

**A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Young Women with Learning Difficulties  
involved in the Criminal Justice System**

by

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## **Abstract**

Young women with learning difficulties are over-represented in the criminal justice system. They are more likely to be arrested, charged, sentenced, incarcerated, and re-incarcerated. A literature review revealed an emerging body of research within the disciplines of disability studies and criminology. Looking more specifically at research focusing on first-hand accounts of experiences from people with learning disabilities in the CJS, I found only a small number of studies (Hyun, Hahn, & McConnell, 2014), with none focusing solely on women's experiences (Chapter 3).

The theoretical underpinnings were drawn from feminist disability studies and feminist criminology. Sense of identity, described in narrative inquiry as 'stories to live by' (Clandinin, 2013) was understood based on labeling theory and sense of belonging. The social model of disability formed the definition of learning difficulties for this narrative inquiry. Bruner's notion of narrative knowledge and Dewey's theory of experience formed the basis of this narrative inquiry in terms of knowing and understanding through experiences.

Narrative inquiry is an established research methodology where researchers inquire into experiences in relational ways (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2009). This methodology is grounded in relationships and an ongoing dialogue that fosters trust, comfort and openness. I met with four young women for eight to eighteen months and we talked about their experiences, including their experiences in the criminal justice system. We also lived shared stories by going places together including appointments, looking for housing and grocery shopping.

This dissertation is organized with the narrative accounts of participants first followed by a published review of qualitative research and three distinct manuscripts prepared for submission

as the body chapters. In chapter 4, the resonances across the four participants' narrative accounts are discussed as narrative threads. These threads are uncertainty and instability in their circumstances, enduring discrimination and stigma, and mothering as well as being mothered. In chapter 5, the notion of counterstories (Lindemann- Nelson, 1995) is discussed as a basis for recognizing the stories that participants shared as stories of resistance and resilience. Seeing the stories that the women were telling and living as counterstories was a way of shifting my perceptions which reflected the dominant stories I knew. Chapter 6 discusses the ethical tensions that emerged during the narrative inquiry process. Considering ethical tensions as educative spaces, I grappled with questions about who I was in the participants' lives and how I could maintain my ethical responsibility to them when writing this dissertation.

I hope to compel the reader to think about the stories shared as a way of knowing, as well as to see the significance in stories of experience for shaping who we are and how we perceive the world around us. I have elaborated on different ways of attending to and understanding stories -- looking at the narrative threads, recognizing counterstories, and grappling with ethical tensions -- in order to show the dynamic and interactive nature of stories when they are seen as opportunities for greater awareness and new possibilities.

## Preface

This dissertation is an original work by Elly Park. The research project, of which this dissertation is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Young women with learning difficulties in the Canadian criminal justice system: a narrative inquiry”, ID: Pro00033756, December 2, 2012.

Chapter 3 of this dissertation has been published as E. Hyun (Park), L. Hahn, and D. McConnell, “Experiences of people with learning disabilities in the criminal justice system,” *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, vol. 42, issue 4, 308-314. I was responsible for the literature review and manuscript composition. L. Hahn assisted with data analysis and editing the manuscript. D. McConnell was the supervisory author and involved in manuscript composition.

Chapter 4 has been co-authored by E. Park, J. Minaker, D. McConnell, and V. Caine, “Narrative Threads in the Life Stories of Criminalized Women with Learning Difficulties” and accepted as a book chapter in the Prairie Child Welfare Consortium (PCWC) Book Series: *Voices from the Prairies* (vol. 5), by University of Regina Press, Regina, SK. I was responsible for the data collection and analysis as well as manuscript composition. J. Minaker assisted with manuscript composition. D. McConnell and V. Caine were supervisory authors and assisted with manuscript edits.

Chapter 5 has been authored by E. Park, “Situating Counterstories: Shifting my Understanding of Dominant Narratives,” to be submitted to the journal *Qualitative Inquiry*.

Chapter 6 has been co-authored by E. Park, V. Caine, D. McConnell, and J. Minaker, “Ethical Tensions as Educative Spaces in Narrative Inquiry,” to be submitted to the journal *FQS: Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. I completed the data collection and analysis as well as

manuscript composition. V. Caine assisted with manuscript composition. D. McConnell and J. Minaker were supervisory authors and assisted with manuscript composition and edits.

## **Dedication**

For Carla, Caris, Tasha and Lina, who shared their lives with me. You are amazing women, and I am honored to be a part of your stories. I will always hold them close to my heart.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to first thank my committee -- David, Joanne and Vera. Your dedication to our project has made this all possible. I am so grateful for your support and encouragement.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my loving family and friends. Each of you was willing to take up some of my load so that I could carry on. I am especially indebted to my mom and dad who have loved me unconditionally and who taught me about sacrifice, loyalty and respect.

Thank you to the University of Alberta, Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine for giving me a home for four years. I also want to express my heartfelt gratitude to the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research for believing in me and providing me with financial support.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Experiences – the experiences of women with learning difficulties in the criminal justice system, and the experiences that the women and I shared as we lived and shared stories – are the basis of this dissertation. As I inquired into the experiences of others, I began by looking inward and reflecting on the stories that I live. The narrative beginnings were the starting point of this process.

#### **Narrative Beginnings**

*When I was young, probably from the age of six or seven, I remember going to the grocery store with my mom as her little helper. I would remind her of all the things we needed at home -- milk, bread, juice, and of course snacks - as we went up and down the aisles. She would try to calculate in her head how much we were spending. We were a family of nine, five kids, parents, and paternal grandparents, so she had to stay mindful of the difference between want and need. When we got to the check-out, there was always a sense of anxiety. I can feel it even today, a worry that we wouldn't have enough money. The cashier would tell us the total, always more than we expected. My mom would hand over all the coupons she had, and then remove the items she knew we could buy next time. She would empty out her change onto the black grocery belt and count out all her coins. We would be holding up the line, the cashier glaring at us impatiently. I was embarrassed. I wondered why we had so little money, I wondered why my mom wasn't better prepared with more cash, and I wondered why I had to be part of a family that had too many mouths to feed. I could feel resentment growing inside of me. As I got older, I continued to blame my parents for our modest lifestyle; I blamed them for being different and*

*making me different. Now, I wonder about the ways in which the lack of material things influenced how others saw me and how I saw myself. I wonder how the labels I had placed on myself and my own struggles to belong affected who I was becoming.*

*Looking back even further, I lived with my parents, my siblings and my grandparents throughout my childhood. My grandparents raised us while my parents worked fourteen hour days. When I was five, I remember going out with my grandmother and my aunt. They did custodial work at an office building. We had to arrive after everyone else had gone home. They vacuumed, cleaned the bathrooms and collected the trash. I was left on my own to explore. As I wandered in and out of the cubicles, I looked on top of the desks and into desk drawers. On one desk I saw a set of brightly colored post-it notes. There were several pads at the corner of the desk. I looked at them longingly, and after I made sure no one was close by, I took a few pieces of each of the different colors and put them inside my jacket pocket. My heart was racing because I knew I had taken something that was not mine, and I knew it was wrong. I do not recall what I did with those post-it notes when I got home; I do remember feeling guilty about what I had done. As I began this study, I wondered what memories the participants would have of childhood that they might share with me.*

As I grapple with my childhood memories, I wondered why I called forth these memories in relation to my questions about women in the criminal justice system (CJS). Why focus on these experiences? Why am I looking into what I have done or what has happened in my life in order to explain my place in this work and engage with women in the CJS? Do I think it helps me understand another's experiences? After reading feminist philosopher, Maria Lugones (1987) and reflecting on the relationship I had with my mother, I understood why my questions about women in the CJS had prompted my reflections on my childhood and my family. Lugones

(1987) refers to interactions emerging from a shared experience or attribute as ‘world travel.’ This common element among individuals becomes a world for those who are able to relate to it. When we travel to each other’s worlds, we understand with arrogant perceptions and loving perceptions (Lugones, 1987). Lugones (1987) gives the example of traveling to her mother’s world, a world she did not understand and perceived with arrogance. She thought that taking her mother for granted and using her was a way of loving her. When she became aware of her arrogance, she realized, “Loving my mother also required that I see with her eyes, that I go into my mother's world, that I see both of us as we are constructed in her world, that I witness her own sense of herself from within her world” (Lugones, 1987, p. 8).

I too have been arrogant when traveling to my parents’ and grandparents’ worlds. My embarrassment, resentment and sense of entitlement came from this arrogant perception. I would think about my mother with a sense of pity, and I was determined to live my life differently. When I looked back at my childhood experiences, I could see my arrogance in traveling to my parents’ world -- I would become angry with my parents for their lacking money and inability to speak English. Today, I feel shame as well as sadness when I think about how my parents must have sensed my arrogance.

As I learned about perceiving lovingly, I became much more aware of how the relationships we form and the interactions we have on a daily basis are contingent on our perception of others. I realized the need to learn to ‘world travel’ with loving perception as I met others, including participants, and as I continued to live in relation to others. To alter the way I perceived was not a natural shift in thinking, but was an intentional change in the words I used and the way I acted toward others. In relationships, I had to become vulnerable and inquire more deeply into our shared worlds in a loving way. I continued to contemplate world travel as the

research project developed and unfolded, particularly attending to the ways in which I wanted to interact with participants and carry out this research.

### **Forming my Research Puzzle**

I spent six weeks at a medium security correctional centre for a fieldwork placement as part of my degree in occupational therapy. This story represents the experiences I had meeting with some of the women in custody.

Rose<sup>1</sup> was so excited about getting out. She had been in and out of jail a number of times, mainly for sex work and possession of illegal substances.<sup>2</sup> This time, she was determined to do things differently. She had been in jail for a month and was going to be released in a few days. She said that she knew she could not go back to her old life, meet her old friends, buy the nice clothes and makeup she would have previously stolen or been able to afford, and that she would have to go back to school to get a decent job. She seemed so confident in herself I was convinced she would successfully overcome the obstacles ahead. Rose had symptoms of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), although she had not been formally diagnosed. My placement at the correctional centre ended, and I was filled with a sense of anxiety and curiosity. All I could think about was what had become of Rose. Was she able to get the support she needed? How was it possible for young women who share such difficult life stories to survive, let alone succeed?

Since my placement at the correctional centre and meeting with women like Rose, I have puzzled and wondered over certain questions that stayed with me. These questions formed the

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<sup>1</sup>This name is a pseudonym. I met a number of people in the prison. This story represents some of the encounters I had with one particular individual.

<sup>2</sup> Women are more frequently incarcerated for sex work and drug related crimes, compared to men (Kong & AuCoin, 2008).



basis of my research puzzle.<sup>3</sup> *What are the life stories of young women with learning difficulties?*<sup>4</sup> *How do they experience the CJS? What kind of impact do their experiences in the CJS have on their present narrative and their view of the future? In what ways have these stories contributed to how women see themselves and how they relate with others?* The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to understand the experiences of four young women who identified themselves as having learning difficulties and have been involved in the Canadian criminal justice system. I wanted to travel with participants to their worlds (Lugones, 1987), and in order to do that effectively I needed to critically examine the theoretical influences that informed my own thinking. I also needed to be open to new questions, thoughts and ideas as they emerged.

### **Identity, Labeling and Belonging**

Narrative inquiry scholars have developed the phrase ‘stories to live by,’ to define the stories that we tell ourselves about who we are and who we are becoming (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Murphy, 2009). Our identity is connected to others. The stories we tell are rarely about individuals, but include multiple characters, settings and plotlines. They are based, in part, on our understanding of the world. Our biases and presumptions about the lives of others often become labels we use to identify and categorize them. As we interact with others we are labeled and we label in various ways, not only by the words used to describe ourselves and others, but also by the ways in which people act towards us and we act toward them. Labels categorize and designate different groups and, as a result, labeling has direct connections to processes of stigma

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<sup>3</sup> The research puzzle refers to the questions and research problem that shapes this inquiry. “Problems carry with them qualities of clear definability and the expectation of solutions, but narrative inquiry carries more of a sense for a search... a sense of continual reformulation” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 124).

<sup>4</sup> *Learning difficulties* is a term used to encompass mild intellectual and developmental disabilities that have resulted in challenges in learning.

and exclusion. How we see ourselves is, at least in part, based on labels and their powerful effects. These labels become part of our ‘stories to live by,’ possibly precluding other outcomes.

*Labeling theory* (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1972) maintains that individuals who have been defined or labeled as deviant by others, including people in the CJS, are treated differently based on labels, which can be in the form of stigma, discrimination, and speculative preconceptions. Contributing to my understanding of labeling theory has been the philosophical concept of the ‘Other’ (Levinas, 1985). Levinas describes the “I” and the “Other” in terms of relationship and responsibility, but ‘Othering’ has been further developed and defined in social sciences as a way to distinguish, discriminate and control (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012). Labeling is a way to communicate or reinforce forms of ‘Othering;’ for example, when individuals are categorized in a particular marginalized or distinct group, they are objectified, leading to power differentials (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012). When labelled a ‘criminal,’ the person is assumed to be deviant -- a rule breaker and insubordinate – an outsider (Becker, 1963). Similarly, people with learning difficulties are labeled and limited by these labels. Often individuals considered disabled by others also identify themselves as being disabled (Smith, Osborne, Crim, & Rhu, 1986). Labels, as a form and consequence of ‘Othering,’ are particularly powerful once they are reified in laws and policies, such as defining crime and disability in specific ways that limit individuals who are labeled.

