HOW WE CAME TO STAY: NARRATIVES OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN REMOTE NORTHERN REGIONS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

by

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Abstract

This research explores the unfolding process of how four social workers living and working in remote northern British Columbia, chose to stay. Social work practice in rural, remote, and northern areas is a topic that has been widely explored in the literature. To date, efforts to increase recruitment and retention of social workers to these areas remain a concern and researchers continue to investigate aspects of practice in these regions. Previous exposure to life in the north is noted in the literature as one feature that supports workers with their transition, or commitment to, a northern location and therefore increases the likelihood a worker may stay longer-term (Cameron, 2010). In response to the need to understand how some social workers come to remain in remote northern place (Graham et al., 2008; Zapf, 2009), this study is completed applying narrative inquiry. Departing somewhat from current research focused on elements of job satisfaction, this research approaches the topic area through concepts of spatiality and how people come to bond with, and attach to, particular places, eventually identifying such places as ‘home’. The four narrated stories of remote northern social work in this thesis provide a different way in which to understand remote northern social work; one that reveals details of the process of coming to stay in a new manner.
Preface

Joanna Pierce (student researcher) designed and conducted this study. The study was supervised by Dr. Judy Gillespie (Principal Investigator). This research was approved by the University of British Columbia’s (Okanagan) Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) and has met all the criteria for research with human subjects. The BREB Certificate of Approval for this research is # H12-01753.
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Finally, I would like to thank my family for their never-ending support. Mom, thank you, and Dad…this is for you.
Chapter One: Rethinking Northern Social Work Practice

It was twenty below zero that morning as I warmed up my car for the long drive to the first of three remote northern communities I intended to visit on this particular trip. “One out, one in,” I said to my family, as I had many times before. As I began my journey, I realized within the first few minutes on the road that I was feeling unusually anxious as I found myself gripping the steering wheel tightly. It had been a number of years since I had lived or travelled north for work. As the hours passed on the snow-covered road, I continued to drive farther and farther away from the city which was now my home. I became aware that the narrow road I was travelling had fewer cars and more large, loaded logging trucks that created whiteout conditions as they passed by me. I found myself waiting to hear the familiar sound of a rock suddenly smacking into my windshield at high speed, leaving a chip that would turn into a crack and creep across the glass during the course of my cold journey.

As I took note of the trees and the beautiful surroundings, I thought about how many years it had been since my social work practice had last taken me on the road, and how much I had missed it. Images of previous places I had been popped into my head and I found myself wondering what those places looked like now. I caught myself continually running through a mental list, as I had done years ago when I ventured out for my first day in remote northern practice. Did I have everything this trip required? What would I do to manage without the things I had forgotten?

As my journey continued, I drove around a sharp, slippery corner to be met by two large moose standing on the road, staring at me calmly as if to advise me I was interrupting their day and that I needed to be aware of that. I tapped the brakes as I drove
around them and realized that I felt at home. As my journey continued I stopped at places I had not been in many years. Despite the time that had passed, I was met by familiar faces and many conversations that confirmed a genuine interest in how things had been for me, what I was doing now and, mostly, whether I was back for good. There was a level of comfort in these conversations that transcended the time that had passed and made me feel as though we had spoken only a week earlier.

As I reached my first destination, I was flooded with memories from my previous social work practice and could not help stopping for a moment to take in all that was familiar, standing silently in a place where I had not been for many years. It felt as if nothing and yet everything had changed. That moment embodied the essence of remote northern social work for me: the long travel through large spaces to reach stunning places, the familiar faces wanting to know who I was as a person rather than the skills I offered, and whether I understood where I was and how to situate my practice there.

In this research, the context of a constructed remote northern reality is understood through experience and the individually assigned meanings of social workers living and working in remote northern regions of British Columbia, Canada, evolving over time and connecting people, practice, and place. Narrating “Coming Here, Being Here, and Staying Here” (see Appendix B) reveals an unfolding process of attachment to remote northern social work in place. The rich details connecting environment, people, and the individual practice insights of social workers who want to continue their lives and work in remote northern regions is facilitated through a critical stance found in narrative inquiry toward taken-for-granted- knowledge (Clandinin & Connelley, 2000; Reissman, 1993, 2008).
Purpose of This Research

This research is inspired by my personal and professional experience of living and working in remote northern British Columbia (B.C.), Canada. During my time there, I became acutely attuned to the many negative perceptions people have of such places. Without a doubt, there are a variety of challenges associated with living in small, remote northern communities (lack of services, access, isolation, etc.), which I outline in greater detail in Chapter Two in a review of the existing literature. These documented challenges have been perpetuated by a dominate narrative which often deters social workers from considering remote northern areas to practice. If social workers do venture into such regions, the accompanying challenges often quickly push them to return to a more urban location. An additional consequence of this dominant narrative is the potential silencing of other experiences or perceptions of living and working in the remote north.

My own personal experience working in remote northern B.C., described in Chapter One, stands in contrast to this dominant narrative: rather than experiences of culture shock, isolation, and burnout, I found myself working in communities where my personal beliefs and values were validated, and where I was presented with unique opportunities to expand my personal and professional horizons. In the present research on social work I failed to see a reflection of these positive experiences of social work in non-urban contexts, leading me to identify a gap in the current literature. Specifically, given the general focus on the negative or challenging experiences of social work in remote northern areas, the literature indicates a need to pay greater attention to narratives like my own: To begin to examine remote and northern social work practice from the perspective
of those social workers who actually live and work in these locations, and willingly choose to continue to do so (Graham, Brownlee, Shier & Doucette, 2008; Zapf, 2009).

In the following chapters, I explore the narrated stories of four social workers who, over prolonged periods of time, eventually came to view their remote northern contexts as their home, and in turn, willingly chose to stay and continue their practice in these places.

This research is particularly timely in light of recent interest for an expanded discussion of remote northern social work. Researchers agree that practice in these areas should be explored and understood from the perspective of social workers who are actually living and working in them (Graham, Brownlee, Shier & Doucette, 2008; Zapf, 2009). In particular, while there is an abundance of literature designed to identify the challenges associated with life in the remote north, (Ginsberg, 1983, 2005; Schmidt & Klein, 2004; Schmidt, 2000, 2004; Zapf, 1993), researchers have highlighted a need to identify the positive aspects, or, as Graham, Fukuda, Shier, Kline, Brownlee, and Novik, (2011) put it, work-life satisfaction rates when living and working in remote regions. Research focused on positive aspects of remote northern social work challenges the current dominant narrative that portrays work in non-urban areas as largely negative. By exploring the processes through which four social workers came to stay in remote northern communities in British Columbia, Canada, I seek to contribute a new narrative, highlighting experiences that compel some social workers to maintain their practices in remote northern regions. Moreover, the positive aspects of coming to stay that I focus upon are those tied to spaces and places, as opposed to the more widely theorized factors related to job satisfaction or the promise of rapid promotion. In doing so, I will draw not
only on literature that assesses the hardships and rewards of life in the remote north, but also on theories of place, which describe peoples’ bonds with and attachments to particular places (Altman & Low, 1992; Manzo & Deveine-Wright, 2013; Tuan, 1997).

When bridging these two bodies of literature, the focus of this research is on how four social workers came to stay living and working in the remote north and while aspects of practice may occasionally intersect, the focus of this research remains on coming to stay in place. I explore the following broad research question:

*What are the narratives of social workers living and practicing in remote northern settings and how do these narratives help us to understand the desire to live and practice in these regions?*

Exploration of this question may assist Social Work programs to better prepare students for practice in remote northern settings. As recruitment and retention literature highlights, social workers are desperately needed in these regions, but many social workers never consider work in more remote northern regions, primarily out of apprehensiveness of the many expressed challenges associated with practice in these regions. As an academic with a research focus that is precisely about these regions and what it is to live and work in the remote north, I believe I am uniquely situated to help students question their assumptions and consider the ways in which northern places might actually be enjoyable or rewarding. The findings of this research reveal perspectives of remote northern social work to me as an academic that are similar to my own experiences, and that can enhance educational curriculum in this area.

The following research presents a narrative analysis of the stories of four social workers who now call remote northern areas of B.C. “home” – stories that make the
pursuit of a career in the remote north appear not foreign or unthinkable, but personable, positive, and relatable. By exposing students to these positive stories (aspects) about the remote north, and to the processes by which these four social workers forged genuine, deep bonds with place, I believe we might encourage a greater number of social work graduates to at least entertain the idea of a career in remote northern regions. My research will ideally have practical application in classroom settings, where narratives about the remote north may be used alongside existing literature about its challenging aspects in order to paint a more rounded picture of life as a remote northern social worker.

**Personal Location: My Story**

Sixteen years ago I had the opportunity to practice social work in remote northern regions of British Columbia. Little did I know that remote work was really the beginning of my learning about people-as-place in the context of remote northern regions. Prior to this opportunity, my social work experience had been mainly in community development and mental health and addictions in the city of Prince George. Before entering a Bachelor of Social Work program, the only personal experience I could draw on regarding remote northern living came from living on Germansen Lake, approximately 200 kilometres north of Fort St. James, British Columbia.
Life in Germansen was certainly remote; there was no power and the water was fed by gravity from a frigid mountain stream into the cabin; hot water required heating in a large metal pot on the wood stove, which took time. The refrigerator was located outside, off the end of the porch, and consisted of a handcrafted box designed for cold water to run through the bottom to keep food chilled. The washroom was an outhouse located in a little hut up a short path behind the cabin. Meals were prepared from scratch, typically the result of hunting for meat and collecting berries that were sometimes made into jam to store over the winter.
After I graduated, I prepared for northern practice by revisiting theories I had learned in school. I understood the ‘generalist’ approach to social work practice, (Collier, 2006) and how this generalist focus was viewed as the best approach for practice in non-urban work. By extension, I felt confident that I would recognize the documented issues of culture shock, feelings of isolation, or burnout, as my practice went along. I can still picture my first day; I arrived and was immediately amazed and intrigued by everything around me. I felt uncertain in my role and I was confronted with my existing assumptions regarding this style of social work practice. I had been taught working in the north was difficult, lacking in many services, which resulted in professionals quickly leaving. In my attempt to prepare for whatever difficulties might arise I found myself anticipating that which never happened. At the end of my first day I remember feeling overwhelmed by the sentiment that I had no idea how I was going to do this work, but was excited to
The place was beautiful and the people I was working with had deep connections to each other and a strong collective sense of community. I was struck by the immediate focus on who I was as a person first and then the expectations of my professional role. I felt free to learn from community as knowledge sharing was a natural process. Local culture was central to providing services in a meaningful way. The freedom of experience reminded me of my remote cabin lifestyle and how I depended on those around me for survival, and from that grounded position, I began to reconstruct my practice from what I thought was involved, to reflect what I was experiencing as social work in the remote north.

I was not prepared for the level of independence I had, but at the same time I was excited to discover all that remote community practice would entail. I spent time exploring where I had come to be and considering how to apply social work practice in a manner that fit well with the place and the people for whom community had always been home. The reality of remote northern social work required me to rethink the generalist foundation, creating a form of practice that embraced relationships and place. Since my initial experience, I have worked in many such communities and have continued to carry a fondness for life in the remote north, driven by fascination with what I would learn from each place that I have been privileged to practice. Russell (1967) summarizes my reflections after my first few days of practice when he writes, "at our very first meeting, we talked with continually increasing intimacy. We seemed to sink through layer after layer of what was superficial, till gradually both reached the central fire. It was an experience unlike any other that I have known "(p. 209).
My theoretical lens that includes a “constructionist’s critical stance toward existing knowledge” (Cohen, Duberley, & Mallon, p. 413, 2004) found me struggling with what my academic studies had taught me regarding the negative issues associated with remote practice, such as dual relationships, isolation, and culture shock. These issues were not my experience. For me, the remote north provided an energizing opportunity that has helped define who I am as a social worker. I found that remote northern social work fit my personal values, especially with respect to being humble, and my belief in the importance of transparency in practice. I, as a person, was visibly front and center, which felt congruent with how I wanted to practice and, by extension, naturally helped me to identify the pieces of my professional identity and why they were important to me. I valued the ability to get to know people deeply and participate in a meaningful way with the community. I enjoyed the opportunity to co-construct programs and provide services that did not yet exist within a community of individuals and other professionals. Later, when I realized that I had, of course, constructed my practice socially from a people-as-place perspective, I began to understand my reality of remote northern professional development. Now, as my career advances, I am committed to undertaking research that draws attention to meaningful practice in remote northern areas through critiquing the current construction of remote social work, and illuminating the purpose or meanings that keeps social work professionals in these regions, as well as utilizing this research to inform my teaching and mentoring of social work students.

**Contextual Terms: the Remote North**

The geographical regions to which I refer in my research are typified by several characteristics. Specifically, remote and northern areas tend to be distant from urban
centers; have a low population density; lack easily accessible services such as shopping or in some instances hospitals; feature extreme weather conditions; and are considered somewhat isolating (Cheers, 1998, 2004; Collier, 2006; Pugh & Cheers, 2010; Schmidt & Klein, 2004; Schmidt, 2009; Zapf, 1993, 2001, 2009). When exploring the terms remote or northern, some defining features are often used interchangeably; however, researchers have drawn attention to several key differences between the terms. Moreover, these terms are conceptualized in slightly different ways in the international and Canadian literature.

Internationally, remote and northern are understood more distinctly than they are in Canada. In his exploration of international literature, Zapf (2009) explains: “the term remote practice is more frequently applied rather than northern practice to accentuate the extreme isolation factor and not the direction of the compass” (p. 88). Zapf (2009) therefore conceptualizes “remote” in terms of the experience of isolation, and being physically far away from services, amenities, and other communities, as opposed to the geographical location of an area encapsulated by the term “north.” By contrast, the term north indicates not only “the direction of the compass” (Zapf, 2009, p. 88), but also carries connotations of extreme weather and plummeting temperatures. In the international literature, then, “remote” refers to communities that may be isolated but not necessarily in the geographical north, because not all countries have “northern” communities that would reflect the weather conditions implied by the term. In this international discussion, Canada, Scandinavia, Europe, and Australia are framed as having similar geographical characteristics, and therefore conceptualizing remote and northern in potentially similar ways (Lonne & Cheers, 2004; Zapf, 2009).
In contrast with the international literature, the terms “remote” and “northern” are often used interchangeably in the Canadian context (Schmidt, 2009; Zapf, 2009). Here, northern regions tend to be remote ones as well, leading to a conflation of the terms. To be specific, however, “remote” regions in Canada are still technically understood as those featuring extreme isolation, with long distances hindering access to services and amenities that people residing in urban centers frequently take for granted, such as stores, hospitals, or neighbouring communities (Schmidt, 2008). Collier (1998) reminds us that such isolated areas tend to be dispersed across the north, where they often remain underdeveloped.

In Canada, the term “north” refers to regions within the 7 provinces that are situated above the limit of isolated permafrost: British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador all have such regions. The term “far north” is used to refer to the land within three territories of Nunavut, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories, comprising roughly 40% of Canada’s total physical geography. Although the ‘provincial north’ and ‘far north’ refer to different regions of the country, either term is used when calling attention to the boundary between northern and southern Canada (Natural Resources Canada, www.nrcan.gc.ca): in other words, either of Canada’s “two norths” may be used to distinguish between the northern and southern portions of the nation (Graham et al., p. 593).

The Canadian north and south carry meaning beyond their physical geography and borders. Canadian geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin put forward the thought that the north is as “much a concept as a place”, while later, in 1993, Zapf focused on a comparison of what is known as south stating, “Northern Canada can be seen as an
enormous hinterland resting above a narrow southern heartland, a vast wilderness area that stretches the conventional rural characteristic of low population density beyond relevance” (p.695). More recently, Schmidt (2009) termed the ‘north’ as ultimately relative and defined in various ways by diverse people. What remains consistent among the various ways the term north has been described is the view of north being a roughly defined large landmass or region with a relatively small population and harsh climate.

Canada’s First Nations and Inuit populations have made important contributions to this fluid, conceptual view of the north. Weber and Shields (2010), for example, highlight that the Canadian north is “an imprecisely defined region” (p. 105). What typifies the area, in their view, is not in fact its distinct geography, distance from urban centers, or extreme weather conditions, but rather, its “intangible aspects”: the feelings associated with living in the region, or a “subjective northerly orientation” (Weber & Shields, 2010, p. 105). Weber and Shields (2010) distinguish between the “Arctic” (a geographical place), “north” (the direction), and “North” (the personal, individualized perception of a place with which one has established a bond or tie). First Nations peoples often exemplify this type of personal, subjective perception of and connection with the North: many ground their identities in the land itself. Others, however, report that those very identities are being confronted and even fractured in the face of the long-term struggles with the Canadian government for possession of and sovereignty over this land in which First Nations peoples have been forced to participate (Weber & Shields, 2010). After forging a bond with their land, First Nations communities were historically stripped of their rights to it, as the early Canadian government began the long process of colonizing the nation (Weber & Shields, 2010). Today, descendants of the earliest white,
European-born settlers typically reside in more urban centers, while many First Nations people remain in the north (Weber & Shields, 2010). Yet the power of the Canadian government, of course, extends over First Nations peoples, influencing the type and quality of life they are able to lead, despite the reality that the government is only minimally present in the north, and its funding barely extends to this region (Weber & Shields, 2010). In turn, some First Nations peoples report that their subjective northern identities have become increasingly tenuous, delicate, and vulnerable, as they have been opened up to be affected by decisions and developments unfolding elsewhere, in more southern regions of the nation (Weber & Shields, 2010). Thus, in many instances, First Nations peoples maintain different, unique views of, bonds with, and understandings of the north.

Further distinctions have been drawn between “northern” and “rural” areas in Canada. Following from the work of Zapf (1985), Delaney and Brownlee (1995) differentiated between the two by noting:

the far north is vastly different from the normal ‘rural’ areas and somewhat different than Canada’s provincial norths, where the same conditions exist, but less dramatically and on a smaller scale…this means is that there are distinct environmental differences between what is rural and what is northern (p. 8).

In 2001, Zapf identified part of the issue with defining the term rural that the word itself being an adjective, confusing the process of developing a precise definition. In a review of the broader literature of the most commonly used criteria of the term, rural is based upon population density. Therefore, rural is defined using two parameters: distance from
larger urban centers, and a low population density per square kilometer, linking the term heavily to agriculture and farming.

In this research, all four participants reside and work in northern regions in the province of British Columbia (B.C.). Due to low population size, restricted access, distance from urban centers and from other remote settings, my participants’ locations can also be considered remote. Therefore, I have applied the term “remote northern social work” in this research. Interestingly, the term “remote north” compliments conceptualizations of space and place discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. Drawing from the discipline of human geography, space is defined as a large geographical area (similar to descriptions of north), and within this defined space are places that carry meaning as defined by the individuals who live there (in this case, remote communities).

Relevance of This Research

Canada’s north is often described as a daunting locale that proves cumbersome to those who attempt to live and work there (Collier, 2006; Zapf, 2009). Recruitment and retention rates for health professionals of all types typically describe similar challenges when working in the remote north. Retention of social workers (Lonne & Cheers, 2004; Schmidt & Klein, 2004; Schmidt, 2000, 2004, 2008; Zapf, 1993), nurses (Andrews et al., 2005; Neely-Price, 2002; Sabo, 2006), counsellors (Crago et al., 1996; Weigel et al., 2002), and psychologists (Barbopoulos & Clark, 2003) in Canada’s remote north has been identified as problematic for all of these professions due to the challenges posed by this locale. Social workers who practice in remote and rural areas have been found to be disproportionately plagued by culture shock, burnout, and isolation. Moreover, social workers who are born, raised, or educated in more central, southern regions are exposed
to discussions of the remote north from this urban, southern perspective with its deficit-based language towards remote northern regions. In particular, the remote north is predominantly discussed in terms of what it “lacks” when held up against the supposedly more pleasant experience of living and working in a city.

In an attempt to challenge this dominant narrative of remote northern practice, Graham et al. (2008) propose that we investigate positive elements of social work in such settings. Others have emphasized the need for localized knowledge, or insights into the advantages (and disadvantages) of remote northern practice from those who actually live and work there (Cameron, 2008; Gillespie & Redivo, 2012a; Graham et al., 2011). In order to obtain such localized knowledge that speaks to the positive aspects of remote northern practice, Graham et al. (2008) propose that we investigate physical spaces themselves, and the bonds that people come to forge with these places over time. In addition to the position of localized knowledge expressed by Graham et al., (2008) there is a secondary narrative which suggests that professionals with previous exposure to rural/remote areas equates to a higher rate of satisfaction in non-urban areas (Cameron, 2008, 2010). Previous exposure stemming from a rural upbringing, student practicum, or time spent in non-urban areas is believed to socialize new graduates to the remote northern context. Prior exposure, which could be a combination of both life experience and academic learning, is expressed by Robert Miller as anticipatory socialization (Miller, 1981; Miller & Ray, 1986).

Zapf (2009) puts forward the notion of attachments to place: connections established in the long-term that eventually result in the creation of a sense of home. The present research explores attachment to place among four social workers in northern
B.C.: by investigating the processes through which these individuals came to stay, I am responding to the recent interest in the existing literature for more explorations of localized knowledge of the north and positive experiences with living and working in these locations.

The idea of coming to stay in a particular place has been explored in the disciplines of psychology, environmental planning, and human geography, producing an extensive body of literature that examines place attachment and place-based dynamics (Altman & Low, 1992; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974, 1975, 1977). Widely cited, Altman and Low (1992) and Tuan (1974) explore the meaning people attach to place and the various ways in which people form place-based bonds. In social work specifically, Zapf (2009) argues that these place-based bonds include attachments to more than just land itself: social spaces, people, communities, families, and other, non-geographical features contribute to creating a particular environment that an individual comes to attach him- or herself to. The contribution of my research will therefore be to explore some of the insights that this relatively under-utilized conception of space and place may offer when applied to the experience of living and practicing social work in the remote north.

Another area in the existing research that warrants further exploration is the long-term, ongoing processes through which social workers come to stay. While some studies explore positive experiences in the remote north, many of these limit their discussions to instrumental aspects such as higher salaries or increased opportunity for promotion. Other research focuses on the influence of personal characteristics or previous exposure that influence the desire to work and live in more northern areas (Cameron, 2008). While these may indeed be conceived as positive experiences in the remote north, the present
research explores aspects of attaching or bonding with the land, community, and place itself. The existing literature is somewhat wanting in terms of such an exploration of the long-term processes that bond social workers with a particular place. Perhaps bonds with places that make social workers view their remote northern locales as “home” are precisely what are needed to facilitate their ongoing, sustained practice in these regions.

My analysis of my participants’ stories, guided by a narrative inquiry approach, comes at a time when the use of narrative inquiry is becoming more prominent in social work research (Josselson et al., 2003; Riessman & Quinney, 2005). Wells (2011) notes that social workers are steeped in narratives on a daily basis, as they listen to, ask about, and participate in developing their clients’ stories. Moreover, social workers assume various roles that involve storytelling, as we either hear a client’s story, help create a new one in clinical practice, or tell our own story as practitioners. Storytelling is thus intuitive and natural to most social workers on some level. While a narrative approach in social work practice is different from the application of narrative as a research method, they share some common threads with regards to delving into and attempting to understand a person’s unique, personal story.

Narrative research emphasizes the social process that evolves between the researcher and the participants in a given study, with the result that narrative analysis is often viewed as a co-constructed process. The resulting participant narrative comes with a plot line and a structure of beginning, middle, and end; a series of characters; a setting, and all of the other features of a traditional “story,” with the researcher and participant collaboratively determining how the details fit into the developing narrative (Riessman, 1993). The resulting narratives portray the storytellers’ meaningful experiences, with the
storyteller choosing each word that describes every moment in detail. Then, in the analysis phase, as each story is read and re-read, the interpretive process reveals the levels of meaning and knowledge that relate directly to the initial research inquiry. The narratives in this research reflect a collaborative process between the participants and myself as the researcher, portraying meaning that underpins what influences a professional social worker’s commitment to remain in a remote northern setting.

This narrative approach adds valuable insights to our present knowledge base regarding social work practice in the remote north. To repeat, the majority of research focuses on static ‘in-the-moment’ information regarding ‘push’ or ‘pull’ factors: factors that either draw social workers to the remote north, or lead them to avoid or leave these settings. A narrative approach, by contrast, offers a more holistic understanding, considering the ways in which people’s experiences and perceptions occur and change over time; how new features may suddenly appear as desirable only after a person has spent a longer period in a given place. Therefore, rather than merely adding to our abundance of knowledge regarding the challenges associated with the north, or some of the attractive features of practicing here, the present research pushes the discussion into a new direction with stories that describe the long-term processes through which social workers bonded with the remote north, and in turn, decided to stay.

**Ethical Issues and Limitations of the Study**

Throughout this process, I was keenly aware that I was privileged with the opportunity to play a role in each participant’s storytelling process. Not only did I view the stories as gifts, but I also recognized that they were foundational to the completion of my dissertation. The largest concern for me in choosing narrative inquiry was the process
of taking the participants’ personal stories of their lived professional experiences and making those stories public (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Recognizing this, I thought through the ethical considerations of their personal narratives being used as part of this research. I grappled with the challenges of interpreting their stories as accurately as possible, while being vigilant about maintaining participant confidentiality and professional integrity.

In addition, it is important to recognize that this form of research does not produce generalizable results and I cannot make any far-reaching conclusions suggesting all experiences would be similar, based on this study alone. Each participant in this research shared unique and personal knowledge and experiences. Acknowledging that those experiences were individual, there were also notable similarities across the four stories that validated the research goals of this study. It is worth noting that the participants for this research were people who had made the decision to stay in remote northern areas and felt committed to both life and practice in that context. If the interview process had included professionals who had relocated to a remote northern area and then left, those stories may have looked very different and perhaps supported the existing grand narrative of remote northern work, which largely describes the challenges of recruiting and retaining professionals to these regions.

**Dissertation Organization**

Chapter One provided a brief introduction to this research undertaking, beginning with a short personal narrative sharing my experience in remote northern travel while facilitating this research. An overview of remote northern social work practice sets the context for the research, describing systemic issues influencing practice in these regions.
The influence of social constructionism on my theoretical orientation, and the fit between this orientation and my research approach was provided. My research question and a brief discussion of narrative inquiry were also included.

Chapter Two provides a summary literature review. The literature focuses on three main areas: a) briefly, the history of social work, highlighting the discipline’s urban origins b) the remote north, and c) concepts of place and space. The issue of remote north is explored describing how non-urban social work is potentially influenced by these geographic locations. Literature that focuses on aspects of job satisfaction in remote areas is included in the discussion of place attachment, linking to my research goal of understanding how over time social workers come to stay in the remote north. The chapter explores the notion of people-as-place and the importance of future training that incorporates this view. The chapter concludes by bridging remote northern social work literature with theories of spatiality and how narrative inquiry offers a new way of approaching the topic area.

Chapter Three describes the process of the narrative inquiry applied to this research. Following a general methodological overview, the chapter includes details of the three stages of analysis: Phase One (narrative analysis), Phase Two (thematic analysis), and Phase Three (meta-analysis). The described data analysis process is aimed at identifying connections to the literature discussed in Chapter Two, while also exploring potential new ways of understanding remote northern social work. The narrative analysis results of Phase One are presented in Chapter Four, while Phases Two and Three of the analysis are found in Chapter Five. The third chapter concludes with the evaluative criteria used in this narrative inquiry.
Chapter Four presents the completed narratives. The participant stories of Gordon, Teresa, Chris, and Anne describe their experiences in remote northern social work practice. The narratives are individual expressions of what brought the participants to remote northern British Columbia and why they have chosen to stay. The stories provide rich details of professional social work practice, skill development, and aspects of place.

Chapter Five features the themes revealed by an open coding thematic analysis of the narratives. Each theme emerged from the stories and is described in detail with examples from the participants’ stories. Following the description of themes, the meta-analysis highlights moments of change. The themes consistent across the narratives highlight change, or shifts in the participants’ experiences, from beginning remote northern practice to choosing to remain in remote northern practice.

Chapter Six provides a discussion of the research findings and implications for remote northern social work informed by participant stories. Reflections on the connection between remote northern and coming to stay in social work practice in place, and what aspects of participants’ stories might assist educators in the development of curriculum for northern social workers, are explored. The chapter also provides suggestions for future research that builds on this study, expanding the literature on remote northern social work practice. Chapter six expresses the need for further work in this area grounded in the voices of the participants who shared their experiences and commitment to this work.
Chapter Two: Remote Northern Social Work

Remote Northern Social Work

Both Canadian and international research on social work in remote and/or northern contexts generally finds that social work practice in such settings is a daunting undertaking that the majority of professionals seek to avoid entirely, or endure only temporarily (Cheers, 2004; Delaney & Brownlee, 1996; Pugh & Cheers, 2010; Schmidt, 2008; Zapf, 2009). Although geographical isolation, greater than average professional responsibility, overwhelming caseloads, and restricted opportunities for personal growth and development are accurate concerns in remote northern areas, they have also become the dominant narrative associated with these practice settings. As a result, this dominant narrative deters social workers from seeking and maintaining employment in remote northern regions, pushing them instead towards practicing in more centrally located urban areas (Delaney & Brownlee, 1995; Schmidt, 2008; Zapf, 1993).

In this chapter, I draw attention to the historical construction of social work as predominantly urban-biased in its design. Social work as a profession has primarily advanced in urban centres in response to urban issues, a process that is paralleled in other ‘urban’ situated professional disciplines, such as medicine, nursing, and education. Drawing from Shari Miller’s 2010 concepts of ‘implicit’ and ‘explicit’ curriculum, I highlight the urban bias of social work based on its historical construction in urban centers around urban issues. Miller’s theory suggests that an implicit curriculum influences how students develop competence in practice. Therefore, if curriculum is implicitly urban in its construction, contextual aspects of remote northern social work will be absent. This chapter will begin by exploring the ways in which this urban bias has
influenced practice in non-urban settings: specifically, how it has contributed to perpetuating the negative perception of remote and northern social work practice. It was not until the middle of the 20th century that professionals within the discipline began to challenge social work’s urban bias, recognizing ‘rural’ social work as a distinct practice setting (Brown, 1933). It is my intention to explore this urban/rural dichotomy in the present research by underscoring the importance of a personal, subjective bond with a particular place that may encourage some social workers to stay in remote and northern regions. By reviewing the literature on space, place-attachment, and place-based realities (Altman & Low, 1992; Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2013; Tuan, 1997), the following review sets the stage for my later analyses of the ways in which social workers in remote northern B.C. came to forge bonds with the places in which they were practicing.

**The Historical Urban-Rural Divide: Social Work’s Implicit Curriculum**

The existing literature identifies the remote north as plagued by low retention and high turnover rates among social workers. As a result, a significant amount of research has focused on investigating the primary causes of these issues: why do so many social workers avoid the remote north entirely, and why do social workers who initially venture to the remote north often decide to leave? One of the most common themes in studies that seek to answer these questions is the historical divide between urban and rural areas.

In explaining understaffing and high turnover rates, researchers have overwhelmingly highlighted that the vast majority of social workers are educated and trained in urban centers, making many unwilling to relocate to rural, remote, or northern communities (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). This body of literature generally emphasizes the negative aspects of practicing in such communities, contrasting them with the
seemingly more desirable elements of practicing in centrally located urban areas, and thereby perpetuating a divide or dichotomy between urban and rural practice. I will begin this chapter by exploring the urban dominated development of the social work profession and how, despite the emergence of distinct practice contexts, professional identity and understanding of practice continue to reflect an urban bias and to perpetuate a dominant narrative of practice in non-urban settings as challenging or downright untenable.

The vast majority of social workers are educated and trained in urban contexts, making many reluctant to overhaul their lifestyles entirely in order to practice in a comparatively small, isolated community far from their established circle of friends and family. Consequently, literature on remote northern social work is primarily focused on the culture shock involved with transitioning from life in an urban centre, where the majority of educational programs and practicum opportunities are located, to a quieter rural or remote northern area in a more isolated locale. Culture shock is discussed further below, where I outline the challenges associated with transitioning to life in an urban, remote, or northern community.

Even the ways in which “rural” and “remote” social work are defined in the literature contribute to reinforcing this divide between urban and remote northern regions, perhaps over-emphasizing the different “lifestyles” one can expect to lead in each area and thereby perpetuating certain negative connotations associated with life in northern regions. The majority of research draws attention to the historical location of social work education and practice in urban centres and, in turn, typically defines “rural,” “remote” or “northern,” regions based on population size. For example, in Canada, Zapf (2001) put forward the contextual view that the very term “rural” is an adjective, and is therefore
problematic in the search for definitions, while in the United States, Ginsberg (1993, 2005) described the term “rural” as varied and changing from time to time. Drawing from the United States Census framework, international Australian writers Cheers, Darracott, and Lonne (2007) suggested that “‘rural’ encompasses unclustered, or dispersed, populations, small towns, and large towns with up to around 50,000 people” (p. 5).

