An Exploration of How Homelessness Affects Indigenous Women

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Jacqueline Louise Nixon

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Jacqueline Louise Nixon, candidate for the degree of Master of Social Work, has presented a thesis titled, *An Exploration of How Homelessness Affects Indigenous Women*, in an oral examination held on August 28, 2012. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

External Examiner: Dr. Priscillla Settee, University of Saskatchewan

Supervisor: Dr. Brigette Krieg, Faculty of Social Work

Committee Member: Dr. Judy White, Faculty of Social Work

Committee Member: *Dr. Margaret Kovach, Grad One Time Committee Member

Chair of Defense: Prof. Tania Lafontaine, First Nations University of Canada

*Not present at defense*
This thesis is an exploration of how homelessness affects Indigenous women. This study was conducted using an Indigenous research paradigm and executed from an Indigenous world view. Seven Indigenous women who were currently or had lived experiences with homelessness shared their stories and experiences with the researcher. Narrative inquiry using storytelling and thematic grouping were used. The medicine wheel concept was used to discuss the themes that arose from the stories. The storytellers where affected in all areas of the medicine wheel by their experiences with homelessness. Finding quality affordable housing, recovering from addictions, and practising cultural traditions were significant contributors to the storytellers regaining balance in their lives.
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Dedication

To the Storytellers with whom I share this thesis.
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Introduction and Location

Who I am and Where I Come From

There is a protocol used by Indigenous people when they are introducing themselves, “…The protocol for introducing one’s self to other Indigenous people is to provide information about one’s cultural location, so that connection can be made on political, cultural and social grounds and relations established…” (Martin & Miraboopa, 2001, p.17). Location is the context of the researcher, recognizing that research is not neutral but is influenced by the location of the researcher (Absolom & Willett, 2005). I am a member of the Cowessess First Nation. My father is of Cree descent from the Cowessess First Nation, and my mother is of Cree/Metis descent from the Muscowpetung First Nation and the Metis community of Lebret, SK.

I have come to realize that both of my parents were stripped of much of their culture and language at residential school. Regardless, much of their ancestral ways of knowing, being, and doing (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2001) survived and were passed onto my sisters and I, instilling in us an Indigenous worldview (Ermine, 1995; Martin & Mirraboopa, 2009; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). It is my journey to reclaim what was taken from our family that brought me to my educational journey. I am finding that my educational journey is intertwined with my cultural and spiritual journey along the Red Road, much like a braid of sweetgrass. As an act of reciprocity, I hope to give back to The People (Nehiyawak) by advancing Indigenous scholarship in a small but useful way by informing policy and service delivery around homelessness and Indigenous women.
Talking about my location in society makes perfect sense to me. Whenever I meet another Indigenous person, they always want to know “where you are from and who your parents/grandparents are”. They want to know where you “fit” in Indian country. I have come to realize that the reasons for these questions are to establish relations or to continue long-held relations between families. It has been an unexpectedly emotional experience for me to write about my location. This process has forced me to think seriously about where I come from, where I am today, and where I am going in the future. I struggle with my identity as an Indigenous person; in some peoples’ eyes I am “too Indian” and in other peoples’ eyes I am not “Indian enough”. So I am marginalized by both mainstream society and parts of Indian country. I have thought many times about how this internalized colonization has had such a “divide and conquer” effect on Indigenous people. I do know that I am only one of a whole generation of Indigenous people to experience this intergenerational effect of colonization and residential schools.

I am a Cree/Metis woman. My Cree ancestors are the Plains Cree, who traveled the plains of Turtle Island. This is the area now known as the north central states in the United States and southern Saskatchewan and Alberta. During the last 150 years, my people were made to relocate by European colonizers from their traditional lands to a reserve along the Qu’Appelle Valley in Saskatchewan called the Cowessess Reserve (Lerat, 2005). I spent a lot of time during my formative years on the Cowessess Reserve. Although I did not live there, I consider it my home and still feel a strong connection to the land there.

I spent my preschool and kindergarten years in Regina, Saskatchewan, living in a neighborhood and attending a school where few Indigenous families lived. Even then, I
knew we were different from our neighbors and that it had to do with the fact that we were an Indigenous family. The weekends were a happy time as we would often go back to the reserve and stay with my paternal grandparents. My paternal grandparents were significant people in my life. They showed me how to live a life with integrity, patience, and love. They had an exceptionally strong work ethic, surviving an era of Indian agents and not being able to go anywhere or do much of anything without the permission of the Indian agent. This was a totally different world than the one we live in today. At our grandparents’ farm, we were free to roam and were fully accepted by our family members. One of my favorite memories was when everyone would gather in the kitchen for a midmorning snack and tea. My grandmother would already have a freshly baked cake, iced and ready to eat by then. There would be literally standing room only in my grandmother’s little kitchen, with my grandparents, parents, aunties, uncles, cousins, and siblings squeezed in. There would be a lot of talking, eating and laughter. My grandfather always sat in the corner of the kitchen by the window.

As kids, we would spend most of the time outside exploring the farm and visiting the animals. My grandparents would take us with them to do their chores, giving us wheelbarrow rides and truck rides, which were always fun! Visiting different relatives on the reserve always included food, tea, laughter, and playing outside with cousins. Back then our family did not participate in any cultural ceremonies. The Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing that did survive were passed on to us by observing the way our family lived and treated each other. We picked berries and fished in the summer and went ice fishing in the winter. My father was a hunter when we were young so we ate a
lot of wild meat. Only as an adult have I come to know why there was a lack of ceremonies on the reserve.

To be sure, there were also many troubled times on the reserve too. I remember family members struggling with alcohol issues, untimely deaths, and suicides. I never questioned why these tragedies happened. I knew it was a common occurrence and just accepted that these things happened in Indigenous families. I did know that the patterns were different from non-aboriginal society.

I always thought that growing up off the reserve was a double-edged sword. I am seen as an outsider in some parts of Indian Country because I did not grow up on a reserve and I do not speak my language. I have often wondered if I had grown up on the reserve, would I have ended up in the same position as some of my cousins. Some of my family members have struggled with substance abuse, prostitution and family violence. My dad said that his grandfather told him and his cousin that they should leave the reserve “because there is nothing for you here”, meaning that there was little prospect for making a living.

Both of my parents went to the Qu ‘Appelle Indian Residential School in Lebret, SK. My grandfather fought to have a Day School established on their reserve so that the Cowessess children could stay in their homes. This school was established, and my Dad attended there for his elementary education. He then had to go to the Qu’Appelle Indian Residential School for his high school years. This system had devastating effects on my family that continue to resonate today. In my father’s family, only he and his older sister attended the Lebret school. The other four siblings attended school at the Cowessess Day School and in the nearby town of Broadview. My Dad said that this separation
effectively divided the family in half. He told me that the family never fully recovered the strong family connections they once had. Despite these challenges, my father went on to become one of the first Indigenous X-Ray Technicians in Canada. Of his siblings, three went on to have successful careers in administration, education, and health, one owns and runs a cultural camp, and one met an untimely death in an alcohol-related car accident.

My Métis ancestors on my mother’s side of the family lived in the Métis village of Lebret, Saskatchewan. My grandmother married my grandfather (a man from the Muscopetung First Nation) as a young woman, having five children. She later separated from him and formed a lifelong relationship with my non-aboriginal step-grandfather. They were never able to get married as my grandmother knew that if she divorced my grandfather and married my step-grandfather, she and her children would lose their Treaty status. I have many fond memories of spending time with my grandmother. She used to let us play tv bingo with plastic bingo chips and outdated bingo cards. Of course, my cousins and I always thought that we might win! My grandmother was also an awesome baker, making pies, cookies and cakes of all kinds, cinnamon buns too. I still make raisin drop cookies in her honor. My mother is one of five siblings, all of whom attended the Qu’Appelle Indian Residential School. My mother attended that school for twelve years, having to live at the school even though my grandmother lived in the village of Lebret. She doesn’t say much about that time in her life, but she did say that “it made her the person she is today”, a nurse and a respected member of her community. She was one of the first Canadian Indigenous nurses to be trained in the late 1950’s and
early 1960’s. Her siblings also went on to have successful careers, one in the military, one in academia, one in human resources, and one as an artist.

This narrative study will be an exploration of how Indigenous women are affected by homelessness. I am, like the participants, an Indigenous woman. Although I have never been homeless, being Indigenous women gives us a shared colonial history, and ability to understand the issues presented from a similar perspective. Learning about the experiences of other Indigenous women helps me make sense of my life journey. Through the experiences of others, I have developed my sense of cultural identity as an Indigenous, Cree/Métis woman.

In reflecting on my identity as an Indigenous woman, I realize that the intergenerational effects of residential schools had a far-reaching effect on Canadian Indigenous people (Dion Stout & Kipling, 2003; Menzies, 2006). My own family has been adversely affected by it. Homelessness is an indicator of the dysfunction that our people suffer as a ripple effect of residential schools (Sider, 2005). The intense trauma that many students suffered manifested itself in unhealthy coping methods, which contributed to their inability to obtain or maintain housing. Exploring how homelessness affects Indigenous women is one piece of the puzzle of my Indigienity. This exploration is one tiny step of my healing journey on the Red Road and our collective healing journey as Nehiyawak (The People). I have never been homeless; however, I am compelled to focus my studies on an area that will help the People. The Elders have taught me that the work I do must always benefit Nehiyawak.
Rationale of the Study

Literature addressing homelessness among the Indigenous population in Canada is limited (Saskatoon Indian and Métis Friendship Centre, 2009). Even less attention has been focused on studies specific to Indigenous women. More literature is available on general homelessness in Canada, Indigenous socio-economic conditions, and housing and Indigenous health issues. Only a small proportion addresses issues specific to women (Bridgman, 2000), and there is an urgent need to develop an understanding of the needs of Indigenous women; such information is essential in formulating policy and service delivery. Research on homelessness with a focus on gender and race is essential in
improving the position of Indigenous women; one of the most marginalized populations within Canadian society. If such policy is to be effective, it must privilege the Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing of the people who are to benefit from it.

In the past, policy was created without the input of the people who were experiencing homelessness. This research will address gaps in the literature with respect to sharing Indigenous ways of knowing around experiencing homelessness. This study will examine the lived experiences of homelessness for Indigenous women and develop an understanding of how Indigenous women are affected by homelessness. In turn, these findings will contribute to informing policy and service delivery concerning homelessness and Indigenous women, some of the very people who are affected by homelessness. With this study, I join the growing number of Indigenous researchers doing research for and by Indigenous people.

**Literature Review**

A review of the literature suggests that there are few studies that focus on homelessness and Indigenous women. First, I will examine housing policy in Canada, and the definition of the different kinds of homelessness. Second, I will discuss Indigenous women in Canada, followed by a review of the overall state of homelessness in Canada. There will be a focus on homelessness and Indigenous women. Finally, a statistical picture of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan will be provided.
3.1) Canada’s Housing Policy, or Lack Thereof

Canada did not have a homelessness problem before the 1980’s (Hulchanski, 2009); in the decades before, the homeless were seen as a small group of transient men who lived in flop houses or rooming houses. In the post war period after 1945, the aim of the federal government was to supply houses for veterans and the private market (Dupuis, 2003). This era saw the creation of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation in 1946, created to assist in Canadians to own their own homes (Leone & Carroll, 2010). The thought at the time was that if middle income families moved to new detached homes in suburbs, low income families could move into the vacated urban homes, creating a filtering effect.

Prior to 1964 the federal government alone was responsible for housing policy and funding (Dupuis, 2003). In the early 1960’s, the federal government started a subsidized rental program for low income families which had joint provincial funding (Hulchanski, 2007). It was a time of economic prosperity and the thought of the day was that every Canadian had a right to housing (Hulchanski, 2002, Hulchanski et al., 2009).

The federal government’s withdrawal of monetary support and policy development started in the 1980’s when funding for housing was reduced, and this reduction in funding continued until 1993 (Hulchanski, 2009) when all spending on new social housing was cut. It was during this time that the federal government began to transfer responsibility for housing to the provinces (Sewell, 2005). The Canada Assistance Plan, which provided targeted funding to the province for social and health programs (including social housing), was replaced with the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST). The CHST is a block transfer of money that the provinces can spend in
any way they see fit, with no specific money targeted to specific programs (Sewell, 2005).

In the early 2000’s, spending on housing started again with the Affordable Housing Framework Agreement, which was signed between the provinces and the federal government (Wellesley Institute, 2008, 2010). The terms of the agreement to add two billion dollars for affordable housing has not been fulfilled and spending on housing remained at the same level in 2007. Neither the provinces nor the federal government have spent what they had committed to in the agreement.

The National Homelessness Initiative was created in 1999 to address homelessness issues and funded temporary shelters and services for homeless people (Shapcott, 2007). In 2007, this initiative was replaced with the Homelessness Partnering Strategy. This program currently supplies 134 million dollars annually to projects addressing homelessness across Canada and will end in 2014 (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012). It should be noted however, this money represents less than 1% of the total annual federal budget and may not be adequate given the rising building costs (Hulchanski, 2005).

The federal government has consistently created policy to support homeowners, high end renters and the construction industry, which is seen as the primary housing sector, while ignoring the secondary housing sector, which is the rental sector, leaving it to the whim of the private market housing sector:

Reliance on the private market for housing provision puts at a disadvantage not only those with low incomes, but also those facing discrimination in the housing
and job markets on the basis of race, gender, family status, disability, immigration, age, or other factors (Hulchanski et al., 2009, p. 5).

As Canadian housing is almost totally market driven, those families who cannot afford to buy a house have been ignored (Hulchanski, 2002, 2005). There is support for home ownership through programs such as “the Registered Home Ownership Savings Plan and the exemption of a principal residence from capital gains tax” (Canadian Housing and Renewal Association, 2009, p. 6), but none for renting.

It has been only in the very recent past that the federal government has started to pay attention to housing for middle and low income earners by consulting with the provinces in a reengagement stage. Housing policy has gone from being strongly led by the federal government in the 1940’s to disengagement in the 1990’s with responsibility for housing being decentralized to the provinces through the block transfers of money to the provinces instead of being specifically targeted for housing (Leone & Carroll, 2010). The amount of money transferred has consistently declined since then. The responsibility has now fallen on the provinces, municipalities, and local non-profit organizations to provide social housing. The advantage of this is that the housing can be tailored to the local population. The disadvantage is that there is no consistency of housing policy municipally, provincially, or federally. The effect of this devolution of responsibility has been that the perception of housing has changed from being a universal right to an individual responsibility (Hulchanski et al., 2009).

Canada is the only developed country in the world that does not have a national housing policy. In 2009, Libby Davis of the New Democratic Party introduced a private member’s bill entitled “An Act to Ensure Secure, Adequate, Accessible, and Affordable
Housing for Canadians” (Davis, 2009). This bill called for the minister in charge of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to:

In consultation with the provincial ministers of the Crown responsible for municipal affairs and housing and the representatives of municipalities and Aboriginal communities, establish a national housing strategy designed to ensure that the cost of housing in Canada does not compromise an individual’s ability to meet other basic needs, including food, clothing and access to education (Davis, 2009).

Unfortunately, this was not passed into law before the last election, effectively dismissing it. There is no existing federal policy for housing for urban Aboriginal people (Belanger, Weasel Head, & Awosoga, 2012). There are however many Aboriginal housing projects that have been created by cities and non-profit organizations in an attempt to fill this void. An example of this is the Bridges and Foundations project on urban Aboriginal Housing (2004). This project focused on:

The Project’s research attempted to determine the difference between what was available in housing and community services in Saskatoon and what was needed by its Aboriginal community. The Project succeeded in gathering a large volume of pertinent information on urban Aboriginal housing, living conditions and quality of life, giving Saskatoon a more detailed knowledge of its Aboriginal population than any other city in Canada. The Project’s research objectives have been largely, if not completely reached. The stated goals in our original master plan have virtually
all been met. (Bridges and Foundations Project on Urban Aboriginal Housing, 2004, p. 1)

This project is an example of relevant and useful community-based research.

As with anything that has to do with spending money, there is a jurisdictional struggle between the federal and provincial governments on who should pay for Aboriginal housing. The provinces see Aboriginal people as a federal responsibility and the federal government sees housing as a provincial responsibility. The decades of neglect by the federal government has left urban Aboriginal people in a void where there is no national policy to direct how housing urban Aboriginal people can be achieved (Belanger et al., 2012).

3.2) Homelessness in Canada

The one thing all homeless people have in common is a lack of housing. Whatever other problems they face, adequate, stable, affordable housing is a prerequisite to solving them. Homelessness may not be only a housing problem, but it is always a housing problem; housing is essential, although sometimes not sufficient, to solve the problem of homelessness. (Dolbeare, 1996, p. 34 in Hulchanski, 2009, p.6)

For the purposes of this study, I will use three terms to describe homelessness. Absolute homelessness means sleeping outside or in a shelter (Hulchanski, Campsie, Chau, Hwang & Paradis, 2009; Tutty, Bradshaw, Waegemakers Schiff, Worthington, MacLaurin, Hewson,
Dooley, Kean, & McLeod, 2010). Hidden homelessness is defined as staying with friends or family but not having a place of one’s own, or “couch surfing” (Hulchanski et al., 2009; Tutty et al., 2010). Relative homelessness describes people who are “housed but who reside in substandard (overcrowded or unsafe) housing and/or insecure housing whereby they may be at risk of losing their home (e.g., under threat of eviction or violence)” (Tutty et al., 2010, p. 9).

Homelessness, as it exists today, is the result of decades of neglect by the federal government in the areas of social housing and poverty (Hulchanski et al., 2009; Tutty et al., 2010). Despite recent attention on the issues of housing and homelessness, there are no accurate national statistics on homelessness in Canada (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2011; Tutty et al., 2010). Available statistics from the 2001 census data estimate that 14,000 people in Canada indicated that they were homeless (Frankish, Hwang & Quantz, 2005). The reasons for the inability to determine the number of homeless people in Canada properly are two fold; first a national homelessness strategy, which provides a definition of homelessness, is nonexistent. Finally, it is difficult to assess national homeless numbers because of the problem encountered when enumerating people who do not have a fixed address. However, if we consider homelessness in terms of absolute, hidden and relative; it is estimated that there are at least 150,000 and as many as 300,000 homeless people in Canada (Echenberg & Jensen, 2008; Frankish et al., 2005; Laird, 2007; Leach, 2010).