Scholars have contended that the definition of ‘learning disability’ used to inform contemporary policy comes from a personal tragedy model of disability -- that is, “unchangeable organic impairments” (Goodley, 2001, p. 211). Söder (1989) adds that the labels used as a part of formal or administrative labeling in schools and healthcare settings, extends to informal settings and often results in segregation, prejudice and negative attitudes. He argues that the current

policy-driven attempts to reduce the negative consequences of the “learning disability” label, by providing inclusive learning environments, is not enough to change perspectives. He calls for more research that investigates attitudes towards people with disabilities. Exploring the experiences of being labelled, including how stigma and discrimination are part of the experiences, can provide greater insight into how labels and ‘Othering’ affect people with learning difficulties, in terms of how they see themselves and how they interact with others. On the other hand, when labels are perceived as positive and affirming, not a result of practices of ‘Othering,’ but rather a way of uniting individuals to form a group identity, it contributes to a sense of belonging.

The power of a sense of belonging cannot be disputed; it is a foundational part of social and cultural practices and norms, and it gives significance and weight to the labels that are created and perpetuated (Steeves, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Identifying with a label and belonging to a group is how we connect to others, how we situate ourselves in our environments (Goode, 1975). Being part of a specific cultural group, a sports team, and/or having a certain type of job can contribute to a sense of inclusion through labels. Belonging is constructed through participation and creating places of ‘fitting in,’ which is a critical part of our growing and the shaping of identities, especially for people with disabilities (Steeves, 2006). As we continuously think about who we are in relation to others and our desire to belong (Yuval-Davis, 2006), we can feel a sense of belonging in contrast to the sense of ‘Othering.’ Therefore, belonging and ‘Othering’ are part of our personal experiences, and our sense of belonging is deeply rooted in the broader social and cultural context.

## **Feminist Criminology**

Feminist criminology discourse has concentrated on the notion of ‘Othering’ in terms of gender roles, power differentials, crime, and socioeconomic status to name a few. Scholars identified the late 1960s as the beginning of feminist criminology with criticism surrounding inequality and gender biases in criminology (Chesney-Lind, 2006; Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988). Since then, research and literature pertaining to women in the criminal justice system (CJS) and feminism in criminology has grown, and various feminist perspectives in criminology have taken shape. Feminist criminology is defined by some scholars as a study of crime and justice with gender being the main focus (Flavin, 2001). Gelsthorpe and Morris (1988) contend that one standard definition does not exist. There are multiple theoretical stances and each has a place in understanding women involved in the CJS. The ones I discuss here, found most frequently in feminist criminology literature, are empirical, standpoint and postmodern feminism.

Feminist criminology has evolved over the past fifty years, growing rapidly with the realization that criminology theories were male-centred (Balfour & Comack, 2014). Based initially on a critique of existing justifications for criminal behaviour, feminist criminology has developed to consider multiple feminist perspectives (Balfour & Comack, 2014). Feminist empiricism focused on ‘fitting’ women into existing criminology theories, firmly grounded in a positivist framework (Harding, 1991). Branching from empiricism, subsequent theories focus on diverging viewpoints with a common feminist lens. Standpoint feminism emerged to include women’s views and introduce personal narratives (Comack, 2014). Postmodernist feminism questions constructs such as ‘crime’ and ‘justice,’ resisting the categorization and generalization of women (Balfour & Comack, 2014). These perspectives continue to be an active part of feminist criminology discourse. Feminist criminologists emphasize the importance of

acknowledging that basic criminology theories come from “male-centred assumptions about the nature of the world” (Comack, 1996, p. 11).

The theory of feminist empiricism emerged from the generalization of established scientific criminology theories. Opposing the idea that perspective matters, the positivist stance maintains that the researcher is an objective and non-partisan outsider, and therefore, it does not matter who is addressing the question or issue at hand (Harding, 1991). Feminist empiricism in criminology holds onto the notions of the positivist scientific method, while questioning the claims of scientific neutrality and objectivity in criminology theories that exclude women (Daly, 1997; Harding, 1991). It “endeavours to develop a scientific understanding of women as the missing subjects of criminology, to document their lives both as offenders and as victims” (Naffine, 1996, p.30). The objectivity and design of the scientific method are not brought into question, but rather, the studies are considered ‘bad science’ because the data collected only included men, generating biased results (Comack, 1996). Concerns regarding feminist empiricism in criminology include the gendering of women (and not men) and the consequence of applying the generated theories (from males) to females (Flavin, 2001; Naffine, 1996). Other feminist perspectives have emerged from the argument that it does make a difference *who* is doing the inquiring. With the intellectual development of feminist criminology, feminists underscore making female offenders visible and showing how traditional gender role expectations, pronounced in the criminal justice system, influence the treatment of female defendants and victims (Naffine, 1996). In contrast to feminist empiricism, Marxist and standpoint feminists acknowledge the criminologist as partisan and encourage the ‘criminals’ under study to actually be included in the study of ‘criminals.’

The roots of standpoint feminism come from Hegel's encounter with the hierarchal relationship between slave and master, with similarities to Marxist feminism in terms of oppression and the differentiation of power (Harding, 1991). However, in standpoint feminism, the oppression is not of a non-gendered proletariat by the powerful bourgeoisie, but rather of women by men (Daly, 1997). The basis of standpoint feminism is "[a focus] on gender differences, on differences between women's and men's situations which give a scientific advantage to those who can make use of the differences"(Harding, 1991, p. 120). Women are best able to speak for themselves (as victims or offenders); women's views have been repressed and power differentials have influenced what is considered 'good' knowledge (Harding, 1991; Naffine, 1996).

The problem of standpoint feminism is not simply one of a conflation of a multiplicity of female standpoints into a single one- the standpoint of the woman who is most privileged. The problem is also that standpoint feminism even when transformed into the plural, tends to reject one form of essentialism only to adopt another (Naffine, 1996, p. 56).

Standpoint feminists claim to have a kind of collective stance, but need to be careful of the collective they are claiming to be, especially when there is the possibility of views that are antagonistic to one another. Nevertheless, recognizing the importance of first-hand experiences and asking questions regarding the differences between the experiences between males and females and among females have been two major advancements from standpoint feminism.

The postmodern feminist perspective is a progression of standpoint feminism and has been described in relation to criminology (Burgess-Proctor, 2006; Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Harding, 1991). Established systems of knowledge reflect men's views of the natural and social

world, and therefore the production of knowledge is a gendered process (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988). The generalizability of crime theories and the inequitable treatment of women in the criminal justice system are only two of many concerns about the influence of gendered systems and entrenched perceptions of moral behaviour in criminological research (Daly and Chesney-Lind, 1988).

[P]ostmodern feminists reject fixed categories and universal concepts in favor of multiple truths, and as such examine the effects of discourse and symbolic representation on claims about knowledge. Within criminology, postmodern feminists interrogate the social construction of concepts such as “crime,” “justice,” and “deviance” and challenge accepted criminological truths (Burgess-Proctor, 2006, p. 29).

Although there are commonalities in being female and being involved in the criminal justice system, there are considerable differences in individual stories, emphasizing the need for personal accounts of rich and extensive life histories to contribute to the current body of knowledge. Postmodern feminism embraces the multiplicity of women and their experiences (Smart, 1990).

One significant gap in research is the absence of personal stories that can support or refute the entrenched stereotypes about women involved in the CJS (Lawston & Lucas, 2011). In a male dominated subculture, the community of research in criminal justice needs to create spaces and opportunities for hearing women’s stories to mitigate assumptions and preconceptions in terms of race, gender and socioeconomic status (Balfour & Comack, 2014; Comack, 1996).

In the CJS, there are women who are victims of sexual and physical violence, there are single mothers with responsibilities of caring for their children and being at risk of losing them, and there are many marginalized women in the lowest income bracket who are highly over-represented (Balfour & Comack, 2014). Inquiring into the experiences of women in diverse environments and circumstances has pointed out certain areas that need more attention such as homelessness and healthcare needs (Oliver, 2013; Sered & Norton-Hawk, 2008). Understanding the experiences that shape the way women see themselves and the world around them is one way to resist assumptions of the dominant narratives of criminalized women to make progress that results in tangible and meaningful change for women involved in the CJS.

### **Learning Difficulties and the Social Model of Disability**

Within the CJS, there is an overrepresentation of women with learning difficulties. Although empirical research has looked at correlations of specific types of learning difficulties as a risk factor for CJS involvement, the experiences that contemplate ‘how’ rather than ‘why’ have not been explored. To understand the context for this work, I begin by explaining the background of learning difficulties within disability studies.

Children identified as having learning difficulties are often placed in special education classes based on academic assessments in school. Consequently, in this outcome-based structure of formal education, service professionals such as teachers, psychologists and social workers will categorize or label a person as having learning difficulties, with specific perceptions of what the person can or cannot do. However, “learning difficulty,” as described by Goodley (2001), is “a fundamentally social, cultural, political, historical, discursive and relational phenomenon” (p. 210). Shakespeare and Watson (2001) similarly describe it as the outcome of multiple forces that are biological, psychological and social. To find the basis of these learning difficulties, one must



look beyond an individual's described inability, to a society that excludes, discriminates and stigmatizes people marked as disabled (Goodley & Rapley, 2001). The challenge in defining learning difficulties is to highlight the multiple factors at play, but at the same time ensure that necessary supports are in place. Although labels are used, what the labels indicate to those who interact with persons with learning difficulties can make a difference in terms of respect, equity and acceptance.

Scholars working within the social model of disability framework understand labels and definitions of disability as heavily informed by social judgments, rather than limitations inherent to the people who are labeled (Oliver, 1990). The focus of this model is on social policies and context within which the labels and definitions are developed and circulated (Hurst, 2003; Thomas, 2004b). As a result of this model, there has been an increased awareness in academia to consider disability in social and physical contexts, rather than in isolation (Shakespeare, 2006).

A social-relational perspective stems from the social model of disability with the epistemological stance of disability as “a product of the social relationships between those with and those without impairment in society” (Thomas, 2004b, p. 28). This perspective acknowledges that impairment or chronic illness can cause limitations and restrictions in activity, but emphasizes that these limitations need not define a person's life (Thomas, 2004a, 2004b). Rather, the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic elements is what constitutes the experience of a disabled person. “People are disabled by society *and* by their bodies” (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 56, emphasis in original). The social-relational perspective also asserts that “disability only comes into play when the restrictions of activity experienced by people with impairment are socially imposed” (Thomas, 2004a, p. 581). This view of disability acknowledges the reality of the impairment, yet suggests that people are not limited by

dysfunction but rather by environmental barriers that prevent their participation in society (Oliver & Barnes, 2010). This perspective challenges the notion of a linear relationship between disability and a certain behavioural outcome, like delinquency (Goodley, 2001), to develop a more multifaceted understanding of what living with disability means.

A narrative inquiry approach complements the social-relational perspective of disability because the approach shares the understanding of “impairment [as] a social phenomenon that is storied, negotiated and constructed in diverse ways” (Goodley & Tregaskis, 2006, p. 644). In this narrative inquiry, making a distinction between learning difficulty and disability is intentional because the participants may relate and identify with having a learning difficulty over having a disability. In addition, the term learning difficulty displaces the notion of an individual impairment, to include the role of context and societal perceptions (Goodley, 2001). Rather than understanding learning difficulties as a specific diagnosis, I sought to understand how the women experience having learning difficulties and story their experiences through narrative inquiry.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings for Narrative Inquiry**

The two main theories underlying this narrative inquiry approach are narrative knowing (Bruner, 1986) and the theory of experience (Dewey, 1938). Bruner (1986) describes ways of knowing as narrative and paradigmatic. Narrative knowing is a storied way of knowing that has been associated with experiences and relationships. “One of the most ubiquitous and powerful discourse forms in human communication is *narrative*. Narrative structure is even inherent in the praxis of social interaction even before it achieves linguistic expression” (Bruner, 1990, p. 77, emphasis in original). The belief that our understanding of others is formed narratively is based on narrative knowing. It comes from the notion of storied experience and people as storied

beings (Bruner, 1986). The latter concept, paradigmatic, describes the power of these narratives and their effects on concrete objects that can be categorized and placed within groups.

In *Making Stories* (2002) Bruner discusses the etymology of narrative-derived from ‘telling’ and ‘knowing’ in some particular way. Narratives are a way of conveying a perspective, an idea, or a certain experience to others, but are also a way to convey the knowledge that comes with the telling. Our identity and perception of self is a negotiated set of narratives, and narrative knowledge provides us with an understanding of others and ourselves (Bruner, 1990). When I am telling others about who I am, I use narratives. I also become familiar with others through narratives. Narratives are a way we are continuing to make sense of our lives and the world around us.

The ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this dissertation are rooted in a Deweyan perspective of experience as dynamic and continuous (Dewey, 1938). Dewey recognizes the unexpectedness that is inherent in living; the uncertainty and complexity is often tackled in research as a problem to be solved or question to be answered (Downey & Clandinin, 2010). From a Deweyan perspective, uncertainty is not a weakness, but contains the possibility for growth and for unexplored stories to be found (Dewey, 1938). Dewey (1981) sees the relationships between the inquirers and their environment that form and develop through experiences, “[making] possible a new way of dealing with them, and thus eventually [creating] a new kind of experienced objects, not more real than those which preceded but more significant, and less overwhelming and oppressive” (p. 175). By uncovering the complexity and depth of experience, uncertainty creates space with the potential for learning and greater understanding.

Dewey’s theory of experience (1938) is based on an understanding of experience as a set of processes that are continuous and interactive. Experiences are not single units but ongoing

phenomena. “Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves towards and into” (Dewey, 1938, p. 38). Therefore, an experience cannot be isolated or excluded from subsequent experiences. It is not an entity with a beginning and end, but rather, experience is interacting and overlapping with other experiences (Dewey, 1981). For example, the experience of talking about the past and sharing stories will affect those who are telling, re-telling, living and re-living experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As stories are told and re-told, they may change because those who are engaged in the telling and re-telling have changed. The narratives shared in this inquiry do not start at the beginning or have a well-defined end. In other words, the experiences will continue after our interactions have ended and are influenced by the experiences themselves.

### **What is Narrative Inquiry?**

The narrative inquiry methodology is based on work by Connelly and Clandinin (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), further developed by a number of scholars in various disciplines (Caine & Steeves, 2009; Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2010; Clandinin & Raymond, 2006; Downey & Clandinin, 2010; Steeves, 2006; Young, 2005). In this research, I focus on the relational and collaborative nature of this inquiry process, described as:

A process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restory-ing as the research proceeds. In the process of beginning to live the shared story of narrative inquiry, the researcher needs to be aware of constructing a relationship in which both voices are heard. (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 4)

Narrative inquiry, therefore, encompasses a methodology as well as the experiences of living shared narratives in relation to participants. To elaborate, there are three key tenets underlying this methodology and phenomenon

Firstly, narrative inquiry is relational research (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). The narrative is the phenomenon under study, and this narrative develops within relationships, including the negotiating relationships between researcher, participants, others and the environment. Relationships fostered by trust, comfort and openness are essential to develop and maintain relational spaces in order to foster research that is meaningful to those in the relationship. Furthermore, relationships are a critical part of the narrative inquiry as they greatly influence the stories shared and the interpretations of stories.

Second, experience is transactional and continuous (Dewey & McDermott, 1981). The aim is not to generate a representation of a reality independent of the knower, but to form a new relation between the inquirer and their environment. Experiences can only be understood through interaction and interpretation of experience, in the living, re-living, telling and re-telling of lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin et al., 2010; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Both the researcher and participant become co-researchers inquiring into lived and told experiences, and the narratives that come from this inquiry are substantially influenced by the interactions. “For the researcher, this is a portion of the complexity of narrative, because a life is also a matter of growth toward an imagined future, and therefore, involves retelling stories and attempts at reliving stories” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). Re-telling and re-living narratives are not simply a matter of recounting stories, but includes the shifts which take place across continuous experiences and the new relationships which form.

Third, experiences are explored with the understanding of people as storied beings in storied landscapes (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Narrative inquirers use stories to understand individuals, as they see themselves and as others see them. Tensions resonate in the relationships between co-researchers and through the experiences, places and all interactions within our narratives (Clandinin et al., 2010). The tensions come from assumptions, ontological beliefs, or individual characteristics of the people within the relationship, but also the social arena where broader tensions are often viewed as the status quo in the politico-economic-social world. When personal narratives ‘bump into’ or collide with dominant or master narratives, tensions form leading to opportunities for change in perspective and large-scale changes to policies (Clandinin & Raymond, 2006; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

**The three dimensional narrative space.** Stories are shared at different times and places and are about different experiences. Narrative inquiry is situated in a three dimensional space: time, place and sociality. These dimensions create the framework of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Each dimension is dynamic, meaning there is continuous unfolding and changing within separate dimensions, affecting the telling and re-telling of the stories, and the narratives situated in the three dimensional space.

The temporal dimension relates to Dewey’s (1938) interpretation of experience as continuous. Within this dimension, movement occurs as reflections into the past and future, but also as lateral movements within the present (Clandinin et al. 2006). When I inquire and write about experiences and lives, I am reminded that I enter in the midst of stories, stories of and with participants that are not yet over, but still becoming. With memory and imagination, there is a need for narrative inquirers to be ‘wide awake’ to the stories yet to be experienced (Greene, 1995) and the potential in the stories that will unfold, not only of the present and future, but of

the past. Narratives have a past, present and future that is specific to the time of the experience, as well as the time it is conveyed in the present.

The specific, concrete settings where experiences occur are part of the dimension of place. The place itself is multifaceted within the narrative inquiry space, which Basso (1988) contends is much more than a geographical location to include cultural, political and historical influences. “Landscapes are available in symbolic terms as well, and so, chiefly through the manifold agencies of speech, they can be ‘detached’ from their fixed spatial moorings and transformed into instruments of thought and vehicles of purposive behavior” (Basso, 1988, p. 102). Moving from places in present lives to past stories has a way of transporting individuals, and the places that are included in the shared stories often have meaning beyond physical elements. When I consider how my own narratives are situated in different places, such as home or school as well as other countries, place indicates much more than physical context, but is closely connected to social and cultural aspects of the narratives. I have to explain the cultural context when I discuss my experiences in certain contexts. I had known implicitly the importance of social norms and cultural influences, but I have become more awake to this notion of place while reading about narrative inquiry.

Sociality is based on “personal conditions including the feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions of the person, whether inquirer or participant, and the external conditions including the culture and relationships that form the individual’s context” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.50). Looking back at my narrative beginnings I think of ways that I may now engage in “retelling and reliving experience in new and more attentive ways” (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013, p. 221) as a result of the experiences I have had with participants in this narrative inquiry. As I move inward and outward, reflecting on the intersections of time

and place, I am able to see the connections between my own school narratives and those of participants. I also see how the narratives that we co-composed were situated in a common time and place but have also continued to unfold in different ways after our research relationships ended. The three dimensional space not only recognizes the significance of each dimensions, but also the interactions between them.

**Field texts to research texts.** Field text is the term used in narrative inquiry to describe the data gathered during the early stage of field work. These texts are used to develop the interim research text, or narrative accounts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Going from field text to research text is an interactive and collaborative process. Field texts are inquired into as the telling and living of narratives, rather than being dissected or pulled apart. Within the three dimensional space, time, place and sociality are used to contemplate field texts. The multiple conversations are placed alongside one another for intense reflection. The inquiry involves discussion and interpretation of field notes while attending to the research puzzle. Interim texts, which formed the narrative accounts, were the result of sifting through and piecing together key elements of the field texts. “As we move from field texts to research texts... we ask questions of meaning and social significance” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 130). Research texts can reveal tensions that show resistance to the dominant narratives, in the form of counterstories (Lindemann-Nelson, 1995).<sup>5</sup> Counterstories are stories that offer possibilities to shift dominant stories (Lindemann-Nelson, 1995). Recognizing the stories that participants shared as counterstories required a shift in the way I listened and understood. By interpreting research texts as more than affirmation of dominant narratives, there were opportunities for new ways of understanding. The

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<sup>5</sup> Counterstories are discussed in detail in Chapter 5.



research texts were created using narrative accounts that developed within the relationship between participants and me and could not be understood apart from the relationship itself.

### **Relational Ethics<sup>6</sup>**

In terms of relational ethics, I have focused on the work of Clandinin and Caine (2013), Bergum (1994, 2003) and Noddings (1986). In narrative inquiry, relational ethics pertains to the emphasis on negotiation and collaboration among researchers and participants, as well as the importance of reciprocity and equity (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Underlying an ethic of care perspective are relational space, interdependency and fostering authentic dialogue as key concepts (Austin, Goble, & Kelecevic, 2009; Bergum, 2003; Gilligan, 2011). Working with participants with an ethic of care is part of being ethically responsible. Consistent with my understanding of relational ethics and the importance of fidelity to the participants, I made an effort to faithfully represent the participants throughout the co-composing and writing of this dissertation.

### **Quality in Narrative Inquiry**

To maintain quality in narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Caine (2013) delineate twelve touchstones,<sup>7</sup> described as “a quality or example that is used to test the excellence or genuineness of others” (p. 169). I describe the touchstones as they relate to this study to show how they influenced maintaining the quality of the work.

#### *1. Relational responsibilities*

Based on relational ethics, as described above, a sense of responsibility to participants within this narrative inquiry guided the relationships that formed as well as the way that the interim texts and research texts were written. I met with four participants on a regular basis for

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<sup>6</sup> Drawing on concepts from Arendt’s (1958) *The Human Condition*, I discuss relational ethics in detail in Chapter 6.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed description of the twelve touchstones, see Clandinin & Caine (2013).

eight to eighteen months and I was able to meet with family members and friends. Our relationships developed in a way that was similar to friendship (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988) in that we had conversations over coffee or a meal, and the relationship was informal.

## 2. *In the midst*

I knew that I was entering in the midst of lives, and although I struggled initially with the first participant in understanding how her life continued outside of this research project, I became more aware with the other participants that their lives did not revolve around this narrative inquiry.

## 3. *Negotiation of relationships*

The relationship with each participant was different based on how much or how little they wanted me to be a part of their lives. I was able to meet with some of the women more than others. The individual relationships also changed over time, sometimes feeling like the ebb and flow of a changing tide depending on what was happening in the women's lives.

## 4. *Narrative beginnings*

The narrative beginnings at the start of this introduction were a critical piece in understanding why I came to wonder about the women's stories in the ways I did. My own narrative influences the narrative accounts in this dissertation as well as the research texts that were based on my interpretations.

## 5. *Negotiating entry into the field*

When I began meeting with participants, I chose to go to community agencies and meet with women before even considering their participation in this project. Rather than recruit participants, I wanted to begin with an individual connection that could build into a relationship.

## 6. *Moving from field to field texts*

Moving from the field, where I went with participants to different places and I did not have a voice recorder on, to writing field texts required attention and organization. It was difficult to recall certain conversations when I met with more than one participant in one day, and I learned to jot down or record fieldnotes between meetings. I realized the importance of fieldnotes and reflections as I went back to field texts to write the narrative accounts.

*7. Moving from field texts to interim and final research texts*

Writing the narrative accounts was a long iterative process. I was constantly mindful of the participants and how they would want their stories to be shared. I also wanted to represent participants in the research texts in ways that were accessible and ways that preserved their voices. Using found poetry in the interim texts and final research texts was a way that participants felt effectively and powerfully conveyed what they were saying.

*8. Representing narratives of experience in ways that show temporality, sociality and place*

The three dimensions, as discussed earlier, were a part of the experiences that we shared. We would be in different places- the car, a restaurant, in a participant's apartment and talking about places they had been or wanted to go. We spoke at and of different times – in terms of the time in our relationship, as well as the past they would try to recall, and in sociality. I used fieldnotes and transcripts, as well as reflective pieces to write the narratives being mindful of the three dimensions.

*9. Relational response communities*

I had regularly attended, for the first two years, the weekly 'Research Issues' table where people who were interested in or engaged in narrative inquiry gathered together to share experiences through reading pieces of writing, talking about challenges and difficulties, as well

as celebrating highpoints and achievements. I was able to hear about the experiences others had while in the midst of their research. Subsequently, I was able to have regular meetings with one of my supervisors, Dr. Vera Caine, to read the work as I began to write. I could see the importance in getting feedback and discussing ideas with a response community to ensure quality of the narrative inquiry.

#### *10. Personal, practical, and social justifications*

The justification for this narrative inquiry was a constant thought running in the back of my mind, and I needed to provide justifications for this study when I completed my candidacy, when I was applying for funding, and when I spoke at conferences. I have provided a more detailed description of the personal, practical and social justifications in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.

#### *11. Attentive to multiple audiences*

I wrote this dissertation being mindful of the four participants, Caris, Carla, Lina and Tasha at all times. I also hope to share it with the community agencies that supported me. Being attentive to the audience determined the words I used and the way I presented the findings in this research.

#### *12. Commitment to understanding lives in motion*

I have been able to meet with two participants, Carla and Tasha, after we had ended our ‘research relationship.’ In the past year, their lives have continued to change and progress. I am aware of how these narrative accounts are not the beginning or the end of their stories, and I see how having prolonged relationships was able to show the continuous progression in our lives.

Reflecting on each touchstone at the end of this narrative inquiry, I am able to see the different points were addressed in this work. Likewise, I see how the various touchstones overlap

with one another and complement each other, such as relational commitments to participants and negotiating relationships to contribute to the richness of the narrative inquiry.

## **Research Process**

I met with four women (ages 20 to 28) from January, 2013 to June, 2014. I was able to meet them through two community organizations I had been in contact with prior to the recruitment process. I was introduced to one participant by a staff member of Community Dreamers.<sup>8</sup> I met another participant at a luncheon held by Community 4 Me for volunteers, staff and people who attend programs. I also attended sessions of different programs offered by Community 4 Me where I introduced myself and talked about this project. Two women approached me and said they would be interested in meeting with me. All four women received the project information letter which we discussed in detail, and they signed a consent form (see Appendix A and B).

