important health service, and ultimately, the health of this very vulnerable population. If counsellors are better equipped to work with these youth, perhaps more youth will be able to connect with counsellors in a meaningful way, and perhaps this connection will be helpful in their journey off the street. However, it is important to remember that counselling is only one part of what may be needed to help Aboriginal street youth. More important is ongoing decolonization on the level on individual, family, and community, in the context of a global decolonization movement. But some of these changes will be years and generations in making, and meanwhile, I hope what Courtney says is true:

“I thought I would be able to change the system and I finally realized that I can’t change the system. The system’s not going to change until the system wants to change. So going back and looking at it where’s the turning point or where’s the starting point?
Counsellors.”

Even if the system is unchangeable, perhaps counsellors can make an important difference. And I hope that the lessons in this thesis can help them do that.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

**Are you an Aboriginal youth (16-24)
who was street-involved for a year or more?**

Have you been off the street for at least 6 months?

**Did you see a mental health or addictions counsellor
4 times or more while you were on the street?**

**Are you willing to be interviewed about your
experiences with counselling?**

My name is Dana Brunanski. I am a Métis woman who has worked with youth in Vancouver for 10 years. I am conducting this study as part of my Master's degree in Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia. My study is about the experiences of Aboriginal street youth with mental health and addictions counsellors, and I would like to hear your voice! You will be compensated for your participation.

If you are interested, contact me at 604-xxx-xxxx or email@email.

Or talk to _____ for more information.

Aboriginal
Street Youth
& Counselling
Study

Dana
604-xxx-xxxx

Aboriginal
Street Youth
& Counselling
Study

Dana
604- xxx-xxxx

Aboriginal
Street Youth
& Counselling
Study

Dana
604- xxx-xxxx

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Dana
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Aboriginal
Street Youth
& Counselling
Study

Dana
604- xxx-xxxx

Appendix B: Youth Information Sheet

Counselling with Aboriginal Street Youth Study Youth Information Sheet

Thank you very much for thinking about participating in my study.

My name is Dana Brunanski. I am a Métis woman, and I have worked with youth in East Vancouver for the past 10 years. This study is my part of my Master's degree in Counselling Psychology. I want to hear what Aboriginal street youth have to say about your experiences with mental health and addictions counsellors, in order to help counsellors do a better job. By sharing your story of being an Aboriginal youth on the street connecting with mental health and addictions counsellors, you could help counsellors do a better job working with Aboriginal street youth.

I am looking for Aboriginal youth aged 16-24 who have been street-involved for at least 1 year, have been off the street for at least 6 months, and had at least 4 counselling sessions with a mental health or addictions counsellor while on the street. I want to respect how you define yourself, but for this study I had to define these terms:

- Aboriginal – If you say you are Aboriginal, then you are.
- Street-involved – Being homeless, in shelters, “couch-surfing”, or spending most of your time involved in street life, for at least one year.
- Off the street – For at least 6 months, living in a stable home, little or no criminal activities, little or no self-harm or self-destructive activities.

If you agree to participate, we will schedule an interview at a time and location that is convenient for you. The interview will be a conversation. I will not ask you a bunch of questions. I will ask you to tell your stories and share what you think is most important about your experiences with counsellors. The interview will last approximately 1-2 hours, and will be audio-taped. You will be compensated for your time. Please look at the informed consent form for more details. If you want to talk more about doing an interview, please contact me at 604-xxx-xxxx or email@email.

Thank you very much and all the best.

Dana Brunanski

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Counselling with Aboriginal Street Youth Study Informed Consent Form

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Rod McCormick (Mohawk)
Associate Professor
604-xxx-xxxx

Co-Investigator:

Dana Brunanski (Métis)
Master's Student in Counselling Psychology
604-xxx-xxxx

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of Aboriginal street youth with mental health and addictions counsellors. Results from this study may help counsellors work better Aboriginal street youth. This research is being conducted as Dana Brunanski's Master's thesis. This Master's thesis will be a public document that will be placed in library at UBC, and results will also be presented in academic journals and community reports.

Procedures:

You will be asked to participate in an interview where you share your story of being an Aboriginal youth on a journey through street involvement, and your experiences with counsellors. The interviewer will not be asking you a series of questions. Instead, the interview will be more like a conversation where you share your stories and what you think is most important about your experiences with counsellors. The interview is expected to take 1-2 hours, and will be audio-taped. If you are willing, you can look at a copy of the story that is written from your interview, so that you can have say in how your story is presented. If you want to do this, please write your contact information on page 3 of this consent form.

Potential Risks:

As part of the conversation you may feel you want to share sensitive topics. There do not appear to be risks, but you may feel stressed. You can stop the interview at any time you want to. If you are stressed, the researcher will provide you with information about someone to talk to.

What you say in the interview will be private and anonymous, but if you say you plan to harm yourself or others, or that you were abused (and it has not been reported), the researcher will have to tell the proper agencies to keep you safe.