Other researchers suggest that factors other than population size should be taken into consideration in order to more effectively capture the qualities of a rural locale. The sociological term “rurality,” which is described somewhat differently than the term “rural,” focuses upon the unique aspects of living in a given community, as opposed to the number of people residing in it (Bealer, Willitis & Kulesky, 1965; Martinez-Brawley, 1990). Zapf (2001) proposes that an urban bias tends to influence our conceptions of such community living: Definitions of rurality are typically presented from a deficit perspective, whereby life in rural regions is presented as “lacking” the features of city life. In other words, life in an urban centre is perceived as the norm, utilized as the standard against which all other lifestyles are compared. At this juncture, the focus of rurality is aligned more with contextual details of particular communities where social workers practice.

As a result of these debates surrounding urbanity, rurality, and the advantages and disadvantages associated with each, rural social work emerged during the 1970s as a valid specialization that could be distinguished clearly from the existing urban-formed social work practice models (Zapf, 2009). Distance from more developed urban areas, smaller and more closely knit communities, and in some jurisdictions harsh weather such as long periods of snow and cold temperatures, shaped the definition of rural social work,
supporting researchers interested in developing models for community practice in rural
areas (Delaney, & Brownlee, 1995; Ginsberg, 1983; Martinez-Brawley, 1990; Zapf,
1985). More specifically, non-urban areas came to be considered distinct from urban ones
primarily in terms of a lack of resources, a smaller number of specialized professionals,
and reduced collegial support (Delaney, & Brownlee, 1995; Ginsberg, 1983; Martinez-
Brawley, 1990; Zapf, 1985). Remote areas were characterized in terms of their distance
from other more remote communities and urban areas; longer travel times to reach other
regions render these places more remote and therefore potentially more isolating
(Delaney, & Brownlee, 1995; Ginsberg, 1983; Martinez-Brawley, 1990; Zapf, 1985,
2009). Finally, regions considered northern are primarily characterized in the literature in
terms of their usually undesirable climates: extreme temperatures and large quantities of
snow that make these areas uncomfortable to live in as well as poor road conditions
during the winter that make travel more difficult (Delaney, & Brownlee, 1995; Ginsberg,
1983; Martinez-Brawley, 1990; Zapf, 1985). Consequently, while certain features and
associated challenges may be common across these different locales, there are
distinctions that must be recognized between rural, remote, and northern areas.
Eventually, researchers began to explore how some of these factors contributed to
discouraging social workers from relocating to northern regions. I explore these findings
in greater detail below, in the section titled “Challenges Associated with Northern and
Remote Social Work Practice in Canada.”

In the 1980s, while still defining the geographic regions where rural practice was
occurring, the ideas of “remote” and “northern” social work were introduced as distinct
from what was then known as rural practice (Zapf, 2009). Collier (1984) is acknowledged
by his peers as one of the first Canadian scholars to delineate remote from rural social work practice in academic literature, and was joined quickly by several national and international researchers (see, for example, Cheers, 1985, 2004; Delaney & Brownlee, 1995; Ginsberg, 1983; Graham, 1990; Pugh, 2007; Schmidt, 2000, 2004; Zapf, 1993) who explored factors of remote social work.

In addition, growing numbers of scholars came to recognize the multiple role demands that remote northern social workers faced on a daily basis (McKay, 1987; Zapf, 1985). In turn, the term “remote” came to be associated in the larger literature with the extreme geographical isolation that had been found to negatively influence social work practice in these areas. In the research produced by Canadian authors in reference to specifically Canadian locales, remoteness was then conceived in terms of latitude and its connection to long hours of daylight during summer and shorter winter days accompanied by prolonged periods of darkness and extreme weather conditions (Schmidt, 2005; Zapf, 2002). As a result, remote social work in Canada came to mean not only working in far-off locales, distant from city centers, but also working in harsh climates, where difficulties travelling could be expected, and the landscape was overwhelmingly unforgiving. Largely absent from these conceptualizations of remote and northern regions are their positive aspects: much of the literature does not view remote northern Canadian locales in terms of what these areas might have to offer residents, such as the attractive features of abundant land or space, in contrast with the congestion and overcrowding of large cities.

As noted in Chapter One, these methods for categorizing rural, remote, and northern conditions in Canada were also unfolding across Australia, Scandinavia, and
other parts of Europe. The international consensus was that the term “isolation” distinguished “remote” practice from “rural” and “northern” practice (Zapf, 2009). The details describing the distinctions between rural, northern, and remote, continued to be explored nationally in the literature on social work practice, with a focus on aspects of settlements, culture, single-industry towns and, most broadly, the relationships between people and their environments (Cheers, 1985, 1998; Fook, 1993; Graham, 1990; Ribes, 1985; Schmidt, 2000). Although most authors (nationally and internationally) agree that factors such as history, geography, economy, cultural context, or demographics are relevant in defining the term “northern,” these descriptive factors are all too often applied interchangeably to “rural,” “northern,” and “remote” regions (Coates & Morrison, 1992; Graham, 1990; Lonne, 2003; Zapf, 1993).

Building off of this conceptual foundation, interest in understanding and describing practice in remote northern Canada grew rapidly in the 1990s (Delaney & Brownlee, 1995; Delaney, Brownlee, & Zapf, 1996; Graham, 1990; Zapf, 1993, 2001). A key milestone was the establishment of Canada’s Lakehead University Centre for Northern Studies in 1988. The Centre launched the Northern Social Work Series of publications, focused on issues associated with living and working in the north. Due to such heightened interest and focus on these issues, in Australia, America, and Canada other researchers began to recognize the importance of understanding not only the structural details of northern practice in the context of each community’s history, but also an awareness of the historical urban-driven exploitation and colonization of northern areas (Ginsberg, 2011; Johnson, 1983; Schmidt, 2004).
Nevertheless, as explorations of northern areas continued, remote northern social work practice has been held tightly to a description of the north as consisting of vast, sprawling lands with harsh climate conditions that mainly negatively impact practice (Schmidt, 2004; Zapf, 2002). These regions are typically held up against the seemingly more pleasant locale of the southern city, thereby reinforcing the divide between urban and rural (Schmidt, 2004; Zapf, 2002). This somewhat biased conceptual framework has contributed to framing the various “problems” associated with remote, northern, or rural social work – such as the social isolation and lack of supervision and mentorship outlined below – as issues that are the necessary, inevitable products of working in such a hostile, unforgiving region. In sum, this section of the literature suggests that social workers decline to work in remote, northern, or rural regions – or leave the practices they have established there – because work in large, centrally located cities more similar to those in which they were educated and trained is preferable.

To better understand the conditions that contributed to establishing this urban education, training, and practice as the standard of comparison for all social work, we must briefly consider the history of the development of social work as a profession. The majority of researchers agree that the dominant narratives describing social work practice in remote, rural, and northern regions stem from the establishment of the profession in urban city centers (Delaney & Brownlee, 1995; Delaney, Brownlee & Zapf, 1996; Ginsberg, 2011; Graham, 1990; Johnson, 1983; Schmidt, 2004; Zapf, 2002). The development of social work in Canada is described in the literature as unfolding across three distinct eras: the Era of Moral Reform (1867 – 1890), the Era of Social Reform...
(1891 – 1940), and the Era of Applied Science (1941 – present) (Durst, 2007; Hick, 2006).

The Era of Moral Reform predates formalized social work practice in Canada. The urge to assist the poor that symbolizes the spirit of this era was found primarily in cities: it developed in response to the contemporary mass migration from rural regions to urban centers (Durst, 2007). Immigrants in particular were making their way to Canadian city centers with the hope of obtaining land and employment (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). The influx of people requiring assistance sparked the development of charitable organizations and settlement houses, both of which would influence what would later become social work practice. The growing demand for these services eventually resulted in their more formalized training, ultimately leading to the establishment of support services resembling a very basic form of social work (Hick, 2006; Knight, 2005).

During the Era of Social Reform, the literature notes a shift away from charity-driven models of assistance towards the implementation of child welfare laws and government-funded workers responsible for establishing and maintaining public welfare (Durst, 2007). Durst (2007), a professor of social work at the University of Regina, frames the approach to social work during this period as more “scientific,” structured, and secular than in the previous Moral Reform Era. As social work increasingly became a “science,” formal educational programs designed to train social workers expanded (Durst, 2007). In 1914 the University of Toronto launched the first Department of Social Services in Canada, followed by McGill University in 1918 (Hick, 2006). These urban educational institutions, as well as the urban issues that these educational programs were
initially designed to address, framed social work from the very beginning as an urban service.

Following the introduction of social work education, an important growth period for the profession came in response to the Great Depression. The large number of people who had fled rural environments in the hope of finding economic stability in urban centers found themselves once again facing unemployment, poverty, and serious social and health concerns. The national scale of crisis meant that social workers were in great demand, leading social service agencies to expand rapidly in their efforts to address the needs of struggling families.

As the Great Depression reached its lowest point in 1933, Josephine Brown published her book *The Rural Community and Social Case Work*. With her own urban education and practice experience, Brown was able to recognize that rural practice was, in many ways, different from that in more centrally located, urban areas. Brown’s work was considered by many as one of the earliest arguments for promoting greater attention to rural practice and the distinct skills such practice requires in comparison to those needed for urban practice (Martinez-Brawley, 2015).

More specifically, *The Rural Community and Social Case Work* (1933) outlined both the challenges and positive aspects of practice in rural contexts. Having lived on a farm herself, Brown was able to draw on her own personal experiences with rural life, to more accurately chronicle the ways in which farm families responded to urban social workers who visited their farms in an effort to provide services. Brown identified farm families as disproportionately likely to experience geographical isolation, lacking in formal education, and often overworked. However, she goes on to note that these rural
families tended to be more strongly bonded to each other, and deeply committed to their shared farm (which they typically viewed as a family investment). The farm lifestyle and experiences, Brown proposes, were often overlooked when urban social workers would visit the farm and attempt to provide the family with assistance in overcoming perceived struggles related to isolation, and economic instability. For example, Brown notes that many farmers would remain unquestioningly dedicated to their farms and their work, even during the toughest of times, until social workers from urban centers arrived and “informed” them that they could improve their circumstances simply by moving to a more centrally located locale. In other words, social workers from urban areas typically suggested that farm life was lacking or deficient in some way, and that those deficiencies could be avoided in other geographical areas. This suggestion exemplifies the measurement of rural life against an urban “ideal” – a process that persists in the retention literature describing social work practice in rural, remote, and northern regions today. Brown’s analysis stands apart from the majority by suggesting that the “problem” is not rural farm life, but rather, the application of urban social work to people residing outside of urban city centers. Rather than attempting to change the lifestyle of farm families, she proposes a different type of social work must be developed to meet their unique needs. Interestingly, even as early as the 1930s, a select few researchers recognized that the skills and approaches developed in urban-centered training programs would require adjustment for rural casework, with standard practice never quite capturing the many details of what rural or later on, northern life could be (Graham et al. 2011).

Later, as a result of the Great Depression and the realization that the economic stability once sought would not soon materialize, families began the process of
“outmigration,” returning to their roots in rural life. The need for social work practices tailored to the specific needs of individuals residing in rural regions grew greater during this Era of Applied Science (Durst, 2007). However, these theories were largely influenced by urban viewpoints (Adams, 2008; Lee, 2001). From the 1930s through the 1950s, social workers were left largely to their own devices to establish connections with rural community leaders and to think creatively to provide services that supported community development in more remote areas. By failing to provide support and guidance to social workers in rural communities, practice in these regions was by consequence devalued. Researchers ignored or silenced the valuable lessons that may have otherwise been learned from the experiences of these practitioners, therefore contributing to the perpetuation of urban-centered social work practice as the perceived norm.

Today, during the ongoing Era of Applied Science (Hick, 2006), social work is widely recognized as an important service that addresses individual problems as well as larger social issues. The discipline has also identified a need for more social workers in the remote north who are attuned to the unique needs of the people who live there (Buchan, Couper, Tangcharoensathien, Theppanya, & Jaskiewicz, 2013; Mirabito, 2012; Schmidt, 2008; Strasser & Neusy, 2010). However, as the bulk of this literature review suggests, social workers are largely unavailable in the remote north due to the variety of variables that discourage social workers from working there.

Ultimately then, the existing literature identifies a divide between rural and urban social work education, training, and practice that has persisted since the beginning of social work itself. Therefore, the urban bias implicit in social work education contributes
in some ways to perpetuating the understaffing and high turnover rates of social workers in remote northern regions.

**Challenges and Benefits Associated with Remote Northern Social Work in Canada**

As the discipline of social work has evolved, recruitment and retention of social workers for remote northern Canadian regions continues to be cited in the Canadian literature as a growing concern (Delaney & Brownlee, 1996; Graham et al., 2011; Schmidt, 2008; Zapf, 2009). Reviews of this body of Canadian research have found that “most literature focus[es] on the negative local environment aspects of remote communities that impact social worker dissatisfaction and eventually workplace turnover or burnout” (Graham, et al., 2011, p. 589). In other words, the majority of existing research focuses on identifying the challenging aspects of living and practicing in the remote Canadian north that may deter social workers from accepting work in these areas (Delaney & Brownlee, 1996; Schmidt, 2008; Zapf, 2009).

Perhaps the most frequently cited aspect of social work practice in non-urban settings is the difficulty of disentangling one’s work life from one’s personal life (Delaney & Brownlee, 2009). As my analysis reveals, in some instances social workers are motivated to move (in many cases temporarily) to remote northern locales because they are struggling to find work in urban centres, and are offered enticing positions in non-urban areas (pull factor). Thus, they may be aiming to advance their professional careers, but must do so at the expense of the personal lives they have spent years cultivating in entirely different geographical areas (Delaney & Brownlee, 2009). Upon moving to the remote north, they may find that their personal lives suffer or face feelings
of isolation (associated push factor), no matter how successful they may be in their new practice (Delaney & Brownlee, 2009).

In particular, this body of Canadian literature tends to paint remote northern social work as intensely isolating and lonely (Delaney & Brownlee, 1996; Schmidt, 2008; Zapf, 2009). Studies emphasize the geographical distance of remote communities from the city centers in which social workers are typically educated and trained, thereby presenting social workers with an image of a life that is far-off, physically removed, and disconnected from the life they have built for themselves so far (Cheers, 2004; Delaney & Brownlee, 1996; Pugh & Cheers, 2010; Schmidt, 2008; Zapf, 2009). Culture shock, one of the most frequently cited struggles, is an individualized experience and “a removal or distortion of many of the familiar cues one encounters at home and the substitution for them of other cues which are strange” (Hall 1959, p. 156). Generally speaking, culture shock is the experience of stress, anxiety, or uneasiness an individual faces when they are in an unfamiliar environment, and away from their understood place. As a result, the literature itself, with its focus on the geographic isolation of remote northern communities, may influence social workers’ decisions to consider relocating to these regions.

Studies have also noted that social workers may struggle to develop professionally in the remote north. In particular, mentorship opportunities may be relatively scarce for social workers practicing in the remote Canadian north (Schmidt, 2000; Zapf, 1993). Given that many social workers choose not to travel to or eventually leave their practices in the remote north, there are fewer established practitioners available and able to serve as mentors for new workers. Frequently, an absence of
workers results in a lack of local supervision (resulting in distant supervision), and support, for social workers who relocate to work in remote northern areas (Schmidt, 2000; Zapf, 1993).

Professional isolation refers to the large disconnect identified between social workers practicing in remote areas and their urban-situated employers and other practitioners – in other words, a sense of removal or isolation from one’s professional network (Collier, 1984). (Note that professional isolation is not necessarily or universally experienced in negative terms; as I explore below, some research suggests that some social workers enjoy a degree of professional isolation, feeling that it provides them with a sense of independence and autonomy over their work).

Given that some professionals do stay and continue to practice in non-urban settings, there has been some interest across the scholarly community in gaining a better understanding of more positive factors of professional practice in these regions: why do these individuals stay (Cameron, 2010; Graham et al., 2011)? What makes their experience so different from the overwhelmingly challenging aspects clearly documented in the literature of social workers who attempt to work in remote northern areas? The rather small pool of literature that has attempted to answer these questions to date has found that health professionals who have positive experiences working in remote communities typically enjoy deep connections with their communities and its members and the feeling that their work is personally rewarding and satisfying, with greater autonomy and independence (Cameron, 2008, 2010; Daniels et al., 2007; Graham et al., 2011).
The idea that small communities could promote deep connections initially appears to contradict other studies that frame remote social work as isolating and lonely. Those feelings of isolation and loneliness appear to be most common among social workers who relocate to the remote north from urban city centers: they are unaccustomed to the lower population density and distance from other communities, leading them to feel isolated. By contrast, some professionals may be willing or eager to attempt to seek new opportunities, and establish roots in a new place. For these individuals smaller remote northern communities actually facilitate the development of close, deep bonds, and collective membership, creating the opportunity to form a new sense of “home” (Cameron, 2010; Daniels et al., 2007). Similarly, in smaller, more isolated regions, community members are often forced to rely on each other for support, facilitating stronger, deeper connections.

Second, stemming from these strong bonds with their community members, professionals in non-urban communities often report finding their work personally rewarding (Cameron, 2008, 2010). In smaller settings, professionals may be more likely to remain closely connected to the people with whom they work; even though they are not “friends” per say, they will almost certainly see these individuals in the community and engage in multiple role interactions. In turn, professionals in smaller communities are more likely than those in large urban areas to observe the ongoing positive outcomes that they played an important role in facilitating (Cameron, 2010; Daniels et al., 2007). In other words, they are able to enjoy seeing the positive outcomes of their work on their communities. Cameron’s (2010) study confirms these findings among a group of medical professionals practicing in small communities. This four-community comparative study
revealed that these practitioners made the decision to stay in their small communities because they felt appreciated by and connected to the people who reside there. Participants expressed feeling genuinely appreciated by the people they helped, which enhanced their sense of personal investment in their work.

Third and finally, while some professionals expressed the lack of mentorship and supervision as typical of work in remote regions, others viewed these realities positively, as a means of attaining greater autonomy and independence at work (Cameron, 2010; Daniels et al., 2007; Graham et al., 2011). Medical professionals in small communities are less likely to be members of large collaborative teams or even, in some cases, have local direct supervisors (Cameron, 2010). This provided them with the freedom to practice as they desired. Similarly, because there are so few social workers presently practicing in the remote north, incentives are offered to entice recent graduates to relocate: for example, Daniels et al.’s (2007) participants reported enjoying financial supports such as student loan forgiveness. Again, due to the small number of practitioners with whom they had to “compete,” these participants also indicated that they were promoted faster, and were awarded incentives such as higher wages, than they would have been able to reasonably expect had they been working in larger cities populated by more social workers (Daniels et al., 2007).

In the end, however, the current literature tends to focus on identifying various challenging features that have come to be associated with living and working in the remote north.
Anticipatory Socialization: A Secondary Narrative

Robert Miller is well known for his research regarding the concept of anticipatory socialization. Miller’s (1981) study found that professionals who transitioned from urban to rural life frequently experienced high levels of stress, accompanied by feelings of isolation and in some cases depression, due to their imagined understanding of the context of a rural lifestyle. The concept of anticipatory socialization suggests that in order to improve recruitment and retention rates, more professionals must be educated and trained in the rural, remote, or northern areas in which they will eventually work (Cameron, 2008; Miller, 1981; Miller & Ray, 1986). Similarly, another study conducted by Miller and Ray (1986) suggested that professionals who had some form of prior exposure to remote or northern regions – for example, if they had been born in such a region, attended school there, or completed a practicum there for a period of time prior to establishing their social work practice there – would acclimatize to such regions more easily than those who had not. Therefore, professionals with prior exposure would be more likely to be recruited to work in remote northern regions, and they would also be more likely to stay and continue to work in those regions for longer periods of time, presumably due to their greater satisfaction with their personal and professional lives in these areas.

Many researchers have empirically tested Miller and Ray’s (1986) theory, and consistently found that the largest positive indicator of retaining professionals in remote northern areas is when the professional has a rural background, or has had extensive experience in rural practice (Cameron, 2008; Daniels et al., 2007; Gillespie & Redivo, 2012a). In terms of American applications of Miller’s theory, Daniels et al. (2007) report
that professionals with rural backgrounds are more likely to establish and maintain practices in rural areas. In a survey of graduates from 12 health-related programs in New Mexico, results indicate that being raised or trained in rural areas encourages workers to bond with and establish strong ties in a community. This sense of bonding made many workers feel deeply committed to addressing the health needs of what they viewed as their home communities. Manahan (2008) confirms that professionals with rural backgrounds have stronger connections to rural areas, rendering them more deeply invested in practicing in these regions. Specifically, Manahan (2008) found that students with a rural background who graduate from medical training programs were fifty percent more likely to return to practice in rural regions.

Similarly, an American qualitative study of physicians from rural communities found the majority of participants had long-term intentions to practice in that context after graduation (Backer, McIlvain, Paulman, & Ramaekers, 2006). Through semi-structured interviews, the attitudes of 11 physicians from 10 rural communities with an average population of 2,031 were explored. The study defined “successful” as physicians who stayed for longer than 4 years. Results revealed a retention average of 16.5 years among participants. Two participants indicated their choice to pursue medicine grew out of a commitment to practice in their communities. The interviews also revealed that participants saw a need to be particularly inventive and knowledgeable to practice in the remote north, and to approach practice in these more remote regions “matter-of-factly.”

Efforts to explore Miller and Ray’s (1986) theory have also been made in Canadian contexts. Paziuk (1992), for example, notes that in northern Manitoba prior to 1983, social services staff were primarily southern, urban, non-Aboriginal social work
graduates. These recently trained southern graduates committed to work in northern
Manitoba for two years, only to gain practice experience and return to advanced
employment in the southern urban areas to which they were more accustomed. Survey
results revealed that a meagre ten percent of the two hundred social workers employed in
the north at the time held a social work degree. The remaining ninety percent employed
were described as northerners who had no social work background, but were hired in an
attempt to manage high staff turnover and meet service demands. The survey results were
then used as a retention strategy to encourage educational facilities that provided social
work degrees to develop them for a more northern location. By facilitating access to
northern situated education, more individuals committed to and who understood northern
living would acquire a social work degree, increasing the number of workers who might
be willing to stay and practice in the north.

Paziuk (1992) quotes Mitchinson and McKenzie (1989) as suggesting that
locating a social work education program in the north would recognize that individuals
who live there are “somehow lodged in and arise out of the connectiveness” (p. 5). The
University of Manitoba Social Work Access Program, launched in Thompson, was a
University of Manitoba degree modified to support northern students. In a follow up
regarding the offering of the newly formed northern social work degree, a review
indicated an increase in the number of northern social workers. Although some graduates
did indeed relocate to urban centers upon completion of their degrees, it was never
predicted that every single graduate would stay and work in the remote north. Ultimately
then, Paziuk’s (1992) research confirms that being raised, educated, or trained in the
remote north increases the likelihood that a social worker will be able to more effectively
adjust with the urban portrayed challenges associated with social work in northern regions.

Gillespie and Redivo (2012a) report similar findings. They administered an online survey assessing the satisfaction of child and youth mental health clinicians practicing in rural or remote areas of British Columbia. Aimed at the five regions identified by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), the survey assessed satisfaction in four domains: lifestyle, practice, preparation for practice, and fit of organizational standards. While dissatisfaction was commonly linked with practicing in small remote locations, participants who were most satisfied with practicing in non-urban locales were recruited from within their community, or had previous rural exposure. As a result, Gillespie and Redivo (2012) conclude that participants with rural backgrounds adjust more easily to practicing in such regions. However, previous exposure to remote or rural settings does not always guarantee that an individual will seamlessly transition to living and practicing in such regions later in life. Gillepsie and Redivo (2012b) also note that although clinicians recruited from within northern communities indicated higher levels of personal and professional satisfaction with living and practicing in rural regions, they also reported greater stress as a result of dual relationships, suggesting the need for more thorough orientations and ongoing support.

To sum up, studies conducted in both American and Canadian contexts confirm Miller and Ray’s (1986) theory of anticipatory socialization. Namely, social workers and other professionals who are raised or exposed in some way to rural, remote, or northern settings are more likely to adjust well to practicing in these unique locales (though there are exceptions, as always). They are more likely to describe encouraging aspects and
experiences of practicing in non-urban areas, and are less likely to experience culture shock because they are already accustomed to non-urban culture, leading to continued practice as described in the narratives in Chapter Four.

Each of the studies I reviewed in this section use questionnaires or semi-structured interviews to organize their findings, capturing a snapshot of a moment in time by conducting cross-sectional analyses, for example, or questionnaires that ask professionals to explain the variables that drove them to leave or avoid practicing in remote northern areas. These cross-sectional analyses capture valuable information regarding the challenges associated with living and working in remote northern regions, and push factors that contribute to driving professionals away from these regions, thereby keeping retention rates low and turnover high. In the present research, I have applied narrative inquiry to explore the ongoing processes through which certain social workers practicing in remote northern B.C. eventually came to bond with place, gradually establishing bonds to these places, ultimately encouraging them to stay there. These ongoing processes of attachment to place are often missed in the cross-sectional studies typically used to investigate issues of recruitment and retention in remote northern regions.

**Spatiality Theory: A New Way of Viewing Remote Northern Locales**

The first two sections of Chapter Two have demonstrated that there is a large body of literature that describes the challenging aspects of social workers in the remote northern areas, or the features that deter practice in these locales. In addition, a comparatively smaller body of research considers some of the “draws” or “incentives” cited by social workers who have stayed for a period of time in remote northern regions.
In sum then, this literature has offered an extensive and valuable empirical understanding of many of the positive and negative features surrounding living and working in remote northern areas. However, missing from many of these studies is a more theoretical consideration of place itself: the ways in which social workers come to bond with and grow invested in remote northern, locales, rather than abhorring them, or appreciating them only for the occupational benefits they tend to provide (such as the rapid advancement previously described) (Locke et al., 1998). Thus, the theories of space and place that are only beginning to be explored in current social work research provide us with a slightly different, more theoretical approach than the surveys and semi-structured interviews that presently dominate the existing literature on social work practice in remote northern regions. These spatial theories and explorations of the ways in which social workers interact with spaces and places (as opposed to their clients, colleagues, and communities) may help us expand upon the existing literature by focusing on social workers’ personal experiences of deciding to stay in the remote north (Kemp, 2013; Reissman, 1993).

Although little research has been conducted on the specific ways in which social workers encounter, negotiate, and engage with remote northern places, theorists in a variety of disciplines have conceptualized the broad, general categories of space and place in many different ways. Topophilia, insidedness, sense of place, rootedness, embeddedness, and community satisfaction or identity are only a few of the ways in which researchers have begun to explore how people interact with particular places (Hufford, 1992; Kemp, 2013; Rowes, 1980; Tuan, 1974; Zapf, 2009). In social work literature, Zapf (2009) suggests the term people-as-place as a way of capturing the
importance of approaching people and their home (place or community) as interconnected rather than independent from one another. Very broadly then, we might organize this literature into two overarching, intersecting categories: first, one that views space as a particular geographic region, and second, one that views place in terms of the objects contained within space, inviting human emotion and bonds (Altman & Low, 1992; Tuan, 1974). For example, Tuan (1974) suggests that one’s conceptualization of “place” can be as simple as a favorite chair in a person’s home, but at the same time, as limitless as the multiple community factors an individual comes to understand as home. Malpas (1999) proposes a similar concept of “space within place,” which he describes as involving five components: larger, open spaces, such as cities or towns; a more generalized sense of dimensionality, such as a room; one’s location or position within an order; a specific locale or environment with its own unique characteristics; and a space or region within which something exists or dwells (p. 22).

Both conceptualizations have significant implications for our worldviews, personal experiences, and life courses. As Locke et al. (1998) explain: “geography shapes life experiences, defines reality, and influences vision” (p. 74). Our experiences are therefore intimately tied to the physical places in which they unfold: different locales shape different realities for different people, influencing the ways in which they view the world.

In a general sense, dynamics of place are discussed in the literature as place satisfaction and place attachment. These concepts share many elements, including how people identify with a particular space and how this identification organizes people in particular places. Although place has been discussed in the literature for more than thirty
years (Lewicka, 2011; Stokols & Shumaker, 1981; Taylor, Gottfredson, & Brower, 1985), it was the work of Altman and Low (1992) that shaped widespread interest in further exploring theories about place in general and about place attachment in particular. Place satisfaction, they propose, refers to objective perceptions of a place: typically, whether someone likes or dislikes the place. Much like the retention literature on social work in the remote north, Altman and Low (1992) suggest that research on space and place has focused disproportionately on place dissatisfaction and the processes through which people adapt to their surroundings in their efforts to overcome that dissatisfaction, rather than exploring the many ways in which attachments are forged and satisfaction is eventually established.

In contrast, Altman and Low (1992) propose that the word “attachment” conceptually infers integration between inseparable aspects, enhances the integrity of those bonded aspects, be they individuals, groups, or cultures. In sum, Altman and Low (1992) depict place attachment as an emotional, cognitive connection between an individual or group and their surrounding environment, suggesting that place attachment is “rich and varied, often focused on homes and sacred places, and emphasize the unique emotional experiences and bonds of people with places” (p. 2). Agnew (1987) refers to these emotional attachments people have with certain places as their “sense of place,” suggesting that this “sense” is established only after one has remained in, and experienced, a particular place long-term.

Further research has been conducted on the means by which place attachment and sense of place is established. Cresswell (2004) suggests that the process of naming a space is often a critical means by which this emotional bond is forged, as the assignment
of a name to a space imbues that space with personal, subjective meanings for the individual who named it. Similarly, human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) offers that “place is a pause in movement” and this pause is what “makes it possible for a locality to become a center of felt value” (p.138). In other words, only by remaining in place for an extended period of time can that place come to have meaning for an individual within it. Moreover, staying in place for prolonged periods of time encourages people to develop shared histories and lifestyles (Tuan, 1977). In small, remote northern settings, these histories and lifestyles typically result in identities that are rooted in a sense of belonging and a profound attachment to the land (Tuan, 1977). Land becomes viewed as home, family, community, and the process of participating in the larger collective. Tuan (1977) goes on to discuss the ways in which people experience place: Experience can be passive, signifying the suffering a person has undergone, or it can refer to having overcome a challenge, resulting in gained knowledge or wisdom. The important thing to note is the distinction Tuan (1997) draws between sense of place and the experience of a place: While an individual may have experienced a place merely by passing through it, acquiring a sense of place requires extended time spent in a particular location.

Place attachment and sense of place are foundational concepts for this research, as they suggest that social workers must discover their sense of place and develop attachments to the remote region in which they are working if they are to continue to live and practice there longer-term (Lewicka, 2013). In much of the existing literature previously reviewed, geography is taken into consideration only when it is described as posing challenges to social workers’ ability to practice in remote northern regions. In turn, much of the literature on social work practice in remote or northern locales fails to
consider the bonds many practitioners come to establish with these places. By contrast, theoretical research on spatiality and sense of place foregrounds these processes of connecting. Research by Graham et al. (2008), for example, suggests that northern residents tend to define the remote north in terms of their lived context, making sense of place crucial to these individuals’ lives and thereby something we must take into consideration when investigating why some social workers choose to leave and some choose to stay.

Another aspect of place considered in the literature is community: participation and integration in one’s community has been found to be correlated with social workers’ desire to maintain their practice in a given region (Cheers, 1998; Martinez-Brawley, 2000). For example, Chenowith (2004) encourages social workers to develop a sense of space and place in both rural and remote settings. One of the means by which to do so is full participation in the community process – that is, immersing oneself into that community, which is itself fundamentally grounded in one’s sense of place. Similarly, Zapf (2009) quotes Chaskin (1997) who defined community as “connections: some combination of shared beliefs, circumstances, priorities, relationships, or concerns, which may or may not be rooted in place” (p. 74). Chaskin (1997) therefore bridges the individual bond to place with a collective bond to a group located in a particular place. For people who live in a remote northern community, there is a sense of belonging, a locality, and collective problem solving that supports an ongoing attachment to place (Zapf, 2009). It is these attachments and feelings of bonding with places that may prove important in the process through which social workers come to stay (Zapf, 2009, Chaskin, 1997).
One example of social work practice considered in terms of space and place is the following narrative by Brian Cheers (2004). His narrative merits sharing in its entirety, as it demonstrates the significance of contextualizing the meaning attached to sense of place:

"I, and you, bring to the conversation my, and your, particular place. It is the only one there is. It is an open dynamic mosaic; a place where lives, livelihoods, environment, culture, and governance meet; a place where community, services, policy and professional narratives intersect. Things happen in places.