**Meeting participants.** Meeting participants was not a simple process. I had made the initial contact with community centres, but meeting with potential participants was not immediate or easy. Although I went to visit the community centres, I realized I needed to take initiative and establish an ongoing presence at the facility to meet with the people who would drop in or attend programs. I had talked about the research project with several different workers at the two organizations asking them to refer any potential participants; however, I recognized the importance of being there rather than waiting for participants to come to me. I was fortunate to have an open invitation to go to Community 4 Me; the time I had spent volunteering for the organizations had facilitated the early phase of recruitment. It took about eleven months from the time I received ethics approval until I met with all four participants. In the end, there was a

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<sup>8</sup> All organization names and identifiers have been changed.

substantial break between when I met with the first two participants, Carla and Caris, in January, 2013 and the other two, Tasha and Lina, in October, 2013. Although unplanned, the space between meeting Carla and Caris and then Tasha and Lina made it much easier for me to give more attention to each participant. I lost touch with one participant, Caris, in August, 2013 and I was able to connect with her again in February, 2014. I began working on the narrative accounts<sup>9</sup> in February, 2014, and I gave these drafts to the participants for feedback and suggestions. We talked about the comments they had written in the margins as well as the parts they highlighted. Discussing and negotiating what should be included in the narrative accounts to best represent the participants was an iterative process with active involvement by the participants. Among the women's stories, there were consistencies, like threads, that became unifying elements (Connelly & Clandinin, 1986). These threads resonated across the narrative accounts, and by distinguishing them, I was able to see the connections between the participants' stories.<sup>10</sup>

Two of the participants are Aboriginal. I had developed relationships with two Elders and other Aboriginal women at Community 4 Me, who offered support and guidance. When I was composing the narrative accounts, I contacted one of the Elders and talked to her about how to be culturally sensitive and appropriate. I wanted to be respectful of the Aboriginal culture. Learning from participants was a significant part of the research process- not only learning about their personal experiences, but also about the social and cultural influences that shape their identities.

Having learning difficulties was based on self-identification of challenges in learning; I met with participants and asked each of them if they thought they had learning difficulties. We talked about some of the challenges associated with learning and any labels that were self-

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<sup>9</sup> Narrative accounts were created using field texts. Each participant and I co-composed a narrative account of their experiences. See Chapter 2.

<sup>10</sup> Narrative threads are discussed in Chapter 3.

imposed or given to them by professionals. They all had experiences of being labeled by others such as teachers, social workers, and health care professionals. The present situation in school systems, with intense assessments and high levels of diagnoses may not have been the case for the participants in this narrative inquiry (Clandinin et al., 2010). It is important to understand how context, such as classrooms and neighborhoods, also change within social and institutional landscapes, affecting the definitions used and the labels that are given.

**Representation in the text.** It was also essential to honor the participants' stories, and using found poetry was a way to preserve the voices of the women while conveying their stories in a powerful way. Poetry has been used by researchers in various ways including found poetry, or 'data poems' where the participants' words are used to create poetry to present in research settings (Butler-Kisber, 2002; Glesne, 1997; Lahman et al., 2011). Using poetry within the research writing was a way to emphasize certain points in our conversations that the participants and I wanted to underscore (Richardson, 1993). From a practical standpoint, the transcripts and fieldnotes combined, amounted to hundreds of pages, and using found poetry was an effective way to articulate the participants' experiences. Likewise, it was important that the research texts were accessible and readable for sharing the narrative accounts with a broad audience base (Lahman et al., 2011). The participants expressed that the found poems were not only compelling, but also the most powerful parts of their accounts.

### **Justification**

There were times when I was asked what contribution this narrative inquiry makes to the greater scientific community. My hope was not to answer questions, but rather to create opportunities to ask other questions based on where participants would lead me. I may never find answers -- there may not even be a 'right' answer -- nonetheless I was compelled to think about

“what we are [I am] doing” (Arendt, 1958, p. 5). When I met with the women in this narrative inquiry, I realized they had powerful stories to share and insight into their experiences that only they were able to offer. This inquiry begins with wonderings, but raises more questions as I think about broader institutional, social and cultural landscapes where the stories are situated.

I attend to the questions which shaped the research puzzle in the next five chapters of this dissertation. The participants and I share their life stories in the narrative accounts. A review of the literature that looks at experiences in the criminal justice system (CJS) showed a dearth of relevant and applicable research in this area. The resonances across the four narrative accounts, referred to as narrative threads, portray how the participants’ experiences have influenced the way they see themselves and others, as well as their outlook for the future. Using the notion of counterstories (Lindemann-Nelson, 1995) as a way to understand and interpret the data, especially when contemplating stories of experience, influence the process of collecting data, or hearing stories, as well as the actual stories which comprise the research findings. Lastly, I consider the ethical questions that created tensions during the research process, learning from the tensions how to work as a narrative inquirer and as a woman in relation to the participants in this study.

## **Chapter Summaries**

### **Chapter 2**

The narrative accounts, of Carla, Caris, Tasha and Lina were written as collaborative interactive pieces of their experiences. Although parts of the accounts were based on my interpretation of the experiences we shared, I also gave drafts of the narrative accounts to the participants to read and we negotiated what to include and omit. Co-composing the narrative accounts was a way to keep the experiences and the women at the forefront of this narrative



inquiry. Likewise, while writing the research texts, it was important to continue referring back to the narrative accounts to stay with experience.

### **Chapter 3**

To analyze the available literature pertaining to people with learning difficulties who have been involved in the criminal justice system, I completed a meta-synthesis of the research that included first-person accounts of experiences. This review revealed three themes: (1) study participants did not understand what was happening to them, or why; (2) they felt alone, and they did not know where to turn, or to whom for support; and, (3) alone and ‘in the dark’, they were uncertain about what to say or do. The discussion looks at the insights we could draw from the limited available data to identify directions for future research. Subsequent chapters are also linked to the recommendations made in this review.

### **Chapter 4**

In this chapter, I focus on the substantive findings in this narrative inquiry. The life stories of four participants are discussed as a way of understanding their experiences. Relationships with the participants were central to the research process; the participants and I were able to better understand the context of their experiences and recognize that change and uncertainty is part of all our lives. Four narrative threads resonated across the four narrative accounts: the uncertainty and instability in circumstances, having someone to turn to, enduring to judgment and stigma, and mothering as well as being mothered. The threads pointed out a need for individualized support based on specific challenges and obstacles, and a need to closely critique current programs and services in place.

## **Chapter 5**

In this chapter, I draw on Lindemann-Nelson's (1995) concept of counterstories--stories "that contribute to the moral self-definition of its teller by undermining a dominant story, undoing it and retelling it in such a way as to invite new interpretations and conclusions" (p. 23). While hearing participants' stories, I contemplate how relationships can offer spaces to share counterstories: stories of resistance and possibility. Participants 'bumped up' against dominant stories of recovery, of being part of the criminal justice system, of being a mother, as well as of school and learning difficulties. Within a context of prolonged relationships with ongoing reflexivity, counterstories were heard in a particular ways where they were accepted as possibilities for shifting the dominant narratives.

## **Chapter 6**

In her book *The Human Condition*, Arendt (1958) calls us to think deeply about our role in the web of human relationships; she insists that we must "think [about] what we are doing" (p. 5). Ethical tensions are used as educative spaces for reflection and discussion. In particular, I consider three concepts from *The Human Condition* to grapple with ethical tensions in this narrative inquiry. Ethical tensions formed while in the 'messiness' of the research – in the field, while composing and negotiating narrative accounts and writing this dissertation. In this chapter, I consider the ethical questions pertaining to who we are as researchers in relation to the participants, showing the multiplicity of stories that shape each of the participants, as well as being attentive to how the stories are shared in ways that represent participants.

## **Chapter 7**

In this chapter I discuss the overall implications of this narrative inquiry and make explicit the relevant personal, practical and social significance of the stories. I look at the

possible impact of this work, within the lives of the women who participated, within my own life, as well as the possibilities for future research. I contemplate moving forward from this narrative inquiry in terms of subsequent inquiries in this area as well as developing my own program of research.

## **Conclusion**

This research began with certain wonderings about the experiences of young women with learning difficulties in the CJS. Initially, there was a focus on the stories that related to their experiences in the CJS, but the interactions were open ended to encourage the participants to direct the conversations based on what they felt was important. I was able to see how their experiences intertwined – experiences of learning difficulties were not limited to school stories or stories of being discriminated; likewise, experiences in the CJS often impacted the women as they tried to take care of their children and go back to school. The importance of attending to stories within relationships and embracing the continuity of stories was a critical part of this work, both in being faithful to the narrative inquiry methodology, and in being ethically responsible while doing the research.

Moving forward, I think about the stories planted in me, stories that participants shared with me through telling of experiences and living alongside one another.

One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted - knowingly or unknowingly - in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives. (Okri, 1997, p. 46)

I have not only changed the way I approach research as a narrative inquirer, I also have a different understanding of stories, situated within relationships, communities, and broader social systems. Being awakened to this new appreciation of stories as a way to understanding, I see that the significance of sharing stories as part of research is the potential and opportunity to change lives.

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## Chapter 2

### Narrative Accounts<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The narrative accounts include excerpts from the participants indicated by italics. Field notes, past and present reflections are woven into the text, and distinguished by ~~~ when deemed necessary for clarity.

## Carla<sup>12</sup>

I introduce Carla with the quote below because it speaks to where she was physically and emotionally when I met her. Her words showed me a new way to think about criminality, addictions, and living in this liminal space where contrasting views of ‘the recovery journey’ seemed to be bumping up against each other.

*Some people here, I am friends with, and that is all the people I hang out with. I have some other friends, but they are in recovery too, and I feel like... I want to be with normal people, but I am not ready to hang out with normal people because I still talk about my addictions. I don't want no one to know about it, but it's still part of my life right now, so, I still have to go to meetings, and people ask me where I am going and I am so honest, but I feel like I am hanging out with the same people and they are going into relapse or whatever,... The therapist I am seeing he is really good. He said, recovery- it is like when you break your leg and you want to put it back to the way it was, that is recovery. Well you don't want to go back to the way you were. So he doesn't like to use the word recovery, he uses discovery. I know what I have to do, I just have to utilize it, but I still live in fear. (Carla, April 2013)*

## Meeting Carla

It was the annual Christmas luncheon put on by Community 4 Me<sup>13</sup> in January 2013. As a volunteer, I was invited to attend, and I was looking forward to meeting some of the women who had participated or were participating in community programs. There were tables set up, with a few people sitting at each of them. I hoped to find someone to eat with, so I looked

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<sup>12</sup> All the names of participants and identifiers in the narrative accounts have been changed.

<sup>13</sup> Community 4 Me works with vulnerable women in Edmonton, Alberta. The luncheon was for staff, volunteers and people who participated in their programs. Names of all organizations and schools have been changed.

around for a familiar face. In the corner, one young woman was talking to a staff worker I knew, Gloria. I walked over to them and Gloria introduced us. I noticed an infant in Gloria's arms. I smiled and asked Carla how old her baby was. Jake was only one month old. As we started to talk, Gloria left to attend to someone else. I was so eager to hold Jake, and I asked her if it would be ok. It had been three years since my son was a newborn, and I was having a moment of nostalgia. He looked at me with big blue eyes and a bright smile. As I held him, she said she needed to change his diaper before we ate. I told her I had just finished potty training my youngest, and I was an expert in the art of diaper changing. She laughed and we went around the corner to a more secluded spot. She took out her diaper pad, and changed him right on the cold laminate floor. With my first child, I would never have dreamed of changing my baby's diaper anywhere but in a washroom with a proper change table, but after three children, I was much more laid back and I would often change my kids on the floor in hallways and other available spaces.

She mentioned that she had two older boys, Cam and Aaron. I felt like our experiences as mothers bonded allowed us to relate to one another with ease. After Jake was freshened up, we went back to the table, and I asked if I could sit with her. She said she didn't think there was anyone else sitting at the table. I suggested we could tag team while having lunch so that she could eat while I watched Jake. I asked her about her other boys. Cam was five and Aaron was eight. The kids lived with their dad and would visit her every weekend. I told her about my own family and children. I asked her how she came to know Community 4 Me. She told me about the program that she had just finished. She attended the program after she decided to stop using drugs. Now, she was eight months sober and enjoying her time with her new baby.