One way of getting an indication of the level of homelessness is to look at the number of people using shelters across the country. Although Alberta, Ontario, and the northern territories have the highest use, all areas of the country are affected. Alberta had
over 1,000 shelter users per 1,000,000 people, while the Yukon had nearly 1,000 users per 1,000,000 people (Trypuc & Robinson, 2009). The people using these shelters would be considered as being in absolute homelessness. As there have been no national homelessness studies done in Canada, looking at regional studies can provide some context to homelessness in Canada.

There have been regional studies done that also provide a picture of homelessness across the country. Tutty et al. (2010) compiled counts of absolute homeless populations in six metropolitan areas across Canada. Although the studies were not identical, they do give us an idea of the numbers of people experiencing homelessness. A couple of the regional studies identified homeless Indigenous populations. Edmonton, for example, with a population of 1,034,945 had a homeless population of 3,079, of which 38% were Indigenous people. Vancouver, with a population of 2,116,581 had a homeless population of 2660 of which 32% were Indigenous people. In Winnipeg, “75 per cent of the people in shelters, requiring intervention or on the street, were Aboriginal people” (Laird, 2007, p.46). These statistics seem to confirm that Indigenous people are over-represented in the urban homelessness population (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2007; Laird, 2007).

3.3) Indigenous Women in Canada

The 2006 Aboriginal Peoples Survey, conducted by Statistics Canada, shed vital information on the status of Indigenous women in Canada (O’Donnell & Wallace, 2011). It showed that Indigenous women are in a unique situation compared to non-Indigenous women in Canada and to Indigenous men in Canada. Indigenous females (women and
girls) make up 51.2% of the Indigenous population in Canada; 600,696 as compared to 572,095 Indigenous males (men and boys). Indigenous females make up 4% of the entire Canadian female population. To clarify the Indigenous female population (which is 4% of Canadian female population):

- 60% reported being First Nations (includes both Status and non-Status Indians), while 33% were Métis and 4% were Inuit. The remaining 3% either reported belonging to more than one Aboriginal group, or they did not identify with an Aboriginal group, but reported having Registered Indian status and/or band membership (O’Donnell & Tait, 2003, p. 6).

In Saskatchewan at the time of the 2006 survey, there were 141,890 Indigenous people with 72,325 or 50.97% of the total provincial Indigenous population being female. The three largest cities in the province, Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert all had significant Indigenous female populations (O’Donnell & Wallace, 2011). Regina had 9,125 Indigenous females, or 9% of the total female population. Saskatoon had 11,010 Indigenous female residents, or 9% of the total female population. Prince Albert had 7,130 Indigenous female residents or 34% of the total female population, making it the largest amount of Indigenous females within a census agglomeration (census area) nationally.

The Indigenous demographic of the census agglomeration of Prince Albert is unique in Saskatchewan (Loder, 2010, p. 6):

- In 2006, the census agglomeration of Prince Albert, with 13,570 Aboriginal people, had the highest concentration of Aboriginal people of any city in
Saskatchewan. Approximately 34% of the people in Prince Albert were Aboriginal. By comparison, Saskatoon had the largest Aboriginal population (21,535) of any city in Saskatchewan, but the Aboriginal population only represented 9% of that city’s total population....

This growing population is comprised of 50% First Nations, 49% Métis, and 1% other or multiple responses.

Other notable statistics that have a bearing on Indigenous women’s homelessness is that the unemployment rate for Indigenous people in Prince Albert was higher than that of non-Indigenous people (Loder, 2010). Indigenous women had the lowest median income of all groups at $16,700. Sadly, 38% of Indigenous people in Prince Albert lived below the low income cut off line, which is “a statistical measure of the threshold level below which Canadians are estimated to devote at least one-fifth more of their income than the average family to the necessities of food, shelter, and clothing” (Loder, 2010, p. 13). This means that 47% of the Indigenous children of Prince Albert lived below the low income cut off line compared to 15% of non-Indigenous children.

3.4) Indigenous Female Homelessness in Canada

Both gender and race have an impact on the well-being of Indigenous women as individuals, as members of families, as members of communities, and as part of the economy (Hull, 2001). Low incomes and unaffordable rent are significant contributing factors to unstable housing that place families at risk of homelessness. Lack of control over housing and living circumstances can result in chronic stress in the long term, which
has detrimental effects on a person’s mental, physical, and emotional well-being (British Columbia Civil Liberties Association, 2004; Distasio, 2005; Frankish et al., 2005; Scott, 2007)

Indigenous women who are amongst the most marginalized in Canadian society face many barriers to success in life. They are women in a patriarchal society, and they are “brown” in a society where being “white” is the unacknowledged norm (McIntosh, 1990; Pattel-Gray, 1998). These barriers create an uneven “playing field” where they must overcome systemic marginalization and struggle to overcome barriers that members of the dominant group in society rarely have to worry about. It is against this backdrop that Indigenous female homelessness in Canada will then be examined.

The literature indicates that there are several structural and individual risk factors for becoming homeless. Structural risk factors such as a lack of affordable housing, discrimination, educational opportunities and services, residential mobility, socio-economic factors, and income (McCallum & Isaac, 2011) impact an individual’s or families’ access to housing. In addition to the structural factors, there are personal factors such as family violence, addictions, poor physical and mental health, the legacy of residential schools, and involvement in the criminal justice system.

A. **Risk Factors Affecting Homelessness**

i. **Structural**

Structural factors are a source of homelessness for many Indigenous women. Examples of structural factors, shortage of housing within First Nations communities (Peters & Robillard, 2007), low minimum wage rates and low income assistance rates,
lack of affordable or appropriate housing, and lack of support or individuals recently deinstitutionalized or released from prison (NWAC 2007; Wente, 2000).

Socio-economic factors such as high unemployment and poverty tend to have the largest impact on women (Laird, 2007). It is difficult for women with larger families or single parent families to find housing large enough to suit their needs. The unavailability of adequate housing on reserves and in remote communities can lead to rural-urban migration. Such a move can leave individuals vulnerable to poverty, depression, substance use and crime (Distasio, Sylvestre, & Mulligan, 2005; Peters & Robillard, 2007).

Risk factors vary between first time and repeatedly homeless women. Housing and economic instabilities are the primary causes of first time homelessness, although family instability and personal risk factors create increased risk (Bassuk et al., 1997). In contrast, the transition from “first time” homelessness into a cycle of repeated homelessness has been linked to personal risk factors. There is a downward spiral that Indigenous women can fall into.

At the top is the economic or personal crisis that might force an otherwise middle-class individual or family into homelessness – whether through job loss, eviction due to gentrification, assault by a partner, or loss of the primary income-earner through illness, accident, death or family breakdown. In the spiral middle is the discharge from a mental health facility, rehabilitation facility, criminal justice facility, or graduation from the child welfare system. The spiral bottom contains those who are ill, who have an addiction problem or have a long history of sexual and/or emotional abuse, perhaps combined with some other of the trigger points
described above. Exacerbating the situation is often an absence of support networks among family and friends, inadequacies in services and income security systems, and discrimination as a result of history that has led an individual or family to this point. (Raising the Roof Final Report, 2001, p.4)

Housing instability can be caused by eviction, overcrowded housing, relocation, racism and a tight housing market. Economic instability can result from employment loss, underemployment and inadequate welfare benefits (Lehmann et al., 2007).

ii. Housing

Homelessness continues to be a significant issue among many Indigenous people with low incomes. Homelessness rates of Indigenous people are alarmingly high compared with non-Indigenous Canadians (McCallum & Isaac, 2011). Housing statistics reveals enormous disparities in home ownership between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. Much of the available housing is of substandard quality, despite the high cost of rent. First Nations on reserve housing will be discussed first, then off reserve housing for Indigenous populations.

a) On reserve

In the First Nations context, 61.9% of on-reserve families live in band-owned housing, which is a form of social housing (First Nations Regional Health Survey [RHS], 2002/03). Approximately a third of First Nation housing needs repairs and another third are in need of minor repairs; 17.2% of First Nation houses meet the accepted definition of overcrowded – meaning that they have more than one person per room. Additionally,
many First Nation households have reported not having access to garbage disposal (21.8%), septic tanks or sewage service (9%), and safe drinking water (RHS, 2002/03). These risk factors have been linked to adverse health consequences such as tuberculosis, hepatitis A and an increased risk for injuries, mental health problems, family tension and violence.

In comparison to the 17.2% of First Nation people living under crowded circumstances, only about 7% of all Canadians lived under crowded conditions (O’Donnel & Tait, 2003). Such disparities in housing conditions and health provide evidence of the urgency of addressing issues of homelessness and relative homelessness among Canada’s First Nation on reserve population.

Problems such as overcrowding and inadequate housing are particularly concerning. There is a current housing shortage of between 20,000 and 35,000 units in Canada. It is estimated that this housing deficit is growing by approximately 2000 units a year. Limited supply of housing leads to unhealthy, overcrowded conditions but also accelerates depreciation of existing housing (INAC, 2005; Peters & Robillard, 2007).

b) Off reserve

For Indigenous people living off-reserve, low incomes continue to affect their ability to obtain adequate, suitable, and affordable housing. In 2001, nearly 24% of the non-reserve First Nations, Métis and Inuit (Indigenous) households were in core housing need (households that fall below one or more of the adequacy, suitability or affordability standards) compared with 13.5% non-Indigenous (INAC, 2005). Often this is reflected in
the fact that many Indigenous people with low incomes live in temporary housing with family and friends, as well as experiencing frequent moves from one housing situation to another. The residential mobility characteristic of the Indigenous population puts the population at a higher risk of homelessness (INAC, 2005).

Non-reserve Indigenous people are more likely to live in crowded conditions and be concerned about water quality. Health experts emphasize that inadequate housing can be associated with multiple health problems. For example, crowded living conditions can lead to the transmission of infectious diseases such as Tuberculosis, Hepatitis A and can increase the risk for injuries, mental health problems, family tension and violence. The 2001 census found that Indigenous people were more likely to live in crowded conditions (one or more persons per room) than the total Canadian population. About 17% of non-reserve Indigenous people lived in crowded conditions down from 22% five years earlier. In comparison, about 7% of all Canadians lived in crowded conditions (O’Donnel & Tait, 2003).

iii. Mobility

Mobility, as well as, residential mobility (moving within the same community) is a process of individual adjustment to housing changes in needs and resources (CMHC, 2006, 2002). As First Nations people move from the reserve to urban centers, they are running into barriers when trying to find housing (McCallum & Isaac, 2011). Many will stay with friends and family if they cannot find housing. Frequently, people will move back and forth between their reserve and the city as they do not have a permanent home of their own at either place. On the reserve, they will stay with family in already crowded homes until they make the decision to move back to the city (Peters & Robillard, 2009).
A household experiences a core housing need when the accommodation fails to meet one or more consumption standards (affordability, quality, and adequacy), and its income is lower than that needed to obtain adequate housing that meets all three standards (Clatworthy, 2000). Difficulties obtaining adequate housing among Indigenous families have been correlated with low incomes that limit the number of housing opportunities available. This fact is also reflected in the high rates of residential mobility among Indigenous children and youth (Wilkie & Berdahl, 2007). Such family circumstances affect children by creating a cycle of upheaval and poor quality housing along with other factors associated with poverty (Delaney & Kesten, 2010). The negative impact of residential mobility often results in low education levels among youth causing lower incomes in adulthood. This creates a situation of higher risk of housing problems throughout a person’s lifetime (Clatworthy, 2000).

iv. Income/Labour

Statistics from the 2006 Census for Indigenous women, in terms of both labour force participation and income, reveal disparities when compared to that of the non-Indigenous female population (Pendakur & Pendakur, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2011; Wilson & Macdonald, 2010). The labour force participation rate among Indigenous women was 59%, slightly lower than the rate among non-Indigenous women of 61.7%. Among registered Indian women, the labour force participation rate was lower on reserves (49.1%) than off reserve (61.8%). The Indigenous women’s unemployment rate was 13% at the time of the census, more than double the rate of non-Indigenous women (6.4%) (Statistics Canada, 2011).
In 2006, the average income of Indigenous women was $15,654, compared to an average income of $20,640 among non-Indigenous women in Canada. This means that average incomes of Indigenous women were about 75% of the average incomes of non-Indigenous women. Among Indigenous identity groups, Inuit and Métis women have the highest average incomes of approximately $16,599 and $17,520 respectively (Statistics Canada, 2011). In real terms, 41.1% of Indigenous women in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan live below the low income cut off line, which is “a statistical measure of the threshold level below which Canadians are estimated to devote at least one-fifth more of their income than the average family to the necessities of food, shelter, and clothing” (Loder, 2010, p. 13).

v. Education/Opportunity

Education is a key socio-economic factor that contributes to an individual’s well-being, employment opportunities, and income. Of Indigenous women aged 15 years and older, 41.6% have no certificate, diploma or degree, 22.9% have a high school certificate or equivalent, 8.2% have an apprenticeship or trades certificate and 17.2% have a college or other non-university certificate or diploma. Only 3.4% of Indigenous women have a university level certificate or diploma below bachelor level while 7.1% have achieved a university certificate, diploma or degree at the bachelor’s level or above (Statistics Canada, 2011). The most comparable numbers to be found on non-Indigenous women is from the 2001 Census, where this population had a higher level of achievement than any of the Indigenous identity groups, especially when comparing the percentages with university attainment. The majority of non-Indigenous women with university attainment
vi. Discrimination

Indigenous women face both racial and gender discrimination when trying to secure housing (McCallum & Isaac, 2011; Sider, 2005, Spence, 2004). Landlords can tell a prospective tenant that the dwelling is already rented or can be hyper vigilant in renting to an Indigenous woman, threatening eviction. In Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where there is a significant Indigenous population, one survey respondent said, “there is a level of discrimination in the housing market as some landlords in the city won’t rent to Aboriginal people. Racism causes available housing to be inaccessible to people who need them” (Wilkie & Berdahl, 2007, p. 19). Lenon (2000) found:

Aboriginal women and women of colour consistently tell us and articulate quite clearly that skin colour matters in Canadian society and, in this instance, within the housing market. Yet relations of power based on race are rarely put forward as a factor structuring homelessness in Canada. This silence worked to exclude the experiences and lived realities of a significant portion of the homeless population from the public discourse on homelessness, and ultimately hinders strategies to deal with the homelessness crisis effectively and holistically. (p. 125)

B. Individual and Personal Circumstances

The interrelationship between homelessness and distress is crucial for researchers and policy makers to understand. Indigenous women in a situation of homelessness often face stressors such as victimization, employment difficulties, and chronic poverty
(Delaney & Kesten, 2010; O’Bryne, 2010). Such conditions take their toll on one’s mental and emotional health. It must also be acknowledged that there is a two-way relationship between health and homelessness, because factors such as depression or substance abuse can make individuals even more vulnerable to becoming homeless (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1998). Once homeless, a person’s health status will deteriorate rapidly (Frankish et al., 2005; Hwang, 2002).

Women suffering from poor health have a reduced ability to take advantage of opportunities and services. Family dynamics and relationships are also significantly affected by the experience of homelessness (Delaney & Kesten, 2010). Mothers who are homeless and facing multiple stressors may inadvertently demonstrate inconsistent parenting, resulting in increased vulnerability of their children or dependents (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1998; McCallum & Isaac, 2011).

Homelessness can impact Indigenous women in varying ways, depending on the causes and duration of homelessness. Experiences of family violence or relationship issues may result in an individual becoming homeless. Other personal factors may include substance abuse or misuse, and poor mental or physical health (NWAC, 2007; Wente, 2000). Indigenous women’s health status, socio-economic marginalization and abuse factors also contribute to incidences of physical and mental health problems. Ruttan, LaBoucane-Benson, and Munro (2008), share one young mother’s experience:

For instance, Melanie recalled an incident that took place when her daughter was six months old: Well, we were fighting, and he broke the door down and the cops came and said that if I didn’t leave him they’d take my baby away. And from
there I wasn’t in the right state of mind, and I ended up in the [psychiatric] ward.

(p. 43)

\textit{i) Health Problems}

Physical and psychological health problems may foster homelessness by depleting economic resources or inhibiting an individual’s ability to earn an income, leaving them with fewer social and material resources (CIHI, 2007). Homeless women experiencing a health or mental health crisis’ may face barriers to accessing health care (Hwang, 2003; McCallum & Isaac, 2011). Substance abuse is a risk factor for homelessness, indicating unhealthy coping skills for serious life problems (Tutty et al., 2010; Phinny et al., 2007; Wente, 2000). Additionally,

...homeless people are at increased risk for a number of physical health problems, including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and respiratory tract infections, musculoskeletal conditions (for example arthritis), infectious diseases (for example, tuberculosis, HIV), poor oral and dental health, skin and food problems, poor management of chronic conditions (for example diabetes) and unintentional injuries. (CIHI, 2007, p.12)

\textit{ii) Violence Against Women}

Domestic violence may increase the risk of eviction and homelessness, because women who experience abuse must often leave their primary residence to escape their abuser (NWAC, 2007, CMHC, 2005). While men’s homelessness may relate to family violence experienced during childhood, homelessness experienced by women, children,
and youth is more directly and immediately a consequence of fleeing violence (Mearns, 2004). Conversely, women will also remain in a violent relationship because they have no other place to go (Walsh, Rutherford, & Kuzmak, 2009). Many women will go to stay with friends or relatives, knowing that their presence will increase already crowded conditions. Below, one woman describes her experience:

[There was] me and my 4 boys, and...I had a nephew and a niece that...I was looking after. So that was seven of us there. And then her four girls, and then she’s got grandchildren she looks after and that’s 13, 14, and then her two daughters... her oldest has three kids, so that’s 17, 18. At least 18, 19 people were living there. I used to just stay upstairs. It was just too chaotic for me there. And then she thought I was getting depressed, and it was not me getting depressed, it was just that I couldn’t handle... a lot of people in... a house...There were three [bedrooms]. (Delaney & Kesten, 2010, p. 9)

Family violence is one of the primary factors contributing to Indigenous women’s experiences of homelessness, though better information on Indigenous homelessness, family violence, and the gendered nature of both is needed (Mearns, 2004; Wente, 2000).

iii) Residential Schools/Intergenerational Trauma

The impact of the Indian residential school system has had an impact on the homelessness experienced by the First Nation community (NWAC, 2007). Experiences within residential schools have manifested themselves in the form of the continuation of physical, emotional, verbal, and spiritual abuse on the following generations (Menzies,
Although intergenerational trauma from residential schools is not the sole source of First Nation Homelessness, it had a major impact, Sider, (2005):

The impact of the residential school system on survivors and future generations is enormous. Suppressed anger, lack of identity, the creation of dependent thinking, alienation from formal education, lack of bi-cultural adaptation, prolonged and intense pain characterize the legacy of the residential school system. At this point, there is no reason to believe that residential schools are solely the root of Aboriginal homelessness, not in the context of a larger social engineering strategy to assimilate Aboriginals into white society. Practices within the residential school system devastated its students and successive generations; but the residential school system did not exist in a vacuum. The residential school system was part of a larger social engineering strategy to assimilate Aboriginals into Euro-Canadian social, political and economic structures. (p.143)

iv) Involvement in the Justice System

Women who have been in the criminal justice system may be more likely to experience homelessness than women who have not (McCallum & Isaac, 2011). Many who have been incarcerated do not have a support system to access when they are released (NWAC, 2007). Young adults are even more vulnerable to homelessness because they may not have developed the social and economic resources to give them the ability to retain adequate housing (Phinny et al., 2007).