But I haven’t come here dragging my place behind me—kicking and barking like some bewildered cattle dog on a sheep station. It lives through me. I make the space I live in my place by giving it meaning as I go about my daily living. The rural practitioner does not sit outside, mysteriously materializing in the space of the community to, just as mysteriously, disappear back to some well-ordered, comfortable, well-to-do planet of professionals when their day’s work is done.

If my place is unique, then so, too, is my practice. I invent it as I go along. I don’t do my practice-I make it in places (p. 9).

As I read and re-read Cheers’ expression of “place” as part of professional social work, I reflected on the many experiences that I have had as a remote northern social worker and how often I felt alone in those experiences. I still experience this void as my experience is not yet represented in the current remote northern literature. Cheers’ (2004)..."
narrative offered me a small way to connect to my own remote northern experiences and provided a perception of greater understanding. It was as if someone could understand the language of thriving in remote northern place as well as I did. I felt excited and inspired to continue to share my experiences as part of preparing practitioners for remote northern work. The attached meaning I carry with me for remote northern regions is, as Cheers put it, made in place.

To summarize the existing research, from Tuan’s (1977) early theories of place-attachment and sense of place, to Zapf’s (2009) later theory of person-as-place, the literature has made clear that “place” is not simply a physical location; it encompasses the process of developing a mental construction strongly bound to an individual’s identity. A sense of place bonds a person to land, other people, and a group community process that an individual interprets as central to his or her sense of self and that can be a key factor in encouraging a social worker to continue practicing in that place.

Theories of space and place offer new avenues for examining social workers’ decisions to live and practice in remote northern contexts and therefore may enhance or broaden our current understanding. Such theories also lend themselves to use of a methodology that has not been employed as often: narrative research. Narrative inquiry involves sharing individuals’ personal stories describing their experiences, and therefore seeks an in-depth understanding of an individual’s subjective knowledge. Payne (2005) proposes that part of understanding an individual’s social identity is listening to past narratives, and using those narratives to develop a clearer picture of the way in which the individual came to be who he or she is.
Expanding the Conversation

The existing literature on social work in remote, rural, and northern regions has identified various challenges associated with practicing in each of these unique locales. A smaller body of literature has also identified a range of positive factors associated with practicing in remote northern regions. Nevertheless, the dominant narrative remains that practice in remote northern regions is often challenging, especially in comparison to practice in urban areas, leading to alarmingly low recruitment and rates of retention. This dominant grand narrative overshadows a secondary narrative in the literature, which broadly suggests that professionals with previous exposure to non-urban areas report higher rates of satisfaction in remote northern work, as described in Miller and Ray’s (1986) theory of anticipatory socialization.

In this final section, I would like to suggest that we may expand this conversation by considering first, an additional theoretical framework, and second, a somewhat under-explored methodological approach. First, much of the existing literature focuses (quite helpfully in many cases) on measuring job satisfaction among social workers practicing in remote northern regions. These studies are concerned with determining either the positive or negative experiences social workers had when attempting to establish their practice in locales perceived to be different from the urban centers where they were educated and trained. As a result, this existing body of literature tends to focus on negative variables such as geographical distance from urban centers, which can lead to feelings of isolation. Additional variables noted, such as harsh climates, are described as physically uncomfortable and a hindrance for travel. Conversely, positive variables are
also highlighted such as greater autonomy over one’s practice, and the ability to maintain close relationships with the individuals one has assisted.

By contrast, the existing literature on theories of space and place suggests that there is something more to practicing in remote northern regions than these considerations of job satisfaction or even lifestyle. Namely, spatiality theory suggests that place provides people with a sense of home, familiarity, comfort, and connection to others and the land (Convery et al., 2012; Lewicka, 2013). Localized knowledge, which we may gather from people who have lived and worked in remote northern regions, will help us gain more insight into the currently under-explored notion of “people as place” (Zapf, 2009). Therefore, I would like to suggest that we expand on the existing literature surrounding social work in remote northern regions by using the theories of space and place (Kemp, 2013). To do so in the present research, the narratives of the four social workers that I present in Chapter Four were considered with an emphasis on their sense of place: the processes through which these individuals came to bond with and attach themselves to their remote place in northern B.C.

The second way in which I propose we begin to expand the existing discussion surrounding social work in remote northern regions is through a currently under-utilized methodology. As elaborated in Chapter Three, I opt to consider the experiences of these four practitioners through a narrative framework. I believe narrative methodology to be an ideal means to delve deeper into the theories of space and place, since storytelling has been identified as an avenue for people to express aspects of their identity and meaningful life events, which may include the process of bonding with a specific locale (Butler et al., 2007; Graham et al., 2008; Schmidt, 2000). Thus, in order to move the
discussion on remote northern social work practice forward, beyond our current understanding, my research explores the process of coming to stay in remote northern place through the narratives of four social workers practicing in remote northern locations in B.C. Analyses of the subjective experiences and narratives of social workers living and practicing in the remote north tells us something different and new.

In other words, considering these four social workers’ experiences of coming to stay through a narrative framework can give us a sense of the ways in which these individuals forged their sense of identity in terms of place. Although undeniably specific to the particular context of remote northern B.C. as experienced by only four individuals, narrative analysis offers an avenue into a relatively under-explored area. As the existing literature typically reports findings gathered through surveys and structured interviews, my considerations of these few narratives provide a glimpse into the longer, more gradual processes through which my participants forged bonds with particular places. In contrast with cross-sectional survey data – which provides us with information about larger numbers of people at a specific, static moment in time – these longer narratives provide us with information about a much smaller number of people, but allow us to gain a sense of their ongoing, continuous efforts to negotiate their relationships with the place of remote northern B.C.

I believe the combination of Tuan’s (1997) description of sense of place with Graham et al. (2011) and Zapf’s (2009) arguments of localized knowledge of living in place emphasize a methodology that represents a usefully broad, overarching, or more “total” experience of social work in remote northern regions. That is, adding a consideration of space and place to the existing dialogue on “push” and “pull” factors,
can expand the current conversation beyond examinations of job satisfaction and perceived distance from one’s urban home, and delve more deeply into other aspects of living and working in remote northern areas – specifically, the experience of bonding and identification with these places themselves.

**Summary Discussion**

A review of the existing literature reveals a great deal of information regarding the challenges associated with life in the remote north, as well as some of the difficulties and rewards associated with professional practice in these locales. Largely missing from this literature, however, is research that examines experiences of living and working in the places and spaces of the remote north over time and how these shape people’s bonds and desire to remain in practice. I submit that a narrative inquiry approach is the best means through which to explore the processes through which people establish personal bonds with the remote north.

While the analysis that follows in the coming chapters does certainly focus on the deeply subjective experiences of only four practitioners living in remote northern places in Canada, I believe that such specificity can be viewed as a strength that allows my research to make a small and important contribution to the existing literature. Namely, the coming analysis serves not to offer a generalizable truth regarding social work practice in remote northern regions; rather, it provides a narrowly focused analysis of social work within a particular remote northern locale, furthering our understanding of the ongoing processes through which four individuals established a bond or connection to each individual place. The variations in subjective experience that can be observed across even just these four social workers’ narratives suggest that, in addition to the already
well-documented, generalizable “push” and “pull” factors that encourage or discourage practitioners from working in remote northern communities, there is perhaps a more personal, long-term process that some social workers experience – a journey of bonding with a particular place that we might do well to consider through narrative analysis and spatial theory. Chapter Three outlines the narrative process applied to this research.
Chapter Three: Narrative Inquiry

Chapter Overview

Lieblich et al. (1998) and Martin (1986) define narrative inquiry as research that uses or analyzes narrative work. In the following chapter I describe the three phases of analysis applied to this research. I do this first by discussing narrative theory, as a way of thinking about the human experience and how stories can help people make sense of their world, in the case of this research, social workers living and working in the remote north. Phase One of the analysis outlines the co-construction process in developing the participants’ stories. Working with the initial interview transcripts, I worked closely with each participant to shape the details of their stories of *Coming Here, Being Here, and Staying*, in the remote north. Phase Two of the data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted on the raw transcripts to protect the collaborative work completed in Phase One, and to respect that the resulting stories (presented in Chapter Four) were not my own. Choosing to return to the raw transcripts for Phase Two also addressed any potential ethical concerns specific to drawing themes from stories I had helped to construct. Finally, I summarize Phase Three of the data analysis, a meta-analysis, which focused on moments of change. The meta-analysis process is a more holistic approach, bringing together components of narrative inquiry while identifying change themes. The chapter concludes with ethical considerations and the evaluation criteria framing this study.

Narrative Inquiry

Researchers have suggested that the main attraction of narrative methodology is an enhanced ability to explore an individual’s professional experiences, personal lives,
and identity formation (Martin, 1986; Wells, 2011). A narrative transforms an individual’s story into knowledge for an audience through the reordering of a storied experience. I therefore treat the narratives of my participant’s stories, “as both a mode and topic of study” (Heilke, 1996, p. 763). That is, rather than considering a narrative to be merely a vessel for human discourse through which place is constructed (as the social constructivist approach might suggest) I treat these narratives as representations of real, lived places, as they are experienced by my participants. The narrative is therefore not a fictional text to be analyzed as a distinct piece of data, but rather, a means through which we may gain a deeper understanding of a place itself, and the identities of individuals as they are shaped by these places (Heilke, 1996). This approach aligns with Well’s (2011) description of narrative analysis as prioritizing the narrative as a holistic whole, with the analysis considering its structure, form, content, delivery, and all other aspects as crucial in order to grasp its teller’s true meaning and experience. This holistic approach stands in contrast to content analyses or certain comparative qualitative techniques, where narratives are fragmented into codes, which are then reorganized into themes and categories to create broader findings that are removed from their original tellers (Martin, 1986; Wells, 2011).

To explore the connections between person and place, my narrative inquiry emphasizes the importance of story-telling (Martin, 1986; Wells, 2011). As Heilke (1996) suggests, people’s experiences can be better understood if they engage in a process of representing them through story. To repeat, although the term story can carry connotations of fiction, I am conceptualizing story-telling as a mode of narrating or re-telling one’s past experiences of real, true events that unfolded in real, tangible places.
Narrative methodology holds that such story-telling is a natural impulse: Connelly and Clandinin (1990), for example, describe humans as story-telling organisms, so that “a person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories” (p.4). Similarly, White (1978) describes narrating as a “natural” “impulse,” noting that “the form of narrative for any report on the way things really happened” is “inevitable” (p. 1).

Narrative inquiry differs somewhat from other qualitative research methods in that its focus is on an individual’s story: a longer, uniquely structured form of narrative, distinct from shorter, verbally-delivered or written responses to structured interview questions (Martin, 1986; Wells, 2011). More specifically, narrative research suggests that we engage in storying our lives by producing pictures, field notes, poems, letters, verbal accounts, and other diverse forms of expression that depict our lived experiences (Lieblich et al., 1998; Martin, 1986; Wells, 2011). Creating space for narrative methods to include all forms of sharing such as pictures and poems invites added layers for participants to express their experience through multiple mediums (Clandinin & Connelly, 2007; Martin, 1986; Wells, 2011).

In other words, storytelling exists in forms other than the written or spoken word, and can encompass any means through which we document and share an experience with others (Wells, 2011). For this reason, gathering and analyzing stories may engage participants differently and therefore, yield different results, than a structured interview might (Wells, 2011). For example, when free to convey their experiences in any medium they wish, people may be better able to capture certain details or recall certain events than they might if they were forced to write about these events, or respond to specific questions in a formal, structured interview setting (Wells, 2011).
Therefore, the process of storytelling assists people in sharing their experiences, but it also aids them in believing their experience to be valuable (Heilke, 1996; Wells, 2011). As a research method, narrative inquiry invites readers to feel personally connected to, and invested in, the research topic. Readers are able to feel a sense of belonging through the familiarity of their own story that might not exist with other methods (Heilke, 1996; Wells, 2011). Narrative research is “built from a rich data source with a focus on the concrete particularities of life that create powerful narrative tellings” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5). Thus, these stories must be approached with a critical, analytic eye, in order to gain a better understanding of the unique ways in which an individual experiences a given phenomenon, such as forging a bond with a certain place (Riessman, 1993; Wells, 2011).

In collecting the narratives of my four participants, I aimed to allow each participant the freedom to convey their experiences in ways that felt natural to them, while still ensuring I gathered useful, consistent data. I decided to build upon the work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000), who suggest that the method for facilitating a narrative study should involve an informal collection of information in a variety of forms, rather than to attempt to abide by a rigid, uniform, lockstep approach. I selected this procedure because Clandinin and Connelly (2000) are known for their research on the long-term processes through which personal and professional identity are shaped, and my research questions explore these same processes in relation to identity formation in particular places.

Simultaneously, I recognized the need to ensure at least some degree of consistency in the material I gained from each participant, in order to produce coherent
findings. Although I sought to elicit narratives that captured each of my participant’s unique, subjective experiences living and working in remote northern B.C., I also sought to ensure each of these narratives contained certain features. Reissman (2008) and Wells (2011) suggest that stories that will be analyzed through a narrative inquiry framework should ideally contain the following features: first, a “plot,” which includes a progression of events in a logically flowing or chronologically ordered sequence; second, a degree of focus on the topic at hand (i.e., the story should not “wander” too far into extraneous details or happenings unrelated to the central process under consideration); and third, the story should incorporate in some way the elements of who, what, why, where, and when; and finally, the story should place emphasis on how the storyteller feels, or his or her personal reactions to the sequence of events that unfolded in the story. The outcome should ensure that the reader gains a clear understanding of the meaning in the participant’s story (Wells, 2011). In my research, I sought to ensure the participants incorporated many of the features of a story as defined by Riessman (2008) by providing participants with a story guide that gently supported the direction in which I was seeking to take my research. It provided participants with broad suggestions to create a beginning, middle, and end to the process of telling their personal stories.

A final strength of using the storytelling approach in narrative inquiry is that it renders my findings more accessible to those who have yet to explore social work practice in remote northern settings. First, narratives or stories are quite widely accessible: across cultures, people tell stories of experiences that were personally meaningful to them. This form of expression can therefore connect us, regardless of where we live in the world. Because narrative inquiry derives from a natural awareness
and process, it becomes a valuable research method. Simply put, narrative inquiry is a way to bring meaning and understanding to human experience. Second, and in part as a result of the universality of story-telling, the narrative approach also allows those reading my research to position themselves within the stories of my participants. For example, social work students who have only heard about, and imagined, the challenges of remote or northern practice, but who have yet to be exposed to practice in these regions, may learn something new or interesting from reading the personal stories of those who have endured such experiences. Readers may be more easily able to feel a sense of connection to an individual’s narrative rather than a data set or other quantitative research results. This is not to say that such quantitative data is less useful or accurate than narratives or stories, but rather, that readers may absorb and derive different experiences from each type of research. As a research method then, narrative inquiry invites readers to feel a sense of connection to the topic and a sense of belonging that might not have existed otherwise.

Additionally, narrative inquiry is a particularly suitable methodology for my research due to its emphasis on context. Context includes specific beliefs and values that make up an individual’s worldview, and physical place is a central aspect of context for all of us (Griffin, 2009). In remote northern regions, individuals often define “place” as stretching well beyond the geographical borders of an immediate community to include wider concepts of territory (Pugh & Cheers, 2010). Territory, for its part, is understood as including the set of communities in a specific area that typically rely on one another in various ways for survival (Pugh & Cheers, 2010). Members may travel between communities located in a larger territory, reaching out to one another for various reasons
such as assisting other communities during fire season, or in order to maintain extended family connections. To understand notions such as collectivism, community, space, or place, we must therefore understand how the individuals within these places and communities understand the geography of their surroundings, the links between the spaces they inhabit and their everyday actions, and the connections between the places they frequent and their personal interactions with others in those same places (Zapf, 2009).

To ensure I captured the unique contexts of each of my participants adequately, I decided to listen to their narratives while physically in those contexts. Narrative inquiry insists on the principle that the re-creation of a given story must be done in collaboration with the participant, and therefore is best carried out in the participant’s own environment, where all the subtleties of place can be explored. It is through these collaborations presented in narrative form that the northern social workers in this study shared their insights and wisdom on the ongoing processes through which they chose to sustain their practice in northern B.C.

**Research Construction and Process: Setting the Stage**

As previously mentioned, remote northern social work is defined through people and place. Zapf (2009) discusses place as central to remote northern practice and the notions of context, locality, and place as having powerful implications for human identity, activity, and solving problems. Furthermore, the shared history and lifestyle of remote settings lead to the development of professional identity that is rooted in a sense of belonging and a profound attachment to place. Conducting research in remote northern areas takes flexibility on the part of the researcher, as the process of reaching the various
communities can be unpredictable at times. Upon arriving in each participant’s community, the researcher must remain mindful of the level of local visibility and the potential of disrupting the relationships established by local practitioners. In addition, the researcher must be aware that interactions with each participant can have impacts beyond professional practice, as participants reside in particular places and participate as community members outside their work roles.

When considering my research design, I wanted to create a framework that not only supported the flexibility required by remote northern living, but also was comprised of an in-depth process of exploring meaning that respected the position of remote northern social work practitioners. A review of the literature revealed that many of the research studies completed on northern and remote practice were carried out by semi-structured interviewing or focus group methods (Baropoulos & Clark, 2003; Cheers, 2004; Daniels et al., 2007; Graham et al., 2008; Green, 2003; Lonne & Cheers, 2004; Schmidt & Klein, 2004; Zapf, 1993, 2001).

**Participant Recruitment: The Search for Story Tellers**

I received approval from the University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus Behavioural Research Ethics Board, which included the approved consent and research information letter provided to participants (Appendix A). The request for participants was sent out through remote northern electronic networks and email list-serves that are used by many of the north’s registered social work practitioners. Social workers were encouraged to share the recruitment poster with others they felt would be interested in participating. Social workers employed in remote northern communities often take on a variety of roles, therefore, to maintain the participants’ confidentiality, their specific job
titles will not be included in this dissertation. The following guidelines assisted with focusing the parameters of my research:

1. Participation in the research was open to social workers employed in remote northern settings in the province of British Columbia, within the Northern Health Authority boundary (see map), with a population of less than 10,000 residents, and a minimum travel distance of 100 kilometres to a larger center.

2. Participants had earned at least a Bachelor’s degree and had been living and working in a remote northern setting for a minimum of two years.

3. Participants were committed to continuing to live and work in the remote north.

Figure 3. Northern Health Authority

![Map of British Columbia showing the Northern Health Authority boundary](image)
4. Participants agreed to have their stories recorded on audio and understood that they would be involved in co-constructing the final versions of their stories with the researcher.

I was pleased by the number of initial responses that came through within the first four days, as it indicated that my topic was of the interest to the target group. Social workers expressed support for the project, commenting that research aimed at valuing the work that they were committed to maintaining would be important to them. Several of the initial responses did not meet the criterion of residing in a remote northern community of fewer than 10,000 people, due largely to a recent influx of industrial workers who were considered transient but had moved north, increasing the population outside the parameters approved for this research.

After responding to the initial request, four participants decided not to participate, all out of concern that their stories might be recognized; they had all worked hard to engage the remote northern communities where they now lived and did not want to jeopardize that work. Issues of high visibility resulting in struggles to maintain client confidentiality are well documented in the literature (Pugh & Cheers, 2010), and social workers’ actions are witnessed by the community members on a daily basis. Community members see where workers go, what vehicles they drive, who comes in and out of their offices, and often are privy to informal information about why a resident is interacting with a social worker; for example, the community might know generally who struggles with addictions or is connected to child protective services (Collier, 2006; Zapf, 2009). The point of caution for the worker is to remain aware of how community members organize their assumed knowledge with the reality of the worker-client relationship.
These challenges created a hesitation for some respondents who, although they were excited about the topic, did not want community members to feel that their work with the respondents might end up in the final research in a manner that could be misinterpreted. In the end, I was able to confirm four participants who agreed to participate. As this is narrative research, “it is more important to work longer, and with greater care, with a few people than…superficially with many…” (McCracken, 1988, p. 17).

The four participants represented different communities (places) within remote northern British Columbia (space), creating the opportunity for an array of views and representation of the issues (Bauer & Gaskell, 2002). All four participants were in long-term relationships and had children. The participants’ direct social work experience ranged from 10 to 25 years in remote northern communities of British Columbia. I have intentionally limited details of the participant’s demographics in this final report in order to be sensitive to their concerns about being identified due to the highly visible nature of remote northern social work practice. It is well documented in the literature that social workers face a daily challenge of trying to balance their involvement as community members with their role as social work professionals (Pugh & Cheers, 2010). Considering these tensions, I discussed the potential of being identified with each respondent and we collaborated on ways to make every effort to protect their confidentiality.

**Interviewing for Story**

Story is a natural and universally understood method for people to describe their life experiences (Moen, 2006). The narrative interview guides researchers through the process of capturing a story and uncovering or exploring the meaning individuals ascribe to a life event (Riessman, 1998). The interview method begins with the first interactions
between the researcher and participant and evolves as the storytelling process moves forward (Moen, 2006). Reissman (1993) describes narrative methods as containing a process of telling, transcribing, and analyzing. During the telling process, the researcher seeks to uncover the story hidden within the participant. This is accomplished by the researcher facilitating a process that guides the participant in telling a complete story. For this research, I conducted an initial conversation to facilitate introductions with each participant. During this conversation, the research information was reviewed and any questions that participants brought forward were addressed. Once the research criteria for participation were explained, the participants were sent the central research question and narration or story guide (as only a general guide supporting structure) for their review.

The development of the story guide was a critical analytical component to my research, as it provided a predetermined structure for participants to follow and gently encouraged a beginning, middle, and end to their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The story guide was designed to gently guide participants through shaping the storytelling process in a manner that met the overall aims of my research and assisted in the analysis phases discussed later in this chapter. Through the use of the guide, additional interview questions were provided to participants for their consideration, for example, (see Appendix B for complete Guide):

a) Coming Here: How did you come to practice social work in this place? Tell me about your first day/week/month, what memories or moments stand out the most for you about beginning your practice in this place?

b) Being Here: Can you describe a typical day in your practice? Tell me some of your favourite practice ‘moments,’ What ‘tools’ are in your
‘toolbox’ for practice in this place? How have they gotten there? What are you taking away or gaining (as a professional social worker) from your practice in this place?

c) Staying Here: What excites you about staying in practice here? If your practice here could have more of something than it already has, what would that be? (see Appendix B)

Reviewing the story guide was intended to encourage participants to begin to reflect on how they wished to convey their narratives of remote northern social work. The final version of the story guide combined flexibility and the appropriate level of structure required to answer the research question, acting as a resource to which workers engaged in the storytelling process could turn (Bauer & Gaskell, 2002, p. 40).

Once participants had reviewed the story guide, follow-up calls were placed confirming willingness to participate, the locations of initial interviews, and to address any further questions that might have arisen. Participants were reminded to review the story guide in preparation for the first interview and were encouraged to use pictures or other creative mediums, if they wished to assist themselves in describing what it means to live and work in remote northern regions of British Columbia.

The interview locations included participants’ homes and places of work. One participant chose a place on her property that carried meaning for her in balancing her personal and professional space in the remote northern community where she lived. Another participant chose his place of work as the setting for the interview, remarking it was important to him for me to understand his place of practice when telling his story. I opened each conversation by thanking the participant for taking the time to meet with me.
Together we reviewed the story guide, the purpose of my research, the technicalities of the recorder position, and the consent paperwork. I began each interview by reading the overall research question and asked participants to tell me their stories of *Coming Here*, *Being Here*, and *Staying Here* in terms of their remote northern social work experience.

Moen (2006) describes a narrative as a collaborative process of co-construction; it soon became clear to me at which points I needed to respond to the participant’s stories, asking them to “tell me more about that moment…” or “and then what?” On reflection, this interaction was largely influenced by my own experience of remote northern work in place. I believe it created a level of comfort in our communications, as there was a common language that participants knew I understood as they were speaking, from both an experiential and a professional place. This interactive co-construction experience enhanced the participants’ stories as they moved through their expressions of events.

The length of each interview was open and guided by the participant. The main goal was to create a space in which participants felt free to share enough of their stories to generate a deep description of their experience. The completed interviews varied in length from 90 to 180 minutes. As the end of each interview approached, I intentionally turned the recorder off. This action reminded participants that information shared after that point would not be recorded as part of their story and served as a gentle reminder of the option to turn the recorder back on to ensure any final narrative elements were explored. In two of the interviews the turning off of the recorder resulted in the participant requesting the recorder be turned back on as we shared several more minutes of dialogue, the reality of ending the interview having sparked additional reflections.
those participants wanted to share. The remaining two interviewees felt their stories were complete with the information that they had provided when the device was shut off.

The dynamic forces of remote northern practice meant that after the initial interview, subsequent interviews were completed via phone in two cases. The use of electronic measures as a secondary method of connecting with participants addressed the vast distances between us, and the prevailing winter weather conditions. Phone conversations also provided immediacy regarding response to any further questions respondents brought forward during the consent process. This medium also respected the time commitment of choosing to participate (Bauer & Gaskell, 2002). Email was used in all four cases to facilitate the back and forth of the co-construction pieces that occurred outside the face-to-face interviews.

Using narrative inquiry was a new approach for me. As I gained knowledge and understanding of the complexities of this type of research, it became critical for me to find an analytical framework that fit my research question and focus and would guide me through the interpretive analysis process. Moen (2006) describes constructs that underpin narrative research as “the relationship between the researcher and her or his research subjects” (p. 6). A central component to my research was the notion that any analytical approach must accommodate place and the social constructs central to this study. I immersed myself in my role as the researcher and the responsibilities I carried for representing the participants’ stories. Once comfortable with the essential attention required throughout the inquiry process, I decided to combine the three dimensions of inquiry described by Clandinin and Connelly, (2007) with Lieblich and colleagues’ (1998) two-by-two model of narrative analysis. Applying a combination of these two
approaches created the framework I worked with in the participants’ stories in Phases One and Two. Taking Clandinin and Connelly’s concepts of temporality, sociality, and place and overlaying them with the two-by-two model supported my need to represent place and the social constructs derived in space and place. The following table provides a visual outline of the steps taken during my three-phase analysis process.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase One: Narrative Analysis—Global, Holistic Content, and Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research Question</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the narratives of social workers living and practicing in remote northern settings and how do these narratives help us to understand the desire to live and practice in these regions?</td>
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Table 1: Process of Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase Two:-: Thematic Analysis: Thematic analysis, categories and themes</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Coming Here</strong></td>
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<td>New, adjustment period</td>
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<th>Phase Three:-: Meta-analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading for overarching change themes connecting all narratives</td>
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</table>
Analysis

Narrative inquiry can be understood as inquiring about an experience through “collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). The narrative literature is explicit that there is neither one way nor a “right” way to do a narrative analysis (Clandinin, 2007; Riessman, 1993). Instead, narrative inquiry is discussed as containing numerous ways of employing narrative analysis, ways of interpreting narrative work(s), and ways of knowing (Clandinin, 2007). This creative flexibility to narrative analysis has opened narrative inquiry to criticism as lacking a scientific empirical representation. Moen (2006) attributes this tension to traditional epistemological views, which demand a more structured, formulated approach to research analysis. In narrative inquiry, narrative analysis emerges through interpretations of lived experiences, a creative process of co-construction.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that verbalizing experience is to verbalize temporality. Temporality reflects the past, present, and future of experience as viewed by the people in the place under study. Labov (1972) also supports the idea of temporal order as a key element in narrative analysis, suggesting narrative is “one method of replicating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred” (pp. 359-360). During the research endeavour this includes the superimposed process of collaboration and co-construction of the resulting narrative.

Narrative research pays particular attention to the process of social interaction, meaning, and “the feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions”
(Connelly & Clandinin, 2007, p. 480) of the participant and researcher who are interacting. Researchers must consider the points through which the event or experience develops. I paid close attention during the interviews to observed reactions, word choices, and environmental factors that were part of the exchange. I used my reflective journal to record my reactions and images that emerged as the participants spoke. During the initial interviews, one participant was discussing his first drive to the community where he would be living and working. He talked about being unprepared for how far it was and the roads seemingly going on forever. As he spoke, an image came into my mind of a road I had travelled in my previous practice and I felt for a moment like I had never left and that I could have gone to work the next day in that very place right where I had left off. I immediately noted my image in my field notes to set my thought aside and focus on the participant interview. Later, I described the image in my reflective journal:

*Hearing the participant’s process of travel to community invited an image of a road I travelled to (name removed). I can remember thinking the road was the longest, steepest, scariest, drive I had ever taken. I felt like I was going to be sick to my stomach, and while I wanted badly to just close my eyes, I could not keep myself taking in the beauty of the trees, mountains, and animals I passed. The only thing that kept me from turning around was a need to take in the canopy of trees in the valley out the driver’s side window of the car. It reminded me of pictures I had seen of a rainforest. I felt intense fear during travel and then once I arrived I was overcome with nerves about practice, but at the same time I was comfortable with the people and place. I have not thought about that experience in many years*
and was taken aback by how naturally it came to me listening to the
participant tell his story. This made me think about how even though I had
left remote practice it remained with me. I had a connection that while with
me in my reflection of practice moments, was disconnected from the
meaning of that work for me until the moment I returned.

The Process of Transcription

The process of accurate transcribing is important in all research involving oral
discourse. In a narrative process, transcription is essential to express meaning, which
goes beyond the participant’s words to include emotions, gestures, reactions, and
expressions. As a researcher I found the process of sharing through gestures and emotions
very powerful and congruent with who I am as a person and a professional. I was aware
that each expression I revealed, or word I chose, became part of how the conversation
and then co-construction continued. I fully experienced the narrative process of storying
being told, and retold overtime, and yet, while it may become reshaped as it is retold, in
each moment it is an accurate reflection of meaning. It was clear to me that to
comprehend accurately the meaning expressed during the storytelling process; the
researcher must not only offer the participants’ words but also the physical aspects of
how those words were spoken. Likewise, there must be an acknowledgment of the place
in which the words were spoken. This combination is critical when trying first to
document and then to interpret the participants’ meaning in action. The researcher
achieves this goal by adding observational field notes and excerpts from reflexive
journals to the recorded story, documenting visible gestures and the environment in
which the interview is taking place, which the digital recording cannot. I found the long
process of transcribing not tedious but energizing. I truly enjoyed the narrative interview process and found listening to the recordings inspired me in co-constructing the participant’s final narrative. I listened carefully for tone and excitement in the participant voices in each recording. As I listened, I could feel myself naturally noting points in the tape I wanted to revisit to ensure I understood as best I could the essence of each word and the meaning behind what was being shared. I began by listening to each recording from start to finish and then referring to my notes of points in the interview that impacted me and where I had inserted myself in the storytelling process. As I listened, my mind created possible images of the stories being told. After each review I read over the journal writing that I had completed before and after each interview to make sure I was as present in each place as possible. I then went back to the first interview to begin transcribing the recorded text word for word. I repeated this process of working through the transcripts and listening to the recorded interview four times on three of the interviews and six on the remaining interview, the whole time reflecting on each interview to make sure I was capturing our time together as closely as possible to what occurred.

**Figure 4: Phases of analysis.**
Initial Transcription Work

Once I had the raw transcriptions, I went back through each one carefully for flow and nuances, beginning the interpretive process of co-constructing the participants’ narratives. During this process I shared each draft with the participants, inviting the back and forth of the co-construction process in a meaningful way (Clandinin, 2007; Lieblich et al., 1998). I found myself completely engaged in this process, visualizing images of the places being described by the participants.

As the initial draft narratives evolved, I connected with participants a second time to review what had been transcribed in our first meetings and to seek expansion of some of the finer details that would enhance their final narratives. The purpose of the second meeting was to support the participants in reflecting upon the depth of meaning of and level of passion for remote northern practice expressed the first time we sat together. Again, I recorded the second interaction and followed the same process of transcribing as I had done previously. I inserted the enhanced details into the original draft narrative and went through each transcript several times, reworking the details to prepare a complete draft. Once the initial stories were transcribed, participants were asked to review their transcripts for input and accuracy. In the initial co-construction process I worked with participants to exclude any information that they felt might result in their being recognizable. Meticulous attention was paid to removing any names of people or locations that could have served as an identifier in that regard. I shared in the participants’ concern and desire to ensure that their anonymity remained protected. In some areas this meant that the resulting narrative lost some details of the thick description shared early in the storytelling process.
Participants were then asked to review the transcripts for input and to confirm areas where I had placed and rearranged words in the original transcript for fluidity. Two of the four participants requested minor changes to reflect moments in their experiences more accurately. I then reviewed the transcript again, focusing on their requested changes to ensure the participant’s anonymity remained intact with the changes applied. One participant requested that I send only the edited version of her narrative as she felt that was where her time was best spent and was more committed to the final development of her narrative, not the required grammatical changes along the way. All revisions requested by participants were incorporated into the final narration.