She seemed quiet, but calm and relaxed. Her ability to talk openly about her life gave me the impression she felt as comfortable as I did. Our relationship formed naturally, and I was glad to have someone to eat lunch with. I held Jake while she went to get her food. He sat in his stroller while we ate and fell asleep after drinking a bottle. As the event was winding down, I became nervous. I could see that Carla was getting ready to leave. I had not talked to her about my current research project, but I thought she would be a great participant. I knew she had experiences with the criminal justice system, but I did not know if she had learning difficulties. I knew that I had to act fast. She stood up to go, and I said it was great to meet her and talk with her. I also told her about being a graduate student and my plan to research with young women with learning difficulties who had experiences in the CJS. Finally I asked if she would be interested in working with me in this project. She immediately said yes. I relaxed, and then proceeded to ask her if she had received any formal diagnoses of learning difficulties when she was in school. She said she has diagnoses of ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder] and generalized anxiety. We exchanged phone numbers and when she left, I was excited to learn more about Carla. (Fieldnotes, January 2013)

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Our relationship developed effortlessly and I felt comfortable talking with Carla. I remember our first time meeting one-on-one. We had established a connection as mothers, and when we met privately at a coffee shop, she said that she was open to talk about anything. We went through the consent form and details about the research project. I appreciated her willingness to participate and we spent most of the hour just getting to know each other better, chatting about our kids and our present struggles in caring for infants and toddlers. We talked

about walking with a stroller in the winter, the slippery sidewalks and wet, heavy snow. We talked about the high cost of diapers and formula. I wanted her to feel reciprocity in our interactions by sharing experiences, but I did not ask her how she felt about our relationship until a few months passed. I was learning not only about Carla, but also about how our relationship would considerably influence the stories we shared and how we perceived one another.

### **Childhood**

It was the third time we were meeting, and we were sitting in Carla's living room. The first two times we met at coffee shops and talked about our present lives. I asked her if we could talk about her childhood. She said that she lived with her mom and stepdad until she was about eight. Then it was just her mom, Carla and her little brother.

*So my mom went through this really bad depression, and she called it Chronic Fatigue syndrome, but she would get up in the middle of the night and go drinking and leave us alone at night. I took care of my brother, and walked to school for years. And I remember the cops came. We used to have to climb in through our kitchen window because we didn't have keys. We would come home from school and climb in through the window. And I remember a couple hours of being home, and then the cops showed up. And they come up to the window and look inside, and I would scream, "Don't come in here, we're ok, just leave us alone." Yeah, being all tough, but we're crying and I was saying, "We're fine, my mom just went to the grocery store." And they were like, "Ok." And they left.*

*And we were alone for three days after that. (Carla, March 7, 2013)*

I remember how I sat in silence as Carla told me about the time the police came to check on them. I just sat there with my mouth gaping. I imagined a frightened girl holding her little brother as she yelled out the window. I wondered to myself, how could this little girl be a mother to her brother? She was around eleven at the time, and her brother was eight. I did not say anything, but I felt my heart wrench as I thought about how often Carla was in a situation of being left alone with her brother for days at a time. I just nodded and listened while she continued to talk. I noticed that her voice changed into a sarcastic, biting tone.

*[My mom] denies everything. And even still when she talks to people, I don't know one person who she doesn't tell, she says, "I went through Chronic Fatigue Syndrome", I just roll my eyes, and I don't hide it. I said to her, "You didn't have Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Mama, I looked it up. That's when you can't get out of bed period. You can't get up and go to the bar." And she said, "I was going through a hard time in my life." "Well that's not chronic fatigue, so stop telling everyone you went through Chronic Fatigue for three years." It's retarded, so there's no point in me talking to her. I went to see a counselor when I was younger, I had so much anger. I swear my mom has multiple personalities. She will convince people she is really nice and polite, and totally different from what I know her as. Even her boyfriends, we will be fighting and swearing at each other, and then when they are there, she will be like, "What do you want for dinner?" And I will be like, "I don't want fuckin' nothing for dinner, fuck you." And they will be like, "Don't talk to your mother like that." And I say, "You just missed whatever happened, you don't even know. Don't try to come in and be Mr. Daddy." (Carla, March 7, 2013)*

She was talking much louder now, and I could tell she was angry when she thought about how the men in her mother's life would show up and act like a dad to her and her

brother. Carla resented her mother for the way she would beat her and her brother in private, while being affectionate and loving to them in front of others. She knew that her mother's excuses of being depressed and going through Chronic Fatigue Syndrome were lies to cover up her neglectfulness.

*And now she is so different, she's like, "Don't raise your voice to your children." And I'm like, "You used to beat us, are you kidding me?" I remember we burnt toast on Mother's Day, and she threw a cup at us, and we ran into the stairwell. And we were young. (Carla, March 7, 2014)*

As I listened to her stories, I began to wonder if Carla had interactions with social services. The police had been to her home, and her mom had abused her and her brother. I wondered if she ever told anyone at school, or called anyone for help. I asked her if child protection services were involved, and whether she ever ran away from home.

*That's the thing, when I look back to when I was a kid, children services is way different now from when I was younger. Child services was involved lots. I remember calling children services when I was younger; my mom just beat up my brother and me really bad, and I called and said if you don't get me out of this house I am going to kill myself. And they were like, can you wait until tomorrow? We will see you at school. And I was like, ok. I was 11 or 12. I was like, sure. And they come to the school the next day and I went to a group home and stuff like that, a foster home. (Carla, March 7, 2013)*

Although Carla didn't say it out loud, I am sure we both questioned what would happen today if someone called child services and said what Carla did. Had anything changed in fifteen years? Nonetheless, they showed up at her school the next day, and Carla and her brother ended up going into foster care, which she said was even worse than being at home. Her



brother returned home in a week, and she ran away and went into a group home. She stayed at the group home for only a few weeks and then went back to her mom.

Despite a complicated past, Carla has a close relationship with her mother today. It did not seem like Carla felt resentment toward her mom, but their relationship was more like a tumultuous friendship. During our first meeting, Carla told me that her mom would come over once a week to watch Jake so she could work on Saturdays. However, after a couple months, her mom suddenly said she couldn't do it anymore. Based on Carla's stories from her childhood and the present, her relationship with her mom seemed to have evolved into a kind of friendship rather than the bond of a mother and child. Carla says that she loves her mom, but knows that she is not reliable. When Carla was in labour with Jake, her mom ended up going on a date and did not visit Carla and the baby until the following day. I could see what Carla meant when she said to me, *"My mom always put guys first, and that drove me crazy, I could never go to my mom for anything"* (Carla, December 2013). Based on what she shared, I could see that her mom was not someone she looked to as a role model for parenting.

In Carla's stories, she did not seem to have many people she looked up to during her childhood. I asked Carla about significant people from her past. She had such a variety of experiences in vastly different settings, I was curious to hear who she felt close to.

*So at 13, I had to have a youth worker. And she would take me to do things and stuff like that. I was the only kid that they ever allowed... like my worker was allowed to take me anywhere and whenever she wanted. She'd teach me how to draw pot leaves and stuff like that. And Kenny from South Park. She was really cool. Like she would take me to fancy restaurants and bowling,*

*and she would just keep the receipts and they would cover it. I was the only person they did that for. (Carla, March 28, 2013)*

I was surprised when she told me that this relationship stood out above others. Carla loved her youth worker. She enjoyed going to different places, but she especially liked having someone she could rely on, someone who gave her stability. Carla felt a connection with her worker. Even though their time together was brief -- less than a year -- the relationship left a lasting impression on Carla.

### **Learning Difficulties in the Past**

In our conversations about childhood, we also talked about school. Carla began telling me about her elementary school experiences by saying she hardly remembered anything from before she was ten. When I asked her why she just shrugged her shoulders and said, *"I don't remember anything before Gr. 5..."* I wondered if she did not remember going to school because of her difficult experiences at home and if she blocked out this time in her life because it was distressing for her. Our conversation about school began with her Grade 5 teacher.

I asked Carla what her fondest memory from school was. At the time, I did not realize that she was describing a major turning point in her life. Only now do I see and understand how Carla learns differently and how her inability to 'fit in' played a critical role in her subsequent school experiences.

*When I was in Gr. 5, I had this amazing teacher, like he sat there, and if we did our work all week long, on Friday we would do shadow plays- he was really artsy, and we would do really cool things. Like on Remembrance Day we did this really cool thing with [Flanders field]. Just everything we did with learning was fun. He had a contest, like best stories. Well, I'm a troubled*

*kid, and I liked dark things, and I thought, 'I am going to win best horror.' I got pulled by my teacher, and I had to write a report about violence and stuff, it was bad. When I started acting up, in Gr. 6, that's the thing, I ended up having a youth worker when I was 13, and she was like, "That was a great story you wrote." And I was like, what story? I didn't know she had it. She was like, "What would they say if they read Stephen King?" (Carla, March 28, 2013)*

Although the horror story she wrote was concerning for her school teacher, it impressed her youth worker. Carla admits that it was dark and disturbing. She said she really wanted to win for 'Best Horror Story.' She tells me that she loves the young adult book series *Goosebumps* by R.L Steine, and I see a collection of them on her bookshelf. I wish I could read that story she wrote. She said she wished she still had it today.

*I was a twisted kid. But I am not a violent person now. I like to watch crime shows and reading about it.... but that right there, I kind of got outcasted. But he was a great teacher I appreciated everything he did. But then in Gr. 6, I had a horrible teacher. She would clap right in your ears, yelling 'that's enough' across the room. And I started acting out. I was the class clown, and I would get so mad. So if I was sent out in the hallway, I would walk around, and the principal would be in the hallway, and he would be like, 'What are you doing?' And I was like, 'Oh, I was angry,' and he would be like, 'Ok'. And I remember just leaving, like I would just leave the school. Oh I hated her - she was just a nasty teacher. And that's when all my friends would stop talking to me... (Carla, March 28, 2013)*

I wonder what she had written that made such a commotion. She did admit it was disturbing with the main character, a child, committing a lot of gruesome murders. I wonder how she felt when the teacher she really liked pulled her from class and made her write a

report. Did she still feel like learning was fun after what happened? She refers to herself as a 'troubled kid;' I wonder when she started identifying herself in that way. She was assigned a youth worker in Grade 6. Carla remembered how the worker compared her to Stephen King and complemented her work. I wonder if Grade 5 would have ended differently for Carla if she had won the contest for best horror. I wonder what the rest of her school experience would look like if her horror story had been received differently.

Listening to her story for the first time, I was trying to process what school was like for her in Grade 5 and 6. I imagined what her teachers might have been like and how she responded to them. I wondered why there was a shift in her attitude from 'learning is fun' to 'acting out.' I thought about the change in her school environment as she went from wanting to win the writing contest to being sent out into the hallway and walking out of school.

I asked Carla about her learning difficulties. The first time we met, she stated without hesitation, that she had learning difficulties. She struggled academically in school; she had a diagnosis of attention deficit disorder (ADD) and general anxiety disorder (GAD). Her sense of learning difficulties seemed to be within the context of the classroom, but was not limited to her academic performance. She also talked about difficulties following along in class and being able to pay attention to the teacher.

*We never had any special classes. We just had regular classes, no special classes. Like nowadays they have these classes for special needs. Like I had ADD really bad, like I could not hear the teacher talking. When the teacher was talking, if there is someone making noise behind me and there is someone out in the hallway, I cannot hear what the teacher is saying. So that was really hard for me. (Carla, March 28, 2013)*

Carla moved around during her teenage years from Edmonton to Vietnam and Haiti, and then Calgary and finally to Ontario. When Carla was in Grade 8, her mom sent her abroad to live with her aunt and uncle. She was in Vietnam, where she was home schooled, and then they moved to Haiti, where she went to a private school. She did not talk about her experiences in school while she was abroad. I wonder how school was different for her while living in Haiti. Her stories of school were filled with moving and adjusting to different places until she finally left school when she was in Grade 10.

*When I was 15, I moved to Ontario, and I did not want to go to school. I was like, please, I'll get a job, don't make me go to school. Because there- high school was Gr. 9-12. So I went from being at the top of junior high, and all of a sudden I am at the bottom. I was like, I am going to be bullied, I am going to get picked on, I don't want to go. And on the first day, they messed up my schedule so bad that I was eating my lunch in the bathroom. Crying in the bathroom. And I was like, that's it, I can't do this. (Carla, March 7, 2013)*

Carla spoke extensively about being teased throughout her school years. She was bullied for *being ugly and poor*, and then later she was called a *whore* and *slut*. I considered whether she thought that being socially isolated also contributed to the other challenges she had at school. The more we talked, the more I realized how we needed to explore different areas of her life to understand how she came to know and accept learning difficulties as a part of how she identifies herself. Looking back, I wish I had asked her if she could define learning difficulties for me. At the time, I remember feeling anxious about asking the question because it seemed to imply that I thought she might not know or that I was thinking she was wrong in her understanding of learning difficulties.

*When I was in Grade 6, 7, 8, I got really bullied for being poor, and everyone, they were all rich people and they were all making fun of me and would pick on me. ...So I never got invited to birthday parties, I got picked on, and got beat up (Carla, March 28, 2013).* She felt rejected and ostracized, to add to her feelings of frustration with learning.

Carla states abruptly that she hated school. She had a difficult time keeping up academically, she got beaten up, and she was socially excluded. Her unstable circumstances at home only seemed to exacerbate the challenges of school, from moving frequently to being abused and neglected. After she shared her stories with me, I could understand why she did not want to go to school, and why she dropped out the moment she turned sixteen.