Homelessness does affect Indigenous women in ways that are unique from the rest of the Canadian homeless population. Existing literature suggests that Indigenous
women face multiple oppressions in their journey to being housed. The housing that is available is either high priced, substandard, and sometimes it is both of these. It is important to develop knowledge that is specific to the housing needs of Indigenous women so that they and their children can have the opportunity to flourish, just like anyone else.

Theoretical Framework

4.1 Indigenous Research Paradigm

Reflecting on and identifying my theoretical framework was for me probably one of the key transformational steps in this research process. It solidified for me the decision to continue my journey on the Red Road as a lifelong process. It also clarified the importance of working for the benefit of Nehiyawak (The People). I wanted to start with a quote about culture and world view from the thesis of Earl Young (2006):

The term culture is used here as the accumulated shared learning of a group based on millennia of communal expertise. Culture defines the human inter-relationships within individual and community contexts. Indigenous cultural values are the ideas and beliefs that a group identified as important. Some examples of these values are inter-relatedness that extends beyond human relations, the centrality of spirituality, and the exploration of one’s unique gifts via a deep inward reflection (Ermine, 1995; Dumont, 1990). I am using the term culture to describe an Aboriginal world view (paradigm) that informs our way of
thinking (epistemology), knowing (ontology) and guiding our interactions (axiology) with the world (Wilson, 2001; Steinhauer, 2002). These diverse Indigenous paradigms or Indigenous knowledge systems contribute to the field of leadership and education for all peoples. Indigenous knowledge systems are ecologically centered and affirm the inter-relationships between people, communities, and ecosystems (Nadeau, 2005). (p.2)

The framework that resonated with me was Wilson’s (2008) interpretation of an Indigenous research paradigm being in the form of a circle. Within that circle are ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology. These four elements merge into each other with no clear beginning or end. The ontology and epistemology are about relationality, our relationships with each other. The axiology and methodology are about accountability to those we are working with, Nehiyawak (The People). Elders say that my research must benefit The People in some way. This paradigm makes perfect sense to me as an Indigenous person. I cannot imagine doing research in any other way.

As a graduate student, I have come to learn that Indigenous ways of knowing, being (Martin & Miraboopa, 2001; Steinhauer, 2002) and doing can and do extend to the area of scholarly research. An Indigenous research paradigm is different from the traditional western research paradigm:

One major difference between those dominant paradigms and an Indigenous paradigm is that those dominant paradigms build on the fundamental belief that knowledge is an individual entity; the researcher is an individual in search of knowledge, knowledge is something that is gained, and therefore, knowledge may
be owned by an individual. An Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational. Knowledge is shared with all creation. It is not just interpersonal relationships, or just with the research subjects I may be working with, but it is a relationship with all of creation. It is with the cosmos, it is with the animals, with the plants, with the earth that we share this knowledge. It goes beyond the ideal of individual knowledge to the concept of relational knowledge. (Wilson, 2001, p. 177)

Ermine (1995) uses the analogy of two worldviews as on separate voyages. The western quest for knowledge being an external search for all that there is to know of the physical world, while the Indigenous worldview is an inner quest for metaphysical knowledge. This description of two separate worldviews is the backdrop for the “ethical space of engagement” (Ermine, 2007, p. 3), which talks about the difference between western and Indigenous knowledge systems/worldviews. These divergent systems, or worldviews, are separate, one is not better than the other, just different. The enormous size and embeddedness of the western system creates an undercurrent that western ideas are universal and the norm (Ermine, 2007; McIntosh, 1998). In my graduate classes and this research process, I have felt the tension that this ethical dilemma can create. I worry that non-Indigenous people will not understand what I am trying to get across to them; that an Indigenous research paradigm is rooted in who I am as an Indigenous person; the research process is both academic and spiritual. There is no separation between the two as both reside within an Indigenous world view, and as such, is a deeply personal and spiritual journey as it has been for other Indigenous scholars (Ermine, 1995; McIvor, 2010; Wilson, 2008). I do believe, as Wilson does:
Research is a ceremony…The purpose of any ceremony is to build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between our cosmos and us. The research that we do as Indigenous people is a ceremony that allows us a raised level of consciousness and insight into our world. Through going forward together with open minds and good hearts we have uncovered the nature of this ceremony. (Wilson, 2008, p. 137)

It also resonates with me that there must both be academic and spiritual preparation in research (Wilson, 2008). McIvor (2010) echoes this thought about her doctoral research: My research journey is a spiritual journey, as is much of Indigenous research and scholarship. I propose, as Indigenous researchers (while inviting our supporters to join), that we make a commitment to a greater uptake of spirit-based research in the academy and beyond. (p. 140)

I do need to qualify this quote by stating that the aforementioned is what speaks to me. I recognize that there is a cultural continuum where Indigenous researchers reside in all areas of the spectrum according to their own personal beliefs, which is as it should be.

For my own spiritual preparation, I consulted two Elders throughout the course of my research. One of them was a person I interviewed for this research. I smudge and pray, attend Grandmother Moon Ceremonies, sweat ceremonies, pipe ceremonies, and have been an oskápêwis (ceremonial helper) for the female Elder where I work. In the summer, I feel immense joy in taking my Elder sweetgrass and sage picking, which has been a collective experience where Iskwewak (women) have shared traditional knowledge with me. I do thank the Creator for putting these traditional knowledge
keepers in my life. I started this spiritual journey a number of years ago and in hindsight I see that it has helped to prepare me for my research journey. I would not be able to understand the concepts discussed previously if I had not had that introduction to Indigenous spirituality and knowledge of Elders. Let me be clear, I do not want to appear to be boasting, only to share my experiences. I am at the beginning of my journey on the Red Road and have a lot to learn.

Weber-Pillwax (1999) suggests seven principles that are a part of an Indigenous research paradigm. These principles are the combined knowledge of teachings handed down through Indigenous communities and families. The principles are as follows:

1. All living things are interconnected
2. The motives of the research must benefit the Indigenous community
3. Lived Indigenous experience is the foundation of Indigenous research
4. Theories are to be grounded in Indigenous epistemology
5. Research is transformative for all involved
6. Indigenous-grounded research will never undermine Indigenous peoples or communities
7. Languages and cultures are living processes.

Other Indigenous scholars have made significant contributions to the developing area of Indigenous research paradigms. There exists a rich diversity of thought, just as there is a rich diversity of cultures and traditions among different tribal groups. For the purposes of this study, I will be following the paradigm and methods noted above.

I keep thinking of that adage, “the more I learn, the less I know”. I am wonderstruck by the whole area of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. I am
humbled by the knowledge that I am walking the same path of the Indigenous scholars who came before me. I am grateful that they had the courage to start the ongoing process of defining Indigenous scholarship on our own terms.

4.2 Feminist Theory

Feminist theory fits within an Indigenous research paradigm and informs my theoretical framework. This theory carries themes of empowerment, critical analysis, and analysis of oppression and patriarchy. Feminist theory focuses on gender equality and the area where race, class, and gender intersect (Mack-Canty & Wright, 2004). Mack-Canty & Wright (2004) state “Feminists today are more likely to address the intersectionality of various ‘isms’ with sexism (Cohen, Jones & Tronto, 1997) and to question the notion of hierarchy itself (Plumwood, 1992)” (p. 853). Today’s feminism advocates that women face multiple oppressions depending on their social and cultural location (Mack-Canty & Wright, 2004).

There are divergent views about the role of feminist theory within Indigenous epistemology. Some female Indigenous scholars contend that there is no room for feminist theory in Indigenous Epistemology (Monture-Angus, 1995 in St. Denis, 2007; Turpel, 1993). The argument is that it is not applicable to Indigenous society as women were held in high regard. To focus on gender is betraying one’s cultural identity.

St. Denis (2007) states “There is a wide range of analysis to be found in feminist scholarship that is potentially relevant and compatible with the needs of Aboriginal women and men and their communities” (p.49). Mihesuah (2003) further notes, “The reality is that most Native women – whether full-blood or mixed-blood, living on or off tribal lands, activist or indifferent – are concerned about both racial and gender
oppression” (p.163). In all Indigenous worldviews, women are held in high regard and their counsel is sought on all important matters (Lyons-Friesen, 2007). However, we live in the here and now, which includes dealing with multiple oppressions against Indigenous women, no matter where they live. Graveline (1998) explains how the educational model she created contains both feminist theory and Indigenous epistemology: “While the pedagogical tools articulated in this Model arise, for me, out of my Aboriginal Ancestral Traditions, several have supports in feminist, anti-racist and other critical theory bases” (p. 71).

When thinking about if feminism fits within an Indigenous research paradigm I think, “how can it not”? Part of Indigenous epistemology is the importance of balance and connectedness in all things. The medicine wheel shows that we need to be balanced in the mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical realms. Indigenous women who experience oppression on many fronts can be unbalanced in these realms. This affects all Indigenous people because we are all connected. It can only benefit those who live according to an Indigenous epistemology, to help Indigenous women regain balance in their life. They can achieve this by resisting and working towards ending the various oppressions these women face.
Method

The methods section is the journey taken by myself and this group of storytellers. Each step of the process will be explained along with any detours in the journey. It will document the process of using both an Indigenous research paradigm and a western, qualitative methodology in a mixed qualitative methods approach. In previous chapters, I explained my theoretical framework. The methodology section is an explanation of methods used within an Indigenous research paradigm.

First, I will discuss narrative inquiry, explaining the rationale for viewing participants as storytellers in the narrative process. Next will be an explanation of the research process from the selection of story-tellers, to data collection and analysis. Finally, this chapter will discuss what the storytellers shared with me and how we shared the analysis of the stories.

5.1) Narrative

I will use narrative in this study (Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin, 2006; Patton, 2002) as it fits well within the Indigenous research paradigm from which I completed this project (McIvor, 2010). The theoretical framework for analysis that I will use in the discussion chapter is based upon the Medicine Wheel.

Personal narratives are a form of storytelling, something that is central to Indigenous knowledge.

Wilson stated that Stories in the oral tradition have served some important functions for Native people: The historical and mythological stories provide moral
guidelines by which one should live. They teach the young and remind the old what behavior is appropriate and inappropriate in our cultures; they provide a sense of identity and belonging, situating community members within their lineage and establishing their relationship to the rest of the natural world. (as cited in Thomas, 2005, p. 241)

I appreciate Thomas’s (2005) idea of calling people who tell us about their life experiences “storytellers”. This word has connotations of wisdom and respect in Indigenous ways of knowing. I see the women who participated in this study as storytellers and have tried to give them and their stories the care and respect they deserve. To this end, I will call the women who participated in this study “storytellers” when not referring to them by name.

Narrative research methods “give voice” to study participants. I used a narrative method within the larger understanding of an Indigenous research paradigm. The narrative approach serves this topic well as experiences with homelessness can produce intensely personal reactions, feelings and experiences. It gives a rich description of thoughts, feelings, and events.

Narrative inquiry is the study of an experience. This method examines the lived experiences of people. It allows people to tell their story, whether it is a story about one incident or the story of their entire lives (Creswell, 1998). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) define narrative inquiry as:

...a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same
spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that made up people’s lives, both individual and social. (p. 20)

Narrative analysis is about bringing to light the rich fabric of a person’s life. The perspective of the participant, not the researcher, is explained and explored. The participant’s values, beliefs, hopes, dreams, experiences, and position in society are the context around their stories. The researcher is invited into their world in order to see things as they see them (Clandinin, 2006). The person is free to share their story in whatever manner she/he sees fit, be it storytelling, photo-voice, art, drama, poetry, or within a conversation, for example, “…experience and story are kept central in a qualitative approach that uses narratives to excavate deep understanding and meaning embedded in our lives” (Barton, 2004, p. 519).

Being fortunate enough to share in a person’s story entails a trust relationship between the researcher and the participant. The researcher must respect the participant if there is to be any sharing of meaningful experiences. The participant must trust the researcher in order to share the details of their lives. This is not a method that the researcher can be withdrawn from and look at information from afar. The researcher must be fully immersed, walking beside the participant through the entire process of gathering narrative data and the entire research process. There is no separation between researcher and participant; instead, the participant is considered a co-researcher. For this project, the research question is: What are the lived experiences of homelessness for Indigenous women and how does it affect them?
5.2) Sampling Strategy

Seven participants were identified using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling involves targeting cases rich in information that will help the researcher to understand the subject of study (Patton, 2002). I chose purposive sampling so that I could be reasonably sure that the research participants would have knowledge of the subject matter. The whole point of the study was to talk to people with lived experiences of homelessness from the perspective of Indigenous women, so I purposefully sought those who fit the criteria. There were several criteria for participating in this study.

First, the person had to be homeless (according to the definitions set in the literature review) or had been homeless at some point in the past. Second, the person had to be of Indigenous ancestry, third they had to be female. Fourth, they had to be over the age of eighteen. The participants self-identified as fitting within the four criteria stated above. I chose participants eighteen years of age and older to avoid going through the strict ethics approval for participants under eighteen. This research option to restrict the age to over eighteen was more efficient than the all-inclusive one, as there were no separate consent forms to use, and the research process would be more straightforward.

This project is a small part of a larger research project led by the principal researcher Dr. Brigette Krieg, who studied the effects of incarceration and homelessness on Indigenous women. The seven storytellers who were interviewed for this project were participants/co-researchers in the larger study. During the last two group meetings of the larger research project, I explained the personal interview portion of the study, what would be involved with this process, and handed out the letter of introduction (see appendix B) and letter of consent (see appendix C). As the participants were already a
part of the larger study group, I was able to speak to all of them at the same time. I asked for volunteers willing to be interviewed for my research project. All seven of the women put up their hand to volunteer to be interviewed. I did not look outside of this group as I was able to secure seven participants for this study.

5.3) Participants

All of the storytellers were Indigenous women who live in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, and their names were changed in an effort to maintain confidentiality. They were all born in either Prince Albert or communities situated north of Prince Albert. All of the storytellers were of Cree ancestry, however their ancestry was coincidental. Although it was not a criterion for selection, the shared ancestry was not surprising as Prince Albert is traditionally Cree territory. Louise, Liz, and Karen were raised by grandparents or parents in what would be considered a traditional lifestyle. Sharon grew up on her reserve. Tanis, Trudy, and Crystal grew up in Prince Albert or other communities close to Prince Albert. All of the storytellers except Trudy and Sharon had children at the time of their homelessness, whose ages ranged from toddler to adult. Two of the storytellers (Tanis and Louise) had large families with six and seven children each and had their children with them at the time of their homelessness. Tanis was the only person who had a job during her homeless experience.

The participants were aware that they were all volunteering to get interviewed and that they may be able to recognize each other’s story in this report. Some of the women were related to each other. Cheryl was a mother to Trudy; Louise was a maternal aunt to Cheryl and great aunt to Trudy. Two of the storytellers were homeless at the time. One woman was staying at her sister’s house, and the other was staying at a friend’s house.
All seven storytellers had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives. The youngest storyteller was in her early twenties, the oldest storyteller is the Elder for this research project, however she did not mention her age.

5.4) Indigenous Protocol

As an Indigenous woman operating from an Indigenous worldview, and believing in the Indigenous concept of reciprocity (Graveline, 1998; Ermine, 1995), I did give the participants tobacco at the beginning of the group meetings. It is a cultural tradition to offer tobacco to a person when you ask them to share their wisdom and experiences with you. Martin and Mirraboopa (2001) state:

In Indigenist research, methods for data collection are demonstrations of Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing. This entails following codes for communication and protocols for interacting that expects different behaviour in different settings with different participants. This will vary in each setting and must be respected as part of the research activity, not just as a means to acquire research outcomes. (p. 6)

The storytellers seemed remarkably appreciative of receiving the tobacco wrapped in grandmother’s cloth. The Elder was especially happy to have been presented with the cloth and tobacco. It was an acknowledgement that they had valuable cultural wisdom and stories to share and that bearing witness to and honoring their stories would be done in a respectful manner.

5.5) Data Collection

Individual interviews were arranged which each of the storytellers. They were given the choice of where they wanted to have the interview conducted. One interview was done at the researcher’s home, part of one interview was done at the storyteller’s
sister’s home where she was staying, and the rest of the interviews were conducted at a local agency that supports and advocates for Indigenous women and their children, Prince Albert Women of the Earth, Inc..

The interviews ranged in length from one half hour to one and one half hours. I conducted five of the interviews and two of the interviews were conducted for me by one of the community collaborators of the larger research project, Marlene Bear. One of the storytellers requested to be interviewed in the Cree Language; Marlene is a fluent Cree speaker and volunteered to conduct the interview in Cree and translate the interview afterwards. One of the storytellers requested that Marlene be the interviewer for their personal interview, and I made arrangements for this to occur. Marlene was a key informant for the research project and had a pre-existing relationship with the women who had volunteered to participate in this study.

Sitting down with the storytellers to do the interviews was sometimes a challenge. Several of the interviews had to be rescheduled; some of the storytellers forgot about their appointments, some of them had other events in their lives arise that needed their attention. Each of the interviews began with the consent form and information letters being explained to the women, who were then given time to read and sign the letters.