**Phase One: Narrative Analysis**

Reissman (1993) proposes that narrative analysis examines, as its body of investigation, the narrative itself. Controversy exists in the process of analysis of narratives, due to the co-constructed nature during the storytelling process. Potential questions to consider are the voice that is being represented or how the researcher’s interpretation when writing impacts the storied experience. Recognizing this problem, I read the work of Chase (2005), which suggests the very process of participating in the storying process means the result is unknown. As I was very aware of my role as researcher in the co-construction of the final stories, I ensured that the draft was approved by each participant and remained centered on the participant’s experience. As the stories developed, I went back and forth with participants as required, seeking slight clarifications and approval of my insertions in the co-constructed storytelling process.

*I can’t believe how much I am struggling with the co-constructive process. Prior to beginning this work I was super excited to get started. Now I feel stress, which*
is rooted in the realization of working with someone else’s words and their emotions, which is a huge responsibility. With each draft, I question who chose each word and, if it was me, why did I choose that specific word? It reminds me of how I approach my professional practice, and my belief that clients are the expert of their situation and how privileged I am to be part of their process, as it is theirs, and not mine.

This process also assisted with organizing each narration to fit under the predetermined sections of the story guide I had provided to each participant.

As I continue to receive feedback from the participants and listen to the excitement in their voices as we shape and reshape their story, I recognize an awareness of my professional values, which include listening and reflecting with clients until the client naturally comes to a point they want to be. While I recognize these participants are professional people describing their professional experience, the co-constructive storying process shares components I would apply in practice including respect, care and concern, transparency, and honouring the client’s process. Knowing this makes me feel more confident in this research process, which is very new to me.

**Reading for holistic content.** Directly following the second interview with each participant (member checking), I began analyzing the interviews. Each final transcription was read through with focus on the overall research question: *What are the narratives of social workers living and practicing in remote northern settings and how do these narratives help us to understand the desire to live and practice in these regions?* As I read and re-read the narratives, I began to note phrases and sections of the plot within
the narrative structures that resonated most closely with the primary research question (Lieblich et al., 1998). The construction of plot is considered a central constant in all narratives, written or oral (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A plot is an intentional process and provides the ability for us to move through the detailed elements of the overall story (Reissman, 1993). Encompassed within a completed narrative are the constructed details of holistic plot that provide the reader with details of the events and their interconnectedness presented in specific order (Lieblich et al., 1998).

I took notes and made interpretive summaries of the areas of the participants’ stories that reflected the meaning sought by the research question. The process of reading for holistic content supported the identification of links and connections and how they were integral to the plot and therefore to that question. I repeated these processes several times until I was confident in the sections of each story that were then included in the final narratives. Denzin (2005) notes that narrative analysis pays attention to “systematic relations among the interaction order, orders of talk, representational orders, and organized properties of material culture” (p. 866). Similarly, in my research each participant expressed their process of remote practice through story, which details order, interactions, relationships, and various spaces and places. Reading for plot also leads smoothly into the next stage of the process.

**Reading for temporality.** In the second reading, I read for temporality as part of the construction of plot and its connection to content. The transcriptions evolved naturally, following the pre-determined framework of the story guide—*Coming Here*, *Being Here*, and *Staying Here*—and the ideas of temporal order. The line-by-line review for plot and development for sequence was enhanced with a review for content-specific
details that connected the experience of each participant’s narration. Reading the narratives while searching for sequential clauses highlights how the events of each narrative connect to holistic content, the overall meaning of the entire narrative, and align to hopefully create connections to greater understanding and new knowledge answering the primary research question. Temporal order creates coherence in the narration process through sequential time and walks readers through an experience, defining and describing its various moments (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006). Temporal order describes the overall flow of each narrative. During narrative analysis, temporal order is often connected to spatial symbols, such as main characters in a story, leading into thematic groupings as demonstrated in Phase Two of my analysis. This process aligns with the co-construction process and theory of social constructionism embedded in the process of assisting the participants with the creation of meaning at a point in time through their narratives. In this manner the researcher and participant have the components of temporality in their relationship (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006).

**Reading for place.** In the third reading in Phase One, I read for place. As the final point of Clandinin and Connelly (2006) dimensions of narrative inquiry, geographical context is defined as “the specific concrete, physical, and topological boundaries of place or sequences of places where the inquiry and events take place” (p. 480). An individual’s identity is also considered as connected to place as described in the literature review, so experience is described encompassing identity in place.

In story, place is where the detailed actions of the narrative occur (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006). In this study, place involves remote northern geographic locations where the social workers live and work. The literature contains references to the
perceived challenges of isolation, lack of services, culture shock, and burnout (Pugh and Cheers, 2010; Zapf, 2009). Each concept can be read in recruitment and retention research; however there are insufficient details describing the places written about and a wider definition of place. To examine social work practice connected to place more deeply, I read through the narrative a third time noting sections that detailed place itself, professional in place, or where participants described person in place. The narratives revealed and richly described concepts of place in three interrelated ways: from a visual, spatial, and physical perspective and in its connection to the people in each place. The final stories represent the three reading analyses completed in Phase One and are presented in Chapter Four. The final pieces were inclusive of my interpretations, which were approved by participants and transformed into the resulting first-person narratives.

**Phase Two: Categories and Themes**

Phase Two focused on a categorical-content analysis of the transcriptions following the three-part structure of the story guide. Phase Two was conducted from the raw transcripts to acknowledge the co-constructed stories created in Phase One, belonged to the participants, and were not mine to interpret. Equally important was the recognition that I was involved in the co-constructive process in Phase One of the analysis, therefore returning to the raw transcripts addresses any concern of theme development with data I had participated in constructing. I searched carefully for specific words or phrases that provided meaning to the narrative elements of *Coming Here, Being Here, and Staying Here* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A thematic analysis was conducted on the original transcripts. Following the analytical framework, these categories evolved to create points of meaning from within the larger narratives (Lieblich et, al., 1998). I chose to apply
thematic analysis to generate themes from the narratives aimed at highlighting key points that helped shape the process of knowledge translation.

Thematic analysis differs from narrative analysis in two interrelated ways. First, as Riley and Hawe (2005) note, narrative analysis “focuses more on the dynamic nature of interpretation” (p. 229) and second, that analysis always commences from the position of the individual storyteller. Thematic analysis often leads to the recording of different themes, whereas narrative analysis is connected to the interpretation and construction processes of developed narration (Bruner, 1991). Narrative analysis focuses on the realities of practice as articulated by the storyteller and theorizes their views over the application of time (Riley & Hawe, 2005). Thematic analysis moves away from the overall holistic narration, and through a reductionist process, focuses on coding words or phrases within the original transcripts to generate themes.

Thematic analysis is applied widely as a method to organize patterns and themes emerging from data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Despite being sometimes criticized for lacking a clear process and set guidelines, thematic analysis nevertheless continues to be applied in qualitative studies, as it contains flexibility vital to some researchers as a tool for analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I adopted the six-step process of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as an analytic tool for Phase Two of my research analysis.
### Table 2: Phases of Thematic Analysis

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description of the process</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:</td>
<td>Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Generating initial codes:</td>
<td>Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Searching for themes:</td>
<td>Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reviewing themes:</td>
<td>Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Defining and naming themes:</td>
<td>Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Producing the report:</td>
<td>The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

Step one of the thematic analysis was completed during the initial transcribing process of my recorded data and led naturally into step two, the initial code generation process. I organized initial descriptive codes and made notes in the margins of the transcripts as I went through each line searching for repeat patterns of meaning. I highlighted similar phrases such as “it’s about relationships,” and “developing a professional framework.” I also highlighted individual words such as “freedom,” “space,” and “independence.” Once I felt confident in the initial set of codes, I took the codes and created a thematic map to begin organizing my subthemes under the prescribed themes of *Coming Here, Being Here, and Staying Here*. This involved a theory-driven approach as I actively looked for words and phrases reflecting predesigned features (Moen, 2006).
Having identified the initial codes, I began the process of placing each code under one or more of the prescribed themes. As a highly visual learner I preferred a visual mapping process as depicted below:

**Figure 5. Visual mapping process.**

I continued adding words and phrases to the three prescribed themes until each initial code was placed within one of the broader themes. All three themes contained numerous notes organized around each theme that I had detailed on large sheets of paper so that I could stand back and view each idea, phrase, and word, and how I interpreted its meaning according to the identified themes.

I repeated this process, moving extracted codes around until I was certain that each code was placed correctly and then reviewed each category one more time. As this thematic analysis was theory-driven, my primary concern was ensuring the placement of the identified codes under the predetermined themes, so I was not concerned with collapsing categories as in other forms of thematic analysis. I continued refining and defining each code until the essence of each theme was clear. During this process I set aside codes that I intended to disregard, but I organized those codes in case I should need...
to repeat any of the steps in organizing the final coding. The final step involved selecting the narrative extracts that I would include in the final write-up of the results under the named categories of Coming Here, Being Here, and Staying Here. In this phase I was focused on extracting sections of transcripts that would not only provide vibrant examples of each theme, but also supported my inquiry into the research question. The selected extracts assisted me in conveying the meaning and context expressed by the participants.

Phase Three: Meta-analysis of Change

In Phase Three of the analysis, stories were analyzed for overarching elements of change. I searched the narratives for content concepts that represented, in each participant’s experience, the transitions of Coming Here through Staying Here. During this process I read and re-read for phrases and applied the same descriptive coding, with a focus on highlighting moments of change or transition in each participant’s experience of practice and life in remote northern regions. As I identified such passages, I noted each page and cut and pasted the selected sections into a new document. Again, during this phase I created a visual map of the identified moments of change, carefully reviewing each step repeatedly to ensure I was confident in my interpretations. I created a map that contained two categories of beginning remote northern social work and continuing remote northern social work, and placed each selected section under those headings. The process of reading for elements of change across each transitional phase of beginning, middle, and end was adapted from Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional approach. The key findings representing change across all participant transcripts are presented in Chapter Five.
Ethical Considerations

Throughout this process, I was keenly aware that I was privileged with the opportunity to play a role in each participant’s storytelling process. Not only did I view the stories as gifts, but I also recognized that they were foundational to the completion of my dissertation. The largest concern for me in choosing narrative inquiry was the process of taking the participants’ personal stories of their professional experience and making those stories public (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The participants naturally expressed concern about maintaining confidentiality, so I was very careful to allow time for the respondents to review the research information letter, consent forms, and story guide attached to my research. I reviewed all three documents during the initial introduction meetings and addressed any questions that the respondents asked. I arranged a second meeting with the participants to confirm participation, set up initial interview times, and provide another opportunity for any further questions. At the outset of our initial interviews, I went through the consent form and story guide with participants one more time before they signed the research documents. The careful attention applied during this process established the beginning stages of the researcher-participant relationship and the start of a transparent process.

Participants are held to high expectations regarding confidentiality by both the social work profession and the communities with which they are engaged. Recognizing this, I thought through the ethical considerations of their personal narratives being used as part of this research. I grappled with the challenges of interpreting their stories as accurately as possible, while being vigilant about maintaining participant confidentiality and professional integrity.
Ethical awareness in all interpretive studies requires researchers to consider their positions in any published material that evolves from narrative works (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Lincoln, 1995). Recognizing the confidential process of all research combined with arguments over who owns the story being told, the researcher must recognize the power inherent in deciding to publish a document that contains someone else’s words (Lincoln 1995). The researcher needs to reflect carefully and consider deeply the ethics of selecting only parts of such stories—Which pieces? Why include this? Why exclude that?

One of the basic tenets of ethical research is to do no harm. If not executed thoughtfully, this process could be viewed as harmful to the participant, whose story was originally presented as an integrated, autobiography. Researchers need to remember that even though confidentiality is in place, participants who review the final research will know how their participation has been projected and remain vulnerable in this sense.

My experience as a remote northern social worker informed my understanding of the potential concerns that participants might face in choosing to participate. Further, my experience enhanced my level of awareness regarding ethical considerations and the influences on practice situated in place (Collier, 2006; Zapf, 2009). These considerations guided my ethical process as I approached the co-construction process of participants’ narratives for my research. I was careful to involve participants in evaluating the transcripts at each stage to verify accuracy throughout the interpretive process. From the outset of each interaction, I was mindful of the ethical framework attached to the question of who was benefiting from this research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Guba & Lincoln; 1989; Reissman, 1993). In addition, the ethical considerations surrounding my research were central in my ongoing self-reflective process regarding my position in and across
my research journey resulting in a final, public product that can be viewed as trustworthy within the narrative inquiry framework (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln, 1995).

**Evaluation Criteria**

The term trustworthiness in qualitative narrative research does not suggest that the researcher is looking for truth, whether transcendental, empirical, or otherwise (Reissman, 1993). Lincoln (1995) provides relational, fluid, and emerging criteria focused on fairness, honesty, and justice as a framework to increase the trustworthiness of research. I applied Lincoln’s categories of authenticity, voice, reciprocity, sacredness, privilege, and critical reflexivity with themes from the seven principles of Lincoln and Guba’s fourth generation evaluation model (1989). The seven principles are embedded in a constructionist paradigm that views evaluation outcomes as not accounts of “the ‘way things really are’ or ‘really work’ or some ‘true state of affairs’, but instead represent meaningful constructions that individual actors… form to ‘make sense’ of the situations in which they find themselves” (Lincoln & Guba, 1989, p. 8).

**Table 3: Evaluation Criteria**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Quality</th>
<th>Process including the seven principles of the fourth generation evaluation model</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity and Transparency</td>
<td>Evaluation as a sociopolitical process, including description of professional and personal standpoints, informed by the participants through a teaching and learning process and sharing of new knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
<td>Joint collaborative process, sharing of knowledge and resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacredness</td>
<td>Egalitarian process embedded in principles of justice, member checking with participants at all points of the analysis process, an emergent process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privilege</td>
<td>Recognizing privilege and indebtedness to all participants in the final writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Reflexivity</td>
<td>Unexpected outcomes, personal awareness across the entire process, use of field notes, and reflective journal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Authenticity.** Qualitative research places little value on generalizing findings for further work, assuming instead the existence of bias and the inability to claim eternal truths (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003; Lieblich et al., 1998). Authenticity encompasses all the criteria in Table 3 (evaluation quality, reciprocity, sacredness, privilege, and reflexivity) and is positioned in social constructions. A central element of authenticity is the researcher’s awareness of community and the potential social consequences of publication. Drawing from my previous practice in remote northern regions, I was mindful of the dynamics of entering communities and respectful of time in those places. Prior to arriving at each destination, I wrote in my reflexive journal, reminding myself of the importance of being fully present. For example, before facilitating one interview I wrote:

> Coming to this place has flooded my mind with images of faces and people I was connected to in my past. I feel as if in many ways I have never left and could pick up right from where I left off. I feel great comfort being here, the people genuinely share their excitement to see me once again and it means a lot to me as I have deep connections to this work... I am surprised at the memories I have and need to make sure my experience does not influence the story or process of today’s interview.

To achieve authenticity, I was careful to be transparent both personally and professionally in all interactions with participants across the research process. Each step was inclusive of my process of reflective writing, to which I referred many times throughout the entire research and writing process.
**Voice and Reciprocity.** The main tenet of voice is paying attention to who is speaking for whom (Lincoln, 1995). In social work education, the notions of oppressed groups are discussed in many different forms, one of which is connected to voice. My experience has taught me that everyone has a voice; however, it is whether or not the individual feels heard, or has the opportunity to be heard, that creates tensions. The goal then becomes to create a space in which those who may have felt silenced are able to share (Lincoln, 1995). In my research sharing was facilitated through the stories of remote northern social workers about their wishes to remain practicing in remote northern regions and the presentation of their stories to a larger audience. Through ongoing collaboration, the participant stories are reflective of a shared teaching and learning process. The final interpretations demonstrated clear engagement and relationship development that emerged through each sentence of the final narrations.

In addition to the shared process throughout the research study, I hope to give back to participants through continued engagement in work in this area. In addition, focusing future research in remote northern areas contributes to broader knowledge on remote northern social work; therefore, in small ways acknowledging the work the participants continue to engage in. One example expressed by a participant, was her hope that more social workers would consider remote northern work and the idea of practicum placements during their educational courses as a potential beginning.

**Sacredness.** Sacredness becomes established in the research process through the expression of genuine care, mutual respect, and actions that reflect justice and equality in the developing relationship. I genuinely appreciated the participants’ taking the time to meet with me and actively encouraged their involvement in the analytical process at all
stages of the research. I was aware of the immense trust the participants gifted me with, from the point of agreeing to engage in sharing their story, and throughout the co-constructive process. They trusted me with their words and by extension the meaning they held for each word that created their final narrative. I was mindful of my role and the importance of maintaining a genuine space that encouraged engagement and demonstrated respect for the effort put into the expression of meaning of their work.

**Privilege.** I was deeply aware of the concept of privilege and felt indebted to all participants for engaging in my research. I understood that through their voluntary participation I had gained the ability to complete my educational journey, which I viewed as an enormous gift (Lincoln, 1995). Stemming from this awareness, I wanted to ensure that the quality of the final product reflected their contributions and my knowledge of the advancements I had made in completing this work. At the close of each interview, I discussed the participant’s opportunity to attend the defense of the final dissertation and the ability to have a copy of the published research. All four of the participants were excited to participate in reflecting remote northern practice through story, with two of the participants explicitly stating they were excited to see the final product but were more excited to contribute to advancing knowledge about the benefits of remote northern social work practice with the hope of encouraging more social workers to try it.

**Critical Reflectivity.** Critical reflectivity is achieved through a keen awareness of self (Lincoln, 1995). It assists with inviting a transparent space into the research process (Finlay, 2002). I actively engage in this process in all areas of my life, as it is important for me to be aware of how my actions influence others both personally and professionally.
At the beginning of my first interview process I became aware that was thinking about a moment in my early career when I realized the difference between practice in community and practice in urban areas. This moment occurred, because I was doing both types of practice at the same time. In community, people questioned me about who I was and who lived in my house before meaningful engagement took place, but in my urban work people wanted to know my credentials and my direct experience with their presenting concern. I found the two perspectives fascinating and representative of collective and a more individual process. Transparency in practice assisted me greatly, regardless of the place I was practicing.

Moreover, I believe in being a constant learner, which keeps me aware of finer details that surround me in daily interactions with others. This belief aligned with a strong interpretive process and the researcher-participant relationship during the co-construction process (Finlay, 2000; Lincoln, 1995). It was important to make sure each participant’s meaning was captured and understood on a deep level (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Morrow, 2005).

My experience as a social work clinical counsellor assisted me with the interpretive process and watching for personal bias, being present, and always respectful that the story being told was not mine but originated with each participant. I allotted time to reflect at each stage. Prior to each interview, I wrote reflectively about my thoughts, intentions, and awareness of my personal and professional history with remote northern practice to process my thoughts along the research journey. One of my earliest reflections, before the first interview, exemplifies the value of that process:
I realized as I arrived that I had not done this work in many years, yet I am feeling overwhelmed with feelings of returning home. My feelings of being overwhelmed were connected to happy memories of the connections I had made with people and work we had done together, and moments were I knew I was in the right place. I am glad I planned this time and space for myself as I did not realize fully how much I have missed this work until coming to this place, today, in this moment, and find myself needing time to look around at everything I missed, the trees, open space, and my knowledge of community. This is where my professional identity took shape.

Re-reading this section of my reflective journal was important for me to acknowledge my position that day, in that moment, and to increase my awareness of my personal experiences contributed to this research.

**Summary**

Facilitating narrative inquiry within a constructionist lens has been a great challenge for me. This dissertation was not only my first attempt at narrative work, but also challenged my internal connection to creative processes and reminded me of the importance of maintaining a critical reflective space. An important component of narrative interpretive constructionist research is the recognition that the end goal is not to present a final, absolute conclusion, but rather to challenge established ways of thinking through understanding (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This goal is articulated in the literature as plausible interpretations, meaning that the focus is on the relational process between researcher and participant and thoughtful interpretation. It supports the idea within
narrative inquiry that interpretation is always open to reinterpretation, recognizing that people live storied lives and their stories evolve over time as they are told and retold across their lives (Clandinin, 2006; Reissman, 1993). Moreover, it addresses ethical validation by acknowledging that I will produce practical outcomes that are aimed at understanding meaning through the co-construction of socially situated stories that are sure to generate further questions. The participants’ narratives are presented in Chapter Four. The stories describe the personal journey each participant experienced from relocating to live and practice social work in a remote northern community, their current practice in place, and their future visions.
Chapter Four: Narratives of Remote Northern Social Work

Narratives

The following chapter presents the participant narratives completed in Phase One of the data analysis (see Chapter 3, p. 77). Gordon, Teresa, Anne, and Chris share, in great detail, their narratives of coming to stay in the remote north. Extensive care was taken in transcribing each audio recording as the foundation for the co-constructive process. All four participants participated in the creation of their narrative of life as a social work in the remote north, choosing their pseudonyms, the title of each chapter of their completed narratives, and specific wording they felt best described their experiences. Keeping in mind the importance of protecting the confidentiality of the participants, each narrative represents the their individual journey from the initial goal of gaining employment, to reactions of culture shock, to finally a deep attachment to remote northern place.

Gordon’s Narrative

Entering Deliverance County

My story begins in the late 1980s, when I began work with the Ministry of Children and Families. Back then, they had an initiative where new social workers that signed on for two years to go to a rural location would receive compensation towards their degree costs. This was a great incentive for a new graduate looking for work, so after completing my degree I went to work and was quickly relocated to Kelowna for my first training experience. As a city person, I remember the moment of my arrival in Kelowna and feeling appalled. I didn’t know how anybody could live in such a small place, or at least that’s how it felt to me back then. I regretted my decision immediately,
wondering what I had done. Only a few months after my arrival, I found myself feeling depressed, not clinically, but depressed, and I remember thinking “I can’t do this” or “stay here” and I really wanted to leave.

I tried to move forward with my work when unexpectedly I became seriously ill. I spent one month in the hospital and five months recovering back in the city. It was a very long process and certainly not how I wanted to return home. Following my recovery I remained concerned for my health, and requested that I be given another six months leave to ensure I was truly okay. My request was based on my fear of the known lack of medical care in the north, but my request was denied. I strongly felt a denial of my request was unfair, and in that moment I decided to quit and that resulted in a total change in careers, to real estate.

At the time I thought things had turned out great! I was in the city again, making more money than I have ever made in my life dabbling in real estate, which was unquestionably nothing like social work practice. Real estate work was very volatile, but also very lucrative, providing me with choices I did not have previously.

Then, one day I decided to run home to grab a quick bite to eat in between appointments, I popped on the television and Dan Rather’s 48 Hours program was on. That particular episode depicted the day-to-day experiences of Los Angeles County child protection workers. I sat there and watched as the two workers followed the police with sirens blaring coming to a halt outside a small house. The police kicked in the front door of what they described as a known drug house and the social workers followed the police inside and began to look around. The situation shown during the program was truly appalling and the whole circumstance was hard to imagine, but I kept watching. It was
noisy; people were screaming and crying, all while the social workers prepared to remove
the kids from the house. Later in the program, the social workers were talking to the
 television interviewer and said something that has always stuck with me: “this is a day’s
work and all that goes with it”. Even though I recognized how media influences what we
see as viewers, after watching that interview that was it for me. Within a few days, I had
made the calls required to go back to social work practice, stating to a manager I spoke
with that, “I was an idiot, I have the training and have been through all the processes, and
I want to get back on board.” I had my interview, and two weeks after that I had moved
to work in a remote northern community with around 2,500 people. A colleague from my
previous real estate work, who thought I was crazy to leave all I had, sent me a letter and
said “I hope you get the bleeding heart liberal stuff off your chest and come back to our
lean, mean, moneymaking machine.” It was a very interesting time for me, as I realized I
had left social work because I thought the denial of my request for more time was
unacceptable, which resulted in a new career where I was making lots of money, but
sadly I realized the money wasn’t enough; it just didn’t do it.

Coming back to social work practice felt good, even though I found myself in an
even smaller place then I had lived before I left Kelowna. I ended up further away and in
many ways more isolated from the city I had come back to. It felt different this time and
the difference was that I wanted it. I planned for my upcoming practice as best I could,
based on my previous experience. In some ways I think the transition was somewhat
smoother, because I knew how I had felt before and where I would struggle.
Experience of Becoming a Northern Person

Coming back to social work practice changed everything for me, including where I wanted to practice. The previous summer, I had taken a week off from my real estate job and visited some friends who lived in a small community several hours north of Prince George. I still remember being amazed at the sense of freedom there, which was a different experience than the one I had years before in Kelowna. I can’t describe the feeling of freedom and how it stuck with me as I drove back to the city on that hot summer day. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was being shoehorned from freedom to rush hour traffic; it truly stuck with me. Instead of looking forward to getting back to city life, I found myself reflecting on how nice it was in the north. I now believe that memory sitting in the back of my head combined with the 48 Hours show are what brought everything together and me to this place. I very actively wanted my new role to be up north.

At first I was thinking Prince George was far enough and a reasonable step for me, “the city boy,” but my employer needed someone for six months in a more northern area, so off I went. By the time my six months was over, my need to relocate to Prince George was non-existent, and I chose to stay where I was. I think that was the beginning of realizing I enjoyed remote northern work. It is such a different way of doing work compared to my experiences in the city.

My first day on the job will stay with me forever. My employer had arranged a room for me at this little motel. Naturally, drawing from city living, I gave myself half an hour to get to work. I learned my first lesson as I arrived at my new office in 40 seconds! To pass time while I waited for the office to open I went to a little restaurant across the
way. I sat down and a waitress came over, and to me she appeared as if she were right out of the truck stop TV shows, stating “Hi, what will you have?” I responded with “just a coffee.” She brought me my coffee and to my utter shock proceeded to sit down and talk with me! As a city person I didn’t know what to do, and thought “What the heck is she doing?” It was my first experience with culture shock. Who would just chat with a stranger? I was very uncomfortable. I quickly finished up my coffee and went back to the office to begin my first day.

The day went by fast, with all kinds of information to process and mainly just getting to know who was in the office and what their roles were. Near the end of the day a senior worker asked me to meet with a family whose file was being closed, which I was excited do as I had a clinical background, so while everything around me was new and overwhelming, I felt like this was one of my strong areas. I proceeded to meet with the family and finally for the first time in my new environment I felt competent, and ended my first day on a positive note. On my way back to the motel I stopped at a tiny food store to buy groceries and I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to see who it was and found myself staring at the couple I had just met with at the office. Again I found myself at a total utter loss for words, my mouth hung open like a guppy because I had never, ever, run into a client outside the professional setting and I had no idea how to handle it other than to stand there gaping at them.

The whole idea of professional boundaries and confidentiality when you work in the city is very academic. If you practice on one end of town and live on the other end, what is the likelihood that you would see your clients? Confidentiality was more about making sure you didn’t do the overt things like publishing someone’s name, or leaving
your briefcase on the Sky Train…but the rest of it, the unplanned interactions, when do we ever discuss that? I quickly learned this was part of northern living and that moment was the starting point for me of looking at how boundaries are handled differently up north than anywhere else. I realized that clients may end up being my neighbours, which I found intriguing.

A little while later, my role expanded and I began working with the surrounding communities, and I felt like I had found my niche. When I first went out, I was amazed at how everyone knew my vehicle and would avoid me, close their doors, and pull curtains to avoid any interaction with me. It frightened people to see me. I had learned a bit about this during school and my colleagues had expressed that families are more apprehensive in smaller communities, but understanding and experiencing the avoidance were two very different things. It became clear to me this part of my work was going to take some time, which again, was different work from what I was used to in the city.

I decided for the first while to just to be present and more visible. There was a bridge where people would gather and lean on the rail to visit. I would walk to the bridge and join whoever was there that day. I wouldn’t say a word just stare at the water and be there. I did this every Tuesday and every Thursday and before long people started to talk to me. All I had heard about this place was how hard the work was and how people were resistant and insular. After I had spent some time here, I realized that wasn’t it at all; practice here required making strong connections and building relationships as a framework for practice.

Suddenly, as fast as I arrived up north I found myself in the role of senior worker, as everyone else had moved on. Aside from feeling I still had tons to learn I was excited
to develop my practice. I had lots of freedom and because I was directing how I wanted to enhance my practice, that freedom was wonderful. As long as I was getting results everything moved along great. Some people may have found becoming a senior worker so early to a new position overwhelming. There was little to no structure to follow, but the other way to look at it was I had complete freedom to take on the challenge and develop my work. For me this was all about relationships. The work was, for me, rewarding.

Thinking back, I initially bought into the conversations about the difficulty of northern practice, for example not being able to “go out and let your hair down” and “people knowing everything” and there is some truth to that, but on the other side of the coin, if you love your work, and I can’t stress enough the importance of that, then here in the north you get to leave a larger footprint because who you are has a larger impact, in addition to your practice skills. Who you are suddenly takes on an importance that it doesn’t have anywhere else. Things like integrity, consistency, and honesty stand out as people see and hear about you. It stands out in a small community so instead of viewing it as constricting I now understand how it feels to be important, not from a place of arrogance, but important because if I don’t do my work and do it well, I will negatively impact people, and in smaller settings you will see that. I get the opportunity to help people and actually see the outcomes of my work—how often does that happen?—and I also get to see it over time. My practice is benefitted by the type of feedback that people don’t normally get because of where it is situated. So, I know what I have done right, and well, and unfortunately I have also been told by clients when I didn’t. I had a young adult
visit me once and tell me that when I worked with him as a teen I didn’t listen, and the choice I made regarding his case was not the right one for him, which was hard to hear.

Thankfully, most of the feedback I have received has been positive, but, regardless, the ability to receive feedback at that level has been amazing and informed my practice. Now, when I think back to my first day and the client tapping me on the shoulder at the grocery store, which I didn’t handle well, I understand that was truth, that was practice in the north and I no longer think about being in the café and having a client come up to me and start talking. I still remind people to meet me in the office and I talk with them about confidentiality, but most don’t care, partly I think because they view me as part of the community. So, for me, confidentiality and boundaries became about helping people in the moment to understand others can hear when you speak in the middle of the café and that I have my own time, too.

Having said that, you also need to realize that sometimes you just have to deal with being visible. For example one time I was on holiday in August, it was beautiful and very hot, my dad was up visiting from the coast and my children were very little. We had just come back from a long hike, and this car came screaming down the driveway and it was someone needing help. As she got out of her vehicle, I asked her why she came to me and she mentioned that she had gone to her neighbour first and her neighbour told her she could trust me and sent her to my house. Everyone knows where everyone lives in remote northern communities so she listened to her friend and came to me. So, you can set all the boundaries you want, but sometimes that’s what happens. It was at that time that my wife came up with the saying “it’s like being a small town country doctor on dishwasher’s pay”.
Another experience that will stay with me was my music. I thought leaving the city meant I wouldn’t be able to participate in music at the level that was accessible to me in the city. I learned that there were a lot of talented musicians where I had come to live and it made me reflect about why I had that belief in the first place. Not only was I able to continue with my music, I came to enjoy kinds of music I didn’t think I would ever enjoy.

As new staff came on board and talked with me about not being able to go out and “let loose,” I would say yes, living here does come with some self-imposed restrictions, but show me any profession that doesn’t come with some form of restrictions. Then, I would discuss the idea of what is wrong with people seeing? We would work through the misconceptions or restrictions workers placed on themselves because of the way they viewed practice taken from their urban experience. In the city there seems to be more of a need to put on your professional façade, and that’s fair enough, because it helps you as the practitioner to get into your objective mode. While that is a good thing in some respects, one of the negative side effects seems to be things like a belief in infallibility; if you are “the professional,” you are the great expert and you will have all this wisdom. Whereas in the small communities people can see you, warts and all. I think there is a lesson to be learned from that. I don’t think there is anything wrong with your clients seeing you at the grocery store, or at the park with your kids; quite frankly people seeing the human side of me benefitted my practice over time. It also made it easier to say to clients “I don’t know, but let’s find this out together.” It feels more natural not to have all the answers and move forward in that manner.
I have been at conferences and heard remarks made that only the dregs of the profession make it up north and my challenge to that statement is that it is actually quite the opposite. I liken remote northern social work to our version of working in a hospital ER. We want and expect people to be team players and at the same time to be confident being the lone wolf, out there in the middle of the night dealing with a situation while being able to keep calm and make the right critical decision in the moment. That is one of the joys of this work; I tell workers all the time if you stay here for a minimum of two years you will gain experiences that many do not have in their entire careers in the city.