*I got a job, and I dropped out on my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. I went and applied at Tim Horton's that was right by my school. And they were like, come back for an interview this afternoon. I was like, "Ok, just hold on, I have to drop out of school, I will be right back." They hired me. I would start at 6 and every day I would go to work and see my friends from school and that's just the way it was. (Carla, March 7, 2013)*

Thinking about Carla's experiences in elementary and junior high school reminded me of my own childhood. In Grade 8, I was taunted by my peers, made fun of and shunned. There was one month when I cried every day at school and felt completely alone. Like Carla, I felt rejected, and I ended up eventually changing schools. Carla ended up going to live with her aunt and uncle in Haiti. I wonder if some of our experiences were similar.

As my own memories shape how I understand Carla's childhood stories, I wonder how she dealt with the bullying and teasing. I think about how she felt when she was sent away to live with her aunt and uncle because her mother couldn't handle her. I wonder what went

through Carla's mind when she was kicked out of her house by her mother's boyfriend and she ended up sleeping in empty houses that were in the final stages of construction. I was deeply affected by the bullying I experienced in Grade 8. My self-esteem, my feelings of self-worth, and my ability to make and maintain close relationships with others today have in part been influenced by what I had gone through. I contemplated how Carla was affected by her school experiences and if talking to me about it reopened any old wounds she had forgotten. Remembering the difficult time in my past brings forward a deep sadness that has remained in me and will probably never leave.

Carla talked about school with bitterness, but also with a sense of tenacity. She called herself the 'troubled kid' and she struggled to fit in. At the same time she chose to leave school on her own terms; she went and got a job and then told the school she was no longer attending. When she turned sixteen, she made the decision to leave, as she states, "*that's just the way it was.*"

### **Going to Win<sup>14</sup>**

Born here  
Dad was never in my life  
Always sitting behind  
"Do the dishes and cook"

***I am going to win***

---

<sup>14</sup> This found poem was created from our conversations about childhood.

I took care of my brother  
We were alone for three days  
Walked to school  
It was bad

***I am going to win***

Raped when I was 4  
Started having flashbacks  
Nothing we could do

***I am going to win***

I was a troubled kid  
Started acting up

***I am going to win***

Bullied  
Would pick on me  
All making fun of me  
Never got invited  
Got beat up

***I am going to win***

## **Addictions**

In June 2013, Carla told me it was her birthday, and she saw the confusion in my eyes because we had just celebrated it in April. She explained that the one year mark for being sober



is called your birthday and you get a key chain. I congratulated her, and then I asked if she still felt the temptation to use because she had mentioned almost relapsing. She said that on her birthday, she did. Everything seemed to be a sign. She almost called her dealer.

*Most of the days I am ok. Even on my stressful days I don't feel like using. Then, there are certain times when you want to use, like dreaming about it, and thinking about it lots... nine months, and a year, it was rocky times. (Carla, June, 2013)*

Carla has days when she just wants to feel numb again, if only for a few hours. She tells me that she knows using drugs will not solve anything, but she wants to do it anyway, especially when she is feeling really depressed. I know the temptation is strong and will likely surface again and again. My own struggles with alcohol have led to experiences of temptation and relapse. I cannot say that it will get easier, or she will be ok because I know these are empty words that others have said to me. I know the power drugs and alcohol have over people who have addictions is indescribable and terrifying. Carla shared her stories about using drugs and about the profound impact it had on her life and her relationships. For Carla, relapsing meant she would lose her son, lose her apartment, and lose her friends. She shared some painful experiences that have helped remind her of the loss that came with addictions.

### **Losing<sup>15</sup>**

*I lost everything when I was using.*

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<sup>15</sup> This found poem is based on two conversations with Carla on March, 2013 and July 2013.

“No one will believe you, you’re a crackhead.”

I lost all my parental rights, custody.

*I went down hard, and I starting using like \$400 worth a day instead of 40... it was crazy.*

I lost my three bedroom condo

I had nowhere to live, and I was on the streets, I would sleep in apartment hallways, doorways.

I lost my car

I couldn't pay the insurance

I lost my friends

I got her out of jail, and she kicked me out of her apartment

*“Fuck this, I can't handle this shit anymore”*

*I lost everything when I was using.*

Carla spoke about her addictions, not only related to drug use but also to shoplifting. She said that she was tempted to steal, especially because she knew she could get away with it.

## Judgement and Insecurities

“Does it bother you to walk around a mall?” I ask Carla as we walk past different stores with Jake in a stroller. Carla has told me stories of when she was an avid shoplifter and her on-going battle with her shopping addiction. She shrugged her shoulders and said, “I won’t steal when I am with him.” Her fear of losing Jake is greater than her fear of jail.

*But even now, I still get frustrated. yeah, like shop lifting, I don’t want to shop lift when I am with him, and I am always with him, because I don’t want him to get taken away by a cop... even though I know I could get away with it. It’s bad, I used to do it all day, every day.... for like three hours and I got a stroller, and I used to always go steal with a stroller, and I used to never get stopped. ...And I would be like, walking around at 2 in the morning pushing a stroller, and I would be like, “Yeah, this is normal, I am just walking my baby- Can I use your phone?” And I didn’t think anything of it. And one day when Jake wouldn’t sleep, I was thinking, well maybe I should just take him out and push him in the stroller, and then I was like- but then people will think I am on drugs, because it just reminds me of it. There are things like at that time, seem like, they would be normal if someone else were to do it, but because I used to do it when I was high. (Carla, June, 2013)*

Although she was often tempted to shop lift and use drugs, she was able to abstain because she knew she would lose custody of Jake, and he would have to go into foster care. As she tells me about those instances, she says, “I don’t know what I was thinking, I would have never have seen him, or my other kids again.” She knows the risks and consequences, and she is not willing to take the chance.

Carla tells me that she noticed people staring at her since she was released from jail. I asked her if she still felt this way, even after more than a year. She said she did. We walk into one store and she tells me about the kind of clothes she used to wear. *"I liked dressing over the top. Like bright neon colors and just out there. Now I am not like that. But I still see things that I like, I will be like, oh my God look at those metallic silver spandex, I love those. But now, I try to get my kid dressed in a fluorescent green sweatshirt. They love it. I want my kids to be bright and vivacious, and their personalities shine through"* (Carla, February, 2013).

As I sit and write months later, I remember this conversation began when we looked at some printed leggings that looked wild and exotic. She pointed out that how she presented herself was not who she was inside. She loved the metallic spandex and the neon colors, but she no longer dressed the same way because she did not want to draw attention. Jail had changed how she presented herself, and how she realized she was not unbreakable. She learned that it is never favourable to challenge the strict protocols that are the basis of prisons and incarceration. She learned to look over her shoulder, and she expected to be judged by others because even though she might try to hide it, she was convinced that others could see through her disguise and labelled her a criminal and a drug addict.

I wonder if Carla will ever be able to freely express who she is inside again. The lessons she learned in jail have made her more cautious and careful, but at the same time she seems to have lost some of her self-confidence. I am not sure if I should encourage her to be more open because I know that she does not want to draw attention to herself or be judged.

*Well when I got out of jail, I would swear up and down that I would get clean. Then I would get out, and they would drop me off. They would take you to Claireview station at 11 at night. Yeah,*

*they will give you a bus ticket and that's it. It would be almost impossible not to go to a drug dealer's house, because you have nowhere to go. (Carla, February 13, 2013).*

I have heard ladies at Community 4 Me tell me that they feel like people are just waiting for them to screw up again. I met with ladies in jail, who were determined to change and resist the temptations that waited for them when they were released. However, similar to Carla's experience, it was not simply a matter of determination and willpower. The way that other people would perceive her was internalized and she felt like giving up or closing herself off because she was ashamed. Carla continues to face the fear of judgment and rejection when she goes to see the doctor, or goes shopping, or when she tries to make friends.

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Carla went to see a psychologist who specializes in post-partum depression soon after Jake was born. She was referred to this counselor after she expressed concerns to a nurse that she was unable to feel a lot of affection for her baby, and she was feeling depressed. The psychologist looked at her chart and immediately asked her if she was using drugs, and then went on to suggest she give the baby up for adoption. As a result, family and child services got involved and made weekly visits, adding more strain to her life. Carla had sought out professional help when she was feeling alone and vulnerable. I could see why Carla felt like she was constantly being judged.

Carla told me she was anxious when we first met and she needed to sit in the corner and evaluate the situation. She said she doesn't like to talk to people in group settings. I imagine the stress she must feel when she is around others she doesn't know. I shared some of my own stories with her, stories about my struggles with addictions, with depression and with

relationships. I wanted her to know that at some level, I could relate. I assured Carla that I was not 'normal' at all and we laughed. Through these moments of reciprocity, both Carla and I could see the similarities between us, where previously we may not have imagined it possible.

(Fieldnotes, February, 2013)

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### **In Jail**

*In jail, you get that blue outfit and that's it, blah. There was this one guard, Shauna, she was awesome. She used to get us little elastics, and I would put my head upside down, and then it would come together like this like a big Mohawk. Yeah, I wore it to court like that one time,... I did not get out. (laughs) Yeah, I don't know why I would get myself into those situations. I thought I was invincible, I was like, no one will hurt me, like I am a good person, as long as I am not ripping them off I will be fine. But the nicer you are in that situation, the more they will take advantage of you, when you finally stick up for yourself, they just turn around and get you back bad. No matter what you do, you can't win. It doesn't work out for anybody...even those on top... Still, you are in jail, and you are constantly looking over your shoulder, the Red Alert guys are looking out for HAs (Hells Angels) and the HAs, you know they...Red Alert, they are like HAs bitches, they do whatever they are told. Even if you are on top, you are still looking out for rival gangs, it's horrible. Sometimes being nice and quiet, just listening.... I mean I am smart, I just don't know how to use my smart. (Carla, February 21, 2013)*

When Carla shared stories of being incarcerated, I thought about how much knowledge she had, and how much I was learning. She said that she learned the things she needed to know, but does not always know how to use it to her advantage. She seemed to know how to

handle difficult situations without being overly optimistic or confident. I am glad she recognizes that being smart does not only mean doing well in school, but also means being able to deal with people.

Carla and I talked about the most recent time she was in jail. She was kept in solitude for safety because her ex-boyfriend, who was in a gang, was in the same correctional centre. She was afraid of him, but at the same time she felt lonely in isolation. This found poem describes her experiences in custody.

### **Christmas in Jail<sup>16</sup>**

Arrested December 16  
I pepper sprayed the law enforcement officer  
My lawyer was on holidays

It took a long time

I have never used a weapon  
I couldn't go to jail

23 hour isolation  
For my protection  
I was in danger

And the guards think they are better than you  
Yell at people's faces, spit on them  
It was horrible

Locked me up for 48 hours  
For drawing on my shoes

I liked to be different  
Now I am not like that

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<sup>16</sup> This poem was created from our conversation on February 21, 2013.

## **Sex, Love and Relationships**

We are sitting on the couch in Carla's apartment. It has been a year since we first met. She talks about feeling lonely and wanting a relationship. We gradually return to talking about her past relationships, something we had talked about almost a year ago, and her experiences working at a massage parlour. She tells me that she jokes around a lot about sex, and she says it's a coping mechanism to deal with her past experiences of rape, abuse, and intimacy. She said she seems easy, but she isn't. When we talk about sex, she is candid, willing to tell me all the details. Many of her boyfriends were part of a gang, and she would be afraid to leave them. One of her last boyfriends beat her and threatened to kill her. Even today, she has anxiety attacks and an ongoing fear that her ex-boyfriend will come after her. When she recently went to jail, she had given the police information about him and his gang. When she went to court, he looked straight at her, and drew his fingers across his neck while he mouthed the words, 'You're dead.' Although a couple years have passed, she still has nightmares, and when the anxiety is overwhelming, she stays inside her house for days at a time. She gets nervous when she passes by certain places in the city because she knows where the gang members hang out. She met with a counselor, and she was told that she was experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). When she talks about her past boyfriends – the way they abused and threatened her, I have a hard time understanding why she would say that she loved them in a way. (Fieldnotes, January 2014)

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*I loved my boyfriends because I needed them for a place to stay, drugs, money, and protection.  
Now I love because I want to. I love because I want to care for him and give to him. Now  
intimacy and sex are to show love, not a way to get things. (Carla, January 2014)*

Her mother did not provide her with the care and love she needed. When her boyfriends would fulfill those needs, she felt a kind of love from them and for them. Even though she feared them, she also knew that when she was with them, she would be protected and cared for in a basic tangible way.

*Intimacy is hard<sup>17</sup>*

### **Being raped**

#### **And then seeing what sex is like with my mom**

*I would just put myself in a different mind*

*I did that all the time,*

#### **Block it out, when I go in**

*I don't even get into it anymore.*

*It's like an acting job,*

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<sup>17</sup> This found poem was created from conversations in March, 2013 and January 2014.

**And I slept with guys I didn't really want to sleep with**

**Because I wanted something**

Like even my kids' dad,  
I hated him on coke,  
he creeped me out,  
he had a different look in his eyes.

*Come on I will pay you.*

After it was done he would slap down a couple hundred dollars or whatever,

*The only reason I want you is because you have my  
kids.*

*I love you and miss you; we were so great together.*

Locking me up in a room,  
beating me up,  
asking me who I slept with,

is not a good relationship.

my dad cheated on my mom,  
and my grandpa cheated on my grandma,  
I don't trust guys.