We started the unstructured interviews talking about the first topic in the interview guide (see appendix A). In an unstructured interview there are no preset questions, only a general idea of what you want to discuss (Patton, 2002). I had a guide with discussion topics/questions but did not follow the list closely. It would have been counterproductive to adhere strictly to the interview guide as the storytellers were giving
me the information I needed in their own way. As Kovach (2009) noted: “Through this less-structured method, the story breathes and the narrator regulates” (p. 99).

The storytellers’ stories quickly took on a life of their own. The storytellers were extremely open and honest about telling their stories. In the moment, I made a decision not to interrupt this process and flow, but did ask questions relevant to the stories that the storytellers were telling when it was an appropriate time to do so. In Indigenous ways of being, it is crucial to listen to a person when they are telling you something and not to interrupt. In the telling of their stories, the experiences of what it feels like to be an Indigenous woman who was homeless were expressed abundantly clear in a way that demonstrated the range of emotions experienced.

5.6) Data Analysis

For this research project, I chose to use narrative inquiry. This style of analysis incorporates thematic analysis as part of its process. There are several steps involved in analyzing and interpreting qualitative data in a thematic analysis (Howitt & Cramer, 2008). The completed interviews were audio taped with the permission of the storytellers and transcribed by a transcriber. I never met the transcriber in person as she lives in Calgary; we communicated through email. Ideally, I would have liked to have had the time to do my own transcribing to maintain the relationship between the data collected through the stories and the search for themes in the women’s shared experiences.

Following the transcription, I read the transcripts to get first impressions. As I read, the storytellers’ voices were running through my head. I remembered all of the emotions I felt in listening to their extraordinary stories, I was amazed that they had survived such traumatic events and saddened that they went through the things they did.
I felt angry at the way they had been treated by others and sometimes frustrated that they had not been able to recover from their addictions.

The transcripts were coded and analyzed using a computer program called Atlas.ti. Atlas.ti is qualitative data analysis software that enables researchers to house interview data in one space and analyze the data in a systematic and organized manner. While I found Atlas.ti useful in organizing the data, initial analysis was a frustrating experience due to either program issues or computer compatibility. Although Atlas.ti offers convenience in organizing data, computer assisted analysis removed me from the data and in order to keep myself connected with the stories I re-read the transcripts and the coding groups several times.

I did end up with some codes that were duplicates, which were combined. At the end of the coding, I had 51 codes from seven interviews. I agree with Kovach, who noted, “It is the fragmentation of the data associated with the coding process which is problematic within an Indigenous methodology framework” (Kovach, 2012, personal communication). However, it was a necessary part of narrative inquiry that I followed for this thesis. I likened it to the strands of an Indigenous methodology in that I tried to make meaning of stories, which is a part of storytelling in the Indigenous tradition. Wilson (2008) says that Elders “let listeners draw their own conclusions to stories” (p. 123). Elders use stories to give traditional teachings about how we are supposed to relate to each other and the world around us. As learners, it is our duty to listen carefully and try to figure out what the teachings are.

After creating the initial code list I grouped the codes into seven broad categories: becoming homeless, feelings of homelessness, experiences of homelessness, the turning
point, resilience and persistence, supports, and gaps in service. I created these categories by organizing the codes by similarity, then naming that similarity. At this point, I started looking for and identifying patterns and themes emerging from the transcripts. The data (stories) was then ‘re-storied’ (meaning retold by me) (Creswell, 2007) by attaching their stories to the different codes to show examples of the codes. In order to bring the storytellers’ voices out, many direct quotes were used to illustrate the themes in the results section. Although the Medicine Wheel framework was used in the analysis of the stories, I purposefully did not organize the results chapter within a Medicine Wheel framework, as I felt that the chapter should be totally dedicated to honoring and respecting the storytellers’ stories. I wanted to preserve the clarity and flow of their stories and I felt that it was more appropriate to use the Medicine Wheel framework in the discussion chapter where the themes would be put into that framework.

Following the lead of other Indigenous researchers (Smith 1999; Kovach 2005; Martin & Mirraboopa, 2001), the storytellers were invited to participate in the analysis of the data. Martin and Mirraboopa (2001) state:

For the Indigenist researcher, data interpretation is more of an issue of according respect to the people and country involved allowing them to tell their own stories, in their own ways. It has less to do with capturing ‘truth’ or drawing general conclusions, than checking and re-checking interpretations with participants. Interpretation needs to be reflexive and draw upon our Ways of Knowing and Ways of Being. This ensures our involvement in the re-presentation of county, self, family and community that can be claimed and celebrated. (p.6)
I asked the storytellers if they wanted to review a copy of their transcripts, which they all wanted to do. I was able to contact five of the storytellers to give them a copy of their transcript. On three separate occasions, arrangements were made to go to Sharon’s house. Each time I went there, a person came to the door and stated that she had stepped out but that she would call me when she got back. After the third attempt, I did not try to contact her again as I felt that maybe she did not want to meet with me. I was not able to contact Crystal, although I knew that she was in Prince Albert. At the time of this research project she was homeless and struggled with addiction. I gave the storytellers a copy of the enclosed Medicine Wheel diagram (see appendix D) that brought the feelings and experiences around homelessness of all of the storytellers together and asked them what they thought of that format and if they thought it should be used in my thesis. The storytellers all liked the Medicine wheel concept and wanted me to use it in my thesis.

I was able to meet with four of the seven storytellers a third time to verify the accuracy of their transcripts. I was able to ask if they felt I had organized the data from their interviews in the form of a Medicine Wheel accurately. I also used this meeting to see if they wanted to add anything else to the diagram. The Medicine Wheel is a theoretical framework based upon conceptual knowledge flowing from an Indigenous paradigm. The storytellers were happy that a concept that they understood and felt ownership of was going to be presented to individuals who they felt were “academic” people. I was able to contact five of the storytellers one last time to see if they wanted to add or change something. By this time, I think that they felt a bit like I was “beating a dead horse”!
5.7) Standards of Verification

I have struggled with trying to apply this concept (Creswell, 1998) to the stories in this project. I feel that the stories are the truths of the storytellers as they know it and this should be credibility enough. My challenge was to ensure that their truths had been shared accurately (Kovach, 2009; Thomas, 2005). Kovach (2009) talks about credibility, which is similar to quality and verification:

For Indigenous researchers, there are often three audiences with whom we engage for transferring the knowledge of our research: (a) findings from Indigenous research must make sense to the general Indigenous community, (b) schema for arriving at our findings must be clearly articulated to the non-Indigenous academy, and (c) both the means for arriving at the findings and the findings themselves must resonate with other Indigenous researchers who are in the best position to evaluate our research. (p.139)

As a beginner researcher, I can only hope that my work has achieved these criteria. I do know that the storytellers who I was able to stay in contact with felt that the findings made sense to them. My thesis committee will tell me if I have clearly articulated my methods in an academically acceptable manner. Only time will tell if other Indigenous scholars will approve of my work.

Viewing the stories with a narrative inquiry lens, several verification procedures were used to assess the trustworthiness of my analysis, namely, clarifying researcher bias, member checks, and rich, thick descriptions (Creswell, 1998). The introduction, location, and theoretical framework sections clearly outlined my position in society and the way I view the world. The Indigenous paradigm within which I live my life was a guiding
force in this study. As I have previously mentioned, Indigenous ways of knowing, being
and doing (Martin, 2009) are inseparable in the research process I have used.

For member checks, the storytellers were consulted for the accuracy of their
transcripts and analysis of the stories. By checking with the storytellers, I was able to see
if they wanted to add or change anything. There were a couple of minor changes the
storytellers requested that I had wanted to include but missed it on the discussion
diagram, so I did make changes to the discussion diagram. The five storytellers I was
able to share the analysis with agreed with my analysis of the themes and patterns, feeling
satisfied that their stories had been captured accurately. Again each one of them
commented that using the medicine wheel was a terrific idea.

In the results chapter, I have tried to provide a rich, thick description of the
storytellers and their stories by including many quotes from the transcripts. In the
introduction and location section and methodology sections, I gave a clear explanation of
my location in society and the Indigenous paradigm from which I see the world. In the
methodology section, I have given a step by step explanation of the research process I
followed. The discussion diagram provides a visual snapshot of what the storytellers
said. Showing the information in the form of a medicine wheel is a visual representation
of one aspect of Indigenous ways of knowing.

5.8) Ethical Considerations

Historically, Indigenous Peoples have been the subject of research likened to
examining an insect under a microscope (Smith, 1999). It was paramount to conduct this
study in an ethical manner according to the recommendations provided by Ermine et al.
(2004), namely, that the participants have “ownership, control, access, and possession”
(Ermine et al., 2004, p. 47) of the information contained in the study. It is essential that the study benefit the members of the Indigenous community, as if it is not helpful in some way, I will only be repeating what non-Indigenous researchers have been doing for decades. To fulfill this responsibility, I felt it was necessary for the storytellers to understand that the study belonged to all involved. The information is theirs to use as they see fit. I assured all of the participants that they would each receive a copy of the final document once it was finished and approved.

The inability to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity is another ethical consideration. There is a possibility that the storytellers will be recognized from direct quotes or stories contained in the final report. The storytellers were informed of this in the letter of introduction and consent letter given to them and when we met individually to conduct the interview.

The ethics approval process was an educational one for me. It made me think about what I was proposing to do and if the project could potentially harm any of the participants. The approval process itself was pretty straight forward; I submitted the required forms outlining my research project and any potential harm that could come to the participants. I had to declare whether or not the participants or I would financially gain from the project. A committee of University of Regina faculty members then reviewed my application and approved it.

As I was a research assistant in the larger study, I had the opportunity to meet and establish a trust relationship with these storytellers in the four months prior to starting to interview the storytellers. Kovach (2009) identifies the importance of this relationship:
Within the research relationship, the research participant must feel that the researcher is willing to listen to the story. By listening intently to one another, story as elevates the research from an extractive exercise serving the fragmentation of knowledge to a holistic endeavour that situates research firmly within the nest of relationship. (p. 98-99)

The storytellers were then given the opportunity to volunteer to be interviewed. It was made clear that participating in the interviews was entirely voluntary and that they should not feel obliged to participate.

I think that being able to build a trusting relationship with the storytellers during the larger study helped them feel comfortable in deciding to participate in the personal interviews. They knew where I lived (I live only about two blocks from Tanis and Louise), how to contact me, and we (including our children) had spent a lot of time together. During that time, they saw by my actions and my words that I was a person that they could trust. They felt as if they could trust me with their stories, that I would treat their stories with respect (Kovach, 2009; Thomas, 2005; Wilson, 2008).

5.9) Confidentiality

The transcripts were identified with a number. An information key with the corresponding storyteller’s identification/contact information was kept separately, with only the researcher and the researcher’s advisor having access to the identification information key. The researcher’s advisor and committee members may see all other information regarding the study. All electronic files that were created in this project were password protected. Although three of the storytellers gave permission to use their real
names, I decided to use fictitious names for all storytellers as the group is small and I did not want to increase the chances of identification by naming almost half of the group.

I had told the storytellers that if they became upset during the interview and wanted to talk to someone else besides me, I would help facilitate that process. Although a list of counselors and Elders was provided to the participants, none felt that they needed to speak with them.

5.10) Limitations

One limitation of this study is that the group of storytellers was small at seven participants. This means that the transferability to provincial or national studies would be minimal. One interview conducted in the Cree language and translated into English has the possibility that statements and ideas spoken about may have been incorrectly translated. Cultural nuances may have been lost in translation to English. I was not able to contact two of the storytellers to get their feedback on the discussion diagram or the accuracy of their transcripts despite sincere efforts to do so. One interview was done in two segments; we had started out at a relative’s home where the storyteller was staying with her grandson. She became emotional during the interview and requested that we stop the interview and reschedule for another date and location. We were able to meet again in another location and finish the interview.

This process was a journey that the storytellers and I walked together. In telling their stories, they trusted that I would treat their stories respectfully and do things in a good (ethical) way when trying to present them in this thesis. The next section tells their extraordinary stories of struggle and survival while being homeless.
Results

This chapter will review the themes that came out of the interviews. I have dedicated this entire chapter to the voices of the storytellers. In the next chapter, I will introduce the Medicine Wheel concept and how it will be used to analyze the data collected. Using the Medicine Wheel framework is to provide an understanding of mine and the storyteller’s interpretation of the data. Here, I wanted to convey some sense of the feelings and energy that came out in the interviews. I want to honour their stories in a good way, which to me is letting the stories unfold as they were told to me.

It is my hope that I have done the storytellers justice in listening to their stories and providing them a space to tell their stories. It was emotionally powerful for both the storytellers to speak their truths and have it acknowledged in a traditional way, and for me to bear witness to the telling. The results include many direct quotations from the personal interviews because I wanted the storytellers’ voices to resonate in the outcome of this project (Kovach, 2009; Thomas, 2005). Louise did her interview in the Cree language, so her quotations are in the third person, as said by the interpreter. All names have been changed in an effort to protect the storytellers’ identities.

6.1 Becoming Homeless

All of the storytellers experienced homelessness early in their lives, as children or young adults. As adults, it was a lonely experience that changed their lives; some were evicted from their homes, some ran away, and some voluntarily left their homes. As a teenager, Trudy was a runaway: “Um, at first I was going through abuse at home from
everybody, mostly my family. I still am. So, I thought the way to get my pain away was by running away and drinking” (personal communication, March 9, 2011).

For Louise, her world changed when her mother died. She was seventeen years old and had a six week old baby. She and her baby were suddenly thrown out of the family home in a remote community by her father. She said:

(In the Cree language through an interpreter) “While me and my baby were sleeping, my dad came in he had been drinking. He came in and he woke us up and he had a steel bar with him. He kicked the bed and (there’s a long pause) dad said “get out, you take your kid and get out.” I was begging him saying papa there’s nowhere for me to go I have nowhere to go. I just begged my dad not to kick us out with my kid, with my baby. He stood there and waited while I got my baby ready and myself get dressed”. She said “I took an extra blanket”. She said “I got an extra blanket a bigger blanket for us”. I kept begging him not to throw us out. So I was breast feeding at the time but I made an extra bottle because I wasn’t sure what was going to happen and all the time I was crying. So he kicked me out and I was outside, I didn’t know which way to go, I kept looking either way, wondering which way I should go. I walked back and forth, back and forth. I had no choice I had to live with my dad. I heard him lock the door and I could hear him crying saying “Why did you have to leave” and he was talking to my mom. I kept knocking on the door saying “let me in I have nowhere to go”. I’ll never forget that, it was real quiet after he probably fell asleep or something. I’ll never forget that because I had nowhere to go. (personal communication, March 3, 2011)
A.  *Family*

Family was extremely important to all of the storytellers. They had strong connections to their children and family members and loved them very much. In spite of the strong connections, they did not always have a close relationship with their family members. Most of the storytellers grew up in single parent families or with both of their parents, who drank. Two of the storytellers grew up in a stable home, raised by their grandparents or parents in a traditional way.

Mothers played a vital role in the storytellers’ lives. Some were strong women, who raised their children as best that they could and tried to pass on teachings they thought were necessary to have a happy life. Louise’s mother knew she was dying and tried to prepare her daughters.

I asked Louise how old she was when her mother passed away Louise said that she was 17. I asked whether her mother was sick. Louise told me that her mother had been ill for quite some time. Louise’s mother used to try and teach them how to do things. She told her girls, “I’ll be leaving soon and I need you guys to know what you’re supposed to be doing.” (Personal Communication, March 3, 2011)

Karen was raised by her grandparents:

I lived a normal life a child should live of riding bikes, riding horses, um, swimming and playing together in the bushes with all my cousins. We all lived in a - on a reserve and we were all really close so we hung together every day and played and went biking, went horseback riding. My uncles that were farming you
know. Berry picking with my grandparents, my grandparents raised me. (Personal Communication, January 3, 2011)

Some of the storytellers’ mothers were suffering with addictions and emotionally abused their children:

A lot of times my mom would bring drunk people home and then she’d wake me up. “Oh give him a hug” and “don’t be a bitch” and it was like people I don’t even know. So I’d always crawl down and you know I was still having low self-esteem. (Tanis, Personal Communication, December 10, 2011)

Some of the storytellers’ fathers were not a part of their lives. Two of the fathers drank heavily during the storytellers’ childhoods. At times, the storytellers were hit by or emotionally abused by their fathers. When asked what the deciding factor was for her mom to leave the household, Sharon explained:

Ah, the abuse of my dad, she was getting abused physically and mentally. Like it got to the point where my dad started hitting us for no reason when we were kids and that’s the reason why we left them. When we did come back he did change but every time he drank he was gone and he tried to come home with different women while we were home. (Personal Communication, January 18, 2011)

One of the storytellers (Tanis) was sexually abused by her father:

Because I always was raised like being alone and being bothered [sexually abused] or nobody believing me and so I always had like low self-esteem. All I ever wanted to do was get an education and that. Like I don’t know, I just felt that ah, I wanted if I ever had kids to raise them differently because it was so awful being
alone because I had nobody. Especially like with my dad molesting me. (Tanis, Personal Communication, December 10, 2011)

At times, family members were there for the storytellers when they needed help. The family member would often bring them back to their parental homes after they had run away. As a teenager, Sharon would often run away from home. She shared this about her family:

We ended up, we were going out, we out for a walk and that’s when my uncle found us. He’s like “what the fuck are you doing?” After that we got into the vehicle, he took us to the store and bought us whatever and drove us home. Of course I got into a scuffle with my mom and dad and they freaked out on me. “Why are you doing this? Why are you going down there?”…We ended up going and sure enough like my family would start looking for me. (Personal Communication, January 18, 2011)

Some of the storytellers’ children have been put in foster care, adopted by others, or are taken care of by other family members:

Then I took her to Edmonton with me and lost her to Child Welfare. She was a ward of the government till she was 18. In that time, it was my family that looked after her. She was in my family circle so it wasn’t until she was about 16 that she hit welfare and started going to, what do you call it, a place for people that are always in trouble with the law, teens. (Karen, Personal Communication, January 3, 2011)

Liz had a horrific experience with the adoption of one her children:
I have three boys. I used to drink a lot and that. When I was staying with my mom in Saskatoon, and when I went to the hospital to have my baby, the welfare system took my baby away right away from the hospital because I was drinking. So my mom and I went to court for my son. My mom was going to look after my son till I straightened out. So we went to court and the judge said to me and my mom, we were both unfit to keep my son. My mom had a little housekeeping room, you know. But because of my record and my mom, she wasn’t a drunk or anything like that, you know. But she always had her own little place. She told the judge that she wanted to keep my son for me. The judge bluntly said “we were unfit to keep my son”. I had five minutes with my son before social services came and took him away from me. The judge said “You have two options; either put him up in foster care or adoption”. That’s the choices we had. They gave us time to think about it because me and my mom knew we weren’t going to get him. So we thought about it and my mom said “If you put him in a foster care he’ll be moved around all over the place but if you give him up for adoption he’ll be in one place”. There was a doctor and his wife that wanted to adopt my son. So when I held him for 5 minutes I was crying and then the social worker came and said “It’s time”. I said “Can I see him from time to time”. They said “No if you are adopting him out you can’t see him”. I said “Well who is adopting him?” They said we can’t tell you that. No information. So they took him away. Never seen my son since he was born. I tell the story to the women. You know, my son was taken away for good from social services. I didn’t have a three month waiting period or a six month waiting period. (Personal Communication, January 24, 2011)
Crystal talked about having her children apprehended and the downward spiral that ensued. When asked about her children being apprehended and her feelings and actions around that experience she said:

I still continued to drink. I didn’t care, I didn’t give a shit. Gave up…I was so addicted to intravenous drugs, in those two years or, you know, and came back and just couldn’t be a mom. But yearn for that, wanted a relationship with my baby but I couldn’t have it because of the addiction was far too gone with me…I did have my own place and then I lost it. I don’t know, I just gave up. I just completely gave up and I don’t know why I did. (Crystal, Personal Communication, January 19, 2011)

B. Experiences of Homelessness

For some of the storytellers, homelessness became a pattern. They became used to being homeless, it felt familiar. For three of the storytellers, the minimum amount of time they had been homeless was two years. A couple of the women had been homeless for over twenty years. The many experiences they had included hidden and relative homelessness, weathering the elements, hunger, exchanging sex for a place to sleep, domestic violence, substance abuse, contact with police, incarceration, and culture.

i) Hidden and Relative homelessness

These storytellers had to make tough choices in order to survive. One woman chose to stay with a man in his house rather than be homeless, others couch surfed. This was a pattern that repeated itself over many years for some of the storytellers. Karen
said, “I’d been homeless for a lot of years. I just lived place to place, house to house, drug house to drug house” (personal communication, January 3, 2011). Crystal shared “I stayed at my mom’s, I stayed at friends, I stayed all over. Like even right now that is what I am doing” (Personal Communication, January 19, 2011).