My previous work in the city doesn’t hold a candle to the skill development I have gained in remote northern practice and, again, who you are plays a very big part. You need to be confident in who you are and have a strong belief in the work you are doing. People are not going to care until they see you care. You can have the academic qualifications, but if you don’t have a visible commitment to caring about your work, it won’t work, it needs to resonate with the people to invite success. Workers need to maintain that amazing curiosity for why people do what they do and what makes them tick, and for me an amazing wonder, actually an honour, is that people let me into their lives. When that connection occurs in northern practice, you get the privilege of seeing the outcomes on levels you don’t get in the city and you see it over time.

I have many skills in my toolbox that I would not have if I had stayed in the city. The largest overall skill is how I have reframed many of the concepts we were taught in school to fit with the place I now live. The concept of dual relationships is a big one, and it often scares new workers because they want to follow the code of ethics, but you cannot avoid dual relationships in the north. Instead, you learn to teach people the
guidelines you are trying to adhere to and involve them in maintaining ethical practice in
the best manner you can, given the place you are practicing from. When you live in a city
there is a disconnect from clients after each appointment, but here you see clients outside
work daily. You have to redefine practice concepts to include “you” in the definition, as
that is what practice is built on in the north. Other concepts such as confidentiality and
professional boundaries, visibility, or isolation are also tricky for new workers. If you
take each one of those concepts and redefine it to include the place you are working you
can do good work. If you stick with the urban-based frameworks, most people do not stay
as it doesn’t fit, and workers end up becoming stressed, burned out, and leave.

The most important skill I have taken away from northern practice is how much
of myself is injected into my practice. You can’t rest on your credentials in northern
practice. I remember when I did clinical counselling in the city and clients would really
give me the third degree about where I had received my degrees from and how much
experience I had. In the north people want to know you and it is how you weave
professionalism with who you are, the skill set you bring, and how you live, that works.
It’s not nine to five, like in the city, you can’t leave your credentials at work, it needs to
be part of how you live. This skill needs to be woven through every interaction and I am
certain I would not have developed this skill in the city.

**Sole Assimilation**

So, if you ask me what keeps me here, I would say it’s being here with very rare
trips down to the coast. When I first came it was challenging, but the freedom to try new
approaches or create new ideas is a great feeling. The rapid promotions are also
challenging, but you get to put your stamp on your work. When I became a supervisor, I
was able to organize my office the way I thought it worked best and that felt rewarding. I was able to mentor new workers in ways that I had found successful and challenge them to think differently about what they had learned to include where they were now living. I never would have had that opportunity in the city. Eventually, as the years passed, my desire to return back to the city at some point simply faded.

Here’s a funny ending to my story. Remember, at the beginning when I was talking about my shock when the waitress brought me coffee and joined me at my table? Well, on one of my trips to the coast to see my dad, he needed something from the store and I told him I would go get it for him. I went to the store and as I approached the counter to pay I started chatting with the counter person working that day. As I leaned on the counter waiting to pay, I suddenly became very aware that she was uncomfortable, backing away from me, with a stiff grin. In that moment I realized I was experiencing a total about-face, recalling my own reaction to the café waitress when I first moved up north. After that experience I had more and more similar experiences that reinforced I didn’t want to be in the city; I was a northerner.

We have a large acreage, which we would never have or be able to afford, in the city and because things are so much cheaper, my wife was able to stay at home with our children. We were free from the pace and the need to have a two-income family that you find in the city. It’s the little things, for example I heard on the radio about the new dog parks in Prince George, which are great, but the process of bringing your dog to a park to play, arranging play dates for your children etc., what a regimented lifestyle. Here, I have dogs that have never seen collars because they have endless space, people visit all the time and there is a freedom to explore. I have truly come full circle to not even
recognizing the benefits of the city, rather feeling like it’s a fast-paced world where people are crammed in cheek to jowl and totally restricted.

In the end, I realized that my previous views of the north were based on total assumptions. I believe we spend far too much time doing our jobs so if you have to do it, the work has to mean something, it has to be big. You need to have a sense of agency or people burn out. People burn out when they can’t make changes to how they do their work and when they can’t self-define in their work regardless of where you are situated.

The opportunity to self-direct and develop your practice is higher in the north, but you have to stay for longer than a couple of years. Then, you become a valuable commodity; people know the names of people who do their work well. In some sense the north is a bigger community than the city. Even now after all my years of practicing, I am still faced with new experiences all the time and challenged to create new ways to respond and meet the needs of the community, that you can’t learn in school.

Working in the city you tend to think in terms of time, in the north you think in terms of distance. As a community member once told me “you guys have the authority to tear apart families, but you never stay around to harvest the fruit of your work.” That still sticks with me all these years later. I have happily stayed. The process of living here has taught me how to practice in a way that is congruent with who I am, and still follows the professional values of social work practice.
Teresa’s Narrative

Inland and North

When I first came to the north in the mid-1990s I had never lived in a place away from the coast. I remember thinking “Where have I come?,” which at the time was Prince George. I immediately and desperately missed being able to see the water each day. Living away from the coast felt very claustrophobic to me, as a city coastal person.

Prince George was a lot smaller when I moved there and the weather conditions in the winter were harsh, which was different from what I was accustomed too. I had no idea how to manage the cold weather, I liked the sun, but could not bring myself to go outside, it was awful. I spent my first winter mostly indoors. I remember finding it really odd that the sun could shine so bright, yet it could be so bitterly cold. The first time I did attempt to venture out, I did not make it too far, as my car was frozen. That’s when I discovered the plugs on all other cars were not for charging, they were for block heaters.

I found myself regretting my decision to move north, but I was here with my children and needed to make things work. I needed a job and in the north there appeared to be opportunities. At the time I remember thinking if I could take the job opportunities in the north and combine them with costal living I would be extremely happy. To me staying in the north was temporary. I needed practice experience and once I had worked for a while I intended to move back to the coast closer to my family.

My children adjusted well and they loved seeing moose and other animals that they had never seen before. They thought living in Prince George was great. I began to search for work and, as I drove around, I had to admit I had never seen so many trees, and the wildlife was everywhere. I worked in an office setting gaining experience in
assessment and referral for my first year in Prince George. Then unexpectedly, I was offered a position further north. Honestly, at first it was the money that made me consider the position. As a single parent I could do lots for my kids with the increase in pay so after talking with my kids; we began organizing for our next move. After I went further north I had the opportunity to work in a few northern areas.

Shock, Intrigue, and Adjustment

When I started my first job, I felt like I was learning to walk all over again. I struggled with not knowing how to apply my skills in a place that, in my mind, lacked everything. The far distances to get to the city for things I might need really concerned me, and that feeling was unlike anything I had felt before. I was used to being confident in figuring things out for myself. As I walked around taking in my new surroundings, I remember thinking I was unqualified, like I wasn’t going to be able to do my job. I couldn’t understand how I was supposed to support clients without other support services, or the ability to refer clients as I had in my previous practice. There was nothing here, and being on my own I had no one to ask. I was used to the city where I had access to supervision, which led to me to doubting my ability to practice here.

I remember my first day clearly. I walked into the building I would be working out of and felt excited and terrified all at the same time. As I met people, I was aware they all appeared to be connected in some way; extended family connections or because a person is known for providing a special skill, like felling trees. Interestingly, the people I met were very cautious being around me, but at the same time interested in details about who I was. I started to explain where I had gone to school and what credentials I had in regards to what my role would be, but no one really cared about my credentials. They
wanted to know more about who I lived with, how many kids I had, and how the roads were on my travel out.

At the end of the day I thought the day was kind of odd; lots happened, but I didn’t really feel like I had accomplished much. I felt like I should have done more but I didn’t know what or how. I think in part it was because people came and went all day with no real structure, like I was accustomed to in my previous practice. That feeling stuck with me for the first few weeks, as most of the days seemed to go the same way. People would come to meet me, saying they heard there was a new professional, or to ask questions about what I might be able to offer, but I didn’t feel like that was what my work was supposed to be.

Then, in my third week, I was in the local grocery store trying to adjust to the limited choices, and an elderly woman came up to me and said, “You must be the new social worker.” Without hesitation, she started talking to me right there in the middle of the store about what I knew about the community. I was having difficulty staying focused as I was very aware we were in the middle of the store and people could hear our conversation. She continued to talk to me about her family, how they had lived there for many years and described the challenges as she saw them for the young people in staying there. Before I fully understood everything our conversation contained, it was over. Later that night, I was in my room and found myself thinking about the kindness extended to me during my grocery store conversation and I realized that maybe what she was telling me was to shift my focus to learn more about where I had come before I tried to work there.
That was the first lesson I took from northern practice. I began to think more about changing how I applied my skills to better align with the context of the community. It was far more challenging than you would think. It involved letting go of some of the processes I learned in university and that I followed in larger places such as Prince George, which was ironic as not more than a year earlier I found Prince George to be small. Instead of feeling like I could not provide service because there was nowhere to refer clients, I began focusing on how to create what was needed and who could help me in creating service. It demanded challenging what I knew and how I thought practice needed to be. I learned to let go of how I had done things in the past and stay focused on how I could accomplish an outcome with what I had around me.

It adapted the way I understood social work practice, ethics, and the guidelines we are required to follow. The most difficult part was developing confidence in making decisions on my own. For example, developing services had to include understanding that everything was so highly visible, and in the city services like safe house locations are protected. Here you can’t hide anything, so we have a safe house and everyone knows where it is. We have all the same policies in place that other safe houses have, but we added a step of educating the community so everyone understands and respects the service.

Everywhere I worked from that point on, I always spent the first few weeks visiting people. I understood that was part of practice in the north; talking and asking the people to tell me about their community and gaining a sense of what was important and how things were interconnected drove my practice. It became clear to me that practice needed to be place-centered. That understanding helped me to apply what I knew in a
way that harmonized with how the community saw things. That process was different from working in the city; there I was used to people coming to see me, asking questions, making a plan and on to the next person, most cases on the hour. In the north I learned I needed to take my time and learn about the community surroundings and then approach my work to reflect what was important to the community.

A typical day for me used to be working in the city, jumping into the car, driving 15 minutes in traffic to my office, work all day and then drive through rush hour back home. I now find myself sometimes driving several hours without seeing another vehicle, to see one person. I have found myself frequently doing work in unexpected places; for example, most of my work with youth was outside and sometimes while playing catch or shooting a puck up against a wall in winters I once found too harsh. There is a real shift from office style practice to learning how to facilitate professional social work balanced with being part of a community.

Much of my work is unpredictable and day-to-day, because in the north anything that happens impacts everyone. If there is a death, everyone knows that person and has connections, in some cases even history with that person, so my planned work stops and becomes refocused on what the community needs during that time. Conversely, celebration is bigger, for the same reason of everyone knowing everyone, so each person takes on a role and it gets done.

I learned that it was mostly me that was uncomfortable seeing a client at the store or at the school when I wasn’t working, not the client. It’s really different. The idea of professional boundaries is different from how I learned it in university. I maintain boundaries, but in a very visible way. I have to explain in more detail what my
professional guidelines require from me in my practice and, when I do, most people respect that. Having said that, professional boundaries while living in community do look different, because you have to balance them with being viewed as a community member.

People’s expectations are different as well. In my experience, there was an expectation to let people in a bit by participating in community events. I think it’s a point of trust: if I expect people to trust me, then I should spend time earning that trust. If you are only visible in your work and people don’t get to see you in a social context, then no one wants to talk to you, because they feel like you are not invested in the community. It is important for people to know how to place you, as they know everyone else and a new worker brings a new dynamic into the community. I guess it is a collectivist kind of idea; everyone knows everything and, like it or not, you rely on each other for day-to-day survival.

That feeling of everyone knowing everyone’s business was always presented to me as a troublesome issue by other professionals I’ve talked to. It is often described to me as the inability to keep confidentiality or professional boundaries. After a while, I realized that is not necessarily the case. Yes, it does make some things more difficult, but if you view everyone knowing everything more as the “norm” for where you are, then you are the only thing that is really different. From that perspective, I was more able to understand how I could make people feel uncomfortable and it was my responsibility to work to change that.

When I worked in Prince George, my skills were in assessment and referral work, but up north my skills look very different. I have to create my work outcomes without much of what is available in the city. I learned to think differently; for example, instead
of referring someone, what could I do to support that person in community and who here could help me do that? I thought lots more about local activities and how I could incorporate those into case plans and ways of engaging clients. My skills have increased in practice from a community development lens in ways that would not have been as clear without the hands-on experience. Group work or even a group perspective is critical. I find even when working individually I have to give equal attention to how that extends into the community due to the small size. People often talk about community-based practice, but I don’t think many realize the details that fall under that heading unless you experience the practice.

The work is far less prescribed, no one is telling you what you need to do and there is no real consistent day-to-day format to follow. I think it has to be that way due to the uniqueness of each interaction, but, unlike city practice, where you do not see clients after they leave your office, here you see them, creating another layer to be mindful of in your work. There is definitely not a consistent process or specific steps to follow, and you need to be okay with that. I like change, and I am okay with making independent decisions, so it works for me. More importantly, I am okay with admitting when I am not sure and need to seek further knowledge or supervision. Working here is independent work, and lots of the time crisis-based, but not individual crisis, because every crisis impacts everyone so lots of my work involves the community. I have seen new workers become overwhelmed by the level of crisis we sometimes face, but if you put it into perspective, in some cases it appears to be more traumatic in part because it touches everyone and the higher number of people involved projects a higher intensity. In these cases, I respond from a family systems perspective, working from the inside of the circle
out while still attending to the overall community response. I find it works well. When I first started here I was only about two months into my position and we had an accidental death that involved someone who had lived here their whole life. The community grief was beyond words, I had no idea what to do, as there was so much happening all at once and I felt completely ill equipped to manage the situation. After the first few days of running around feeling like I was not assisting in a meaningful way, I took a step back and thought I had to try something that helped me organize better and still reach everyone at the level they needed. So, with the help of a few people, we began to organize layers of response, from larger groups to individual services and things went much smoother. I would also say when a larger crisis occurs the response is never the same, but what is different is my professional confidence in creating a response that will assist in a meaningful way.

My practice has really developed strong, quick decision-making skills and I find I am able to handle some fairly challenging situations confidently. Maybe a good way to describe it is strategic thinking. I have to think beyond the individual, even when working with a client individually and incorporate a community perspective in every piece of work I do. When I talk with colleagues in Prince George they think it’s crazy what I do. Funny, I think they are crazy for working in the conditions they do. They have high caseloads, no office space, and budget talk all the time, etc. I have lots of space, create my own plan for the day, and get to try new things all the time. I guess working here has made me more individually confident. I think it has also helped me understand my professional framework as well.
It is really hard to describe the skills you learn in this style of practice because often you don’t even realize how much you are learning or adapting due to living here. When you live here, there are no drastic comparisons, so for me it was not until I spent time in training around city-based practitioners that I realized the difference in my skill set. I think one of the key pieces is the ability for a natural disconnect that workers have in the city. Clients come in and you meet with them and then they leave and you are on to the next file until that client returns. The worker may also have several other services working with that client to meet their needs. I am not saying workers in the city don’t care, my colleagues are every bit as committed as I am to my work, it is simply a completely different perspective. I see my clients every day, and I am their referral option; I watch as clients apply the goals they make and I see when things work well, or if they don’t. The level of relationships built with clients is far deeper and complex, as you need to maintain professional boundaries that are hard for everyone.

My toolbox is strengthened by my ability to think on multiple levels. In school we learned about topic areas individually such as child welfare, mental health, or community development, even generalist practice, but what I do is all of that and more. It is practice that involves working with the larger community and individual clients. In either situation, with each professional decision you make, you have to consider the broader influences, the existing connections, the environment you are living in, and the potential costs. It is truly a more complex, strategic way of thinking about practice, and I know I would not have this understanding without this work.
I Am a Northern Social Worker

I never thought of myself as wanting to stay in northern practice, but after I had practiced in a few places it just kind of happened. I was thinking about the story guide you sent me and when it said “staying here,” that really made me think about why I do for the last week. It helps that my children love living here and in many ways are establishing their own connections to living here. The people are the main reason I like northern practice; they are down to earth and truly appreciate someone who wants to invest their time here. You get to see what happens when the work you do with clients works because of living here, and if you work with young clients you get to see them grow up. Working in the city, I never knew what happened to clients when they left my office, especially if they didn’t come back, but here I will see clients either way. Here you really get to see outcomes on a large scale. You get to work with people in different ways and things are way slower paced; it’s beautiful here. It is kind of like if you pictured a beautiful big spider’s web sparkling in the sunshine. Each thread is extremely fragile on its own and sparkles in its own way, but each thread is also connected to another thread which is connected to the larger structure which makes it strong. The web has been built in a specific place that has meaning to why it is there. Equally, if you damage one thread, the entire structure is compromised. You have to practice thinking about all those pieces with each decision you make.

I don’t know, I remember taking a course in school about northern practice and we learned about burnout and isolation and how dual relationships were difficult to manage. There was a lot about the challenges of what living and working in northern communities looked like. I often think about that; I am able to see those pieces that are
for sure here, but mostly it’s just different, not harder or worse, just different. It’s hard to describe, sort of like if you went on vacation to a place you had never been before, that doesn’t mean that place is awful or hard to be in, it means the people that live there do things differently and the place is different, and to them you are different. It takes a bit to figure it all out. If you can think beyond generalist practice, because the work is more complex than that, you can really enhance your skills greatly.

So, if I tried to sum up some of the general points I would say I don’t have to drive in rush hour traffic out here, but sometimes I have to drive a long distance. I don’t have to be stuck in my office all day, and I see my clients more. I definitely don’t have resources to send people to, but I get to create alternatives. I get to know people not only as clients but also in their day-to-day lives, so when something happens like someone dies, it’s hard, but I had a chance to know them. I don’t have an office full of colleagues to work with, but out here the community works together. It’s just different and I think people are convinced it’s horrible, but if you are able to think outside the box, learn about where you have come to, and participate, I think it’s great work.

It has been great for my family. We have experienced the outdoors in ways I would have never done. We have been fishing and hunting, gone on boat rides and camping trips together. My children are learning more about how to create their own fun and explore rather than being digitally plugged in all the time. I feel like it helps us to identify what is really important to each of us and our little family.

If I were to write a book, my family and the people that live here would be the co-authors and I think the biggest chapter would be on how to prepare your thinking for coming here. I think a lot of my first days and months of shock could have been avoided
if I knew a bit more about some of the differences in community living and that it was
okay to do things differently. I was stopped every time something happened and I had to
think about a different way of managing the situation then I would in the city, because
out here it couldn’t be handled that way. If I had known that before I came, it would have
made my first few months much easier. I try to tell new workers that now when I have
the chance, because I think some people leave before they figure that out sometimes. I
would write the book using the example of the web sparkling in the sun, and describe
each thread, all the connections and the power that holds the structure together.
Anne’s Narrative

Coming Home

I grew up in the north in a very small community. It was truly small-community living. You know lots of details about everyone who lives there and you see them every day. Things are a bit slower paced because you don’t have all the access to stores, services, or entertainment that you would find in a bigger city. As young kids we spent a lot of time outside and created our fun. My parents raised us to be responsible even when we challenged that at times, and there was never a question that we would leave for university at some point.

After I graduated, I went away to university and got my degree. Attending university was an interesting experience for me. It was the first time I experienced the difference in people my own age that had been raised in the city. It highlighted for me how people can become accustomed to certain ways of living and base their expectations from what they are used to having. For me, coming from a small community, my expectations were very different. I was not used to all the access to everything that some of my classmates were. It was a learning moment for me as I balanced what I needed to learn with maintaining my values and lifestyle.

Partway through my university experience, life led me back north. I met the man who was going to be my future husband, which led to me finishing my fourth year of studies in Prince George. At the time, my husband had a few years left to finish after I was graduated, and during that time we thought lots about where we wanted to live when he was done. We were seriously considering Squamish, British Columbia, as we are both big into rock climbing. When I finished my degree I began to look for work in Prince
George and applied all over, but could not get work. I ended up having to waitress for a while to make ends meet. Then, an opportunity came up for me farther north and back in the community where I grew up. I took the job opportunity to gain experience, and my husband and I managed our relationship at a distance while he was finishing his degree at the University of Northern British Columbia.

I remember us saying to one another, “Two years max, and we will move.” Once my husband finished we agreed we would move to Squamish. Later, my husband finished his degree at UNBC and came to join me while we planned our next steps and was quickly offered a job in the community. Everything continued to lead to us staying longer than we had initially decided to be here. Twelve years later, we now have a family and careers and plan to retire here. It is interesting how I came from a small city, left to go to university on Vancouver Island, met someone who brought me part way back north to Prince George, and then my first social work position took me back to my home community where I didn’t think I would come back to once I had left. It was a complete full circle.

**Stepping Stones**

I remember going to work here for the first time. It was familiar but new all at the same time. There was an amazing group of social workers in the office at the time. The office had five or six staff that had all been in the office for around five years, which is not heard of much in the north and that made me excited to be part of the work done there. Unfortunately, now that I have been here for over twelve years, it is crazy to think about the number of people that have come, stayed for brief periods, and then suddenly left. It feels like at least every two years, sometimes less, that there are new workers
rolling in to take over for those that left. I think part of why the initial workers had been there for so long was because at that time there was great supervision. My first experiences in that office were amazing. I had the privilege of mentoring under four social workers who all had their own way of practicing, which was a great learning experience. All four helped me to shape my practice, but at the same time I had freedom and was encouraged to create my own style.

I remember the first time I met one particular colleague that I ended up working with the most and how we just seemed to connect. We are still very good friends to this day. I was so passionate about social work practice and she would sit and discuss cases with me for hours. Those discussions helped me develop my style of northern practice. It was through those interactions that I realized I could bring forward ideas and how to balance being from the same place I was working in a way that the clients were comfortable with it. I remember thinking at least up north my practice would be filled with meeting families and getting out to the nearby community, but, to my disappointment, I learned that even up north, a lot of my work involved completing paperwork.

As I began my work, one of my strongest memories was having grown up here and not really having knowledge about the nearby neighbouring communities my new position would be providing services to. It was a huge "Aha!’ moment for me realizing that I grew up in this community and had never once been to that community. I had to spend time thinking about how I could have grown up here my whole life and never have wondered about who lived in my neighbouring community. It was huge for me and I struggled with how that had happened. The first time I went, I remember thinking how
segregated the community was, and for me it was an opportunity to change and meet with people I had previously been separated from. I guess it was difficult realizing that there was more to my home community than I was exposed to growing up.

It remains somewhat difficult for me to really think about the differences in northern practice, because I grew up here. For me, it was coming home to a familiar place. I think the biggest skill in working in a remote community is to learn to think outside the box. You have to be creative in your thinking and problem-solving skills. Creative thinking and challenging policies is a critical part of my social work role, because you simply don’t have the resources available here that you would in a larger center. So, an example of how creative thinking can be formed might look like a resource option for a mom with several children. The work can be very intensive and in order to provide support that keeps everyone together, creative practice came alive and the idea to rent space in a local bed and breakfast and have the family stay there was formed. It was a lot of work, but the family was able to remain together and receive the supports they needed to get back on their feet in their own community. If we had not created that, they may have potentially been divided with foster care involvement, or perhaps required to move to Prince George to get the services they needed. So you need to ask yourself “How can I make this work?” while facilitating ethical practice. You need to be creative to find a solution that is often outside the box. In another situation, I worked with a mom who struggled with mental health issues and required supports on and off, because she had several children, which was overwhelming for her at times. We were able to work with a local camp to rent one of their cabins for her and the kids to stay at when she needed the
support and put services in place so she was able to receive support and parent her children, otherwise child protection services would have had to intervene.

My practice here also exposes me to all levels and types of social work, including work with youth. I was working with one particular youth on and off for several years. She had a lot to work through, but eventually she graduated and went off to university. A few months ago, I ran into her at the store and she was back visiting family, working towards graduating with a business degree, and was planning to take a year to travel before she went to work. It was nice to see how well she was doing and in a bigger center I would likely not have run into her to get those pieces of her story.

Watching families grow and interact, in some cases for many years, is an amazing opportunity to enhance your practice development. You meet families and then you get to interact with them on numerous levels, often wearing several different hats. In larger cities you would refer people to the services required and that might be your entire involvement, but out here I get to facilitate all that is required because there is no one else, and I like that. You get to apply different skills and think about practice work from several different lenses; for example, individual, family, protection, addictions, prevention, and education, to name a few. If you can thrive in this style of practice, the leadership opportunities are very high. I have been asked to take on lead roles since very early on in my position here.

Because the community is so small, you bump into families everywhere, the grocery store, on walks, etc. Now that I have been practicing here for 12-plus years, I have been able to see families grow and when I bump into them I view it as part of prevention work. Families see you all the time, and in my experience this helps with
people coming for support before things get too far along. I guess in some ways seeing clients all the time can result in the opposite of workers feeling they have no privacy, and from families’ perspective, neither do they, because everyone knows what’s going on with everyone else, so because it’s all out in the open, families tend to come to me when they need support.

I remember at the beginning of my practice here, I was worried about how that would work, but it does, you go out and see people, they say hi and you say hi back and it works. The biggest challenge for me is having grown up here. It makes it hard to navigate confidentiality for people. I think for the most part it has worked out, as people who know me really well will ask to see someone else or ask me to connect them with someone out of town.

If I were trying to summarize the practice skills I have gained practicing in the north, the biggest one for me is being open-minded and going back to the families to ask them what works for them. It’s learning to be humble as clients may have ideas that we have not thought of that will work. It might not fit exactly how we learned in school to practice, but adapting or combining ideas may result in success. I think sometimes it can be scary to take risks that might not work but you have to try new approaches due to the lack of resources and once you develop that confidence to try, your practice grows. I have learned it is okay, through trial and error, to be creative and think outside the box, even though in many ways it is by force due to service limitations, but in turn that process has made me a stronger practitioner. It is the on-the-ground experience that shapes you. I believe you end up doing better practice because you are forced to think differently in complex circumstances. I also think it takes a certain amount of courage to attempt
practice in a manner that you know fits for the community, even though you may not have other similar proven models to draw from. I guess it is confidence in decision making combined with being humbled by experience.

It helps if your personality is adventurous and you are comfortable with chaos. Your reaction to new challenges needs to be “How am I going to work with this situation?” and then confidence to take the lead with the decision you have made to respond. I need the freedom to do what I need to do in my practice and I am given that opportunity here.

**Settled**

Although for me working here was coming home, I could have chosen not to come back and have started my family somewhere else, which was the plan for the first little while. I remembered when I first went away to school coming from a small town, I actually wanted to be a teacher and had applied for the teaching program at UVIC, but was denied, which led me to social work and where I truly believe I am supposed to be. After years of frontline practice, I have a great career position and I have started my family. Now that I have kids, I have been able to reduce my hours and maintain my practice working with families.

One of the main reasons I am committed to stay is my connection to my work. I am a hard worker and feel that I am recognized for the work that I do. This, combined with how hard it is to get workers to stay, has encouraged my employer to work with me to create some flexibility that I needed so that I can continue staying here and balance my family life. For example, they supported me in the flexible hours that I needed while my kids were small, and in a larger city like Prince George that probably would not happen.
or be approved. I was supported in creating a proposal for the hours I wanted that worked around my daughter’s schedule, but did not compromise my job, and it was approved. The level of support I have received has created a situation that I don’t ever want to leave. I feel very privileged in what I have here and I think my employer likes the work I do as well, or why would they provide me with so much support? That support has kept me here for sure.

The other piece that keeps me here is the work is so different; we practice very different in the north. Northern practice offers workers the opportunity to be more in charge of their work and what that work is going to look like. I think in larger centers you may not have that experience because everything resource-wise is right there, and in some ways there is a missed opportunity to work with people the way we do here, which impacts the skills you develop as a social worker. I feel like I do better practice here. I also think there tend to be closer relationships between social workers and higher trust, because you have to support each other on a higher level and in different ways in remote settings. In addition to seeing your clients all the time, you also live close to your colleagues and other professionals, so establishing and maintaining those professional relationships are important.

I plan to stay here in my job until I retire. My practice here has provided me with the opportunity to raise my family the way I want to. Both myself and my husband have excellent jobs, we are able to spend time together as a family, and have lots of space to be outdoors and do activities we enjoy together. I know we would not have all we do if we lived in a larger city. We feel privileged to be where we are now and are committed to stay and continue our work in the north.
If I were to write a book about this, it would contain the process I went through having been from here and then coming back to work. I saw things in a way I had not considered before and it changed me. The book would include discussion of how to think creatively and how to become comfortable with abstract processes. I would want to combine that with the need for personal characteristics such as being resilient, having courage, and confident while being humble. I would invite my colleagues to be part of creating the book, as they all have their own unique styles that stem from the same different way of thinking. I would also invite the other professionals we engage with to share how northern practice impacts their work, to provide a picture of how the different disciplines engage in work together to support clients. Perhaps, really breaking down how autonomous northern practice can be and how sometimes new workers can be their own barrier to how their experience unfolds.

The second half of the book would have to be from the perspective of the clients we serve. I think it would be powerful to have learning that included the experiences of clients for workers to consider as they develop their own professional identity and style. As I mentioned earlier, sometimes clients have ideas that we don’t think of that work well for their situations, so learning how to consider those ideas as part of a professional framework is important.

I am clearly happy to be a northern social worker and at this point in time plan to practice here for many more years.
Chris’s Narrative

Shock and Wonder

It was the mid-1990s and a bunch of my friends who had graduated the year before I did were recruited as part of a huge initiative. It appeared that most of the people I knew were recruited to British Columbia. When I graduated, I put on my application I would work anywhere and kept calling until one day I got a call and was asked if I would relocate to a very remote place in northern British Columbia, and I said yes. So there I was moving across provinces from a very large city to remote northern British Columbia.

I first arrived in Prince George to complete some initial training and then off I went up north to do some final training in a smaller community prior to my final move to where I would be working. It was an interesting transition as each place was smaller than the last. When I left Prince George for my first stop for training, I worked with a social worker that had just left the place I was heading and she offered me some insights. The experiences she shared about the place I was heading were interesting and, three months later, off I went.

I remember driving out and the road I was on had nothing but trees, which was very different from where I had come from. It seemed to go on forever with no signs of anyone living around that area. As I was following the directions given to me, I finally came upon a sign that said north to Alaska! A few hours later, I came to a single-lane bridge. I had never seen a single-lane bridge before; it was spanning a gorge and the road went directly up on the other side. I made my way across hesitantly and hoped nothing was going to come from the other direction that I was unable to see. A few more hours passed by and I thought to myself, I should have brought something to eat, because there
was still nothing. I had never considered there would be no 7-11 or a little store to get food, and no one had told me. Suddenly, I came across an old building covered in antlers that said “Home Cooking.” I was hungry, so I pulled in and ate. I continued my journey and soon wondered what the meat I just ate was, as I didn’t remember seeing any farms. Elk, moose, deer or maybe bear, but it had tasted great and that was good enough for me. Being the guy from the city, I was also keenly aware as I drove along that I had seen more quads, gun racks, and four-wheel drive trucks and I wondered what that was all about, where was I heading? Later, as I gained experience, I came to understand it was hunting season.

Little did I know I would be on such a steep learning curve from the moment I left the city. You can look things up and have some idea from what people say, but other than actually experiencing northern remote practice, there is no real way to describe everything you go through. I was glad my experience involved a few transitions; those moves helped me prepare.

**It’s Beginning to Feel a Lot Like Christmas**

I arrived in the community and I remember seeing signs for a laundromat, gas station, video store, and hardware store and I thought to myself, “Hmmm, this isn’t as bad as everyone says.” I stopped in one of the buildings to learn it was in fact, the post office, video store, and a few other things all in one. I asked the lady who worked there for directions to my house and she responded with, “Oh, I just cleaned that house this morning.” I was handed my key and went to the house, feeling like it was kind of weird that the first place I stopped just handed me the house key without even asking who I was and had been in my new home just a few hours earlier.
Knowing I had arrived was a very overwhelming feeling; I had gone from a city of over 500,000 to Prince George, which at the time had a population of less than 70,000, to a community with a population under 1,000. I thought to myself, “What the hell have I done?” and in the same moment, “Wow, this is pretty cool!” I had come from a one-bedroom apartment in the city to a three-bedroom house with a basement. The long journey of finishing school was over and this place is what was next. I didn’t know how it was going to work out, and that made me feel anxious and excited all at the same time.