### **Being on my own**

**I don't need someone else --**

**when I truly do love someone I would do anything for them.**

### **Raising Children**

Carla stated that she would never put guys before her kids. She wanted a relationship, but she would make sure she was not dependent on someone else because she knew that the relationship may not last. She made a conscious decision to put her children first.

Raising children is something that seems to come naturally to Carla. She was determined to raise them differently from the way she was raised, and she took her role as a mother seriously. She has this ability to be stern with them but show her love at the same time. I noticed how skilled she was when I went to her apartment and her kids were there with her. They would start to fight, and she made them sit on separate sides of the room, warning them that if it happened again privileges would be taken away. They did not protest, but did as they were told. I admired her level of control over the situation and her ability to discipline her

children so effectively. Looking back now, I realize that her stories demonstrate how she identifies herself as being a good mother to her children.

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I met Carla's two older sons, Cam and Aaron, for the first time about two months after Carla and I met. It was Easter and they were staying with her over spring break. She had planned a week of activities. She took them to the library, she bought eggs to hide around the apartment, and she took them out to laser tag. With three young boys, ages 8, 5 and 1, I was impressed with how cool and collected she was. Her boys listened to her and were well-behaved. She told me about her parenting style- she is aware of how important it is to be in charge and gain respect from your children before they become teenagers. However, she does not spank her kids because she had been so badly abused as a child. She also puts her kids first, before romantic relationships, because her mother never did that for her. (Fieldnotes, April 2013)

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*My mom was abusive. So I will never abuse them, I don't like spanking my kids, there are other ways of doing it. I just have to be stern to my kids. I will just take them into the bedroom; I will take him by the arm. I will not spank my kids. I remember I did it once and I felt so bad. I said sorry, and then I think I bought him something... Really I hate that. And I will never put a guy before my kids. If a guy doesn't like my kids, he can leave. My mom let guys kick me out of the house or whatever. She always put guys before us. (Carla, December 2013)*

It was helpful to see her with her kids; I was able to better understand Carla as a mother and to appreciate her sense of responsibility. There was a time when had she lost custody of Cam and Aaron. She was using drugs and she knew they would be in danger if they stayed with

her, so she voluntarily gave up custody and the boys stayed with their father and stepmother. When she went to visit her kids, she had to listen to their dad and stepmom call her a crackhead and a liar. It was especially hard for Carla because she knew Cam and Aaron were able to hear. Now, almost three years later, she has them on the weekends and holidays. She talks about the possibility of taking them full time. She never gave up on being a mother for her boys, and she kept that sense of identity even when they were not with her.

*Especially as a mom who doesn't have your kids, you try to help other people's kids. I did that when I was using, I would try to help other people living here because I didn't have my own, and when you're a mother you wanna, your mother instinct automatically kicks in.... You see people in the drug scene too who don't have custody of their kids but they still automatically mother to every other kid, cause like, making up for it, but my mom used to get so mad at me, she would be like, you're watching someone else's kids and you don't even have your own...and I'm like, well I can't see my kids, so whatever....(Carla , July 2013)*

During one of our first conversations about her childhood, Carla told me she had been raped as a little girl. I was surprised that she was calm and composed as she shared her story. Even though she seemed impassive, she told me how the experience affected her as a teenager, and as a mother.

*I was raped when I was 4. I was in a dayhome, and the mother had two teenage kids, and they raped me and this other girl. And I didn't remember it until I was like 12. And I started having flashbacks about what was going on, just dreams and remembering things that happened. I started asking my mom questions- "Were we in a dayhome with a whole bunch of kids and there was a playground in the backyard, and it was in a suburb area and they had teenage kids?*

*And did we give our bird to them?" And she was like, "Yeah," and then I told her that they raped me. ...And there was nothing we could do about it because she doesn't remember who they are. ...So then I started acting out when I was a teenager because of all that, trying to block it out. So I started drinking, smoking weed, doing ecstasy. ...Then I started being really promiscuous in school, trying to get attention from guys and stuff. And then I got called a slut, made fun of, and stuff like that, picked on. So I didn't really like going to school at all. Hated going to school.*

*(Carla, March, 2013)*

At the time, I did not know how to react to her story. Then in a later conversation she talked about sex and how she felt about the men in her mother's life from an early age (around 8 years old). When Carla talked about her childhood, she repeatedly said that she resented her mother for always choosing men over her children. She would often see or hear her mother having sex with men and it disgusted her. Once, when she was pretending to sleep on her mother's bed, she heard her mom and boyfriend kissing and talking. The naked boyfriend carried Carla back to her bedroom. She was horrified, yet she could not do anything but lay still. She had been deeply scarred by negative memories of sex, affecting her relationships as well as raising her children.

Carla tells me she fears mistreating her children because she has heard that people who are sexually abused have a greater risk of passing it on from one generation to the next.

*It's a coping mechanism. And some things still bother me, when there's something about rape on TV or whatever, they said, if you were raped as a kid there is a higher chance of doing it to someone else. That was really hard for me because I had the boys, and I would feel like people know I was raped so even changing the kids' diaper, if I am touching [his penis] the wrong way...*

*like even now, when I pull it back, I am like, 'Oh God, am I thinking dirty thoughts?' I have to remind myself that this is normal. I feel like I shouldn't be doing this. It's my son and I shouldn't feel bad about doing it (Carla, March 28, 2013).*

Her childhood experiences have clearly influenced the way she raises her children. She is determined to give her children a different kind of childhood and give them a kind of love that she never received. In her stories about being tempted to use drugs again, she always talks about her kids. She reminds herself that she would not be able to see them, that they would be taken from her. She tells me, "What was I thinking?" When she says that to me I feel like she is telling me how much she loves her kids.

## **Determination**

It's really hard

I want my kids to be bright and vivacious

Personality shine through

*Have you thought about adoption?*

*How can you take care of your baby?*

*Are you having withdrawal?*

*Will you use again?*

I gave my kids to their dad because I started using

wanted them to be safe

wanted to use more

I lost all my parental rights

*No one will believe you --*

*you're a crackhead*

*you can't take your kids*

I will never abuse them

I will never put a guy before my kids

*I am going to win. They are going to win.*



As conveyed in this poem, Carla was able to draw on her past experiences and learn from them when raising her kids. She felt tension in the sense of being judged and feeling the need to conform while wanting her children to be themselves and share their uniqueness with others.

## **Home**

The fourth time we met we stayed in her apartment, and I was glad she wanted to stay in rather than go somewhere else. It was easier to watch Jake and still talk freely without worrying about privacy. She was wearing sweats and a t-shirt, and no make-up. I was glad she felt comfortable enough around me to invite me into her home.

When I walked into Carla's apartment I could see how much she liked to make the space her own. She had zebra print on her coffee table, and pictures of her kids in frames on her book shelf and TV stand. She loves moustaches, and I saw them in different forms around her living room, from the picture on her mug, to a moustache figurine on her shelf. St. Patrick's Day had just passed, and she still had some green decorations up. (Fieldnotes, April 2013)

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I think back to those times when I went to see Carla. She would regularly rearrange her furniture, and she always decorated for special holidays. Her favorite holiday is Halloween, and she created a Halloween tree with a skull for the topper, which she would use later as a Christmas tree, just one example of her creativity and pragmatism. She had a keen eye for details. When we went to a restaurant, she noticed the décor and when she saw something she liked, she would look it up on the internet. After meeting with Carla for a few months, I started

to notice my surroundings more, and I became more interested in adding a personal touch to my home. I realized that Carla had influenced me.

I became aware of the difference in perceptions of home - for example, for me, home is a warm and safe place that meets my needs in terms of space, location, and durability. Carla, on the other hand, loves to shape and create her place to reflect her identity. She defines home as *“any place I feel safe in and had my own things to decorate with. Anywhere I felt comfortable to have my own things out basically.”*

### **Memories of home**

As we sat in a Vietnamese restaurant, Carla told to me about her diverse living circumstances, and some of the dangerous situations she had been in; her experiences of home were not like anything I had experienced.

*I started acting out really bad, so I had to live with my auntie and uncle, and they lived in Vietnam at the time, so I lived there for 6 months, and I was home schooled, and then we were in Haiti for 6, 7 months, and I went to a private school. And then I came back to see my mom, and I didn't want to go back to Haiti, because there was stuff going on there, there were bomb threats at the grocery store, and my friend's driver got killed for his briefcase, or whatever, it was crazy. And I lived behind a fence. We lived in this huge house, the house was amazing, my backyard was huge, every fruit tree imaginable, pool in my back yard. I had doves in my balcony. But I was constantly behind a gate. And one time I was walking to my friend's house and I had to have a guard walk me with their guns out so I wouldn't be kidnapped for ransom.*

*(Carla, March 7, 2013)*

I wondered how living abroad shaped who she was today. Although she fondly remembered her time in other countries, she wanted to come back and live with her mom, after only one year. The changes that took place during her year away from Canada seemed to signify a shift from childhood into adolescence, and from being rooted to being displaced.

*Yeah and then I moved back to Calgary, and my mom had met some guy online who lived in Ontario. So she said, "Well, if you want to live with me you have to move to Ontario".* After Carla returned from Haiti to live with her mom, she moved to Ontario where she did not know anyone. She was kicked out by her mother's boyfriend at the time when he found a nugget of weed in her pocket.

*And one friend I made there, she was like, "You can come live with me." So I was like, ok. It was a nice Italian family and they took me in. I lived with them for a while. And me and my friend got into a fight because she ended up sleeping with my boyfriend, and I was like, "I'm leaving." After she left her friend's place, she had nowhere to go. Then I was sleeping in abandoned houses, they were just being built, like nice houses, and it was summertime anyways, I would just bring a little sheet, sleep and then wake up, shower at a friend's house and go to work. (Carla, March 7, 2013)*

Carla had moved several times over the years and did not seem to have memories of a consistent place she called home. When she was single, she would live with boyfriends or stay with friends. However, once she was pregnant with Jake, she realized that she needed more stability, rather than depend on others for a place to live.

## **The drama**

The main reason why Carla decided to quit using drugs was to have a safe place for her and Jake. She was still using when she was pregnant and couch surfing. *I had nowhere to live, I was out of detox, and I was on the streets, I would sleep in apartment building hallways, doorways, you know those creepy people, I was one of them. (Carla, March 7, 2013)*

She knew that she could not have her baby and keep him without having a place to live. She mentioned that if she had a safe place to live, she would probably still be using. For Carla, quitting drugs was only necessary to secure housing and keep her baby. I was surprised that her reason for getting sober was not for her own health, but because she did not want to have her baby taken away. I am impressed with Carla's ability to remain sober. Even when other women in her building relapsed and she had easy access to drugs, she did not use.

When Carla said that her living situation is currently the biggest barrier in her life, I wondered what she meant. She lives in a recovery house that provides subsidized housing and support for women who are going through treatment and the recovery process. There is an expectation that the residents will look out for one another. During the weekly mandatory meetings, the women are expected to talk about their struggles and issues in detail, and Carla feels like there was a lack of privacy with the way the house is being run.

*The hardest thing for me is living where I am living. It is really difficult with all the drama that is happening. Because this is a recovery house, people move in and out frequently, and people are getting away with things they shouldn't be getting away with. (Carla, March 28, 2013)*

Cynthia had been a good friend of Carla's for the past few years. They knew each other when they were using drugs, and now they lived in the same building and moved in around the

same time. However, her relationship with Cynthia suddenly fell apart. She lost a good friend and had to face all the drama and craziness at the same time. Carla pointed out that she was still surrounded by drugs even though she is not using. She said that she felt crippled while she lived there and wanted to get out.

*Yeah, there's no way that Cynthia even could stay here, we all hate her now- she can't live here. Like what she did is not even cool. Like even if we found the crack pipes and she moved out, we could have still been friends, but after trying to cause all these problems or whatever, it's just not even nice, like trying to get Nancy, the girl that runs this place fired....like, it's out of control, so now she is getting in shit so she has to meet with her boss today. And this is what went wrong at Christmas. I was pregnant, and she was in drug court. She had two weeks left in drug court before her graduation. She came to me saying, "Look I used. It was just one hoot and then I left, but I need you to pee for me." So I peed in a container, and she figured out this contraptment because she had to pee in front of them in drug court. She used one of those 5 hour energy drink things, you stick it inside you, and have saran wrap over it. And then you just poke it with a needle or whatever. That's the thing, I peed for her to help her out, because I didn't want her to have to go to jail for 5 years. But I was wrong. And then this other girl was like, 'Well, I peed for her too. The week before, she said she just had a couple drinks.' And she was going out in the middle of the night... and she was losing massive weight, she was getting super skinny. So then we had to come clean, and tell Nancy what we did. ... and Nancy was like, "Why didn't you tell me all this stuff?" (Carla, March 28, 2013)*

A year later, I re-read this story, and I finally realized how difficult it was for Carla to be living in this temporary residence. When Carla first told me there was 'too much drama,' I did not consider what she meant. I failed to recognize the struggles that she was facing Carla has been feeling more and more like she is trapped and wants to move out, but she can't afford it unless it is subsidized housing. Having a home, a place of stability is something she longs for and something she needs to feel like she is making progress. While she is still living at the recovery house, she feels like her past as a drug addict is very much at the forefront. *"So living here, really I feel like I am crippled, I don't feel like a whole person. I dunno, it's hard to explain"* (Carla, February 10, 2014).