Trudy spoke of the pattern of couch surfing:

Then sometimes I would get into arguments with my mom and get kicked out, or sometimes I’d walk out. I’d try and stay at a family’s house or a friend’s place for a couple of days. And then move to another house then to another and to another. (Personal Communication, March 9, 2011)

Tanis and Louise ended up moving from one place to another because there was not enough room for their large families. Sometime the people they lived with got stressed from so many people living in one house. For this reason, the storytellers and their children never felt that they could stay too long in one place:

Cuz I went to this house, we were staying at this girls’ house where we were sleeping on the floor and it was dirty. Like the floor was really dirty she didn’t take care of her house or her kids. She had people come in and out and me and my seven kids are in the living room floor. (Tanis, Personal Communication, December 10, 2011)

When the storytellers who had their children with them managed to secure housing it was substandard. The houses would be small and sometimes have mold in them. Louise secured housing on her reserve, but the house was very old and in need of repair:

So I asked her, I said Tanis had told me you always had a real old house that wasn’t
very nice but you always kept it so spotless. She said that house that she lived in was 52 years old. She always made sure that she had furniture and a clean house. She said she used to have to have pails all over in spring and in the summertime because it was leaking through the roof and everywhere else. She asked for a, um, a big tub to be put in her front so that she could, I’m not quite sure what she was doing with it, she said something about cracks. She said “I always asked for help from the Band, and I really tried hard to make it look good. I went and bought this ugly paint. She said we painted inside and outside. I wanted my kids to feel like they had a home. (Personal Communication, March 3, 2011)

The housing that was available and affordable was sometimes located in areas that were not child friendly, there was a high level of crime or prostitution in these neighborhoods. These activities put children at risk of being harmed by others who were committing crimes. Tanis talks of living in an unsafe neighborhood:

   So I was homeless seven months and the place where we were living too there was gangs and I had continued working at Zellers where I’d have to leave at five o’clock in the morning. So I’d go out to my car and there would still be people outside and here my kids are sleeping cuz I never had anybody to keep them they kept themselves. You know, but anyways it would be four o’clock in the morning, four thirty I’d walk outside people are still outside so I’m sitting there warming up my car. Wondering if they’re gonna kick in my door are my kids gonna be ok. Cuz you know they don’t see a guy or anything with me. So we just couldn’t stay in that place anymore it was unsafe and you stand outside there was people there and it just felt unsafe. (Tanis, Personal Communication, December 10, 2011)
It would not be until they could obtain government subsidized housing that they had a place that was safe, secure and in good repair:

And she talked about living at PA Women of the Earth for one week. “I lived there and I just felt like giving up. I just felt like nothing was ever going to work for me. But I tried to be really, a good parent so I tried to keep it together for my kids. She said I think I was here about eight or nine days and all of a sudden I got a call and I got a place to live”. (Louise, Personal Communication, March 3, 2011)

Not having a home was hard on the storytellers’ physical health. Poor and inconsistent food compromised their immune systems, making them vulnerable to disease and viruses. A lack of shelter exposed them to the elements and insects. Spending the majority of their days and nights outdoors was physically demanding, especially for Liz:

One time I had to sleep outside under the bridge. Oh my God I’m telling you that was sickening because there was bugs you know, all kinds of stuff right by the, right under the bridge there and it smelled and, but that was the only warm place I could find me and my friend aye?...That’s how I got pneumonia was it was raining and me and the guy I was with and two other women and another guy were drinking in this abandoned building. We had no place else to go to sleep so we slept in that building. I got sick in there and I had pneumonia, I got pneumonia because it was cold and we had no blankets no nothing aye. Just ourselves. But hungry and cold, a person doesn’t know what hunger and cold is until they have walked that road. I never ever thought in my life that I would walk that road but I did. (Liz, Personal Communication, January 24, 2011)
Hunger was a frequent experience for a lot of the storytellers when they were homeless. Some of them had no means to buy food, some had an income, but it was not enough to buy food after the rent and utilities where paid. Liz spoke at length about hunger. She talked about what she and her homeless friends had to do to feed themselves:

Because we’d go into the bins. Especially at the Boston Pizza or Pizza House you know. After midnight they throw out all the food and usually it’s on top in the bins. We’d wait when they’d throw out all that food and we’d go and grab it as soon as a guy took it out of there. It was on the top part aye so it wasn’t right in the garbage. It was still warm and we’d eat that. You know, a lot of times we never ate for days. I could hear my stomach growling and I would have a sore stomach cuz I wouldn’t be eating for a few days. I’d lose weight and I was skinny. So you know that’s how I lived when I was on the streets there. ..Yeah. We used to go and raid gardens. Get potatoes and carrots and onions out of the gardens, people’s gardens because we were so hungry. We’d find a place where somebody lived like one of our friends. We’d go and cook, make soup out of the potatoes and carrots and onions. Yeah we used to do that a lot. Garden raid. (Personal Communication, January 24, 2011)

Exchanging Sex for a Place to Sleep... Or Not

Tanis spoke earlier about feeling like she had no choice but to exchange sex for having a roof over her head. She was put into a difficult situation and did what she thought was best given her circumstances. Karen and Liz spoke about having a strong
sense of the sacredness of their bodies in the way that exchanging sex for a place to stay was a line that they were not prepared to, nor did they cross:

I wasn’t going to go, there was other people’s places I could go sleep at, but that meant giving my body to them. Or you know, being disrespected and I don’t let anybody disrespect me, you know. If it doesn’t feel good it’s not going to happen. You know. I don’t care what it is. I was raised to respect myself and not ever disrespect my body. So to this day I’ve never ever been a hooker. Because that’s not right. I’ve never sold my body for a hoot or went and slept at this guys house “I’ll keep you warm for a night and I’ll give you food and I’ll give you a couple of pieces if you come have sex with me for the night”…. . It’s just something that’s very sacred to me. It’s all I have that’s mine is my body. (Karen, Personal Communication, January 3, 2011)

**iv) Violence Against Women**

There were situations where the partners that the storytellers chose were violent towards them, it was a difficult situation. The storytellers would be staying with these men because leaving them meant they would be once again homeless “I was only with this guy for three days, you know, then he beat me up in Calgary” (Karen, personal communication, January 3, 2011). Tanis had experienced domestic violence several times: “Because throughout my life my kids have seen me beaten up, but at that time I didn’t realize that. I always thought well it’s just me getting beaten up like it doesn’t affect the kids.” (Personal Communication, December 10, 2010). Trudy spoke of one
scary incident:

But I found some guys that are like that so I’d be getting abuse from them too. Over jealousy or for not doing what they say. So one night I was with my ex-boyfriend and he was threatening me that I would, he would make me go walking back, because I was in ___ and we lived in ___. He told me he’d make me go walking back if I don’t listen to him. So then I said “Ok, then, I’m sorry for whatever I did to get you this mad”. Then he’s be, then he still got mad so he would throw me onto the bed and he would sit on top of me and hold my arms down. Be poking his fingers into my veins. He said, “aren’t you gonna cry”. I said “No”. Then he would scoff me and just slap me. He just went to bed and I just went to bed beside him. His family, his sister and her boyfriend were there but I don’t know, I guess they’re scared of him or something. He’s like “Go ahead scream and do whatever, no one is gonna come and help you”. Even his brothers were there. Just like they knew what I was going through with him. So I got his sister to find me a ride cuz I wanted go home so I did. Now I don’t bother talking to him or seeing him. (Personal Communication, March 9, 2011)

v) Substance abuse

For four of the storytellers, substance abuse and homelessness were inextricably intertwined. The addictions and homelessness fed off of each other, it became a vicious cycle. Several times they would try to get sober but got pulled back to what they call “the lifestyle”. Three of the storytellers had parents or partners who drank or used drugs, but who did not drink themselves.

Their addictions put them into unsafe situations, in contact with drug dealers and
other addicted individuals who were violent. Some of the storytellers committed crimes while using or drinking and ended up in jail. Sometimes their addictions put them in the wrong place at the wrong time. Karen explains how she got hit by a car:

I couldn’t, I had been up all - I don’t know what day, I think it was day three I was on being homeless and running the streets. Just not being able to sleep because the drugs keep you up. So it was four o’clock in the morning I got hit at a quarter after four. That’s the exact time because I was in the hospital at four thirty. When I come to they told me “You were admitted at four thirty. So at four o’clock I was to meet my dealer by the Triple X which is behind the Salvation Army. But the pay phone was across a busy street. (Personal Communication, January 3, 2011)

Several of the storytellers used drinking/drugs as a coping mechanism to deal with emotional pain, low self-esteem, and grief. Their substance abuse put them in dangerous and vulnerable situations:

Then finally I just got sick of it and I went drinking so I’d have somewhere to crash. My friend would give me a place to crash. Until one time I got really drunk and then my friend said she, that wasn’t her. She had her friends to hold me because I couldn’t even stand. So then her friends walked me to the railroad tracks and they left me there and that was in winter. So I was just laying in the snow by the railroad tracks freezing. Other drunks would be walking by and asking if I need help and I’d tell them to leave me alone. “I don’t know you”. So they did and I was just freezing there. Then my one friend she came back for me
and she was so mad at those girls for leaving me there. (Trudy, Personal Communication, March 9, 2011)

The sense of not being loved fed the substance abuse, which became a vicious cycle of drug abuse and homelessness. Once this cycle of hopelessness is started, it is exceedingly difficult to break out of. Liz and Karen explain this pattern well:

But I was still drinking and you know, still going back to the streets and living that lifestyle. Because I didn’t care. I thought my family didn’t care for me. That was my way of thinking. I thought they didn’t care about me because I drank too much or did drugs and that and uh, but they did care. Just that they didn’t want to see me that way. So I would always go back to that street life because there was something, I don’t know there was something missing in my life and I didn’t know what it was… When a person’s homeless they skip out on life. They give up on everything. (Liz, Personal Communication, January 24, 2011)

A couple of the storytellers had their children apprehended because their addiction prevented them from caring for their children in a safe way. The children were then neglected or put into an unsafe situation. This had a devastating effect on the storytellers:

But here I am, a single mother, two girls who are in foster care. I’m an addict myself… I did have my own place and then I lost it. I don’t know, I just gave up. I just completely gave up and I don’t know why I did. I chose alcohol and drugs to numb the pain. To cover it up…That’s what I mean like I can’t forgive myself. I can’t. Before they were taken away they knew mommmy was a drunk and mommmy was drunk all the time and that’s it. So that’s how they remember me
and that’s why they don’t like me. (Crystal, Personal Communication, January 19, 2011)

Most of the storytellers have had friends and family close to them die. This brought them an incredible amount of emotional pain that they did not have healthy coping methods to deal with:

You know a lot of my friends committed suicide, a lot of my friends died of alcohol, drugs - I’ve seen them. They died, a couple of them died in front of me. My best friends. We were just partying upstairs that time and she said “Liz I’m going to go down and sleep for a while, wake me up in about an hour”. So I said “Ok”. So about well over an hour I went down to wake her up here she was dead on the bed. It just freaked me out…. Then another one was a guy friend of ours. We were all partying upstairs that same building again. We were listening to powwow music. This guy, a friend of ours came upstairs and had a few drinks with us and he went back downstairs and he came back up again and he gave us a powwow tape and he had a few more drinks with us. Then he went back downstairs and he got murdered downstairs by a couple of guys. (Liz, Personal Communication, January 24, 2011)

The storytellers were aware that their addictions fueled their homelessness. Karen was remarkably clear about this. When asked if she ever remembered a time when she was clean and homeless, she stated: “Clean and homeless? Never. My homelessness had to do with my addiction. I wouldn’t be down there if I was clean” (Personal Communication, January 3, 2011).
Five of the storytellers had been successful in drug addiction recovery and were grateful that they were no longer in the grips of their addiction. Sharon reflected on how her life would have been if she had not been able to quit doing drugs:

I still see them and they look so different compared to the way they used to look, and knowing that fact that they’re into needles and all that you can just tell when you look at them and just think “Oh shit that could have been me if I stuck around”. I’m so glad I made that step forward. I wonder how life would be today, like looking at all these people out there on the streets. They could have been me you know. (Sharon, Personal Communication, January 18, 2011)

vi) Contact with Police

Trudy and Karen spoke of being accused of a crime because they were homeless. Trudy had been left in a town where she did not know a soul:

So then I sat around downtown and then I sat by a church, praying that I would get help, that someone would help me find a place to stay for a while until I find a way to go back home. Then I ended getting picked up by the cops. They didn’t believe that I wasn’t drunk when I was walking straight and talking straight. They threw me in the car and took me to the drunk tank. At first they asked me what was my name and I told my name and they were like “No you’re lying to us” and I said “No that really is my name”. So they got real mean to me and started saying that I should tell them the truth or else I could get charged for lying to them for my name, and they threw me in the drunk tank. So then they got Social Services to come get me and take me back home. (Personal Communication, March 9, 2011)
Karen received harsh treatment at the hands of the police because she was sleeping in a public place:

This is a public place you cannot - you know, and they weren’t nice about it. They’d be kicking us. They’d kick us right in the stomachs. You know, get up and get out of here right now. Clean this mess up, you got five minutes or you’re getting your ass kicked you know. Or you’re goin to jail for whatever. But they got to know us all, those homeless people in Edmonton and it just, you know, we were just, I was always nice to them and did whatever they wanted you know. Cuz I never wanted to get beat up by them. (Personal Communication, January 3, 2011)

vii) Incarceration

Three of the storytellers were incarcerated because of things they did while living on the streets immersed in their addictions. The combination of addiction and homelessness increased the probability that these women would commit crimes they wouldn’t ordinarily commit. Addiction messes up one’s priorities and sense of right and wrong. At the height of addiction, some people will black out and not remember committing crimes. One storyteller recalls:

That was because of my addiction. I was junked and I don’t remember but I take responsibility for doing it because I was drinking. I don’t remember doing it but I got four theft charges and I spent five days in jail as a result of the last charge.