I arrived at the office and discovered I was the senior permanent social worker in the office. The first people I met were the administrative staff. They welcomed me in and showed me my office and the rest of the building. My office had a window and I remember being amazed with all the space the office had compared to other places I had worked. The short tour concluded in the staff room where I saw pictures of previous social workers who had spent time in the office. I stood up against the wall and my picture was taken and hung next to all the other pictures. The other pictures had a start date and an end date, but mine had the start date and just an empty line. All the other photos were filled in with the day the social worker started and the day they left. I was taken aback by the number of pictures that bordered the room and the staff had a conversation with me about how they knew I was smart and a social worker and how I was going to want to change things, but to stop and look at all the people who have come before me and all the people who have left. The administrative staff had been there through all these people coming and all these people leaving, and asked me please not to change anything; they would let me know what to do and to just go along with the
program. It was clearly difficult for the staff to constantly adjust to new social workers while trying to help with the needs of the community.

Later, I was introduced to the other social worker, who took me around and showed me the area and, a few weeks after, left for a new position. My supervision needs were organized by phone, which seemed to work okay. The only downside was that I had several changes in supervisors, even though it was at a distance, as they left their northern remote locations for other work.

During my first week I went with the other social worker to an outlying community to do some work and my colleague informed me that social workers were not favoured where we were heading. Once there, it was clear that the relationships were really strained. I believe this was compounded by the struggles social work was facing provincially at the time as a profession. It was a very different focus then, to how I can do practice now.

It was clear as I sat and listened that much of the strain impacting practice was broken relationships and I knew if I was going to be successful I needed to work from that perspective. It was a very challenging start to my practice, as I felt like I was starting to dig my way out of a hole that had been there for a very long time. I decided to focus on client-centered practice and really listen to what the client wanted, in addition to expressing what some of my concerns were, and it seemed to work. I knew this was going to be a different way of practicing, everything about it felt different. The people had a different way of looking at things than I did, there were no services to help me, and the way people were connected to one another was all learning for me. At first it was a lot of flying by the seat of my pants until I figured out the balance between what I was taught
in school, what mentors had told me, and what my personal values were, and how that fit with where I was practicing.

I remember one experience when I first started northern practice. I was going out to meet with a few families and was being taken around by an informal helper who worked in the community. I remember having all my papers in order and a list of what I needed to know, what I was going to ask, and what I needed to get through. I felt prepared. We went to see the first family and I asked all my questions, wrote everything I needed to down, and then we left. On our way to the next family, the worker stopped by an old tree that was on the edge of the water and appeared like it had grown out of the water wrapped through the rocks; it was beautiful. The worker sat and asked me what I thought of the family we had just talked to, how I felt about it, and what I thought the family was going to learn. We debriefed and discussed what had occurred and then she started to talk to me about the family we were going to see next, the hardships they had been through, where they were now, and where she hoped to see them in the future. She had a very calm way about her when she spoke. The next visit went well and at a far slower pace. Then, we went to visit some people who talked with me about the community and their thoughts and again the pace was much slower. She was a great woman who taught me not to rush from one thing to another, to take my time, and put it into context and place. It made me think about the history of the area, and what things have impacted the area, and where. It was important for me to take the time to understand all of it, so that my practice could be more complete and more helpful and not just directing what is going to happen. After all these years of practice while keeping that in mind, I am sure I still only understand a fraction of what she was getting at. That
interaction grounded my personal belief that we always have to learn and we always have to listen.

So my practice became about relationships. I worked hard to have relationships with everyone: clients, members of the community, informal helpers, other professionals, really anyone who wanted to be part of working towards the goals that my clients had. I wanted to create an environment where everyone felt involved. My goal was always to maximize common ground. I realized one of the major differences from practicing in the city was there I had other services I could refer to, or draw from, but out here it is community and people. I had to learn or create new ways to achieve outcomes that in the city I would just refer to the appropriate service or get other professionals involved.

My practice in community continued to develop and involved engaging as many people as possible who wanted to work together to create a network of people to address the needs. This was even more important in the surrounding communities I supported, as I was only able to get there once every few weeks, so having a network of community members that supported the overall goals was a large part of the work. Depending on how far away the community was, it could be eight to ten hours of travel to get there to provide service, so it was important to have a strong local network and a more open approach to collaboration in my practice.

Another funny example from my first week was after I settled in; the next morning I thought I would go for a run and take a look around. I strapped on my tennis shoes and started my run, and as I was jogging I passed by a woman who asked me “what are you running from?” and I responded with “nothing I’m just out for a run.” The lady commented while looking very confused “Ohhhhh.” I guess I was seen as being a bit
weird to just want to run around town. A lot more people do it now, but when I first came people didn’t know what to make of me running around for no apparent reason.

After that experience, I started to make sure I participated in as many local events as possible: Canada Day events, volleyball night, snowmobile races, and other annual events at the park. It was about everyone coming together; the teachers would be there, I would be there and community members were there, and everyone participated together. Some professionals chose not to participate, but, for me, I strongly believed if I was going to work successfully in my new home, I had to be part of the community, and part of that was engaging in local activities. I think it is important for the people to see you in “normal” ways and to recognize that you are not only a social worker. I could show people that I could go out and have a good time in a healthy interactive way.

Sometimes my practice would involve visiting and talking outdoors over a tea or a pop that modelled normal interactions that built strong relationships and trust. It was about eating food and having conversations. It is being able to meet the needs of the community with the skills of the people there, and create new ways to get things done when needed. Not only does the community get to know me, I get to learn about the people and place I have come to, and what is important from their perspective. That piece is a large part of the work in the north.

I think the biggest skill that I learned in my experiences in northern work is to realize that my time will be spent differently due to all these issues you learn about in school. For example, in a larger center you have referral sources, colleagues to chat with, and access that you simply do not have here. I know we learn that in school, but I still think the reality of what that means is what creates struggles for a new worker. I learned
that everything I did in my practice had to be more rounded. I needed to ensure that everything I did where I now lived was reflective of how I wanted people to view me. I learned how to engage people on deeper levels, because I see them all the time, not only as clients, but as neighbours and that is really important. The longer you stay, the better and stronger those relationships become. We learned lots in school about the importance of establishing rapport with clients, but it is more than that here, it is deeper, and my ability to do that is what makes staying here successful. I don’t think I would have those skills if I had remained in the city. It is difficult to describe the link between the context and that style of practice.

I also think practice here is difficult to describe, because even though the population here is low, nothing is ever the same. The day-to-day work is always challenging in a new way based on need, so I don’t think there is a simple model that could reflect what it looks like. There aren’t as many individual issues, because everything that happens impacts everyone, so you have to be able to think from that perspective. Everyone is impacted when someone dies and equally, in a good way, when a baby is born, and I have to figure out where I need to be in that system.

Honestly, when I first came out here, my plan was to work for a few years and save up some money and go back to my home province and buy a house. Then, in my third year, a relationship kept me in northern British Columbia. My partner and I left for a few years to a slightly bigger northern community where I gained a lot of supervisory experience. It was that opportunity to supervise other social workers that made me realize I wanted to get back to my practice. I also realized I would likely stay.
My Career Home

It’s the people, the people keep me here and in this work. Recently, I have thought about moving, but not to a city, to a more remote northern position. During the process of considering the new opportunity, the local communities around here have really expressed their support in both understanding my desire to consider the opportunity and that they would be happy to have me stay. This made me reflect; when I first came here I would attend a community event and at that time the talk was “What is the social worker doing here?” to the today of “Chris is barbequing.” What a shift! I say to new workers now to get out there, stay out there, participate; if you see kids playing hockey, go play with them and if people want you to sit and talk with them, make the time to do that, because you learn so much from those pieces. The learning assisted me with developing my professional identity and along the way I learned a lot about myself as well. Those interactions change and create relationships, and that is when your practice becomes really great.

What workers tend to miss in northern work is that it’s not that communities are pushing you away because they don’t think you are qualified; it is more about people not knowing you and not feeling confident about what your intent is or if you will fit in with everyone who has been living there for many years. If you want your work to be successful, you need to take the time to learn about the community and area you are practicing in and then apply the skills you have based on how those skills will work best with the community.

One of the points I have learned in staying is the importance of consistency so people are not surprised about what is going to happen. This is important as people get to
know you, because they know how I am going to work, where my line is, and my response to my working relationship with them. There is an understanding as things happen that things are consistent and still going to move forward and everyone is treated in the same manner. It is also less stressful for me as the main social worker. I can be confident that there is a general understanding about what my role is and that I am invested here.

The stories that have been shared with me over the years put my university learning into context in ways that would not have happened in larger cities. I realized that because I was the professional out there, I was the only one that the people could talk to about their frustrations about the past, and it was my opportunity to invite change. I have found that the work takes longer and in some ways is harder, like lack of services, but the changes last longer, and practice outcomes tend to be better. I get to see them. Many of the kids that were little when I first came here are now parents and I have had the privilege of being part of that process.

So in the end, I stay for the people, for the friendships, to influence the communities’ experience in a positive way when they feel they have had poor to no service in the past. I stay, because I don’t want to contribute to the list of service providers who come and then leave, often abruptly. Somebody has to provide service and stability to the work that needs to happen in the north, and it’s rewarding, really rewarding work. You get to see and live the outcomes, the progress. You get to be part of peoples’ stumbles and watch as they come to decisions that take them to the next step. You become viewed as part of the community.
Life here fits for me. I love being outdoors and trying new things. There are endless adventures you can be part of. If I were to write a book about my practice out here, it would have to be with the people who live here. I have learned a lot from living here and brought my skills to add to what was already here. It is a real collaborative lifestyle.

Summary

Narrative inquiry supported participants in sharing how their knowledge is constructed regarding remote northern social work practice. Through a storytelling process, participants were able to express how they came to live and practice in a remote northern region and their individual processes connecting to place. The final co-constructed narratives highlight meanings specific to professional and personal growth, transformation from intended transience to a strong connection to place and an increase in confidence that solidified the participants’ aspiration to remain living and working in the remote northern setting. The empowering participatory process enhanced the ability for the meanings of their lived and professional practice to reveal themselves.

In Chapter Five, Phase Two of the analysis will focus on thematic analysis to present connecting themes between the participants’ stories. The method of thematic analysis will highlight specific details within the presented stories that will assist with examining more closely the connection between place and practice and potential areas of localized knowledge to enhance the curriculum. In Phase Three, a meta-analysis will provide examples of moments of change connected to practice in remote northern regions. Together, the themes and meta-themes form the details of how we can begin a
new conversation focused on the possibilities of what we can learn from narrative inquiry about social work in the remote north.
Chapter Five: Analysis of Narrative: Phase Two Thematic Analysis

The following chapter describes Phases Two and Three of my data analysis. In Phase Two of my narrative analysis, I aimed to identify common themes that arose across my participants’ individual stories. As noted in chapter 3, I completed both the thematic analysis and Phase Three Meta-Analysis, using the raw transcripts of my original interviews with the participants, rather than the stories I later co-constructed with them. This decision allowed me to protect the stories that were outlined in Chapter 4; these stories do not belong to me alone, as they were co-created with my participants. As such, this decision supported my desire to preserve the integrity of those stories by basing my interpretive thematic analysis directly on the original raw data I gathered during the interview process. Phase Two, of the thematic analysis revealed seven themes: 

- Facing Career Realities
- What have I done
- Shifting Perspectives: Aha! Moments
- Autonomous Development of a Community Professional Identity
- Who I am, Not What I am
- Living Within the Results
- I am a Northern Social Worker
- Honoring Individual Voices

which are presented in the following pages. The Phase Three meta-analysis highlights overarching themes describing moments of change that occurred over time. Three themes emerged during the meta-analysis: 

- Unforeseen Transformation to a Commitment to Place
- New Emergence of a Strong Personal and Professional Identity
- A Change in Relationship with Place

Throughout the thematic analysis, I remained mindful of my primary research question: 

*What are the narratives of social workers living and practicing in remote northern settings, and how do these narratives help us to understand the desire to live and practice in these regions?* To keep my results focused in a way that would help me
answer this question, I searched for recurring elements in my four participants’ stories that were particularly relevant to their decision to stay in the remote north.

I completed this thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step model as my guide. Although many researchers view the interview transcription process as time-consuming, and may accordingly pass the task off to their assistants or students, Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize the importance of transcribing one’s own data in order to become more deeply familiar with it. Accordingly, I personally transcribed each of the four interviews, recording each utterance and sound from the digital files I recorded during each interview. Taking this time to transcribe the interviews was critical to becoming familiar with each sentence of the participants’ narratives, and was accordingly an integral component in my initial interpretive process.

Having completed the transcription process, I then utilized an open coding process to identify initial inductive codes, as prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Next, I identified latent themes through an ongoing interpretive process, whereby I would read and re-read each narrative in order to fully immerse myself in their stories. In addition to repetitively reviewing the narratives, I also referred back to my process journal and interview notes as additional supports to ensure I made visible contextual links that are impossible to glean through a recording of an interview alone. For example, my notes reflected facial expressions, gestures, and changes in a participant’s tone of voice, all of which convey additional information than would their words alone, especially in their capacity to emphasize each participant’s unique voice and experiences in remote northern B.C. As I read through each narrative, I coded for words or phrases that I found focused on my research question, making interpretive notes in the margins.
and linking sections of my reflexive journal writing. During the next several readings, I coded for consistent words and phrases and focused on identifying common patterns emerging across all four transcripts. Table 4 is an example of my initial coding process.

### Table 4: Initial Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Selection</th>
<th>Coded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“it was crazy, like I had never felt so out of my element and unprepared…”</td>
<td>What Have I done?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I didn’t know ah where to start ah overwhelming”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Umm, two years max was my intention, could not even think about any longer”</td>
<td>Facing Career Realities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“just needed something on my resume”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rather than using a digital program, I opted to code each of my interviews manually. This allowed me to sit with each page of every transcript and take the time to think deeply about each word or phrase and its potential meaning – a level of detailed scrutiny that may have been lost, had I opted for a digital method. The process of completing the analysis manually also allowed me to add notes in the margins about codes and phrases that stood out to me in terms of their links with my research question, and assisted me in thinking through the connections across the transcripts as part of the interpretive process.

As a highly visual person, I found holding the pages in front of me while reading each narrative to be far more engaging than attempting to analyze them on a computer screen. I also used my hard copies of the transcripts for a visual mapping exercise: I
literally cut up my transcripts so that one element or segment of data could by physically
lifted out of the interview to which it belonged. I would then move these different “strips”
of data around, forming groups characterized by similar concepts and thoughts.
Ultimately, this process allowed me to visualize my initial mapping of themes. Once I
had completed the initial coding and sorted these initial codes into groups, I then
reviewed the data for broader or higher-level themes. As I began conceptualizing the
initial groups, themes naturally emerged from the data sets.

Figure 6. Mapping themes.

After completing step two (identifying initial codes, as shown in Figure 3),
themes began to emerge more clearly across each story. As outlined in step three of
Braun and Clarke’s (2006) model, I then explored and refocused the initial codes into
potential themes by reorganizing the excerpts I had cut out of the transcripts into even
more broad possible overall themes. After I had grouped all the relevant excerpts, I had a
visual map that included 11 potential themes. I continued the process of moving each
excerpt around, examining variations in meaning until each example appeared to be
positioned in a group that matched conceptually. Figure 7 is an example of the
highlighted sections of the transcripts and the initial visual mapping process of the overall themes.

**Figure 7. Thematic Process**

Next, I analyzed the 11 initial groupings to identify and confirm clear themes across all four narratives. I carefully reviewed each excerpt to ensure coherence with each potential theme. I merged several potential themes together, creating seven final themes. As I strove to honour each of my participants’ unique voices – rather than allowing them to blend together into a set of overly simplified, broad themes – the narratives also revealed three additional individual themes that I felt were noteworthy in terms of my research question. To ensure the seven common themes were an accurate reflection of the meaning within the narratives as a whole, I went back and reread the narratives several times. As I reread the transcripts, I focused my attention on locating the identified themes in relation to the narratives and watching for additional excerpts that may have been overlooked in the initial analysis. Once this step was complete, I went through the steps I had taken to interpret the themes one further time.
In steps five and six of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) model, the process of “define and refine” (p. 22) begins. Each theme must be confirmed and named, and I had to decide what excerpts from the narratives best captured the meaning of each theme. I reviewed and organized the themes and the excerpts that reflected the essence of meaning contained in the narratives. In addition, I began to conceptualize how I would describe each theme.

Lastly, I would like to mention that due to the very personal nature of the information gathered during narrative analyses, narrative researchers will often add another layer of analysis to protect participants’ confidentiality. This practice allows participants’ individual identities and experiences to remain better protected, while simultaneously allowing the researcher to preserve the integrity and full meaning of the narrative itself. There has been continuing debate in the narrative research community on this practice (as outlined by Connelly & Clandinin, 2000), but due to the small populations and high visibility of participants in this research context, the decision I described in Chapter Three was to use a thematic analysis to protect them to the greatest possible extent.

After completing my narrative analysis, the seven themes that emerged were: Facing Career Realities; What Have I Done?; Shifting Perspectives: “Aha!” Moments; Autonomous Development of a Community Professional Identity; Who I am, Not What I am; Living Within the Results; and I am a Remote Northern Social Worker. Each of these themes is outlined in greater detail below. I have also included direct quotations from my participants’ interviews in order to preserve their intended meanings and individual voices, as well as to more compellingly illustrate these thematic findings.
**Theme One: Facing Career Realities**

Employment was discussed by all participants as an essential factor in motivating their decisions to re-locate to a remote northern region. All four participants were recent graduates seeking an opportunity to apply their newly acquired social work degrees. Participants discussed the challenges they faced in gaining employment, especially in larger urban areas, which resulted in their decisions to relocate to the north. For example, Chris acknowledged: “I needed a job and in the north there appeared to be opportunities.” Chris stated simply that the need for employment in the field outweighed choice of location: “I was willing to move anywhere and got a call with a job offer to relocate to a remote place in northern B.C., and I took it, with little thought about where I was going.”

Participants often stated that they initially took jobs in remote B.C. while thinking the relocation would be merely temporary. Several explained that they intended to gain the requisite practice experience that would allow them to advance their careers in social work before relocating again to more desirable locations. For instance, Teresa noted: “I needed a job and in the north there were jobs, so I said yes but planned to be there for two years max and then return to the city.” Participants indicated that they were aware that having practice experience on their resumes would provide them with greater opportunities, including supervisory positions, when they returned to urban environments. Little attention was given in any of the interviews to the realities of remote northern place; rather, my participants focused heavily on the need for practice experience when explaining their initial decisions to move to northern B.C. Not one of the participants intended from the outset to stay in a remote northern setting; they viewed
their new position and place of residence as temporary from the outset, intending to gain experience for future urban-situated employment.

Discussions of participants’ initial conceptions of their remote northern setting as a temporary place of practice usually led to conversations about the places they had left behind. Teresa, for example, explained that she had had a connection to the sight and sounds of the water in her former place of residence. All four participants expressed intense feelings of loss, and noted they were unprepared to experience such emotions upon leaving their old homes. All four also indicated these feelings of loss were not experienced until they arrived in their remote northern setting and compared it to what they had left behind. As a result, all four participants experienced a bond or attachment to their previously inhabited places, as described in the literature (Altman & Low, 1992; Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2013; Tuan, 1975).

Moreover, these initial feelings of loss suggest that the process of seeking employment overshadowed my participants’ understanding that they would be making sacrifices by obtaining that employment. While seeking a job, none of my participants sought or were provided with knowledge of remote or northern regions themselves: information about place or about the personal ramifications of relocating were not things that their employers had prioritized during the preparatory hiring process, nor was it something they seem to have been interested in acquiring. As a result, the participants indicated that they were confronted with numerous personal and professional challenges upon arriving in northern B.C. that they had to struggle to manage simultaneously. Working through these changes and challenges led my participants to ask themselves, “What have I done?”
Theme Two: What Have I Done?

Upon arriving in their remote northern locales, participants were initially very disturbed by the decision they had made. For example, Gordon stated: “I regretted my decision immediately and wondered what I had done. There was nothing but trees for miles, where was I, and how could I have made this decision?” Teresa commented that she had anticipated her life would be different from what she was accustomed to, yet she still felt completely unequipped to manage what she came to see as overwhelming differences in context and geography. As mentioned above, Teresa explicitly indicated that her sense of identity was inextricably bonded to the place where she grew up, in ways she herself was not fully aware of until she left. Once in her new place, the realization of these strong connections intensified her initial (negative) response to her new home. Teresa described deeply missing the visual aspects of the place she had left behind, including the close proximity of water. She also deeply missed what she described as “the little things,” such as her favourite market and the general sense of knowing how to get her day-to-day family needs met. Ultimately, Teresa shared that she had not realized how much of her identity had developed in connection with the place in which she had previously lived. These bonds became evident to Teresa herself only once she arrived in her new environment:

I immediately and desperately missed water. I had lived where I could see it every day. There were continuous little things that I had not realized I really valued and that were part of how I felt day-to-day and now I no longer had access to them, such as, walking by the water, or certain little shops. I guess I just didn’t fully understand how much I liked where I lived until I left.
Although Teresa expected her move to northern B.C. would impact her lifestyle to some degree, she was not prepared for such an intense, emotional reaction to the vast disparity between the place she had left behind and the new place she had chosen to work in. In the literature, Zapf (2009) addresses this “place disparity” and “culture shock,” noting that the sense of disparity is a result of the loss of an intense bond an individual has with a certain place that holds meaning for them. In turn, the described geographic disparity appeared to heighten participants’ initial reactions both personally and professionally, as Teresa expressed: “I felt isolated from things that were familiar to me, but I needed the employment experience, and that was where my thoughts were when I agreed to relocate.” Teresa’s sense of isolation was the result of feeling that she had left something behind, rather than the result of living in a physically isolated geographic region.

That sense of isolation and loss seemed to initially hinder Teresa and the other participants from bonding with their new place. In their efforts to cope with their initial negative feelings, participants immediately felt a need to leave and return to their previous locales. Gordon, for example, shared, “I regretted my decision to move up north almost right away and wanted to leave. It is difficult to describe in words how it felt internally to just want to run.” (Note that this impulse appears to reflect a broader trend identified in my earlier literature review: although many social workers may practice very briefly in remote or northern regions, these areas are most often characterized by high turnover rates, which could be due in part to the feelings of loss and isolation expressed by participants in this study.)
Participants indicated they worked through these initial feelings of intense change by reminding themselves that they had committed to staying only temporarily, in order to gain social work experience, and that they would be returning to the place they had left behind within a set period of time. Participants described themselves in relationship to the place they once lived, acknowledging feeling overwhelmed by the extreme difference in geographic surroundings. Those feelings were only exacerbated when they had to fill new, unfamiliar work roles, contributing to an overall sense of displacement.

Participants shared that they gradually, in small ways, began to adjust to the idea of staying for the short term in their chosen remote northern place. The internal acknowledgment of being committed to the short term shifted the participants’ focus to the newness of their work and how to live in remote northern places. Gordon explained his coping strategies by noting: “I stayed believing it would be temporary so I could do it for a short time; it was not at all what I expected…my new job was a very steep learning curve, but I believed I could do it temporarily.” Chris said he found himself constantly going back and forth in his mind about seeing potential in his new opportunity and negotiating the many realities of struggling to fill a brand new, unfamiliar position: “I had mixed feelings of wanting to leave and being excited. I was very uncertain about how to approach my new role and I was not accustomed to how much independence I had, it seemed boundless.” Chris expressed there was no one, such as a supervisor, to tell him what to do or otherwise guide him. He said that such great freedom could leave him feeling unsure at times, and that he found himself naturally wanting to retreat to a place that looked and felt more familiar. Overall, Chris suggested that he yearned for a geographic and personal place that he understood and connected with personally, but the
intrigue of new, unfamiliar territory was captivating to him, and he was unable to dismiss his desire to learn more about it.

Other participants shared Chris’s sense of being unguided, and accordingly felt unnerved as they attempted to negotiate both life and social work practice in their brand new, unfamiliar locale. Several said they had to learn to invite, rather than avoid, relationships, as remote northern lifestyles require recognizing that everything is visibly connected on multiple levels and socially situated in bonds to place. Gordon acknowledged the necessity of relationship building, noting he felt compelled to make “strong connections and building relationships as a framework for practice.” Gordon eventually achieved such a strong social network by meeting his community members twice a week on a bridge that overlooked a river, and just being present within his surroundings. This collective practice, according to Gordon, helped him recognize the importance of establishing and maintaining multiple relationships with those who inhabit his community.

Finally, all four participants suggested that their initial impulse to think “what have I done?” was largely a result of their unfamiliarity with a brand new environment that was different from the more urban setting to which they were accustomed. Gordon, for example, emphasized the realities of transitioning from city life to life in northern B.C.: “As a city person, I did not know what to do. Things were very different, and the day-to-day ways in which I met my needs in the city were different here.” Participants described how even the simpler things, such as access to services and stores, took energy to reshape in their minds. As mentioned above, Teresa repeatedly expressed her feelings of concern and discomfort in her new environment:
When I started my first job, I felt like I was learning to walk all over again. I struggled with not knowing how to apply my skills in a place that, in my mind, lacked everything. The far distances to get to the city for things I might need really concerned me, and that feeling was unlike anything I had felt before.

Initially then, my participants perceived differences between the places to which they were accustomed, and that which they had come to inhabit. These differences were causes for concern and even anxiety for some of my participants, leading them to focus on what was not present in their new environments, as opposed to what was. Although all four participants initially asked themselves “what have I done,” they eventually began to experience subtle shifts in their thinking, finding themselves more open to exploring local services and activities. As I listened to each participant reflect upon this turning point in their perception of their new community, I began to question if this was the beginning of their process of coming to stay.

**Theme Three: Shifting Perspectives: “Aha!” Moments**

All four participants traced very similar narrative trajectories as their interviews progressed, beginning with the shock of having relocated, followed by the regretful “what have I done,” and eventually, a fresh, reframed perspective on life in a northern community. For example, Chris recalled: “When I first arrived here, I ran around feeling out of place for a while, and then I realized, I was the one getting in my own way, because I was trying to work like I was in a bigger city office…which would not work here.” Theme three describes such “Aha!” moments, as experienced by each of my four participants: namely, the point in their narrative that they identify as the moment at which they altered their views about living and practicing in northern B.C. For Chris, that
moment entailed recognizing that he would have to alter his expectations and habits in order to stop living as though he were in a city, and start living a new lifestyle.

Gordon articulated developing a similar understanding that his new life in northern B.C. would have to be different than his old one: “The work is really independent, no one telling you what to do, very little routine, not at all like a city social work office.” Both Gordon and Chris mentioned that they eventually developed alternative conceptions of time, which differed from those they had maintained while living in cities. Gordon contrasted the long periods of time he used to spend on transit in the city with his new reality of “arriving at work in 40 seconds.” Chris highlighted:

I had to shift my thinking about time. I had a strict schedule in my last job, and here things change quickly, sometimes I see one person in a day and other days I see ten. I learned the community members’ way of life was different from my city background and it became easier when I rolled that into my approach to practice.

Chris’s experience with scheduling his meetings does not only have to do with social work practice in remote settings; it also has to do with the pace of life and the flexibility expected in such settings. Chris described remote northern work as far less rigid, and immobile, monotonous, than the schedule many come to expect while living in cities. Chris’s experience highlights that working in a remote northern community is different from more urban experiences in that one’s schedule will often be influenced by community dynamics. Adjusting to these new realities of time and pacing allowed both Chris and Gordon to begin fitting in or becoming more accustomed and attached to their new communities.
Similarly, Gordon suggested that he eventually discovered the need to shift from the more detached or removed demeanor, with a concern for professional boundaries he had cultivated while working in cities to develop a willingness to interact with clients outside of office hours. Due to the small population sizes of their communities, my respondents indicated that everyone in the neighbourhood would know who they were – an extremely rare experience for people used to living in large cities, where the vast majority of people are strangers. Gordon explored this transition from living a low- to high-visibility lifestyle:

When you leave work in the city, there is a clear disconnect from clients, but here you see clients outside work daily. You have to redefine social work concepts to include ‘you’ in the definition, as that is what life is built on in the north, people want to know who you are first and then what your professional role is.

One of Gordon’s “Aha!” moments consisted of his recognition that he would no longer be able to disappear into the crowds, characteristic of the city; rather, his new community members would always recognize him. My participants indicated that this moment of acknowledgment sparked at least the start of a faint desire to stay in their new community. For example, Teresa explained:

People here need to know you so they can place you within the community. It’s a real collective way of knowing and being. People here know who to go to for specific things, such as, guidance, or fishing, so for me to work effectively, people here need to understand how I fit in their place.
Once people began to recognize her, know who she was, and understand the role she had to play in their community, Teresa came to feel as though she had some degree of purpose and belonging in that community. This was the beginning of the roots she would put down in her new home, bonding her to a particular place inhabited by people who made it clear that they needed her.

All four participants acknowledged that the higher degree of visibility they experienced in northern B.C. could be difficult to negotiate at times. For example, it was often challenging to preserve one’s privacy during free time or “off” hours, but each participant shared the strategies they had cultivated in order to manage their visible community profiles. Gordon noted:

You hear people saying you can’t go out and drink, because a client might see you, but really I wouldn’t behave in an outrageous manner in the city, so I think it’s okay to go out socially. It’s interesting to me how some of these ideas become part of practice; here trying to hide having drinks with a friend would make people think you were a phony and not invested in being a member of the community.

Gordon eventually came to adopt (at least some of) the ways of thinking characteristic of northern community members: rather than viewing social drinks in a bar as a negative strike against his reputation as a professional, Gordon was able to develop an insider understanding of how northern community members viewed such practices – namely, as an indicator of his personal investment in his community. His comments suggest that he eventually came to see himself as a northern social worker, or at least, a social worker
who truly and personally understood the norms and expectations of working in northern B.C.

Other participants reported similar experiences, including running into their clients at their children’s schools or sporting events. Like Gordon, Teresa felt largely confident in those interactions: “I explain clearly to my clients that I will see them outside of my office and we talk through boundaries around respecting one another’s personal time.” These conversations with clients surrounding the personal boundaries that social workers themselves required were viewed by my participants as extremely helpful in preventing uncomfortable situations and lowering work-related stress. However, Gordon shared that sometimes, just like anywhere else, “things just happen and you have to deal with them.” Gordon went on to note that “things happen” in the city too, and that what social workers need to remember was “here, when things happen, it reflects life here, just as it would in other places, that’s all.” The participants came to view infringements upon their personal boundaries not as negative aspects of living and working in a remote northern community that deterred their decision to stay there, but rather as part of their job that could affect them in a variety of different locales.

Overall, my participants stated that social work in their remote northern setting required them to become confident with practice that is less structured, more flexible, and largely independent and autonomous. They learned to expect and even enjoy these different conditions only after immersing themselves in northern social work practice for a small amount of time. In addition, each participant reported engaging in deeply personal, individualized processes of identity re-formation, during which they would work to become comfortable and confident with their new role, and with practicing that
role in such a particular setting. For Teresa, this realization came from immersing herself in her new community and learning the many connections that existed across it, which she described in her narrative as “a spider web.” Using her new understanding of the various ways in which her neighbours were interconnected, Teresa was able to expand her understanding of place, coming to appreciate and bond with her new home. Anne, for her part, shared being grateful for the support she received from another social worker when she first arrived. She found it extremely valuable to know that she could talk to someone who understood the place she was now residing and working in. Ultimately, each of the participants reported experiencing an “Aha!” moment that marked the beginning of their formation of ties and bonds with the places they now inhabited and in turn, the beginning of their journey of coming to stay.

**Theme Four: Autonomous Development of a Community Professional Identity**

All four participants stated that working in their remote northern settings contributed fundamentally to shaping their personal and professional identities, and that such a formative experience had bonded them strongly with the place where it had all happened. For example, Gordon felt strongly that his “previous work in the city doesn’t hold a candle to the skill I gained in remote northern practice,” and “it adapted the way I understood social work, ethics, and the guidelines we are required to follow. It changed me as a professional and a person.” Anne reported: “being here assisted me with developing my professional identity and along the way I also learned a lot about myself.” Without having worked in northern B.C., Anne and Gordon suggested that they would not have grown into the people they are today, rendering them forever bonded to the places that contributed to shaping their identities.
Central to this process of identity formation was the opportunity to make decisions independently. Such independence and autonomy guided the participants into a more reflective approach to their practice, as they took this decision-making ability seriously. For example, the participants repeatedly described how they questioned themselves continuously with regards to what “ethical practice” could mean in their current context. This line of questioning forced them to grapple more deeply with the new places they were inhabiting, and the behaviours and attitudes that were appropriate within these contexts.