What you say in the interview will be presented as a whole story, so there is a small chance that your real identity could be guessed by someone who knows you really well. You will be able to look at the story that was written from your interview before the research is published, and, if you want, you can remove any details that you think might identify you.

Potential Benefits:

The results of this research may help counsellors do a better job with Aboriginal street youth, and you might feel good about being part of that. Also, just telling your story to a good listener might be helpful. However, these benefits are not guaranteed. You may or may not benefit directly from participation in this study.

The results of this study will be made available to you when the study is finished. If you would like to receive a copy of the final report, please fill out the mailing address form on the last page of this form.

Confidentiality:

Your participation in this study will be kept private and anonymous. You will be asked to choose a name that will be used in your story. All audiotapes and documents will be identified only by this name. They will be kept secure in a locking filing cabinet and on password-protected computers. You will only be identified by your chosen name in the thesis and any future reports or presentations.

Compensation:

You will receive an honorarium in the amount of \$30 for participation in the interview and \$20 for providing feedback on your story.

Contact for information about the study:

If you have any questions or want more information about this study, please contact Dana Brunanski at 604-xxx-xxxx or Dr. Rod McCormick at 604-xxx-xxxx.

Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects:

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or RSIL@ors.ubc.ca.

Consent:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time with no personal consequences. Your decision to participate or not will not influence the nature of your relationship with the University of British Columbia or any agency where you access services and may have heard about this study.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

Participant Signature

Date

Printed name of the participant signing above

Feedback:

If you want to give feedback on the story that is written from your interview, please let us know how you would like to be contacted. We will contact you within one month after the interview.

Please check off preferred method of contact and fill out your contact information.

Email: _____

Phone: _____

Mail: _____

Other: _____

I would like to receive a copy of the final report:

Name

Mailing Address

City

Province

Postal Code

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Grand Tour Question

Tell me your story of being an Aboriginal youth on a journey through the street, and your experiences with counsellors.

Possible Probes

Tell me about your decision-making around choosing to access a counsellor.

Tell me about your first meeting with the counsellor.

Tell me about the development of the relationship with the counsellor.

Tell me about some specific things that the counsellor did or said that made a difference for you.

Tell me about being Aboriginal, including “who you are and where you are from,” your connection to Aboriginal culture and communities, and how you think being Aboriginal impacts your experience of counselling.

What pseudonym would you like me to use for your narrative?

Appendix E: Ethics Certificate

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - FULL BOARD

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Rod McCormick	INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT: UBC/Education/Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education	UBC BREB NUMBER: H08-00347
INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:		
<small>Institution</small>	<small>Site</small>	
UBC	Vancouver (excludes UBC Hospital)	
Other locations where the research will be conducted: Interviews will be conducted in locations chosen by the participants, such as youth drop-in centres, community centres, other public locations (including UBC), or their homes.		
CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Dana M. Brunanski		
SPONSORING AGENCIES: UBC Faculty of Education		
PROJECT TITLE: Counselling with Aboriginal Street Youth		
REB MEETING DATE: March 27, 2008	CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: March 27, 2009	
DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:		DATE APPROVED: April 1, 2008
<small>Document Name</small>	<small>Version</small>	<small>Date</small>
Protocol:		
Thesis Proposal: Counselling with Aboriginal Street Youth	1	March 8, 2008
Consent Forms:		
Informed Consent Form	1	March 8, 2008
Advertisements:		
Poster	1	March 8, 2008
Youth Information Sheet	1	March 8, 2008
Questionnaire, Questionnaire Cover Letter, Tests:		
Interview protocol	1	March 8, 2008
<p>The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.</p>		
<p>Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board and signed electronically by one of the following:</p>		
<hr style="width: 60%; margin: 0 auto;"/> <p>Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair Dr. Ken Craig, Chair Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair Dr. Daniel Salhani, Associate Chair</p>		

Appendix F: Counsellors' Engagement Status

Engaged - Aboriginal

Maxine: Gayle, A&D counsellor
Maxine: Francine, residential A&D counsellor
Rose: Ben, drop-in counsellor
Casper: Tim, residential A&D counsellor
Casper: Terry, residential A&D counsellor
Casper: Jeremy, residential A&D counsellor
Maxine: Vera, A&D counsellor

Engaged - Non-Aboriginal

Maxine: Evelyn, Mental health outreach counsellor ("bittersweet" engagement)
Maxine: Mike, A&D outreach counsellor
Courtney: Lexie, mental health day program counsellor
Courtney: Elizabeth, mental health outreach counsellor
Courtney: Abby, sexual assault counsellor
Rose: Stephen, drop-in counsellor
Casper: Shannon, drop-in counsellor
Casper: Elaine, school counsellor
Casper: Marlo, sexual abuse outreach counsellor

Not engaged - non-Aboriginal

Maxine: Randy, program counsellor
Courtney: Chris, mental health counsellor
Courtney: mental health outreach counsellor at age 21
Rose: Post-Suicide attempt counsellor
Casper: Darryl, art therapist, abuse counsellor