That was in April. (Crystal, Personal Communication, January 19, 2011)

Karen was incarcerated for dealing drugs and is currently facing a theft charge:

I ended up doing two and a half years for being homeless and being on the street and selling it. Because I was a good hustler and a lot of dealers wanted me to sell
their drugs for them because I was good at it and I was honest. Ah, until I did two and a half years it changed my whole - when I got back out of there I vowed never to go back to do, for trafficking or drug use. I’d been clean from the law for since I got out of the pen for trafficking. I never went back to jail yet. (Personal Communication, January 3, 2011)

Liz was incarcerated for a serious crime that she does not even remember committing as she had blacked out from drinking too much alcohol:

You know, but I was really loaded. But that was the last I remember. Next thing I woke up I was in the drunk tank. I kicked out a door and the cops came and opened the window and said “What do you want, you murderer”. That’s what they called me. I said “What am I charged with?” “You’re a murderer”. That’s all they kept saying to me. I said “Murderer?” I guess I stabbed that woman quite a few times but I didn’t kill her aye. But that’s what they were saying, murderer, to me. Ah, I was so sick. I was thinking “Murderer, what did I do”. You know, because I blacked out I don’t remember. So they put me in another cell. When I went in that other cell I asked that woman guard, I said “Can you find out what I’m charged with”. She said “Yeah”. So she went and she said “You’re charged with attempted murder, you’re lucky you didn’t kill that woman”. (Liz, Personal Communication, January 24, 2011)

viii) Culture

Culture has had a positive impact on all of the storytellers. They all have been exposed to traditional ways of knowing, being and doing (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003) at different points in their lives for different periods of time. Karen and Louise both lived a
traditional lifestyle as children growing up. Louise lived a traditional lifestyle on the land in Northern Saskatchewan until she was about thirteen:

My dad used to go hunting and then he’d trap beavers and rabbits, moose. After he’d hunt and he’d get all of this meat we’d put it away you know, making dried meat and stuff like that. So we could eat for the winter. My mom used to make candy for us, for the kids to have, it was with molasses and sugar. Every morning we’d have to get up and warm up the house and people would come and visit. She said, my mom would go to the chicken house and she’d, when we had company and she’d cut their heads off”. Of course we had a good laugh about that one because I can remember that too. Then she’d hurry up and she’d make a big meal so that the people could have something to eat. (Louise, Personal Communication, March 3, 2011)

For a couple of the storytellers, prison provided an opportunity to reconnect with their culture and learn traditional ceremonies. It seems ironic that inmates would have the opportunity to learn ceremonies in prison, but innovations in corrections have led to resource people being available to provide traditional teachings. Being forced to live without drugs and alcohol provides the opportunity to have the clarity of thought needed to participate in ceremonies:

I did two and a half years, that’s where I found myself. I started working every program there was available in jail to help me. I was an inmate role model for the Pen. I was looked at very highly because I was a mentor. I used to go to cells and mentor the girls in there. I walked the red road which was very sacred and I became an elder assistant. To be called elder assistant is very, it’s a very big
role... For me, that’s the only thing that’s keeping me sane today. That’s the only thing, that’s why I’m still alive is that I believe. I believe in spirituality and spirituality is a big step in addiction. If you have nothing to believe in you’ll never, I can’t say that you’ll never make it, but I’ve never found a person that’s made it without faith in a higher power, which is the Creator to me. I have a lot of respect for the sage and the sweat lodges and that. That’s where I get my strength. That’s where I feel good just being one with mother earth and the Creator. (Karen, Personal Communication, January 3, 2011)

Liz spoke about receiving teachings from the Elders at the Healing Lodge. Their words gave her the encouragement that she needed to make the decision to follow the Red Road. Hearing respected Elders tell her that she was a worthy person lifted her spirits enough to make that change in her life:

But when I changed my life around and I got my voice back, and when I started walking my Red Road my self-esteem just built right up. After the elders gave me teachings and that. Oh man did I ever feel good about that, you know. They used to tell me “No one is any better than you are, we’re all equal” she used to always tell me that. “So hold your head up walk proud”. She always told me that. “Hold your head up walk proud you’re an Indian woman, walk proud hold your head up” they would tell me, in Cree aye. So I always keep that in my mind, walk proud, nobody is any better than I am. Then my voice started coming back to me. I started praying for a voice. I prayed a lot for my voice and my voice came back to me. (Personal Communication, January 24, 2011)
6.2 Feelings of Homelessness

The storytellers had diverse feelings about being homeless. They spoke of the impact of homelessness on their children. They had a range of distressful feelings that had a negative impact on them: being overwhelmed, anger, fear, worry, hopelessness, low self-esteem, the negative impact on their children, and responsibility.

A) Feeling overwhelmed

Some of the storytellers felt overwhelmed at the prospect of trying to find a way out of their life on the streets. They spoke about not knowing where to start, what to do, and how to get to each agency. Add to that the confusion of struggling with an addiction and the effort becomes a non-starter. “I would look around. But I wasn’t experienced in anything. I didn’t know anything about how to get a job or how to write resumes or anything like that. So I just gave up on that” (Liz, Personal Communication, January 24, 2011). Karen became overwhelmed with the sometimes complicated administrative processes required to access support at helping agencies. The feeling of being overwhelmed combined with drug withdrawal drove her back to the streets:

By the time you go over here and go over there and you’ve got no bus ticket and you know, you have to be at this end of the city, then you have to go the other end of the city. You know, it’s just too much and it’s too overwhelming. To sit there and then, you just sick and fed up with it…Yes because it’s a big world out there and it’s stressful when you’re an addict and trying to stay clean and you have to go here to see welfare, then you have to go over here to see housing, and
you have to be around all these people. It’s just overwhelming, for me as an addict I found. (Personal Communication, January 23, 2011)

B) Anger

The storytellers felt frustration and anger when they did reach out but did not get a helpful response. It took courage for the storytellers to approach a helping agency, and it seemed like the agencies did not acknowledge the personal risk they were taking in reaching out for help. When a couple of the storytellers did to go to a helping agency, they were turned away. That angered them:

I remember one time I got so pissed off at one of the social workers because ah, they wouldn’t help me. So I just left and went and got drunk on that, and - that idea, because I was so pissed off at them. (Liz, Personal Communication, January 24, 2011)

There is a lot of money that goes into Salvation Army and like you know, they’re supposed to help the needy. Well I was desperate, I wasn’t needy, I was desperate. All I wanted it is like I said, like at least a room one night so we could at least shower up and have one good sleep. We couldn’t even get that. (Tanis, Personal Communication, December 10, 2010)

C) Fear

Fear was a common emotion among the storytellers when speaking about being homeless. As a homeless woman, you are particularly vulnerable to being a victim of violence and the storytellers felt that. Sharon had a fear of not knowing what will happen to her. She stated: “I had a lot of family there but I was homeless and that’s not a good
feeling because you don’t know what you’re going to do the next day or where you’re going to you know, take a shower, pamper yourself (Sharon, personal communication, January 18, 2011). Sharon continues to talk about fearing for her personal safety and security (Sharon, personal communication, January 18, 2011): “Not knowing anybody but two people that’s all. Yeah and not having any money…The fact that something might happen or could have happened”. Karen expressed the same fear for her personal safety. When asked what it was like to become homeless Karen stated: “When I first became homeless it was scary. Well just scary knowing I didn’t know if I was going to get beat up by hookers or, people like, I hung out with pretty notorious people”. (Karen, Personal Communication, January 3, 2011). Fear of becoming homeless made Tanis make some difficult choices about how to survive:

Like I was too scared to be on the street, to be a prostitute so I decided to like stay with this guy. It was still a form of prostitution but I had no way out, there was no programs. (Tanis, Personal Communication, December 10, 2011)

D) Worry

The storytellers constantly worried about what they were going to do. Having few resources at hand compounded that stress. It was especially stressful for the storytellers that had their children with them. These storytellers wanted to keep their children safe and have a place for them to live:

I really thought about phoning Social Services and asking them to take care of my children till I could figure out what I was going to do or until I could find a place to live. Or even Pelican FCFS. The kids were always saying they didn’t want to stay there, they wanted to go somewhere else. I used to spend lots of time
worrying about what I’m gonna do. (Louise, Personal Communication, March 3, 2011)

Sharon also worried about her homeless situation:

It affected me very badly because half the time you don’t even know where you were cuz you were at parties and thinking “Oh my God what’s gonna happen, I better not get too drunk and ..” A couple of times I have gotten to a point where I was so drunk, luckily one of my ex-boyfriends were there with me. Something could have happened to me like that. I’m glad I didn’t experience that. But if I did it would probably be different today. But I’ve heard stories a lot of that happened in that kind of situation. (Sharon, Personal Communication, January 18, 2011)

The feelings of the storytellers combined show the high level of distress that they experienced, there was very little time and space for peace and happiness. These emotions can feed off of each other, making a person feel like they constantly have to have their guard up, not knowing who they can trust.

E) Feeling hopelessness

Many of the storytellers felt hopeless during their time being homeless. The everyday grind of survival took an emotional toll on them. Those who struggled with addiction were especially vulnerable to feelings of hopelessness:

Like we kinda gave up on life. I guess I kind of gave up on life you know, because I didn’t know anything about how to help myself. How to go about things…I never thought I would ever be doing this in my life. You know, I used to think “Geeze I wish I could just die. I’m tired of being homeless”. At that time
I didn’t know that word though. “I’m tired of being on the streets and sleeping in abandoned houses, cars, trucks whatever, outside”. You know, eating out of garbage bins…When a person’s homeless they skip out on life. They give up on everything. Because it seems like we’re shunned by society you know, and sometimes social services won’t help and we feel like we’re a nobody. That’s how I used to feel about me. I used to just hate living. The only way I could stop thinking about it was to drink. (Liz, Personal Communication, January 24, 2011)

Karen said this about feeling hopeless: “With my experience with homelessness? Some days it was cold, some days I was hungry, some days I was, just wanted to give up” (Karen, Personal Communication, January 3, 2011).

F) Low self-esteem

A couple of the storytellers mentioned having a feeling of low self-esteem. The cumulative experiences of homelessness can feed this downward spiral. Once a person starts to feel low, it becomes increasingly difficult to raise oneself out of that feeling. Abuse suffered in childhood affected Tanis’s self-esteem then and as an adult:

Because I always was raised like being alone and being bothered or nobody believing me and so I always had like low self-esteem….Especially like with my dad molesting me. My mom kind of putting the blame on me cuz she said throughout the years even when I was… you know she’s telling me “Oh you’re a bitch you’re a slut, everybody knows that”. All I ever did was try and go to school. (Tanis, Personal Communication, December 10, 2011)
Liz spoke about how low self-esteem kept her homeless:

So, I know what it’s all about when a person’s homeless. It’s really, really it really brings your self-esteem down. It made me feel like I wasn’t worthy of anything… Because I was nothing but, everybody was saying “You’re not going to amount to anything. You’re always going to be drinking, probably die as a drunk”. That’s what I used to hear all the time. Sometimes someone would say “Oh you’re so useless”… It really made my self-esteem low. (Liz, Personal Communication, January 24, 2011)

Liz and I had a further conversation about feeling down when interacting with helping agency people. “To know what it’s like to be homeless, to be looked down upon, to be shunned. They don’t want nothing to do with you. Just “get away”. Just ordinary people and social workers. Even the cops, “Get away” (Liz, Personal Communication, January 24, 2011). Liz portrayed this feeling of utter despair, like she could not sink any lower. It made me wonder if any of the ordinary people and service people she met with noticed how she felt.

G) Impact on Children

Homelessness had a negative impact on the children of the storytellers. Louise spoke about having to sit outside all day with her children during hot summer days. The children would be hot and thirsty with little relief. Crystal lost custody of her children because she lost her apartment and could not find housing for them. The children felt many emotions related to homelessness and manifested itself in their behavior:

So it wasn’t good and by this time you could see the effects on the kids. They weren’t you know, happy, healthy, they were kind of like to themselves and there
was anger you know, you could tell that they were angry. They’d start fighting amongst each other or saying words. I always tell the kids like “You don’t say things to one another that’s all we have”… And we’ll still continue to cry. We’ve already been in our house two years and we still haven’t dealt with pain and stuff. So like I said, I’m not even sure if we will deal with it. (Tanis, Personal Communication, December 10, 2011)

H) Responsibility

One of the storytellers spoke about the freedom of being homeless. She liked the freedom aspect of it but also acknowledged that it was a double-edged sword. She didn’t have to be responsible for anyone else – responsibility was a big thing for her. For Karen, responsibility, or being responsible meant that she could never go back to the streets, to her addiction, and she was not ready for that:

When you’re homeless, when you’re homeless you know, you’re free. Carefree you don’t have to worry about anything or looking after anybody or living under anybody’s rules….The feeling of being free. You have no responsibilities. It’s ah, the only responsibility you have is to get your next high… No responsibility, nothing, just get high. Don’t have to answer to nobody, don’t have to do dishes nothing you know. Just live out here in this big free world…So when I say the freedom of homelessness is nice at times, but sometimes it can be cold and you can be hungry or, just starve for clean clothes and a nice hot bath. Just to relax and get high in front of a TV would be beautiful. (Karen, Personal Communication, January 23, 2011)
6.3 The Turning Point

All of the storytellers had a turning point in which their lives markedly improved or fell apart. For most of them, it was in a positive direction. They took the opportunity presented to them and were able change the course of their lives. Some of the women continued to struggle in the cycle of addictions and homelessness. Trudy learned a hard lesson when she was left intoxicated by some railroad tracks in winter:

Now I’m just, I learned my lesson from that one night from getting ditched by the railroad tracks. So now I don’t, try not to drink. But when I do I just don’t drink lots, as much as I did that time. I watch what I’m doing. So now I’m back in school trying to make a difference instead of being like my dad. (Trudy, Personal Communication, March 9, 2011)

The turning point for Liz was being sent to a Federal Healing Lodge and meeting the Elders that worked there:

Instead of sending me to Edmonton they sent me to the Healing Lodge. Man was I ever happy. I was so happy. I said “This is it”. I’d been in jail all across Canada, I told them Elders at the lodge. “I’ve been in every jail across Canada. I’ve been in rehab centres, I’ve joined AA, I’ve done everything that I can think of, nothing has helped me” I told them. I said “I need help. This is my last stop the Healing Lodge. If this place doesn’t help me I might as well die”. That’s what I told the Elders. They told me get ready for a ceremony. (Liz, Personal Communication, January 24, 2011)

Crystal’s turning point led her down a dark path that she continues to travel:

So I went and I met another man. laughs. You know. Being single for so many
years then going into a relationship again and then breaking up was very devastating to me. I turned to alcohol again and then I just started drinking a lot. So we broke up then I lost my job, so I lost all self-control and respect for myself. I lost my children cuz I was drinking too much. (Crystal, Personal Communication, January 19, 2011)

6.4 Resiliencies & Persistence – The Will to Survive and Thrive

A) Survival

The storytellers did whatever they had to do to survive: pick bottles, stay with strangers, steal, deal drugs, sleep wherever they could find shelter. Most of the storytellers had one key person who helped them get housing, get sober, or both. Those storytellers who were still in the midst of their addictions kept putting one foot in front of the other. Even if their current priority was to get high, they never seemed to lose that little bit of hope that things will get better sometime:

As long as I had a little place to sleep you know, whether it was in an abandoned car or house or wherever you know, I’d be ok. We used to have lots of blankets that we’d find in garbage bins, because we’d go into the bins… A lot of times a lot of these people that I hung out with didn’t have assistance so we’d either sleep outside in the summertime, and um, and then we’d get up in the morning, early in the morning and get a cart and start picking bottles. You know, across the river. Enough to buy a big can of lysol or hairspray. That was the way we lived for the longest time. Months you know. Because social services wouldn’t help us…We used to go and raid gardens. …And to change clothes we used to go and you
know when they hang the clothes out after a wash. At night they leave them
hanging out, we just go clothes raiding. (Liz, Personal Communication, January
24, 2011)

i) Education as a Way Out of Homelessness and Poverty

All of the storytellers except two have at least secondary standing. They all felt
that education was tremendously important for them and their children. It was
recognized that they needed an education in order to have a better life for them and their
families. Two of the storytellers were attending upgrading at SIAST. One of the
storytellers went on to obtain a Bachelor of Indian Social Work. Tanis saw education as
a way out of poverty and homelessness. She graduated with her grade twelve this year.
Louise saw education as vital to a better life for her children: “I wanted my children to
have a good education. I wanted them to be educated and have a good education not end
up like me”. (Louise, Personal Communication, March 3, 2011).

6.5 Supports

The storytellers had a diverse set of experiences when it came to supports. Most of
the support came from ordinary people, and family, not helping agencies. Some turned to
their fellow homeless people for support. One of the storytellers spoke of the fellowship
she had with other homeless people:

But we stuck together. The homeless people stuck together. We helped each other
out. If we didn’t have a place to sleep then they’d have a place they would tell us
come and sleep there. Or if they had lots of blankets they would give us a blanket
you know, stuff like that. Today these homeless people don’t do that. They don’t
stick together. But when I was out there, that was in the nineties, we stuck together. We helped each other out, you know. If we were hungry, you know, somebody would have something. One of our friends would have something to give us to eat… So I went back to my family of street people. That was my family. They cared, they helped me, they shared. They were the kindest people you could ever meet you know. They’ll give you the shirt off their back, their last penny, their last smoke, their last little bit of food that they have. That’s how they are. (Liz, Personal Communication, January 24, 2011)

A) Family

Many storytellers turned to their family, who would help them out with what limited resources they had on hand at the time. Sharon’s earlier description of her uncles showed that she had extended family that actively cared for her. Karen has a sister who has been a constant support for her. She has allowed Karen to stay at her home whenever she wants to for as long as she wants to. This gives Karen time to spend with her grandson, who lives with her sister. The storytellers’ families shared the limited resources they had with them, whether it was a couch to sleep on or food to eat.

B) Community Resources

Although some were able to access formal supports such as social assistance, contact with this agency was always difficult and frustrating for the storytellers. A few of the storytellers were able to attend drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs and upon completion of these programs they were able to stay sober. The organizations that provided food seemed to help the most. Crystal worked with a number of agencies and spoke of how ineffective they were:
I have three counsellors, three counsellors, two counsellors and a probation officer I can talk to. I have an addictions counsellor, a counsellor at Catholic Family Services but nothing really helps me. Cuz it’s like I’m talking to people and I feel like a broken record cuz I’m talking about the same story over and over to different people. (Personal Communication, January 19, 2011)

Liz felt that the only time social assistance would help her was when she got released from one of her many stays in jail. She would get paroled to the local YWCA:

Um, I think the best time I used to get, I got help that one time from social assistance was when I went to jail and I got out and somebody told me to go to social services they would help me cuz I just got out of jail. So that’s what I did and sure enough they did help me. They took, I had to go to jail in order to know about that. So when I got out I went to social services and they assisted me right away. I got my own little room, and a little place. But that’s where we all drank and partied you know, cuz I was getting assistance now….I’d get released from jail then I’d go back on assistance. That was the only way I could go back on assistance was if I went to jail all the time. (Personal Communication, January 24, 2011)

Karen also used the prison system as a form of support:

A lot of times I would get so drunk cuz I wanted to go to jail and it was in the fall. So I could be in jail where it was warm. I’d have three square meals a day, I would have a shower or a bath and warm bed to sleep in. I used to do that a lot. Do something just to go to jail. (Personal Communication, January 24, 2011)
Shelters and soup kitchens were used where available. Liz attended a Cree AA group with success for about a year. Interestingly, none of the storytellers spoke of churches or religion as a support that they used.

6.6 Gaps in Service

The storytellers I interviewed all identified what they felt were gaps in services for homeless or at risk of homelessness people. Karen and Liz, the two storytellers with the most time spent being homeless said that there was nowhere to take a shower and wash clothes, and nowhere to go if you were high or drunk:

You couldn’t utilize the women’s shelter when you were doing drugs. I was always high. I used right across the street and I slept there on the Salvation Army sidewalk. We used cardboard to sleep on. You know cuz it got cold sometimes. You’d make little, you know, go in garbage cans and find old clothes. You know, then the cops would come and tear it down. (Karen, Personal Communication, January 3, 2011)

Sharon thought that there was a lot that could still be done to help homeless people:

There’s a lot missing. They don’t have enough supporting groups up there to actually build a place for people that are actually sleeping out on the streets. Out in the bush, trying to keep themselves warm. At least they should have a home that they can have, like even a floor with a blanket. That would really help them you know, instead of freezing or hearing the next day “Well this homeless person froze to death”.