All four participants expressed how the inherent autonomy found in remote northern practice helped them develop as professionals. Specifically, participants were forced to rely on their own assessments and skills, since they were left without the guidance or even influence of larger service agencies and structures. This style of practice was preferred by all four participants. Anne, for example, articulated that:

The process of living here has taught me how to practice in a way that is congruent with who I am, and still follow the professional values of social work practice. Although I understand there are professional and personal differences in some areas, here you need to understand them as together.

Chris similarly indicated, “I feel like I do better practice here. There tends to be closer relationships and higher levels of trust between professionals, a kind of understanding about community life.” Teresa said this degree of independence was initially daunting for her, as she “was unprepared for the freedom and expectation to make decisions independently at first, and it was a big pressure for me…I was used to having restrictions and requiring approvals at each step.” However, she then noted: “If you can think beyond
generalist practice, because the work is more complex than that, and by complex I don’t mean bad, it’s connected with where you are, then you can really enhance your social work skills greatly.” Gordon also explained: “Unlike working in a structured office setting in the city, I had lots of freedom, and because I was directing how I wanted to enhance my social work identity, that freedom was wonderful.” Each participant reported feeling a sense of freedom, independence, or autonomy directly due to their new location. They attributed their newly formed personal and professional identities to that freedom to explore and rely upon themselves, rendering their sense of self a product of the northern locale in which they were living and working.

In sum, while the degree of freedom and independence was daunting at first for some of my participants, all four of them eventually came to view such independence as professionally and personally freeing. Geographical space had left each of my participants as the sole social workers for their respective communities, and this in turn created more metaphorical space for them to explore and create new modes of practice that they viewed as more in tune with the places in which they were working. Such space also encouraged self-explorations and discoveries that apparent during the storytelling process of my interviews: I witnessed each participant smile and share gestures that expressed a comfort with how far they felt they had come in their personal and professional lives as a result of having moved to northern B.C., and how much their new found sense of self had bonded them to the place in which this transition occurred.

Theme Five: Who I am, Not What I am

The importance of strong relationships was discussed by participants as central to their newly formed identities, and in turn, to their connections with their new northern
participants identified a variety of differences between living in larger cities and northern, smaller communities. In the city, my participants said they had been merely acquainted with their neighbours, and would exchange short, polite interactions when they ran into each other. By contrast,
in northern B.C., participants reported that everyone knew details about everyone else, forging a much more closely knit community. As Gordon noted:

“If you come out, work, and leave, even if it’s just to your house and people don’t see you, then no one wants to talk to you because they don’t think you are interested in the community, honest participation is important for you in staying and the community as it is how small communities function.”

Therefore, central to my participants’ decision to stay was their ability to forge strong personal relationships with their neighbours that they described as assisting them to feel like members of their new communities. This sense of personal bonding also supported my participants to feel as though they were better able to do their jobs, which further facilitated their sense of belonging in place. For example, Teresa talked about the need for community members to know who she was on a personal level before engaging in a working relationship: “It’s important for people to know how to place you, as they already know everyone else and a new social worker brings a new dynamic to the community.” Chris similarly commented: “You have to approach social work in the north differently and understand that for the first little while you focus on meeting people and letting them get to know you.” Theresa and Chris’s comments highlight specific aspects important or relevant to the practice of social work in northern communities, and are also discussed as central to their decision to stay in such communities. Teresa and Chris imply that if they had not figured out how to successfully practice in their new neighbourhoods, and if community members had rejected them as outsiders who were unwilling to become members of their community, they may not have enjoyed life in remote northern B.C. to the degree that they did. Their narratives of coming to stay could have accordingly
morphed into narratives of being pushed out or developing a desire to leave, having failed to acclimatize to the needs of their community, or to develop the sense that their community members needed and wanted them.

Moreover, the specific practice styles adopted by participants appear to have contributed to building and solidifying their bonds with their communities, further encouraging them to stay in place. For example, participants articulated the need to apply group processes at a community level, as exemplified by Gordon: “I guess it is a collectivist idea, everyone knows everything, and like it or not, you rely on each other, and it’s important to be able to do that.” Chris similarly stated, “I worked to have strong relationships with everyone, informal helpers, other professionals, and community members that wanted to be involved.” Chris and Gordon recognized important contextual aspects of community practice, opting instead to practice in a way that allowed for considerations of the wider community’s needs. Moreover, my participants came to conceive of themselves not as autonomously operating individuals, but rather, as important contributors to a bigger system. Participants described themselves as part of their community, and understood that relationships in place were important to guarantee the success of their social work, but also contributed to their personal success and happiness. These relationships were also important to participants as people and members of the community, which enhanced an unspoken bond between them, and the place where they chose to live and work, as demonstrated in their individual narratives.

**Theme Six: Living Within the Results**

Participants discussed the ability to see the results of their work as valuable to their practice. Anne enthusiastically shared, “I get the opportunity to help people and
actually see the outcomes of my work. This is possible because I live here, so over time you continue to see change.” In a remote northern community, participants said their ability to work with clients over the long term, to know people more personally by virtue of being their neighbours, and to see them operating more healthily and happily in their daily lives provided them with the fulfilling experience of witnessing positive changes stemming from their practice. This is not to say that the participants did not have negative experiences. For example, Gordon received feedback from a youth who was now an adult that Gordon had made the wrong decision in regards to his plan of care years prior. However, in both cases it appears that the participants’ social work practice spilled over into successful personal and professional gains, which influenced their enjoyment of and attachment to their communities. For Anne, this was powerful, as she indicated, that in social work practice workers often interact with clients for one brief moment of their lives. By contrast, choosing to stay in a remote place created the opportunity for her to witness a client’s journey over time. Anne discussed staying as offering fulfillment from being part of long term outcomes and a social context of participation not available as visibly or perhaps as intimately in larger centers. This process links back to theme four of personal and professional development: enjoying her clients’ successes allowed Anne to feel increasingly confident in her role as social worker, contributing to the ongoing formation of her personal and professional identities as deeply rooted in northern place. Teresa, for her part, described this process as making her feel as though she were part of something bigger than herself; like Anne, Teresa came to understand contextually being part of the ongoing process of helping people make long-term changes, and over time
was naturally compelled to stay in her northern B.C. community in order to observe success among the people she viewed as both clients and at times, friends.

Gordon also enjoyed these phenomena: “you get to be part of people’s stumbles and watch as they come to a decision that moves them forward.” Participants acknowledged that in larger centers, they did not know their clients outside their practice, and often found themselves wondering what had become of a particular client. In remote northern work, by contrast, their shared personal connections with their communities allowed them to discern details they would have otherwise been left to wonder about. This was demonstrated in Teresa’s comment: “You get to see and live the outcomes and progress.” She went on to note that her “practice is benefitted by the type of feedback that social workers don’t normally get because of where it is situated. For example, if a client decides not to come back in the city, you may not ever see them again, but here you will, so you have to work things through.” The realities of living and working in a small, isolated community motivated Teresa to find the best possible solutions for clients she knew she would remain closely connected with, providing her with an incentive to more deeply invest herself in her community.

Anne also found herself becoming rooted to her northern B.C. community due precisely to the work she was performing there: “watching families grow and interact, in some cases, for a number of years, is an amazing opportunity and privilege.” The process of coming to stay, for Anne, was therefore in part motivated by a desire to witness the fruits of her labour. The overall sentiment from my participants, as exemplified in each of their narratives, was that they had developed substantial portions of their professional skill sets specifically from practicing in northern, remote regions, and that they therefore
owed at least some degree of their sense of self as social workers to the places they now inhabited. Their described newfound ability to practice more holistically due to the numerous personal connections made with clients was clearly conveyed. For example, Anne shared, “I learned how to engage people on deeper levels, because I see them all the time, not only as clients, but as neighbours, and that has been really important.” The successful outcomes of these new modes of social work practice only compelled my participants to stay, as they wanted to observe the positive outcomes of their work manifest amongst those who were more than just clients in their eyes.

**Theme Seven: I am a Remote Northern Social Worker**

The final emergent theme expressed by participants was a newfound self-perception as a remote northern social worker. This new identity was forged exclusively as a result of having practiced in remote northern regions, and was therefore grounded in an important transitional moment of finally coming to feel as though one “belonged” in such a place. Both Anne and Gordon said simply, “I plan to stay here until I retire.” Chris shared: “I never planned on staying, but after I had practiced in a few remote northern places, I just stayed.”

All four participants described their commitment to remaining where they worked as stemming from two main categories: their professional careers, and their personal lifestyles. Remote northern place provided my participants with the space to grow and explore who they are as professional social workers and simply as people. As a result, place socially expanded to consist of family and community, and each participant was able to find his or her own sense of home. The contextual element facilitating my participants’ wish to continue living and practicing social work in a remote northern
region was captured by Gordon when he stated, “The north is a bigger community than the city….even though remote northern communities are at a distance from one another, there is a mutual understanding of the meaning of participating in community life.” The result was a feeling that he was part of something bigger than himself, or his current place.

All four participants reflected on the fact that practicing in remote, northern communities had allowed them to become the social workers and people who they are today. Gordon explained that “the opportunity to self-direct and develop your practice is higher in the north,” and that he also enjoyed “the freedom to try new approaches, or create new ideas in meaningful ways” specifically due to the place in which he was practicing. Similarly, Teresa noted: “northern practice offers workers the opportunity to be more in charge of their work and what that work is going to look like” (Teresa). By expanding their practices in directions they may have otherwise failed to explore, my participants became different people as well. In turn, the participants’ personal and professional identities came to be deeply rooted in place.

Teresa similarly reflected upon the value of having to adjust to her new, initially foreign locale: “I have reframed many of the concepts we were taught in school to fit with the place I now live and call home.” These exercises in adjustment forced Teresa to test herself, both in terms of her professional skill set, as well as in terms of her personal qualities of determination and perseverance. Having pushed through the initially challenging phases of transition and adjustment, participants reported feeling more confident in their skills as social workers, and more grounded as community members.
Completing these challenges in a particular place resulted in participants coming to identify that place as their new “home.”

Finally, all four participants noted that residing in the remote north enhanced the quality of life they were able to provide for their families. For example, Anne stated that “it has been great for my family” and “I know we would not have all we do if we lived in a larger center.” Teresa reflected upon the outdoor adventures that she and her family repeatedly embark upon, in addition to relishing the endless space they can enjoy as truly liberating: “We have experienced the outdoors in ways I would never have never done, like fishing, hunting, and camping trips.” Gordon also shared that “we have a large acreage, which we would never have, or be able to afford, in the city and because things are cheaper, my wife was able to stay home with our children which she had always hoped for.” Providing such wonderful places for their families to flourish furthered the number and depth of roots that my participants were able to put down in their new communities. Allowing their children to bond with remote northern places encouraged my participants to continue bonding with those places themselves, providing yet another motivating factor in their decision to stay. With their family members establishing bonds with their remote northern communities, my participants were merely pushed along the path towards calling these places “home.”

**Honouring Individual Voices**

Three additional points highly relevant to my research question emerged in individual transcripts, but not consistently across all of the narratives. First, Teresa spoke to the disparity between academic learning and experiential learning stating, “understanding the challenges associated with working in a remote northern community
and experiencing them are two very different things.” While the other three participants did not explicitly refer to this phenomenon, the idea of practical experience prior to relocation may have influenced some of their initial reactions described in theme two, which is reflected in current literature focused on previous rural exposure (Cameron, 2010). However, Teresa most pointedly engaged with this concept, highlighting that despite her awareness that life in the remote north would be different from city life and pose some challenges, she was nevertheless shocked upon actually arriving and experiencing those challenges for herself.

Second, only one participant acknowledged the potential for rapid advancement in northern areas. All four participants had initially planned to relocate back to urban areas after they gained some practical experience, but one participant’s decision to stay was motivated in part by the realization that promotion opportunities were more plentiful in smaller communities with less professional competition. My other participants, by contrast, were more wary of increased responsibilities, as they made evident with their initial anxieties regarding how to make independent decisions and work without direct supervision and guidance.

The final important point in the individual narratives was the idea of “in the city.” Participants made comments reflecting upon certain specialized services that had been available in the city, and the lack of those services in the remote north. In addition to workplace comparisons, participants discussed social amenities specific to a city location. In both personal and professional references, participants appeared to adjust, as described in themes three and four. In addressing these concerns, participants described a natural process of learning new ways of problem solving and advocacy work, in addition to a
new way of approaching social activities. Specifically, Teresa highlighted that she eventually learned to love being outdoors in a way that was impossible in the city. She also noted that she appreciated that her children could not be “plugged in” constantly.

The themes presented to this point highlight specific details contained in the narrative analysis of Phase One. These themes assist with conceptualizing some of the key concepts within the participants’ position and transition to remaining in the remote north. My participants’ stories portray remote northern life in terms of its tight-knit communities, independent and autonomous work style, and spill-over between personal and professional life. Having lived in such unique locales for extended periods of time, these places eventually came to shape the ways in which my participants saw themselves, their place within their community, and the value they brought to that community. Over time, these ever-deepening connections to place created a sense of home. In the next section of analysis, Phase Three, a meta-analysis focused on identifying change elements.

**Phase Three: Meta-analysis**

In Phase Three of the analysis, the data was examined in search of change composition. In this phase of analysis, I examined the data to reveal concepts of professional and personal change moments based on the reality of remote northern contexts described across all four participant narratives. To this end, the transcripts were read for the moments of change presented by Lieblich et al. (1998) as “before,” “transition period,” and “after.” I read and re-read for phrases and applied the same coding process as applied in Phase Two, with a focus on highlighting moments of change or transition in each participant’s experience of practice and life in remote northern regions. I searched for content concepts that represented, in each participant’s experience,
the transitions of *Coming Here* through *Staying Here*. Through this process, three overarching meta-themes were identified: Unforeseen Transformation to a Commitment to Place, New Emergence of a Strong Personal and Professional Identity, and A Change in Relationship with Place.

**Unforeseen Transformation to a Commitment to Place**

All four participants discussed different pivotal moments that sparked and shaped the process over which they came to stay in the remote north. In the beginning, participants expressed coming to the north intending to stay only temporarily; they were solely seeking employment experience that would allow them to obtain what they then viewed as “better” opportunities in an urban center. In other words, their position in the remote north was initially seen as a means to a more desirable end, rather than a position that they might eventually come to love and maintain. Immediately following relocation, participants described intense feelings of regret over having left the places they knew and had established bonds with. They then came to feel overwhelmed, believing they lacked the skills required for social work in a remote northern context. As their narratives progressed, however, they each articulated important turning points that marked subtle transformations in their initial impressions of the remote northern places in which they had settled. Each participant storied a number of smaller, unique interactions that, when considered in sum, created points of change: for example, some reported engaging in local music, silently being present on a bridge, visiting and also learning while sitting by the water, and engaging local people as part of addressing community concerns. None of the participants indicated a specific moment at which they suddenly knew they “belonged” in their remote northern community; rather, it was only by reflecting back
upon their experiences and narrating them in story form that my participants were able to pull together a variety of interactions or experiences, and assert that those moments contributed to their initial considerations of coming to stay. After my last interview, I captured this reflection in my field journal:

*I find it intriguing that the participants have, in many ways, made purposeful decisions that are directly connected to their changes in perception of community life, however appear unaware how these smaller seemingly unimportant moments have contributed greatly to their current perception of remote north. Their stories remind me of how I visualize sculpting my next art project. I begin with a solid block and without really thinking about each little piece I slice off, how many times I smooth over one angle in the clay, or what it will actually look like in the end, I eventually create a piece of art that has meaning to me and in that moment it all makes sense.*

The progression of these smaller changes in perspectives often occurred randomly and slowly, and yet, these subtle changes constituted some of the fundamental parts of my participants’ larger perceptual change towards the north. Gordon described the culmination of this process as “becoming a northern person,” suggesting that the end result of bonding with a particular place is that one becomes a new “person” who is intimately bound to that new locale. He detailed the series of small changes in perception that led to his “becoming a northern person” as follows:

*Here is a funny ending to my story. Remember, at the beginning when I was talking about my shock when the waitress brought me coffee and joined me at my table? Well, on one of my trips to the coast to see my dad he needed something*
from the store and I told him I would go get it for him. I went to the store and as I
approached the counter to pay I started chatting with the counter person working
that day. As I leaned on the counter waiting to pay, I suddenly became very aware
that she was uncomfortable, backing away from me, with a stiff grin. In that
moment I realized I was experiencing a total about face, recalling my own
reaction to the café waitress when I first moved up north. I was a northerner.

As I listened to Gordon share this piece of his story, it was clear that this one brief
interaction signified to him that he had truly connected with his new place. His shifts in
perception of the north had been so subtle, and had occurred so gradually, that it had not
even occurred to him that he had adopted a new way of seeing that was more
characteristic of his northern neighbours than of his city ones. Only in retrospect did
Gordon experience this moment of awareness, during which he finally became able to
link his former perception of the café worker with the urban store employee’s perception
of himself. In his interview, he explicitly mentioned that he had not really thought
through how he went from his first interaction to this critical moment; although he stated
the aftermath of the transition felt good, it unfolded in such a subtle way as to remain
unapparent to him as it actually happened. Such subtlety rendered my participants’
transformations all the more surprising and unexpected: not only was their love of the
remote north unanticipated, given that they had relocated there purely for occupational
opportunities, but it was rendered that much more surprising by unfolding so slowly so as
to only become noticeable after it had taken place.
New Emergence of a Strong Personal and Professional Identity

Participants in this research began their stories by describing their initial social work practice experience as a state of chaos. Even with their knowledge of generalist practice skills, participants expressed uncertainty about how they could conduct social work in a remote northern region. All four expressed further unease with regards to extreme independence and a lack of supervision. Similar to aspects in the literature on culture shock (Delaney & Brownlee, 2002; Zapf, 1993), life and social work practice in the remote north was described as so foreign, my participants reported ongoing states of anxiety in both their personal and professional lives upon first relocating. However, similar to the shifts in perspective described in the Unexpected Transformation theme above, participants indicated that they quickly began to actively rethink their professional skills and adapt their lifestyles in order to adjust to their new locales. Eventually, they claimed that they developed well-defined contextual personal and professional identities in which they are deeply confident, and which they owe to their remote northern contexts. Teresa described this contextual evolution specific to her experience of realizing the importance of the connections between the personal and professional in community, in unforgettable terms:

Picture a beautiful big spider’s web sparkling in the sunshine. Each thread is extremely fragile on its own and sparkles in its own way, but each thread is also connected to another thread which is connected to the larger structure which makes it strong. The web has been built in a specific place that has meaning to why it is there. Equally, if you damage one thread the entire structure is
compromised. You have to practice thinking about all those pieces with each decision you make.

Having developed a new sense of self as a result of working in a remote northern locale, participants reported having that new identity reinforced by continually engaging with clients they had helped. Gordon, for example, explained: “I get the opportunity to help people and actually see the outcomes of my work—how often does that happen?” As explored in greater detail above, the opportunity to witness the positive outcomes of one’s work strengthened the participants’ bonds with their spatial contexts: the new places they inhabited propelled them towards new practice techniques, and they were able to witness the success of those techniques due to the smaller and more tightly-knit nature of their remote northern communities.

Finally, Anne illustrated the circular or mutually reinforcing effects of personal and professional identity cultivation: “The process of living here has taught me how to practice in a way that is congruent with who I am, and still follows the professional values of social work practice, and along the way I learned a lot about myself.” Anne, like my other participants, suggests that she had to experience life in this particular remote northern community in order to both better understand herself as a person and, in turn, develop a mode of social work practice that she feels aligns well with that place-defined sense of self.

**A Change in Relationship with Place**

Gordon, Teresa, Anne, and Chris eventually came to embrace their new geographic locations in the fullest sense. Notably, their conceptualization of “place”
came to involve not only the physical terrain and spaces they inhabited and worked in, but also the people who were integral to making their communities “home.” It is challenging to articulate the innumerable details participants ascribed to place, as with each sentence, they touched on their experiences of naturally connecting people, land, and community. In the end, the process of bonding with one’s place – including the people who inhabited it – culminated in a change in my participants’ individual understandings of what constitutes a happy personal and professional life.

For example, Gordon stated that his wife was able to stay home with their children – an arrangement that was important and desirable for them as parents. Teresa, for her part, shared an appreciation for the number of outdoor adventures that she and her children had the opportunity to participate in; her youngsters are not, as she put it, “plugged in” to technology for most of their waking hours. Every participant noted that the seemingly endless space surrounding them actually provided a strong sense of place and home. They also tended to juxtapose their new northern homes against their former city ones, noting in particular that urban dwellers tend to maintain merely respectful relationships with their neighbour, but generally do not know much at all about them as people. In addition, each participant noted that they were able to disconnect from their clients when they worked in the city, and in turn, maintain a private life wholly distinct from their working lives. Such privacy was noted as being of importance to participants prior to their relocation. Part of the transition to viewing the remote north as “home” involved acknowledging the bond they had with their previous urban life, and then exploring ways to let go of their urban-formed views of the remote north. Eventually, all
of my participants would re-work both their personal and professional identities to reflect their new locales.

Summary

Chapter Five provides the results of my narrative analysis through a thematic process. The analysis highlights transitional points in the participants’ experiences as they adapted both personally and professionally from a familiar urban position, to an entirely new place within a remote northern context that initially appeared daunting and foreign to each of them. The words and phrases that made up the resulting themes represent my interpretation of the participants’ meaning, stemming from their lived experiences of social work in remote northern B.C.

The meta-themes in Phase Three of the analysis reflect concepts that focus on change. The meta-themes captured complex meanings identified in the narratives that were not brought forward explicitly by participants. Chapter six includes a discussion of these findings, an exploration of their connections to the existing literature, and future research implications.
Chapter Six: Rethinking How We Approach Our Understanding of Remote Northern Social Work

This research used the personal, narrated experiences of four social workers living and working in remote northern areas of British Columbia as an avenue through which to explore why and how some social workers ultimately decide to make remote northern areas their homes. These four stories are not intended to represent the experiences of all remote northern social workers, nor are they meant to define what social work practice in remote northern regions is. That said, aspects of Gordon, Teresa, Anne, and Chris’s stories, presented in Chapter Four, or my interpretive thematic analysis presented in Chapter Five, may resonate with social workers working in northern regions. Their narratives demonstrate that coming to stay is a process; an ongoing, long-term and often gradual process. Whereas the existing literature highlights many negative experiences, such as culture shock or burnout, my research suggests that these common experiences are sometimes worked through. Thus, while much of the existing literature focuses on cross-sectional analyses, capturing only positive or negative snapshots of social workers’ experiences, narrative inquiry allowed me to explore the ways in which these practitioners can establish an ongoing, deeply personal and subjective attachment to spaces and places over time.

In this chapter, I present the three-part narrative process that all four participants seem to have followed as they bonded with and decided to stay in their remote northern settings (Coming Here, Being Here, and Staying Here). In addition, I will discuss aspects of narrative inquiry and how this approach offered a new contribution to the unfolding process of coming to stay that may not have been possible with other research.
methodologies. However, I feel it is important to begin this chapter by acknowledging the four social workers who took the time to share their unique experiences, and honor their individual voices with a discussion of the unique features of each of their stories.

**Honouring the Uniqueness of Each Participants’ Narrative**

Gordon’s narrative exemplifies the sheer force of some of the negative aspects of social work practice in the north identified in previous research, and provides a particularly compelling example of moving through culture shock to eventually enjoy a highly positive perception and experience of northern communities. Specifically, his fear of the lack of medical services actually drove him to quit his first position as a social worker in Kelowna in the early 80s. He had returned home to the city briefly after falling ill and was denied a request to spend a further six months in the city in order to fully recover. In response, Gordon actually changed careers into real estate temporarily, but was prompted to return to social work by sheer coincidence when he viewed a particularly compelling television program where a social worker voiced the reality of her work. His narrative is also unique in its irony: Gordon had originally agreed to work in Kelowna because he had been promised the financial incentive of compensation towards the costs of his degree. He was then attracted to his career in real estate because it was financially lucrative, and he enjoyed the stability that accompanied the new job. Yet, the rewards of social work were so evident to him that he eventually decided to return to his initial career, although that return would mean a loss of the financial stability he had come to know. Later, when he relocated to an even smaller, more isolated place to practice social work, Gordon ironically found the differences from city life appealing, as opposed to appalling, as he had experienced his first time. Gordon’s narrative exemplifies
the importance of place, rather than merely the significance of a love for social work practice. Although he was inspired by the television show to return to a meaningful, rewarding job, Gordon also experienced a shift in his perspective of city and remote northern life. His visit to his friends’ house changed his view of the north from restricting and isolating, to freeing and liberating, which he expressed in terms of dreading returning to rush hour traffic. Therefore, rather than viewing a northern practice setting as a challenging sacrifice he would have to endure in order to obtain meaningful work, Gordon actively desired to work in a remote northern place. Gordon creatively summarized his transformation of coming to stay in the conclusion to his narrative highlighting the reaction of the store clerk as he leaned on the counter to talk to her, and seeing the look of fear on her face prompted Gordon to reflect on his initial reaction to the waitress when he arrived in the north.

Teresa’s narrative is unique in that she immediately and intensely recognized the significance of place for her personal sense of self and happiness, thereby demonstrating the relevance of the literature on place discussed in my earlier literature review. The very first thing she mentioned when reflecting upon her initial move to the north was that she had never before lived away from the coast, and that being away from the water felt intensely “claustrophobic.” The weather proved similarly challenging for Teresa in particular, once again because she had been acclimatized to much more mild temperatures, only to be thrown into what she described as the “bitter cold.” Teresa disliked her initial experiences in the north to such an intense degree that she might have followed in Gordon’s footsteps and returned to the city and the coast, had her children not been with her. Her narrative implies that the move was all the more significant and trying
because she had relocated her entire family to the north, and as a result, she had to “make things work.” Teresa’s narrative is particularly interesting because, unlike Gordon, who obtained a position first and moved to the north second in order to accept that position, Teresa moved to the north first, and then began seeking the work that she had heard was so much more readily available. Interestingly, it seems almost as though feelings of guilt at having moved her family far north kept Teresa there until she could find the work she was seeking, as she did not see leaving as an option for her and her family. Later, Teresa shares her joy at how easily and quickly her children bonded to their new home, and by extension how they created their new sense of home and all the possibilities that came with their new surroundings.

Anne is the only one of the four participants to have been born and raised in a small, northern community, who left, and later returned to her home community – the very same one in which she grew up – following the completion of her degree. Acknowledging her upbringing, Anne was presumably acclimatized to life in the north – and this particular northern setting - yet she nevertheless experienced many of the same struggles and difficulties adjusting to working there that other participants had experienced. Her work, and that of her husband, brought her “full circle,” yet she somehow also followed the same narrative arc that the other three social workers in my study experienced. For instance, similar to other participants, Anne indicated that she and her husband initially intended to stay in the north only temporarily for a maximum of two years. Over time, as their bonds with their neighbourhood and attachments with the people who lived there deepened, they eventually came to acknowledge that they wanted to stay and even retire in their remote place. Upon reflection, Anne’s narrative
demonstrates her unique experience of how she eventually came to re-establish a sense of “home” in the very place where she had grown up and that she considered to be home from a young age. By contrast, my other participants came to view entirely new, initially foreign places of work and residence as “home” after leaving their previous homes and forging bonds with their new communities.

Chris’s narrative rests in the gradual nature of his transition to life in the north. My other participants narrated their moves as jarring, shocking, and rather instantaneous changes, during which they picked up and moved from a bustling city to a small, quiet, northern community. By contrast, Chris detailed how he was initially sent to Prince George for training, then to a somewhat smaller community for further training, and then finally to the community for which he had been recruited to work – the smallest of them all. He explicitly acknowledges this gradual decline in the scale of the communities, explaining: “It was an interesting transition as each place was smaller than the last.”

Although one might assume that these incremental moves would help acclimatize Chris to his end destination, thereby somewhat supporting Miller and Ray’s (1986) theory of anticipatory socialization, his narrative also follows the three-phase narrative arc that I will outline in greater detail below. Namely, as he is making his way to his new place of work, Chris points out things he has never seen before, such as single-lane bridges, and highlights that the place through which he is travelling is already subverting his expectations and assumptions, including a lack of convenience stores or restaurants where he might have found something to eat. Chris’s narrative exemplifies the virtual inevitability of surprise experienced by my participants: regardless of the fact that he had experienced similar small and northern communities in B.C., or that he had met and
talked with another social worker who had practiced in the very community to which he was headed, Chris was nevertheless continuously shocked by the differences between city and northern life as he made his way farther north. Chris both supports and somewhat undercuts Miller’s (1986) theory of anticipatory socialization, as he gained some degree of exposure to remote and northern communities before settling in one, yet nevertheless experienced some degree of culture shock after completing his final move to the most northern region. However, some degree of culture shock may be expected, even for those with prior exposure, and Chris worked through that shock in order to eventually consider northern B.C. “home.”

**Connecting Narrative Findings to the Existing Literature**

Under-staffing and high turnover rates among social workers in remote and northern communities have been extensively researched. As described in Chapter Two, this large body of literature explores the ways in which the terms rural, remote, and northern have come to be understood in different ways, the unique hardships associated with living and practicing in these locales, and in turn, the push factors that so often motivate social workers to leave after only a short period of practice, or that deter them from practicing in these regions in the first place. Specifically, living and working in remote northern areas has been found to be correlated with culture shock, burnout, isolation, and dual relationships (Schmidt & Klein, 2004; Zapf, 1993, 2002, 2009). Knowledge of these challenges typically discourages social workers from pursuing employment in the remote north. While many of the described challenges associated with professionals working in the remote north are valid aspects of non-urban areas, over time they have also become the dominant narrative of what living and working in these areas
involves, silencing other perceptions. However, the literature does contain a secondary narrative describing people who enjoy non-urban settings, specific to individuals with previous exposure to northern areas (Cameron, 2008; Daniels et al., 2007). The secondary narrative linking previous exposure to higher satisfaction rates among professionals supports anticipatory socialization theories, which suggest that in order to improve recruitment and retention rates, more social workers must be educated and trained in the rural, remote, or northern areas in which they will eventually work (Miller & Ray, 1986).

Clearly documented in the current literature is the idea that in order to facilitate the retention of social workers in remote northern regions, researchers need to focus further attention on the “pull factors,” or variables that contribute to encouraging social workers to stay and continue practicing in these areas (Graham et al., 2008; Graham et al., 2011; Zapf, 2009). In line with these suggestions, I have analyzed the narratives of four social workers living and practicing in northern B.C. to gain some new insights into the processes through which these individuals eventually decided to stay. My research therefore complements the existing literature, acknowledging that the social workers who participated in my study were indeed reluctant to move to the north, and did endure some challenges, but were eventually able to establish deep bonds with their new places and communities. The specific contributions associated with my narrative inquiry approach are outlined in greater detail in a later section of this chapter. Here, I outline the findings of my research that confirm those presented in earlier studies, as well as the positive aspects of northern social work practice that are less easily identifiable in the existing literature.
First, in confirmation of previous findings, participants indicated that they were confronted with several challenges upon arriving in northern B.C. The existing literature suggests that social workers in remote or northern regions often feel as though they work in relative isolation, with little guidance, supervision, or mentorship (Collier, 2006; Ginter, 2005; Paziuk, 1992; Zapf, 1993). All four participants confirmed that they initially felt such concerns regarding the nature of their work as it related to the north, mentioning that they perceived they were expected to be “really independent,” and that they “lacked routine or direction.” Gordon, Teresa, Anne, and Chris all explicitly recognized that many of their initial responses to working in the north aligned with the literature that describes culture shock, burnout, and isolation (Collier, 2006; Schmidt, 2004; Zapf, 1993). However, participants also discussed in great detail the strategies they eventually developed to redefine these initially negative responses, and the ways in which that process of reforming and problem management came to shape their personal and professional identities. Ultimately, as will be outlined in greater detail below, my participants came to enjoy and appreciate these aspects of practicing in the north, stating that they enjoyed having the freedom to practice how they saw fit, to make decisions independently and autonomously, and to effectively be their own bosses. In sum, my findings confirm previous research that finds living and working in the remote north can be challenging, but also expands on those findings by exploring the ways in which some social workers are able to transition towards viewing those challenges as opportunities for personal and professional growth.
Narrative Inquiry and Thematic Analyses: the Ongoing Process of Coming to Stay

As I conducted both my narrative and thematic analyses, my focus remained on exploring the ongoing processes through which social workers ultimately decide to continue living and working in remote northern regions. In this section, I reflect upon the narratives of Gordon, Teresa, Chris, and Anne, and the connections drawn between these narratives and my thematic analysis. I suggest a sequential process that occurred over time, across which they each came to understand, bond with, and stay in places within northern B.C. The following three sections titled *Coming Here, Being Here, and Staying Here* trace the unfolding of this process, with each section providing contextual, subjective details from each participant’s narrative in order to illuminate the larger process of change through which they ultimately decide to stay in remote northern place.

**Figure 8. Transforming Process**

**Setting the Stage: Coming Here**

The first chapter in the participant narratives suggests that all four social workers possessed preconceived notions of remote and northern regions that were largely influenced by their educational experiences in urban settings. The minimal information they had obtained about living and practicing in these regions, however, left them
insufficiently prepared for when they would encounter remote northern regions. Specifically, in Chapter Two, I draw on literature that suggests social workers practicing in the remote north often find themselves working in isolation, with little supervision or mentorship from senior social workers, and having limited access to support services (Balance et al., 2009; Crago et al., 1996; Manahan, 2008; Schmidt & Klein, 2004). Other studies highlight that life in remote northern regions is typically burdened with culture shock, burnout, isolation, and dual relationships, (Schmidt, 2008; Zapf, 1993). Although participants were made aware of these concepts and perhaps other practice tensions or challenges as part of moving to northern B.C., my participants indicated that they nevertheless perceived a gap between what they had been educated to expect and what they actually experienced.

For example, all of the participants suggested that they read or were taught that living and practicing in remote northern regions was inhospitable, intensely challenging, and in many ways an undesirable lifestyle that most social workers would not want to maintain any longer than necessary (Graham et al., 2011; Zapf, 1993, 2001). When they decided to relocate to northern B.C., this grand narrative that they had been taught greatly influenced their initial expectations and perceptions of their remote northern place. In particular, all of the participants indicated that they initially set out to northern B.C. with the intention of staying there very temporarily. Their goal was to obtain work experience that would buttress their chances of obtaining advanced employment positions in urban areas. As a result, they resolved to endure the challenges they had been taught to expect alongside living and working in the remote north, in order to obtain the experience they required to obtain work in what they then believed to be more desirable locales.
The literature I reviewed in Chapter Two frames anticipatory socialization – or previous exposure to rural, northern, or remote areas – as one potential means by which we might address the high turnover rates and lower retention rates of social workers in these regions. As mentioned, previous experience living or working in a remote northern area has been found to predict a smoother, easier adjustment to living in similar regions again later in life. By contrast, those who have never lived, worked, or otherwise been exposed to remote northern regions typically find it more challenging to acclimatize themselves to life in these areas. My research builds upon these existing findings by including the notion of spatiality: people bond with and attach themselves to particular places often over longer periods of time (Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2013). Those who have prior experience with such places may be able to continue to build on their existing bonds and attachments when they return to similar locales later in life. Yet in addition, the notion of people-as-place relationships, that was the focus of my research, suggests that even those without such prior exposure may come to develop similarly deep bonds and attachments after spending time in remote northern regions.

Anne’s narrative highlights some of the complications with anticipatory socialization, as well as some of the ways in which considerations of spatiality and place theories might compliment the notion of prior exposure. Anne grew up in a small northern community that she eventually left to attend university in a more central, urban place. Upon completing her degree and returning to the remote north for employment, Anne found herself struggling to re-acclimatize and feel at home again. Even though Anne possessed the very type of previous exposure that, according to the theory of anticipatory socialization (Miller & Ray, 1986), should have rendered her an ideal
candidate to practice social work in a remote northern region, she found her return deeply challenging and was not able to readjust as easily as this theory suggests. As noted by Gillespie and Redivo (2012b), one of the issues Anne faced in the first phase of “Coming Here” in this three-part journey, was adjusting to dual relationships, despite her more in-depth knowledge of the realities of life in remote northern locales.

Participants also reflected upon the significance of people-as-place bonds during this first phase of “Coming Here” by reflexively identifying the importance of their previous places for their personal identities. While they do not specifically apply the people-as-place term coined by Zapf (2009), they exemplified Zapf’s term in their discussion of “Coming Here.” Only by *Coming Here*, did participants gain a complete understanding of the extent to which their prior homes had shaped their sense of self. When they were living and working in their previous places, my participants suggested that they had not necessarily noticed this connection between their selves and the places they inhabited. But upon relocating, when they no longer had those places informing their identities, they said they suddenly became aware of the degree to which they based their sense of self upon the places they formerly identified as “home.”

These jarring realizations were exacerbated because each participants had rather hurried relocations to northern B.C. They indicated that, immediately before their moves, they had been focused exclusively on their need for employment or their job search, and then once they had obtained an offer, on the many tasks involved in moving their belongings. Any feelings of excitement during this period were directed towards their new job and the beginning of their social work career. Therefore, their attention was pulled away from their attachment to their current place and lifestyle, and redirected
towards what they had been taught to view as the many transitions required when relocating to the remote north. Only upon actually arriving and attempting to settle into their new homes did the participants realize the significance of the places that they had left behind, and those they would now attempt to call home.

The participants’ reactions to the realities of their new environments then consumed their focus. Whereas they had failed to pay attention to space or place while living in their former homes, space and place began to absorb much of their interest once they were living in remote northern B.C. Specifically, they stated that were unpleasantly surprised by their new places, eliciting the aforementioned reaction of “What Have I Done?” To manage these reactions to their moves, my participants indicated that they simply continued to tell themselves that they had only moved to the remote north temporarily, and would be able to return to what they identified as “home” once they obtained the practical experience they were seeking. This first phase in Gordon, Teresa, Chris and Anne’s journey consisted of a variety of emotions and perceptions, beginning with a lack of awareness of the importance of space, followed by the sense of nostalgia and missing the places that were familiar to them, which in turn were followed by feelings of anxiety and confusion about where they had relocated, and whether it had been a mistake for them to have moved to these remote northern regions. Having worked through this series of emotional responses to particular places, they began the process of bonding to their new locales, leading to the second phase of their three-part transition: “Being Here.”
The Transformative Process Leading to: Being Here

After overcoming the initial shock of relocation, my participants stated that they began to grapple with the challenges, as well as some of the positive aspects, of life in their new homes. They detailed the processes through which they came to learn about their new place, the people who resided in them, and the expectations their new “neighbours” had regarding community engagement. Each participant was particularly aware of the need to work through their new “visibility” as one of or the only social worker in the community. Having everyone in the region know who they were, and the role they were expected to play in the community, was described as both challenging and rewarding. For example, participants had to work to establish professional boundaries, given that they would inevitably encounter their clients while going about their everyday lives outside of work hours. Simultaneously, however, they were able to enjoy feeling as though their contributions were well-received and appreciated, given that each member of the community recognized who they were and the work they were performing for the collective good. As a result, the beginnings of “Being Here” and acclimatizing to their new locales consisted of more fully exploring and understanding their social “place” within, as Teresa describes, the web of existing connections in the community. Teresa shared learning about who in the community was known as the fisherman, and how fish were caught and shared in a manner that ensured the fish would be there for future seasons, and those who could not fish were fed. Gordon shared one of his first critical realizations that part of engaging in his new place was making his way to a local bridge and sharing in conversation with community members who routinely gathered on the bridge deck to fish and share stories. The bridge had a significant role in the community.
that Gordon was initially unaware of. Similarly, Chris described a moment he shared sitting by a river and learning from a community member about the importance of place to the people who lived there. In all four of the stories there was an expressed appreciation for space and place and how community members interacted with one another, with aspects of place being central in those interactions.

The narrative summaries portray this process as complicated, textured, and multidimensional. As they began to uncover solutions to the various workplace challenges they encountered, my participants stated that they grew as professional social workers and as people, attributing these personal and professional developments to the specific places that motivated them. For example, participants suggested that it was challenging at first to work independently, with little to no professional guidance, supervision, or mentorship. Overcoming these initial hardships, however, enhanced their confidence in independent, professional decision making, transforming their perceived sense of self into assured, and competent practitioners. My participants suggested that these professional and personal developments were products of working in their particular places: without the challenges posed by these places, they would never have been forced to develop as people or as social workers. Consequently, in the phase of “Being Here,” participants forged new and substantial bonds with their new places, beginning a process of tying their personal and professional identities to their new homes. In other words, they established a sense of “place identity” during this second phase (Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2013, p.2), coming to associate their positive self-advancements with the place that spurred them. In this sense, culture shock and high
visibility were transformed by my participants into the catalysts of positive outcomes, which in turn motivated positive perceptions of their spaces.

As time went on, the participants reformulated their senses of self to include the remote northern locales that they were increasingly coming to view as home, but which had, of course, not been part of how they understood themselves in the past. Gordon describes this as “becoming a northern person.” Part of this process also involved a shift in perception regarding what features of a given place were essential and desirable. For example, all four participants indicated that they initially viewed the amenities readily available in many urban settings, such as health care services, shopping centres, and social activities, as essential to their preferred way of life. However, upon relocating to the remote north, they quickly discovered that these amenities were not readily available. While this shift constituted the basis of at least some of their initial culture shock, my participants eventually came to alter their perceptions of their personal needs and wants. As part of the process of “Being Here,” they developed a desire to participate in their communities and engage socially in different ways than they had in the city. In addition, maintaining an openness to what was around them revealed that there was more opportunity than the participants had originally thought, such as Gordon experienced with playing music.

According to the place-focused literature reviewed in Chapter Two, becoming attached to a particular place is an ongoing process that often includes a series of unique emotional experiences within that place (Altman & Low, 1992). As these experiences transpire, they bond the person to their place (Altman & Low, 1992). Thus, as my participants were able to move beyond their initial emotional responses to their new
locations, they were better able to explore the different, new options these places had to offer. As their time in remote northern places extended, the participants continued to make small, yet important, changes to their daily routines, perceptions, expectations, and ways of living until they had eventually developed new personal and professional identities for themselves that included understanding of the remote north as their home (Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2013; Tuan, 1977; Zapf, 2009).

**Remote Northern Social Work and: Staying Here**

At the end of each narrative, participants captured their commitment to their lives as remote northern social workers by stating: “I am home.” A connection to community and the people who lived in each place was abundantly evident, suggesting that the decision made by each of the participants to stay was rooted in the connections they had developed with these places. Each participant acknowledged, in detail, that their relationships with the people who composed their new communities had shaped their sense of belonging in these new remote northern places. Also important in enhancing the feeling of being “home” was my participants’ ability to craft a family lifestyle that reflected each of their personal values, goals, and desires. As part of describing this sense of community, each narrative contained a description of place, as a large open space, or, as Gordon shared, not requiring fenced boundaries inviting a sense of freedom, which bonded his family to their place. Teresa described her family’s new place as full of endless outdoor adventures that she and her children continue to explore. Each participant grew to appreciate the land, wilderness, and special places such as sitting by the river in ways they had not experienced in their previous urban homes. For each participant their remote northern “home” is painted in their respective stories as one large community.
containing relationships that are only properly understood by those who live there, in these particular geographic places.

In turn, none of the participants really made a “choice” or “decision” to stay in northern B.C. Rather, they underwent quite a tumultuous series of emotional reactions, personal and professional developments, and family lifestyle evolutions, the combination of which led them to view their remote northern locales as “home.” Rather than experiencing a “eureka!” moment in which they spontaneously knew that northern B.C. was a good fit for them, my participants described ongoing and often conflicted processes through which they established deep roots in their new communities. There was no conscious or pointed decision to stay; rather, the thought of leaving remote northern B.C. now seems illogical and undesirable to my participants, given that they have come to perceive it as their “home.”

Many of the aspects portrayed in the above sections of the participant narratives (Coming Here, Being Here, and Staying Here) could be related to more broadly by social workers residing in northern areas, as well as other professional working in these regions. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write, it is not the role of the narrative to carefully sketch out a cause and effect relationship within a story, but rather to describe fine points to draw in the reader in a manner that is relatable and guides the reader back to an exploration of the complete picture. Therefore, it is likely that nurses, teachers, medical professionals, and perhaps police officers that relocate from more urban centers face similar challenges to those described by the participants (initial shock upon arriving in place, high visibility, lack of amenities, etc.).
Uniqueness of Narrative Inquiry

Having been grounded in a narrative analysis, my research diverges from many of the other, typically quantitative studies conducted on retention and turnover in remote northern regions. As mentioned in Chapter Two, much of the existing literature captures a snapshot moment in time by conducting cross-sectional analyses, or questionnaires that ask social workers to explain the variables that drove them to leave or avoid practicing in remote northern areas. These cross-sectional analyses capture valuable information regarding the challenges associated with living and working in remote northern regions, and push factors that contribute to driving social workers away from these regions, thereby keeping retention rates low and turnover, high. However, such cross-sectional analyses by design fail to investigate whether the decision to stay or leave is made over a longer period of time – that is, the process by which certain social workers eventually come to bond with a place.

This is precisely the information I sought to gather by means of narrative analyses of stories of coming to stay. Rather than obtaining quantitative data or even highly structured qualitative data in response to structured interview questions, I engaged in a process of story-telling with each of my participants through which we collaboratively constructed narratives that encapsulated the process through which they bonded with their particular places. This storytelling approach and the narrative analysis that followed, I would like to suggest, offer some new insights when compared with the more typical quantitative data that currently forms the foundation of our knowledge of retention and turnover in remote northern regions.
Specifically, taking this narrative approach allowed me to consider the perspectives of social workers who bonded with and decided to continue living and working in these regions. By contrast, much of the existing literature based on cross-sectional data explores the challenges associated with life in such areas, and factors driving social workers away from them. Moreover, a narrative approach allowed me to, in some ways, go beyond merely identifying positive experiences associated with working in remote northern regions. Researchers have identified a need to identify such experiences, but these would remain in line with the quantitative approach described above: merely identifying positive aspects of life in remote northern areas would serve only to build a catalogue of pull factors to stack up against the already well-established list of push factors. However, this approach also fails to address the more long-term, ongoing processes through which people forge bonds with particular places; those processes that cannot readily be captured in a survey response. Although one might indicate in a survey that she appreciates nature, or enjoys living in a certain neighbourhood, and considers the locale a “positive” aspect of her practice, the longer-term experiences of developing that type of appreciation that I was able to gather through a more in-depth narrative analysis suggests that there is more to place bonding than simply fondness or enjoyment. In particular, my participants’ stories revealed long-term, ongoing processes through which they established deep roots in their communities. Only by considering the entire processes through which these roots were put down may we truly understand how they transitioned from disliking and wanting to leave remote northern B.C. to considering it their “home.”
Inviting the storytelling process has the further advantage of acknowledging people’s subjective experiences as important in their own right: as sources of useful knowledge valued on an individual basis (Reissman, 1993). Certain quantitative approaches that gather cross-sectional data implicitly treat these experiences as though they at their foundations are all the same. Questionnaires and surveys with multiple-choice answer options, for example, imply that every individual who has had the experience under investigation will be able to describe those experiences using the very same words, as though these experiences may be encapsulated with the checking of a box. While this methodology is indeed useful in many contexts, I propose that considerations of the process by which social workers come to stay in remote northern regions should be informed by both quantitative and qualitative data. Specifically, the narrative inquiry approach I have taken allowed my participants the freedom to convey their unique, individual experiences as stories, using the words they felt best conveyed their personal experiences of moving, transitioning, and building their new homes.

As is customary among narrative researchers (Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 2007; Riessman, 1993, 2008), I opted for a narrative inquiry approach in part out of my strongly held belief that people “story” their lives, creating narratives out of their own experiences in an effort to make sense of those experiences. Storytelling is a natural part of human interaction, as “humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). My research methodology therefore mirrors conventional human interaction, allowing my participants to convey their experiences in as natural a way as possible. All four participants narrated their initial experiences of the remote north in
terms of their preconceived understandings of it: they re-told the narratives they had heard during their schooling in urban centers, depicting the north as tiresome, challenging, and unwelcoming. However, they then went on to story their emotional transition from viewing their relocation as a potential mistake, to appreciating certain aspects of a northern lifestyle, to viewing the north as their home. The process through which they came to stay in the remote north is best understood if we examine this entire narrative arc, rather than considering only snapshots or segments of it, as a cross-sectional approach risks doing.

Ultimately, the stories that were told during my research were told because they are meaningful and important to their storytellers. A narrative inquiry approach therefore provides a productive, natural extension to quantitative data analyses, by offering a more humanized expression of one’s experiences that taps into the uniqueness of one individual’s personal encounters with a given issue.

**Limitations**

There are a number of limitations worth noting in my research. First, my small sample size limits the generalizability of my findings. Thus, because I have considered only the experiences of four individuals in very particular locales, caution must be exercised when discussing my findings in terms of their applicability to social workers in general practicing in remote or northern regions. However, in qualitative studies, the goal is not to be primarily concerned with generalizability, but rather, to offer a richer, more contextualized and individualized understanding of a given experience. Rather than striving to obtain an understanding of social work in remote or northern areas that may be applicable to the largest number of people, my narrative inquiry approach aimed to
provide some nuanced, detailed insights into this experience that encourages social workers to consider it in a new, expanded light.

Second, my narrative inquiry method was intended to provide participants with the freedom to share the aspects of their personal stories that they felt were most important, without the influence of structured interview questions. However, in order to obtain data from each participant that was relevant and comparable, I provided participants with a story guide prior to their interviews in order to guide them through a beginning, middle, and end to their storytelling process. This story guide was intended to provide participants with a broad shape of a potential narrative arc, but may have influenced what information they shared (Appendix B). In theory, the structure of their narratives would have been slightly different, had they not been provided with a story guide.

Third, my inclusion criteria limited participants to those who had positive experiences with living and working in the north. If I had sought a broader sample that included social workers who didn’t have these same positive experiences, I likely would have uncovered very different narratives detailing the processes (both long- and potentially short-term) across which social workers decided to leave these areas. However, given that the existing literature presents an abundance of information regarding the variables and processes that motivate social workers to leave, I determined that my inclusion criteria were necessary in order to gain insight into the opposing forces that promote a decision to stay.

Finally, my research was limited to the experience of living and working in northern B.C. The experiences of my participants are therefore quite likely different from
those of social workers practicing in other remote or northern areas in other regions of Canada or the world. To summarize, stories are not necessarily generalizable, but rather are relatable, and paint a detailed, nuanced, in-depth picture of the stories of these four individuals exploring the depth of the attachments they forged to their specific locales. Their stories also portray coming to stay in the remote north as a process that occurred over time.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

As I completed my research and outlined my findings, I was able to identify a need for future research in several areas. First, I would like to suggest that a narrative inquiry framework could be utilized to develop a better understanding of social work best practices in remote northern regions. The present research utilized the stories of four social workers to explore the processes through which they ultimately came to stay in the remote north, but it was beyond the scope of my research to explore the ways in which their stories shaped their actual practice habits. My analysis centered on the personal experiences of my participants as they bonded with place, rather than the populations each participant worked with or in-depth details of what such interactions involved. Future research could therefore explore in greater depth the connections between an individual’s bonding with a particular place, and the ways in which their expanding first-hand knowledge of that place influences their social work practice. It makes intuitive sense, and previous research seems to suggest, that different skill sets and practice habits would be necessary for effective practice in remote northern and southern urban locales. A narrative inquiry approach could be helpful in uncovering the processes through which remote northern social workers came to understand and utilize these unique skills.
Another direction for future research is the further exploration of the smaller transitional moments in each participant’s progression from viewing their remote northern positions as temporary, to viewing them as “home.” I believe it would be valuable to revisit the notion of process as it is occurring. For example, each of the stories in my research involved a substantial number of years, and perhaps focusing future research in phases, such as those in the story guide, would reveal more specific details not captured in the larger stories. While participants did offer some details highlighting urban-focused viewpoints, there are more nuances that could be explored. The purpose of this research was to capture the entire narrative arc of the participants’ experiences, thereby demonstrating that the decision to stay in remote northern locales to practice social work is less of a decision than it is an ongoing process. Building on this foundation, however, future research could invest greater resources into digging deeper still into social workers’ personal stories in order to gain an even more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which this significant and unexpected transition occurs.

In addition, as discussed in Chapter Two, many professionals practicing in a non-urban context express similar challenges to those described by social workers practicing in remote northern regions. This suggests that my finding of the process social workers experience overtime, eventually resulting in an attachment to place, is an area that may have wide-ranging implications within other disciplines. Further research could explore both the broader idea of process and diverse contexts of practice as place from a multidisciplinary perspective.
Finally, future research should explore in greater depth the influence of personal demographic variables upon social workers’ decision to stay in remote northern regions. Although it was somewhat beyond the scope of the present research, some of my findings seemed to indicate that the personal attributes of individual social workers could influence their perception of and willingness to bond with northern communities. Presumably, one’s age, gender, and any number of personal variables would influence their ability to transition and adapt to these new settings. Future research could strive to determine whether certain “types” of people are more or less likely to relocate to and eventually bond with remote northern places. Research in this area would be useful in promoting greater retention of social workers in these communities. Moreover, determining more clearly individuals who are most likely to adapt well to the remote north may influence hiring practices for remote northern communities, thereby increasing the chances that these positions will remain filled for the longer-term.

**Conclusion: A Personal Reflection**

I began this exploration feeling keen about facilitating research that more closely reflected my own experience of living and practicing in the remote north – an experience I found deeply rewarding. Something about practicing in the remote north made me feel as though I was part of a tightly knit community, bonded together by our shared commitment to and attachment with the place we collectively inhabit. As I reflected upon my own personal and professional experiences of working in this type of locale, I began to see that narrative inquiry was the pathway I had been searching for as I sought to share these experiences with others.
I initially chose narrative inquiry as it aligned closely with my own beliefs surrounding people, place, and their ever-evolving influences upon each other. I also wanted to paint a broader, less restricted picture of life and work in the remote north than I had seen in some of the existing literature, which portrayed these areas as barren, limiting, and generally undesirable. As a result, my chosen methodology facilitated a personal exploration; allowing participants to share their own stories in relatively unstructured ways; and opened up new avenues of exploration that have previously been under-explored in the literature on social work practice in the remote north. What’s more, I felt as though having shared the experience of remote northern social work practice with my participants facilitated a deeper, more nuanced story-telling process. I felt at home in my travels to meet with these participants, as I had once lived and worked in similar locales. As we co-constructed their stories, our shared understanding of a deep attachment to the remote north and its unique communities helped enhance the process. Ultimately, as I engaged in the interpretive process of the analysis, I came to realize the true strength of narrative inquiry in representing the complex shaping process where the social workers establish a profound connection to remote northern life.

As I conducted the interviews, I often found myself reflecting back upon and reconnecting with my own remote northern experiences. At times, I found it very challenging to stay focused solely on the participant stories. Memories of my own remote northern practice continued to resurface as the participants shared their own thoughts, concerns, and moments of excitement. There was an instant connection between me and the participants that was grounded in shared experience, which I believe added depth to the storytelling process. Upon completing this dissertation and discovering aspects of the
incremental process through which these social workers came to stay in the north, I reflected back on my own practice and questioned why this perspective had never entered my mind. I wondered if I too had spent too much time struggling with what I had learned remote northern social work was “supposed” to be, instead of expressing what the remote north meant to me, on a more personal level. After the initial interviews were completed, I found the further I immersed myself in the data, the clearer my understanding of the connections between participants, place, and this long-term bonding process became.

I submit that future research will benefit from taking a step back from what is presented as the dominant narrative in the current literature, and instead, further explore the ongoing journey through which people become rooted to particular places. By becoming more open to the notion of social work practice as shaped by a sense of place, we can gain a contextualization that can only enhance professional competency and preparedness. I would like to suggest that social workers considering practicing in the remote north should aim to meaningfully engage with their new places, which requires an abandonment of urban views, to invite the presence of place. Such meaningful engagement requires a curiosity about place and an openness that encourages people in a particular place to share their understanding of how they identify with each other in their location.

I have stated many times to students taking the remote northern course I currently teach, that it is hard for me to impart exactly what it is like to live and practice in remote northern regions. I have so many visual images of such places and sharp memories of my personal experiences in those places, but do not feel I can capture and convey the intensity of my experiences at the level I know them to be. In the future, I believe I will
be able to more coherently and fluently express what life in the remote north is like by
drawing upon the notion of storytelling I have explored in such great depth during this
research. I will more adeptly capture the essence of the remote north by storying it,
sharing my own personal narrative of how I came to live and stay in the remote north. In
other words, having completed the present research, I am now able to strengthen my
 teachings about the remote north by drawing on my own and the participants’ lived
experiences in these regions.

It is my belief that engaging in this pedagogical exercise will encourage my
students to believe that they can and should forge their own perceptions and
understandings of the north. Of course, I and other instructors must continue to teach
about the previous findings in the literature, and I do already acknowledge the various
challenges associated with living and practicing in the remote north, especially if one is
accustomed to city life. However, I believe students would benefit from a broader, more
well-rounded conversation of the north that includes not only positive experiences of the
region, but more in-depth considerations of the bonds between people and place, and the
processes across which those bonds were forged. By sharing personal stories of the
remote north, students will become more open to the notion that this locale is not
experienced in the same (i.e., largely negative) way by everyone. Rather, the remote
north is open for interpretation, waiting for people to forge their own attachments with
this unique space and its communities.

At the opening of this dissertation, I narrated a short story of my remote northern
experience as I approached the data collection for this research. Reflecting back, my own
personal experience in coming to the remote north was very similar to that of the
participants in this study. I too was armed only with knowledge of—and thus concern about—the impacts of culture shock, isolation, lack of supervision, and burnout. I often discuss with my students the moment, several months into my first experience, where I realized that this negative view of the north was not actually my own. I had openly adopted an urban perspective about the north, and had assumed that the negative features of this place would be all I could notice about it. But as my own remote northern reality came into focus, I recognized the need to discard what I believed could be known and be conscious of what was. Eventually, I came to hold my own views of the remote north and, like Gordon, Teresa, Chris, and Anne, thoroughly enjoyed what I was experiencing there. The narrative approach helped me to make this realization, and it is my hope that by sharing this approach and its findings with my students, they too will develop more open minds when it comes to contemplating life and practice in the north.
References


and research from northern and rural Canada (pp.16-29). Toronto: Canadian Scholar’s Press.


Appendices  
Appendix A  
Narratives of Remote Northern Social Work  
Consent Form

January 7th, 2013

Who is conducting this study?

Principal Investigator  
Faculty Supervisor:  
Judy Gillespie, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
School of Social Work  
University of British Columbia Okanagan  
(250) 807-8745

Co-Investigator, Student Researcher  
Joanna Pierce, IGS, PhD candidate  
(phone) 250-961-5770  
(email) Joanna.Pierce@unbc.ca

Dear Participant:

I am a doctoral student at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan campus, in the Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies program. My dissertation research is focused on exploring the meaning ascribed by social workers regarding their desire to continue practice in remote northern regions of British Columbia. This will be accomplished by gathering stories from three to five social workers reflective of their practice experiences in remote northern regions. The title of this research is The Stories of Social Workers Practicing in the Remote Northern Regions of British Columbia.

Participation and Results

You are being invited to participate in this research to share your story of living and practicing social work in remote northern British Columbia. I would like to learn more about what attracted you to this work and what maintains your desire to continue practice in remote northern regions. Through the stories of social workers practicing in remote northern regions the results of this research will enhance the current literature in practice development, student learning, and a variety of other key components connected to working in this area. The results will be presented in a defended dissertation and may also appear in published journal articles, book chapters and conference presentations. This research is completely voluntary; you may withdraw at any time, without consequence. Should you choose to withdraw any information you have provided will be
removed from the research. All face-to-face meetings will take place in a location that is agreed on by both the participant and the researcher.

Details Regarding Your Participation Should You Agree to Participate

Social workers interested in participating in this research will be asked to participate in the following steps:

1. Each participant that meets the requirements for participation in this research will be contacted to determine a phone meeting date and time that best meets each participant’s availability. Prior to this phone meeting the information letter and the consent to participate will be sent to each participant via email for their review. Any initial questions or concerns will be discussed.

2. The first face-to-face meeting will involve introductions, review the research process a second time, define roles, answer any final questions and confirm participation. The initial meeting will be done in person if possible, however electronic measures will be in place should weather or other unforeseen issues arise that are out of the researcher’s or participant’s control. (approximately 1-2 hours)

3. The second meeting will be the research interview or storying process. Participants will be asked to tell their story about practice in a remote northern region of BC, providing details around what meaning keeps them engaged in this practice. This meeting should take approximately 2-4 hours depending on each participant’s storying process. Should further time be required a second interview may be organized to support participants in completing their storying process. Each participant will choose a pseudonym that will be used in the final published dissertation.

5. Next, participants will be sent a transcript of their story for review. Should participants have any feedback regarding the transcribed story, a meeting will be organized to discuss the feedback, if there is no feedback a short phone meeting will occur to ensure participants are clear about the next steps moving forward and to confirm the transcript is approved as recorded, by each participant. (approximately 1-2 hours)

6. Once all the stories are collected and initial data analysis has occurred, the initial findings will be sent to all participants, for a member checking process regarding the findings.

7. Concluding, all participants will be sent the final written draft of the completed research for their review; participants will be invited to the research defense should they wish to attend; and will receive a copy of the completed dissertation upon approval.

The total amount of time required for your participation will be approximately 10 to 12 hours, over an 8 week time frame.

Benefits and Potential Risks
We hope that the storytelling process will be an insightful experience for participants, and that this process offers the opportunity for you to have a voice regarding this topic area. While all measures will be in place to protect participant confidentiality, your participation in this research comes with low risk of being identified should someone recognize your story that you consent to share as part of this research. In summary, as a research participant you acknowledge the following:

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<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tr>
<td>You understand you are agreeing to participate in a research study</td>
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<tr>
<td>You have read the above information sheet and you have received a copy of this information</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>You understand that your story will be tape recorded using a small microphone and transcribed for review by you as the participant</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You understand the risks involved in your participation in this research study</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>You have had the opportunity to discuss the research study with the researcher before the scheduled interview</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You understand that your participation in this research is completely voluntary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You may withdraw from this research at any time without consequence and your information will be removed from the research and destroyed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You understand that the researcher will maintain confidentiality during all phases of the research to the best of her ability</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You understand that no personal information that may identify you will be used in the final research dissertation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>You understand that the researcher will be the only person to have access to your personal information</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>You understand that if you disclose information about the safety of a child, the researcher must report the concern to MCFD</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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I, ____________________________, wish to be identified by the following name, ____________________________, for the purposes of this research.

Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impact on you.
• 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.

Date: __________________________
Participant                          Researcher
Name: ___________________________ Name: ___________________________
Signature: ________________________ Signature: ________________________

Thank you in advance for your time and participation in this process. If you have any questions or concerns about what we are asking of you, please contact the research lead or co-investigator. The names and telephone numbers are listed at the top of the first page of this form.

*If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Services toll free at 1-877-822-8598 or the UBC Okanagan Research Services Office at 250-807-8832. It is also possible to contact the Research Complaint Line by email ([RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca)).*

Sincerely,

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Appendix B
Interview Guide

I am seeking to understand experiences of professional social work practice in remote northern settings through narratives of those practicing in these settings. To help you think about your experiences I have organized potential questions into 3 parts: coming to your practice in this setting, being in practice in this setting, and staying in practice in this setting. These questions are meant to assist you in reflecting on your professional practice in this setting.

In addition, feel free to share any photographs, poems, songs, drawings, maps or other material that assists you in telling your stories of coming here, being here, and staying here.

Part 1: Coming Here

- How did you come to practice social work in this place?
- Tell me about your first day/week/month?
- What memories or moments stand out the most for you about beginning your practice in this place?
- If coming here were a chapter in your life story what might be the title of the chapter? Why would this be a fitting title?

Part 2: Being Here

- Can you describe a typical day in your practice?
- Tell me some of your favorite practice ‘moments’?
- What ‘tools’ are in your ‘toolbox’ for practice in this place? How have they gotten there?
- What are you taking away or gaining (as a professional social worker) from your practice in this place?

Part 3: Staying Here

- What excites you about staying in practice here?
- If your practice here could have more of something that it already has, what would that be?
- An additional reflection:
- If your story of practice in this place were a book, who would be the co-author(s) of this book? What would some of the chapters in the book be about? What might the longest chapter be focused on? What areas would have to be covered for the book to accurately reflect your day-to-day practice?