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Cuz there’s nowhere for them to go and half these places have their policies and rules. You know like if the person doesn’t have drugs or alcohol on them, allow them to sleep you know. Don’t just push them away you know. Like go freeze somewhere, go get drunk somewhere else you know. That’s the problem here, they just get pushed away. Yet they’re supposed to be out there supporting and helping, giving them a hand. (Personal Communication January 18, 2011)

One gap is that helping agency offices are not all in one place. It is difficult for people to go to each office when they do not have car or money for the bus. The process to apply and work with social services was terribly frustrating for many of the storytellers. Application forms for assistance of any kind including housing is long, complicated, and difficult to fill out. Unified assistance of any kind was not available to help these women through the process:

Oh God, ok, when I got released I got released into a halfway house. It’s an apartment building for storytellers and that’s where they being their lives and learn how to live and be responsible for paying rent and going out and finding a job for the day and coming back and going to meetings. It was so easy until the halfway house was taken away and I was done my sentence. I was just pushed out to society and there you go. Live. (Karen, Personal Communication, January 3, 2011)

When the storytellers were finally able to receive social assistance, they found that it was not enough to survive on. There was a lot of bureaucracy and time spent waiting for cheques to process. The catch twenty two of services offered to homeless people is that you must have an address in order to receive help, “You try to and get social services. They’d ask “ well where are you living? “Well I don’t live anywhere”. “Well
we can’t help you till you live somewhere”. “Well I needed money in order to live somewhere” (Tanis, Personal Communication, December 10, 2011). Another gap that Tanis identified was the complete lack of housing for large families due to occupancy rules:

Well yeah because not only do you need an address, they can’t help you unless you have an address. Like my God I have seven kids. I don’t know it’s just hard. So I think with these programs and not only that, like even when I finally did get my place through P. A. Housing, I had to lie to them. Cuz I have seven kids and yet you know, I couldn’t say “Well I have seven kids” cuz there’s some conditions on the government where the government says “Oh no, there can only be so many children per room per whatever. You know like the government I don’t feel should be telling us how we should live. We know what we’re comfortable. Like it should be up to us to know how we could live, or how many bedrooms we need. Like when we were homeless we lived in a one bedroom place with my mom so there was like ten of us in there. Yet there was no government coming in and saying “Oh no you can’t live here, here I’ll put you in a bigger place”. Like you know we were forced to live like that but yet to get a house from them, like you have to lie. So I did lie to them and I said I had three kids and so I got a four bedroom place. I always raised the kids you don’t lie no matter what. Yet here I had to lie to them in order to get a place. (Personal Communication, December 10, 2011)

There is no question that the experiences and feelings of homelessness have negatively affected these storytellers. Homelessness brought out a whole gamut of
emotions that caused severe stress for them. At the time of the writing of this chapter, five of the storytellers have homes to live in, and two are staying with friends or family. Liz is a respected Elder in the community. She has a university degree and a full time job. Tanis, Trudy, and Louise are all either working or going to school. Karen recently completed a twenty eight day detox program. She travels between Edmonton and staying with her sister and grandson in Prince Albert. Sharon is a stay at home mom, and Crystal is unemployed and continues to struggle with drug addiction and homelessness.

Discussion

It felt a bit uncomfortable doing the analysis part as, in my cultural tradition, it is up to the reader to interpret the meaning of the story, not for someone else to do that for them (Kovach, 2009). The way that the storytellers and I were able to make sense of the stories while fitting within an Indigenous paradigm was through a medicine wheel. A medicine wheel is an Indigenous concept that has many teachings; one teaching explains how a person can live a healthy and balanced life, putting a person in a good position to live to their fullest human potential (Bopp et al., 1984).

We chose to use the medicine wheel for a few reasons. First, it is something that we use in our own lives as a compass for trying to live life in a healthy, balanced way. Second, by coincidence, all of the storytellers in the study are of Cree ancestry and are all familiar with the medicine wheel, which is a fundamental concept in the Cree culture (Hart, 2002). The medicine wheel is the perfect fit for discussion from an Indigenous research paradigm. I honestly can’t envision another concept that would fit so well. First I will explain the medicine wheel concept; next, I will discuss how homelessness affected
the storytellers using the medicine wheel. Last, I will discuss how this research project relates the literature on homelessness and Indigenous women.

7.1 The Medicine Wheel

The medicine wheel is an Indigenous concept that is used and understood by many Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island (Four Worlds Development Project, 1984). Turtle Island is a common way to describe the land that Indigenous peoples in North America have inhabited since time immemorial. My Elders have taught me that the medicine wheel is comprised of four different areas, mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical. To have balance in all four areas is to live life to its fullest potential. When you are balanced in all areas, you are living life in a good way. If you are unbalanced in any or several areas, your body and spirit will be affected by that (Bopp et al., 1984).

Hart (2002) talks of foundational concepts of the medicine wheel: wholeness, balance, connection, harmony, growth, and healing. These concepts together mean that one cannot focus exclusively on one area of the Medicine Wheel. All parts of the Wheel are interconnected, and one must strive for balance and harmony amongst all four areas. When a person is balanced they are in the ideal position for growth and healing. On a cautionary note, I use this concept here but there are many ways of understanding the Medicine Wheel. For further inquiry, it is best to take tobacco to an Elder to learn more about it.

There are Indigenous worldview principles that are also used which will help to further explain the medicine wheel (Bopp & Bopp, 1989):
1. Wholeness. All things are interrelated. Everything in the universe is a part of a single whole. Everything is connected in some way to everything else. It is, therefore, possible to understand something only if we can understand how it is connected to everything else.

2. Change. All of creation is in a state of constant change. Nothing stays the same except the presence of cycle upon cycle of change... There are two kinds of change. The coming together of things ... and the coming apart of things. Both of these kinds of change are necessary and are always connected to each other.

3. Changes occur in cycles or patterns. They are not random or accidental. Sometimes it is difficult to see how a particular change is connected to everything else. This usually means that our standpoint is limiting our ability to see clearly.

4. The seen and unseen. The physical world is real. The spiritual world is real. These two are aspects of one reality... A balanced life is one that honours the laws of both of these dimensions of reality...

7. There are four dimensions of “true learning”. These four aspects of every person’s nature are reflected in the four cardinal points of the medicine wheel. These four aspects of our being are developed through the use of our volition. It cannot be said that a person has totally learned in a whole and balanced manner unless all four dimensions of her being have been involved in the process. (p.26-29)


7.2 A Medicine Wheel Approach to Homelessness

A) Spiritual

Some of the storytellers described looking for something but not knowing what. This could have been a sense of belonging and community, which are key values in the Indigenous world view. There was a spiritual void that they were searching to fill. For many of the storytellers, when they discovered or rediscovered their cultural traditions it marked a turning point in their lives. The cultural and spiritual practises provided ways and skills for coping with life that the storyteller may not have had before. It also produced a sense of belonging and community that comes with participating in cultural ceremonies. Working with Elders provided mentors for the storytellers. The elders would listen to them without judgement. They would be someone trustworthy the storytellers could rely on.

In my own life, I have called this “rejoining the circle”. The cultural traditions of our ancestors are our birthright, and if we so desire, we can choose to follow the Red Road at any point in our lives. The storytellers might not have realized that returning to their cultural roots assisted them in their healing. It helped heal the emotional pain and spiritual void that they had been feeling. I believe that practising our traditional culture gives us tools and skills to cope with life’s challenges. I am not suggesting that returning to our culture is the only way to heal; it can be another set of tools a person can use.

Organized religion was never mentioned by any of the storytellers. There is a couple of possible reasons for this. It could be that organized religion was not a part of their family of origin’s way of life. Another reason could be that as the storyteller and
their families reconnected with their traditional culture, organized religion no longer had a place in their lives.

\[ B) \textit{Emotional} \]

The storytellers spoke of suffering tremendous emotional pain in their lives. The lack of housing added to this pain and in some instances was the source of pain. It was a blow to their self-esteem that they were not able to find suitable housing for their families. They felt it somehow spoke to their abilities as a parent that they were homeless, that they had failed their children.

Stressful emotions were a constant in the lives of the storytellers. Emotions such as anger, worry, grief, hopelessness, and fear can cause stress and affect the storytellers physically as well as emotionally.

There were a couple of positive emotions that had a powerful effect on the storytellers. Love for their children drove the storytellers to do the best they could do for their children, to give them what they needed to thrive. This love is what kept them trying to secure adequate housing when they were homeless or couch surfing. The emotional power of addiction recovery had a positive effect on their emotional well-being. Tackling their addictions and taking control of their lies gave the women a boost of self-esteem. This provided them with the clarity of mind and confidence they needed to keep looking until they found adequate housing.


C) Physical

The obvious physical threat was in the lack of safe and affordable housing. Being homeless was the root of many physical threats the storytellers faced. The scarcity of housing forced the storytellers into relative homelessness. Couch surfing was a consistent pattern amongst all of the storytellers, they would move from place to place sleeping where ever there was room, until they no longer felt that they were welcome there. Not having a home put the storytellers’ personal safety at risk. They always had their guard up to the threat of physical or sexual violence. They sometimes had contact with the police which became violent. The police would also make them move from where ever they had stopped for the night, sometimes forcing them to walk around all night.

The storytellers also spoke of not having anywhere to go when they were drunk or high. The lack of money or income contributed to the storytellers’ homelessness. They had only enough to cover the basics and were not able to save enough to make a rental deposit. Hunger was a common theme. For some, it was a symptom of a lack of money, for others it was a result of money being used for alcohol or drugs instead of food.

D) Mental

These storytellers faced immense challenges and barriers all at once, and throughout they have displayed this incredible resilience. They had in themselves a will to survive even while struggling with addictions. The storytellers with children always had their children’s well being and safety utmost in their minds. This gave them the
motivation to keep fighting until they were able to secure adequate housing. Their struggle to acquire a home for their children is a testament to their mental toughness.

Sometimes it was their addictions that drove their persistence to survive. That drive to find the next high or drink is so strong that it becomes their number one priority above all else. The will to survive comes from the urge to stave off the pain of withdrawal rather than the will to recover from their drug addiction.

Education was important to all of the storytellers. Most of them had at least secondary standing at the time of the interviews. The two women who did not have their grade 12 diploma were attending upgrading to complete their Adult Twelve. Liz is the exception with having completed a bachelor degree in social work. This means that their parents had encouraged their daughters to complete high school or that the women themselves knew that the key to a better life is through education.

The storytellers did not specifically say that they had been the victims of racism. However, being that we live in a society where the dominant group is privileged over racialized groups, it is likely that systemic discrimination and racism affected their experiences (Lenon, 2000).

7.3 Contributors to Imbalance of the Medicine Wheel

A) Addictions

Addiction to alcohol or drugs affects all areas of a person’s life. Many people use drugs or alcohol to numb the emotional pain they feel. They do not have the skills or
knowledge to deal with it in any other way. It impedes their ability to think clearly and make sound decisions. Physically, alcohol and drugs, can have a lethal effect on a person’s body. A body can only tolerate so much of these substances before it begins to break down from damage to organs and diseases develop.

B) Racism/Discrimination

Although racism was not named in many of the storytellers experiences, it did affect the storytellers in all areas of their lives. We live in a western society that defines the dominant culture as the norm from which all others are judged. This puts Indigenous populations at a disadvantage. It could be that racism is such a reoccurring theme in their lives that they are not always conscious of it. Poverty was another key influence to imbalance of the storytellers’ medicine wheels. Only one of the storytellers had employment income during the time of their homelessness. Tanis was working a minimum wage job and. She stayed with her mother in a crowded house and was saving money for rent. There were periods when some of the storytellers were receiving social assistance, but it was difficult to get adequate housing with the amount they received.

C) Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse affected two of the storytellers. The storytellers did elaborate greatly on this topic and as a gesture of respect, I did not question them further on this, believing that they would share what they felt comfortable sharing. This abuse left such deep wounds to the soul that it affects the storytellers to this day. The way these women saw the world and themselves was altered because of the abuse. Some say that the emotional,
mental, and spiritual suffering is harder to bear than the physical suffering. It takes a strong will and support from others to restore balance after such an assault.

\[D\) Homelessness\]

Homelessness became a vicious cycle that was hard to break out of. Some of the storytellers are still caught in that cycle. The addictions are part of what keeps the storytellers caught in this cycle. The sense of hopelessness also feeds this cycle. The feeling that “things will never get better, I will never get my children back, I can’t get sober so why try to go straight, better my situation, and try to find a home”.

All of the storytellers had a turning point, whether it was for better or for worse. They came to a crossroad and made a decision to break out of the cycle of homelessness. For a few of them, it was the assistance of one key person or a serendipitous turn of events that turned the tide for the better. For a few of the storytellers, the crossroad event caused them to fall into homelessness where they remain stuck to this day.

For those who were able to break out of the cycle of homelessness, their lives have continued to improve in all areas of the medicine wheel. Recovery from addictions has helped the storytellers move in a positive cycle. Each positive event in their lives built on the last, creating a foundation from which to live a good life. The storytellers are role models for their children, teaching by example how to overcome adversity and show their children positive and effective ways of coping with life’s challenges. This is part of what it means to live life on the Red Road, which the Elders say is living life in a good way.
The storytellers had strengths and weaknesses in all four areas of the medicine wheel. They can use this medicine wheel to figure out where they are unbalanced. Once they know the areas that are not in balance, they can do the work that they need to do to be in balance and have and live a good life.

Helping agencies, while making some progress, did create barriers at times. It may have been because of the lack of education or the attitudes of the people working at these agencies. It seems that the agencies were not always accessible, using only business hours. Or there was no agency who would help the storytellers when they were in a vulnerable state of intoxication. The agencies being in different areas of each community made it a hardship to get to each one because of a lack of money for transportation. Once at these agencies, the policies, procedures, and paperwork were difficult and sometimes overwhelming for the storytellers. They felt that there was no one to help them through each process explaining the policies to them. The forms may seem as if they are laid out in a simple fashion, but, it is particularly challenging for people unaccustomed to doing paperwork.

The storytellers had a constant struggle to find a roof over their heads, one night at a time, trying to keep safe on the streets or while couch surfing. This constant hyper-vigilance and the downward emotional spiral and wounding of their spirits knocked them down. Their bodies endured the elements when staying outside at night and sometimes assaults from others. Tanis did speak about how homelessness still affects her and her children. I wonder whether their feelings and experiences of homelessness brought on post-traumatic stress.
Ermine (1995) wrote about the outward quest for knowledge in the physical world and the inward quest for the knowledge of the metaphysical world. The storytellers’ journey through homelessness had some parallels to this theory. The storytellers went through both internal and external struggles with their homelessness. The internal struggle was the feelings they felt throughout their homelessness. The storytellers spoke of looking for something but not knowing what it was, unknowingly on a quest for that metaphysical knowledge of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing (Martin & Mirrabooka, 2003). The external struggle, the quest for knowledge in the physical realm, was to find secure housing. It seems that most of the storytellers were successful in their internal and external quests as they have “rejoined the circle” and were able to find adequate, secure and affordable housing.

It is clear that homelessness affected the storytellers in all areas of the medicine wheel. Their stories demonstrate how interconnected their feelings and experiences of homelessness are. Securing adequate housing is a step towards balance. It is my wish for all of the storytellers that they are able to continue to try to find balance in their lives and live a good life with their families.

7.4 Comparison of Results to the Literature

A) Structural Risk Factors

The storytellers’ experiences with homelessness echoed much of the literature. They all struggled with having low or no income (NWAC, 2007). All of them had the experience of hidden homelessness, staying wherever they could have for as long as they
felt they could stay without “wearing out their welcome”. When they did find a place to couch surf, it was often a place that was overcrowded in substandard conditions (INAC, 2005; Peters & Robillard, 2009). The storytellers moved frequently between communities and within communities. Louise and Tanis found that it was exceedingly difficult to find housing for their large families. The lack of stable, adequate, and affordable housing pushed them to keep moving in order to have a roof over their heads at night (Peters & Robillard, 2009). Only one of the storytellers, Louise, had lived in on-reserve housing. The house she had was old and in substandard condition. This aligns with the literature from First Nations Regional Health Survey (2002/2003). Many of them spoke of the frustration of receiving little assistance from helping agencies. There was a sense of frustration in that they felt the agencies there to help them did not do their job (Raising the Roof, 2001).

B) Individual Risk Factors

The storytellers all spoke about being in distress when homeless. They feared for their personal safety, worried about how they would survive, and wondered whether they would find a place for their families to live (Delaney & Kesten, 2010; O’Bryne, 2010. Two of the storytellers, Karen and Liz, had long periods of absolute homelessness. They referred to this as being “out on the streets”. During this time they were struggling terribly with addictions (NWAC, 2007; Wente, 2000). Karen and Liz both had traumatic health scares while being homeless, Karen in a car/pedestrian collision and Liz with pneumonia. Their health status took a back seat to trying to survive (Frankish et al., 2005; Hwang, 2002). Crystal, Tanis, and Trudy had been victims of intimate partner violence, which placed additional stress on their already tenuous housing situations
Three of the storytellers had been incarcerated, which precipitated being homeless upon release from jail, as described by the Native Women’s Association of Canada (2007). The topic of residential schools was only mentioned in one interview, with Crystal, who said that she had liked her time at that school as she had been cared for better than what her mother could provide. This is in contrast to the literature that talks about the detrimental effect of residential school (Menzies, 2006). The residential school that Crystal attended was Indigenous owned and operated. This may have made the difference in how she perceived she was treated.

Although the storytellers had their own unique story to tell, their experiences are the same as many Indigenous women across Canada who have experienced homelessness. It is our hope that by speaking out the storytellers and I can contribute to a solution for homelessness. This process has transformed all of us; for myself, it has confirmed my commitment to journeying on the Red Road and continuing to work towards solutions for homelessness in my community. The storytellers felt that their stories were being shared in a respectful manner, this made them feel validated and heard. Being a part of this research process has boosted their confidence, they are beginning to realize that they don’t have to have a bunch of letters behind their name in order to have an opinion. They have learned that their opinion can be respected, they can be experts in their own experiences with homelessness.

C) Housing Policy

As indicated in the literature review, there is no existing federal policy for housing for urban Indigenous people (Belanger, Weasel Head, & Awosoga, 2012).
Decades of neglect in the area of social housing has created a gaping hole in Canada’s social safety net. The creation of a national homelessness policy would close this gap. A national policy would have the mandate and capacity to carry out national studies to get accurate numbers of homeless people across the country and provincially. It could have the power to direct enough targeted money to adequately house all Canadians. The one thing needed to make this happen is political will. The current federal government to date has not shown any interest in adequately housing its citizens as the government’s track record indicates that there is a belief that housing is an individual responsibility.

As with anything that has to do with spending money, there is a jurisdictional struggle between the federal and provincial governments on who should pay for Aboriginal housing. The provinces see Aboriginal people as a federal responsibility, and the federal government sees housing as a provincial responsibility. The decades of neglect by the federal government has left urban Aboriginal people in a void where there is no national policy to direct how housing urban Aboriginal people can be achieved (Belanger et al., 2012).

There are, however, many Indigenous housing projects created by cities and non-profit organizations in an attempt to fill this void. An example of this is the Bridges and Foundations project on urban Aboriginal Housing (2004). This project focused on:

The Project’s research attempted to determine the difference between what was available in housing and community services in Saskatoon and what was needed by its Aboriginal community. The Project succeeded in gathering a large volume of pertinent information on urban Aboriginal housing, living conditions and quality of life,
giving Saskatoon a more detailed knowledge of its Aboriginal population than any other city in Canada. The Project’s research objectives have been largely, if not completely reached. The stated goals in our original master plan have virtually all been met. (Bridges and Foundations Project on Urban Aboriginal Housing, 2004, p. 1)

The storytellers all felt the effects of this policy void and gap in Canada’s social safety net during their experiences with homelessness. Had there been a national housing policy and policy specific to Indigenous women, most, if not all, would have been able to avoid their homelessness. Readily accessible housing for women leaving an abusive relationship may have prevented Tanis from couch surfing and camping in yards with her small children.

The lack of support services for people living at or below the poverty line has been a contributor to the homelessness of Indigenous women. Liz and Karen may have never returned to prison had there been housing and support services available when they were released from prison. As the introductory quote stated at the beginning of the literature review:

The one thing all homeless people have in common is a lack of housing. Whatever other problems they face, adequate, stable, affordable housing is a prerequisite to solving them. Homelessness may not be only a housing problem, but it is always a housing problem; housing is essential, although sometimes not sufficient, to solve the problem of homelessness. (Dolbeare, 1996, p. 34 in Hulchanski, 2009, p.6)
Whatever health, addiction, income, or violence problems the storytellers had, being homeless made the problems worse.

The storytellers experiences brought to light gaps in policy and service delivery, many of which seem to have common sense kind of solutions. Support services for homeless people need to be centrally located and user friendly. There needs to be one main contact person who can help people navigate through the different agencies involved with supporting homeless people and families. Agency workers need to be educated about the root causes of homelessness and take a global perspective instead of an individual perspective. Social assistance rates need to be increased to the point where a family is not living at or below the poverty line. Social housing regulations need to accommodate large families. Finally, services to fulfill the basic needs of homeless people and families are lacking. Increased availability to services such as showers, Laundromats, and a safe place for homeless people who are under the influence of drugs or alcohol would contribute greatly to overall health and safety. Beckwell Scriven (2009) also found that people struggling with addictions and homelessness in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan found it very difficult to find shelter if they were high or drunk. The people interviewed spoke of trying to get around shelter regulations but most often ending up sleeping outside wherever they could find shelter.

It seems that if the storytellers had access to affordable housing at the time of their crisis, much of their homelessness could have been avoided. Society saw the storytellers as responsible for their own homelessness, further isolating them from the community. The lack of a fully funded national housing policy for urban Indigenous people put the storytellers and their families at risk of violence, hunger, and disintegration of their
families. It is a testament to the strength of the storytellers that they are still alive, even if some of them are still struggling with addictions and homelessness.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I will discuss what the implications of my research project are for social work education, social work practice, and social work research. Next I will discuss ideas for alleviating the homelessness of Indigenous women in a practical and meaningful way. Lastly, I pay tribute to the storytellers, who were brave and gracious in sharing their stories.

8.1 Implications for Social Work Education

First and foremost, social work students must be educated in how federal public policy works and the effects that it has on Canadians. It is important to know the history of housing policy in Canada and how the current situation of homelessness was created by past policies and withdrawal of funding by the federal government. These policies have shifted the perception of housing from being a universal right to an individual responsibility only in the past thirty years (Hulchanski, 2005). When housing is seen as a personal responsibility, it then becomes very easy to blame the individuals for their situation and justify the withdrawal of funding for affordable housing. Add to this the effect of other policies such as residential schools and the Indian Act, and the effects of discrimination, and one can see the harm inflicted upon Indigenous women.

Social Work students must be taught about the importance of listening to the voices
of those people who are directly affected by social problems. When one is talking about policy and program delivery, it is easy to try to solve the problem without including the people who are directly affected in a meaningful way. It is vital that marginalized populations such as Indigenous women be included in the process of finding solutions to homelessness in Canada.

It is crucial for social work students to learn that they must serve as advocates for the marginalized populations of our society. From these women’s stories, it is clear that there was not one social agency or professional person that they felt was an advocate for them. There was no one person they could trust to work on their behalf and help them find a way out of homelessness.

Finally, the importance of recognizing Indigenous research paradigms and methodologies as legitimate forms of inquiry needs to taught and explored within social work education. Indigenous social work students need to know that they can do research from within their own world view. This recognition is one way of putting words into action regarding advocating for social justice and giving voice to the marginalized in western society.

8.2 Implications for Social Work Practice

The causes of homelessness are often complex and varied, so solutions require changes at many levels. Increased access by homeless women and families to resources such as jobs, and housing is necessary. In addition, there should also be mechanisms to address the individual experiences of women who suffer from personal barriers such as depression or substance abuse (O’Byrne, 2010).
When working to end homelessness, we as Social Workers must walk this journey with the women affected by homelessness. We must value the voices of those with direct experiences of homelessness in its various forms. Social workers must always treat the homeless with the dignity they deserve, to treat them as if they were their own relatives. Many First Nations people end important communication with the saying “All My Relations”. This phrase reminds us that we are all connected and that we must treat each other with respect. This includes the people that you see on the street struggling with addiction.

Services and programs tend to be oriented towards the male population, despite higher proportions of Indigenous women among the homeless population. Even in Canada’s largest cities the availability of services is limited. In smaller cities and towns, such services may not even exist (NWAC, 2007). Solutions that foster participation should be utilized when dealing with homelessness among Indigenous women. Offering opportunities for women to share their perceptions and experiences of poverty and homelessness can give insights into the lived experiences of homeless women’s daily lives.

Well-designed, participatory research can ensure that Indigenous women’s voices are heard, and their concerns raised (NWAC, 2007). Helping agencies need to work together to assist Indigenous women in meeting their mental, spiritual, emotional, physical needs. In addition, initiatives involving empowerment can be a way to combat the powerlessness felt by many Indigenous women, who feel that their voices are not being heard and are suffering from desperate circumstances (NWAC, 2007).
Developing culturally relevant services and support are crucial to solving issues of homelessness among the Indigenous female population (McCallum & Isaac, 2011; NWAC, 2007; Ruttan et al., 2008). Culturally relevant solutions should strive to nurture and develop the talents and abilities of Indigenous women. Providing education to service providers and policy makers about the culture and experiences of indigenous women may develop more effective solutions to homelessness. Such solutions should involve key members of Indigenous communities. Opportunities for dialogue and sharing can help to change how we conceptualize homelessness. Changes to current homelessness concepts will eventually lead to the development of more creative interventions (Larner, 2004).

One example is My Aunt’s Place in Regina, SK (McCallum & Isaac, 2011). This is a shelter established by the YWCA that serves women and children who need temporary shelter while trying to attain secure housing. Over 90% of the clientele are of Indigenous ancestry. The shelter employs Indigenous staff including a resident Elder. The staff are provided with professional development opportunities in order to increase their level of Indigenous knowledge. Tenants are expected to contribute to the day to day maintenance of the house. The staff members at the shelter help the women secure housing and address any personal barriers to obtaining housing.

Support must be provided to enable Indigenous women to gain safe, permanent housing and improve self-sufficiency. This can be facilitated through increased flexibility of social services and by building networks of support. Research suggests that because many homeless mothers tend to receive help from relatively few professional resources, helping agencies must be creative in fostering networks of community support.
(McCallum & Isaac, 2011). Policy makers should also consider the role of social support when developing shelter, health care, educational, and community development initiatives to improve the lives of homeless and economically disadvantaged families (Letiecq et al., 1998).

Finally, the federal government must be pressured to commit the funding necessary to end homelessness. As affordable housing can be attained for all homeless citizens for approximately 1% of Canada’s total annual budget, it is clearly only a lack of political will that stands in the way of providing this universal right to all Canadian citizens (Hulchanski, 2005). As long as the federal government can shirk its responsibilities to citizens by blaming the victim for their circumstances, they do not have to own up to their clear lack of regard for the basic needs of Canadian citizens, including Indigenous women.

8.3 Implications for Social Work Research

The lack of research focusing on Indigenous women and homelessness demonstrates a need for further research in this area. It is essential that Canadian society and policy makers be aware of how this marginalized section of society is affected by homelessness. This project is one brick in a foundation that must be built in order to end homelessness in Canada in an effective manner. Social advocates need to have access to research of this kind in order to promote a socially progressive agenda for ending homelessness. The voices of the people directly affected are vital and need to be heard. Policy development can miss the mark when it does not include those who are affected. To strive for anything less is not acceptable.

Narrative forms of research methodology fit well within an Indigenous research
paradigm, it fits perfectly with the Indigenous tradition of storytelling. This is a method that works well to keep the power balance equal between interviewer and interviewee. It is essential to emphasize this power balance as it has not always been done in the past, to the detriment of Indigenous people as a whole. I hope that my work here will also contribute to the area of Indigenous scholarship in some positive way. Throughout much of my thesis, I was able to “stand on the shoulders” of other Indigenous scholars, using theory and methodology they had put forward. This research has contributed another brick in the growing foundation of Indigenous research done by Indigenous people.

I marvel at the remarkable strength and resilience of the storytellers. These women have been to hell and back, yet they are still able to smile. Many times they fell, but they picked themselves up and kept going. They did the best they could do with the knowledge and resources that they had. Really, what more can you ask of a person? Some of them were able to remove the chains of addiction; some of them keep walking with the chains of addiction wrapped around them. It is the storytellers’ hope that by sharing their stories, they will be able to help other Indigenous women in the same position. I share this thesis with them, it is as much theirs as it is mine. I feel privileged to have been allowed to walk with them and be trusted to do the best that I can in bringing their stories forward.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A

Group Discussion/Interview Topics

The group discussions and interviews will be loosely formatted around the following topics:

- what has been the lived experience of the participants?
- how each participant defines homelessness
- how homelessness impacts their mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health
- what programs and policy changes they feel are needed to meet the mental, emotional and physical needs of Indigenous women experiencing homelessness.
Appendix B

Letter of Introduction

December 5, 2010

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in an explorative qualitative study on the effects of homelessness on Indigenous women. In this study a number of people will participate by taking part in an individual interview.

You will be asked to participate in an individual interview with the researcher which will last approximately one hour and which will be recorded and transcribed. The individual interviews will last approximately one hour and will be recorded and transcribed. The interviews will take place at Prince Albert Women of the Earth (PAWOTE) or at a quiet location of your choice. The list of topic areas and possible questions are enclosed on appendix A. The researcher may contact you after the interview to clarify comments you have made. The researcher will give you a copy of the transcript of the interview to check that the information in your transcript is correct.

I do not expect any risks to you during your participation in this study. If some of the discussions are upsetting to you, feel free to stop the process at any time or refuse to answer any questions or become involved in any discussions that you do not feel comfortable with. If you wish to speak to a counselor or Elder after the interview, the researcher will provide a list of counselors and Elders and facilitate contact with your chosen resource person. You will need to pay for any costs associated with seeing a counselor or Elder.

Any information taken from your participation in the study will be kept as confidential as possible by the researcher and you are requested to do the same. Although the researcher will do everything possible to protect your confidentiality and anonymity, it cannot be 100% guaranteed as there is a chance that direct quotes or stories from the transcript used in the final report that may identify you to others. The researcher will use different names to describe participants in the transcripts. The only people who will have access to the transcripts will be the transcriber, the researcher, and the researcher’s thesis supervisor. The recorded and transcribed interviews will be stored in a locked cabinet in the locked faculty of social work office of the researcher’s thesis advisor and destroyed after three
years. Information stored on the researcher’s personal computer will be protected by a personal access code that only the researcher will know. The consent forms and the transcripts will be kept separately.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may stop participation in this study at any time and still be a part of the study.

This project was approved by the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina. If research participants have any questions or concerns about their rights or treatment as participants, they may contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at (306) 585-4775 or by email at research.ethics@uregina.ca.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or the interview process please feel free to contact myself or my advisor at the information below:

Jackie Nixon
Researcher
(306) 922-0465
jackielnixon@gmail.com

Dr. Brigette Krieg
Thesis Advisor
(306) 664-7383
Brigette.Krieg@uregina.ca

You may receive a copy of the final report once the study is complete. Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Jackie Nixon
Researcher
Letter of Consent

Title: An Exploration of How Homelessness affects Indigenous Women.

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here or information not included here, please feel free to ask the researcher. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand all of the information.

Introduction: Current literature suggests that Indigenous women are adversely affected by homelessness. The purpose of this narrative study is to explore how homelessness affects Indigenous women.

Procedure: You will also be asked to participate in an individual interview the researcher. The individual interview will last approximately one hour and will be recorded and transcribed. The interviews will take place at PAWOTE or at a quiet location of your choice. The list of topic areas and possible questions are enclosed on appendix A. The researcher may contact you after the interview to clarify comments you have made. The researcher will give you a copy of the transcript of the interview to check that your transcript is correct.

Research Personnel: Jackie Nixon, Master of Social Work student, is the researcher.

Risks and Benefits: I do not expect any risks to you during your participation in this study. If some of the discussions are upsetting to you, feel free to stop the process at any time or refuse to answer any questions or become involved in any discussions that you do not feel comfortable with. If you wish to speak to a counselor or Elder after the group discussions or interview, the researcher will provide a list of counselors and Elders and facilitate contact with your chosen resource person. You will need to pay for any costs associated with seeing a counselor or Elder.

The benefit of participating in this study is that you will have an opportunity to discuss your experiences as an Indigenous woman who has been affected by
homelessness. You will contribute to providing a set of specific recommendations for interventions pertaining to Indigenous women and homelessness. Your input will assist in developing knowledge and supports for Indigenous women who are forced to deal with homelessness. The study will contribute to the growing foundation of Indigenous research done by Indigenous people, and will address an ongoing social problem. This advancement will hopefully benefit other Indigenous women.

Confidentiality: Any information taken from your participation in the study will be kept as confidential as possible by the researcher and you are requested to do the same. Although the researcher will do everything possible to protect your confidentiality and anonymity, it cannot be 100% guaranteed as there is a chance that direct quotes or stories from the transcript used in the final report that may identify you to others. The researcher will use different names to describe participants in the transcripts. The only people who will have access to the transcripts will be the transcriber, the researcher, and the researcher’s thesis supervisor. The recorded and transcribed group discussions and interviews will be stored in a locked cabinet in the locked faculty of social work office of the researcher’s thesis advisor and destroyed after three years. Information stored on the researcher’s personal computer will be protected by a personal access code that only the researcher will know. The consent forms and the transcripts will be kept separately.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may decline participation or withdraw from the study at any time. You have the right to refuse to answer any question without penalty and may continue to be a part of the study.

Ethics Approval: This project was approved by the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights or treatment as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at (306) 585-4775 or by email at: research.ethics@uregina.ca.

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact myself or my advisor at the contact information below:

Jackie Nixon  Dr. Brigette Krieg
Researcher  Thesis Advisor
(306) 922-0465  (306) 664-7383
jackielnixon@gmail.com  Brigette.Krieg@uregina.ca

You will receive a copy of the final report once the study is complete. Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.
Consent Statement

Having read the above, I agree to participate in this study and consent to the following:

I agree to participate in an individual interview  
Yes____  No____

I grant permission to be audio taped  
Yes____  No____

I wish to remain anonymous  
Yes____  No____

I wish to remain anonymous, but you may refer to me by a pseudonym  
Yes____  No____

The pseudonym I choose for myself is______________________________

You may quote me and use my name  
Yes____  No____

I have received a copy of this form  
Yes____  No____

______________________________________________________________
Signature of Participant                     Date

______________________________________________________________
Signature of Researcher                      Date
Cover Letter of Introduction

December 5, 2010

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a study on the effects of homelessness on Indigenous women. In this study a number of people will participate by taking part in an individual interview.

- You will be asked to participate in an individual interview with the researcher which will last approximately one hour and which will be recorded and transcribed. The interviews will last about one hour and will be recorded. The interviews will take place at Prince Albert Women of the Earth (PAWOTE) or at a quiet location of your choice. I may contact you after the group discussions and interview to clarify comments you have made. I will give you a copy of the transcript of the interview to check that the information in your transcript is correct.

- I do not expect any risks to you during your participation in this study. If some of the questions are upsetting to you, feel free to stop the discussion at anytime. If you wish to speak to a counselor or Elder after the interview, the researcher will provide a list of counselors and Elders and help you to contact them. You will need to pay for any costs of seeing a counselor or Elder.

- Any information from your interview will be kept as confidential as possible by the researcher and you are requested to do the same. Although the researcher will do everything possible to protect your confidentiality and anonymity, it cannot be 100% guaranteed as there is a chance that direct quotes or stories from the transcript used in the final report that may identify you to others. The researcher will use different names to describe participants in the transcripts. The only people who will have access to the transcripts will be the transcriber, the researcher, and the researcher’s thesis supervisor. The transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet and destroyed after three years.

- Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may stop participation in this study at any time and still be a part of the study.

This project was approved by the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina. If research participants have any questions or concerns about their rights or treatment as participants, they may contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at (306) 585-4775 or by email at research.ethics@uregina.ca.
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You may receive a copy of the final report once the study is complete. Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Jackie Nixon  
Researcher