In June, 2014, Carla moved into a subsidized townhouse. I wonder if this change will help her move on, or will increase her temptation to use drugs. It was her two year 'birthday' recently, and she is excited about the future. At last, she tells me, she feels like she has a home.

**I am different now...**

*I got so many different sides to me. I have like so many different personalities or whatever. Like I am dark, or whatever, I like dark things, and gothic, and I am bubbly and I like vibrant and bright. I like being mellow and quiet sometimes, and then loud (Carla, July 2013).*

I have loved seeing more sides to Carla with each meeting and each conversation we had. I recognize now, just how important it was to build a relationship with her, and to have a mutual sense of trust and respect. When Carla first shared some of her childhood stories with me, I was overwhelmed, and I did not know how to respond. As we became more comfortable with one another, I could ask questions and express my feelings of dismay or sadness. She also mentioned that she was more at ease with me now than when we first met.

*When we first met, I was quiet because I was assessing the situation, like when I was in the drug scene, you just sit there and you don't say anything around certain people, you sit there and learn and get a feel for what kind of people they are, and see how much you can open up and be a dork. Like people wouldn't suspect that I was the way I am, like now I am joking around and obnoxious. Oh, no I am in everyone's face all the time, cracking jokes, making fun of everybody (Carla, July 2013).*

I became aware of a confidence in Carla that I had not perceived during our initial conversations, but noticed when she talked about self-esteem. *Usually when girls [work at a massage parlour] it takes away their self-esteem. I don't really tell people this, but I don't really feel bad for doing it. I didn't have self-esteem issues except when my stuff got stolen. That's when it hit me. Because I was working there and then everything I worked for, doing that, after it got stolen, they basically stole my soul, like I sold my soul for that shit or whatever (Carla, July 2013).*

Looking backward, I remember our conversation about self-esteem. I was surprised at her unwavering assurance of herself. She said that her self-esteem was not based on how others viewed her, or what she did for a living. I could see that she based her self-worth on more than how others perceived her. She seemed to have an inner strength that was not easily shaken. When we talked about her experiences with learning difficulties, her confidence came through. She struggled with learning, but she did not let other people tell her what she was capable of. She knew that she was able to learn, albeit in unconventional ways.

*Yeah, you need to know things... even when I was a kid, I had a hard time learning because I didn't know what it was meant for. But now, I know how to do drug dealing, I know that an*

*eighth is that much because I needed to know that... I mean sure they are bad things, but I learned it. (Carla, February 21, 2013)*

**Present learning difficulties.** I try to picture Carla back in high school when she walked out of school and into Tim Horton's for work, or more recently when she slept in apartment hallways and abandoned houses. Although her stories are part of her life and have played a role in defining who she is today, she knows that she is not the same person she was. Her learning difficulties, however, did not go away as she left school and went on to do other things. During the five years when she was using crystal methamphetamine and going in and out of jail, her learning difficulties did not seem to affect the way others treated her or perceived her. She was confident and she quickly learned how to handle dangerous situations with drug dealers and gang members. Now that she is trying to go back to school and preparing for her high school diploma equivalency exam, her learning difficulties have resurfaced, not simply an issue of the past.

***And it's hard because you are constantly classified as being stupid, you know what I mean?***

*People say - you don't need meds, you can do it without meds, just watch what you eat, and ADD is not really there, just do this and do that -- but they just don't understand, it is there. I can't just focus without meds, I need meds. But it doesn't matter - everyone is different. It's just like with studying, some people need it to be really quiet and others don't. It's weird. With the ADD distracting me, I can't focus, but I need music in the background so I can study. It's just one steady noise that is constantly going on. And people are like, how can you study with that? But when I am in a classroom, and there is one person tapping a pencil, and one person making*



*noise and people cross talking- I can't stand that... So you sit there and you can't be like everyone else and you can't study like everyone else. It is a barrier. (Carla, January 2014)*

Carla seems to know what she needs and how to address her problems. She says that she has to have medication in order to focus, and she needs music in the background. She is discouraged, not because of what she cannot do, but because of the physical and social barriers in her way. She had planned to take her GED (General Educational Development) exams in May to get her high school equivalency certificate, and she knows she will need to get medication to treat ADD symptoms before she can successfully take the exam. Her struggles today seem to emulate her difficulties in school as a child. She learns differently and needs adaptations to be able to learn.

*I have tried, and tried, and I just get further and further behind, and then I think, I should just give up. And right now I am thinking I should just go to work. That's where I am right now. And yeah now I am worried, it took me so long to get my meds, and now what if I can't get a student loan, and whatever. But I need to get my GED. I don't know, I can get a job without a GED, but if I work full time, I won't want to study....I don't know I am all over the place. I was thinking in April, I would pay and I would write it May 9 or 10, so if I do that, I will be alright. (Carla, February 10, 2014)*

## **Epilogue**

Today, I met with Carla for the first time after we 'ended' our formal research relationship. There was a time back in March, I remember coming back to my office desk and feeling completely crushed. I did not know how to help Carla, and I felt like she had no hope of getting a new place or going back to school. She said that things seemed to be worse than when

we first met. She said she felt like she was back in jail again. She had fallen in her apartment, and broke her tailbone, so she was almost immobile and confined to her home. She was depressed and disheartened.

Now, three months later, I see her smiling and taking things one day at a time. She had talked to someone in a government agency about financial assistance. She is able to receive funding for her schooling. I was so glad to hear the good news. She sounded excited but said she was nervous because she had to go in for an assessment to see if she qualified to write the GED without extra schooling. Although it would be a commitment by Carla to study and pass, I knew she had the drive to do it. She seemed to have a renewed sense of purpose, and I was thrilled that she wanted to share the news with me.

Her life has continued to unfold and move forward. She has secured subsidized housing and is moving in a week. She had to go through a rigorous application process because of her criminal record, but she was able to get through it. She had to appeal the initial rejection she received, and she was calling their office every day to find out if her appeal was processed. Her persistence paid off and she will rent a nice townhouse in a child-friendly neighborhood. I am so proud of her determination and perseverance. Jake is at that stage in life when everything is new and exciting, and his enthusiasm is contagious. She loves to watch him discover the world around him and say new words each day. There was a time back in March when she felt like she could not keep going, and she was ready to give up. Somehow, she was able to pull herself back up and has hope about the possibilities that the future holds.

I doubt there is one specific reason why she was able to 'get over the hump' that seemed insurmountable to me, but she did say that there was this certainty she felt that she could do it,

and she clung to this belief rather than submitting to the doubt. In that critical moment when she was dialing the number of a former friend who sold drugs, she was able to stop and think about everything she had worked for. She was able to see how she could lose it all with one rash decision. It was no longer about knowing right from wrong or wallowing in self-pity. She said that she knew she had the choice and the power to shape her future. (Fieldnotes, June 15, 2014)

## Caris

### From the Beginning...

Caris and I met on a January afternoon. I was just starting this research and seeking participants through specific community organizations<sup>18</sup> that worked with women involved with the criminal justice system (CJS). I had been corresponding with a worker at Community Dreamers, Anne, and she agreed to meet with me.

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I took a deep breath of the cold, crisp air. The sky was clear and blue; it was a gorgeous winter day. I was feeling anxious and intimidated by the unfamiliar physical space, but also the experiences and lives of people. I stepped into a big open room with a few pieces of furniture. No one seemed to be there, but after a minute someone came into the room and I asked if Anne was around; the man did not know at first. He called Anne's cell phone and said that she should be back in about twenty minutes. I decided to wait. About 30 minutes later, Anne came in with a couple of young women. She apologized for being late and asked me what I wanted to talk to her about. I introduced myself and described the research I was planning to do. I explained that I wanted to come to know Community Dreamers and meet some of the people who dropped in, hoping that among them there would be young women who were interested in working with me. Anne immediately introduced me to Caris, who had walked in with her. Caris had recently told Anne that she wanted to share her story with others because she thought it could help people understand more about the specific challenges and obstacles that those with FASD might face. Caris had made a short video describing how having FASD has

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<sup>18</sup> I had approached three organizations to work with and received ethics approval prior to beginning the recruitment process.

affected her life to present to the judge for her court case. Making the video had been empowering for her, but she said that she wanted to do more. Anne thought participating in this research project was exactly what Caris was looking for. I looked to Caris for a sign of approval, and she was smiling. Anne had to go do some work, so she left us. (Fieldnotes, January 2013)

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From the beginning, I wanted Caris to like me, partly because I knew we would be working closely together for several months, and partly because I wanted our relationship to be meaningful to her. I hoped we could get to know each other and form a connection where stories would naturally flow, without the need for formal interviews and a list of questions. Out of respect, I felt the need to develop a relationship before actually asking her more personal questions or inviting her to share her story. I had a strong desire to make sure there was reciprocity within the relationship; I wanted her to *want* to share her story and to *want* me to be a part of her life. I envisioned us meeting weekly and having great conversations, but also going places with her and meeting her friends and family. I wonder what Caris thought?

I shared my experience of completing a placement for occupational therapy at a medium security correctional centre. I explained that my interest in this research stemmed from the powerful stories I heard from the young women while I was at the correctional centre. She told me that she had been there recently. We worked out that she was there only a few months after my placement. She nodded in agreement when I told her that I felt like the young women I had met did not have a place to share their stories, nor did they feel like they had a voice.

Caris mentioned that she was excited to be seeing her son, Josh. I asked her where he was. He was placed in temporary custody with a foster family while she was in jail for a month, and she was planning to get him back soon. She was excited for a fresh start; she had been living with her boyfriend, Josh's dad, but she was now at a shelter looking for her own place. Caris also told me that she also has a daughter who is four. Her daughter is with her relatives, but she could visit whenever she wanted. I did not want to bombard her with too many questions during our first meeting. After we chatted for twenty minutes, she gave me her phone number and told me to call her. I went back out into the cold, but my face was flushed with excitement and anticipation. (Fieldnotes, January 2013)

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I realized after our first conversation that I had a lot to learn. I felt a gap between us; I was not sure what to say and I felt myself trying too hard to make Caris feel comfortable. I hoped she did not feel the distance between us that I perceived. Without asking her about it, I had set plans for what would happen in the coming months. Looking back, I was putting a lot of pressure on her to meet the expectations I had established.

During that initial meeting, I explained my interest in working with women who had learning difficulties. Caris said that she had been diagnosed with FASD. I asked her if she could tell me more. I wanted her to tell me what she thought about her experiences in school, rather than assume that I knew what learning difficulties looked like for her. I was surprised when she told me that she was only recently diagnosed about a year ago; when she was being admitted into jail she went through an assessment and the possibility of FASD came up. She had spent the first twenty one years of her life feeling like there was something wrong with her – that the

way she acted and the mistakes she made were her fault. She was glad to finally have an explanation for why she behaved in certain ways that had caused problems for her in the past, like being extremely forgetful and acting out impulsively. *“I have frontal lobe damage and can’t understand consequences”* (Caris, January 10, 2013). She also talked about showing a lack of emotion which other people interpreted as not caring.

For a long time she was frustrated because she could not understand why she kept making the same mistakes. She said that knowing she has FASD has changed the way she interprets her behavior. Now she tries to slow down and think about things before jumping in. She said that she had anger issues before her diagnosis. I wondered if her anger stemmed from exasperation and confusion. She said that she was relieved to know she had FASD, but I wondered how she was able to address all of the challenges that come with this.

The way Caris talked about the recent changes she had made in her life, she seemed confident in figuring out how to move forward despite the difficulties that might come with having FASD. She had applied for and was receiving AISH (assisted income for severely handicapped). I equated her assurance and awareness with stability and determination.

### **Trying to build a life**

When Caris and I first met, she was looking for a place to live. She asked me if I could help her. She said she was only able to look into private rental properties because of her criminal record and low credit score. Large rental companies do a criminal record check on prospective tenants. I had never considered the added complexities of ‘starting over’ after being involved in the CJS.

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I was already feeling discouraged and defeated as most of the apartments we drove past were affiliated with a large property rental company. We parked at a fast food restaurant, and I was able to search on my iPad for vacancies. There were only a handful of apartments for rent by owners who allowed children. None of the places we found within her price range were in a safe area of the city. We decided to go to the particular area where she wanted to live, and drive down the streets. I pulled over when we saw a vacancy, so she could write down the names and numbers of the apartments. After finding about three vacancies, we parked the car and she called the numbers. As I heard her talking and leaving messages on the phone, I wondered if owners be less likely to rent to someone who is First Nations? I realized how little I knew. When she said her name to the answering machine, I thought, 'Her name gives away her cultural background.' Would those listening to the message make assumptions? Would they even call back? I thought that Carla would be disadvantaged by her cultural background without really thinking about what this disadvantage might be.

I felt defensive for her, but in doing so I too was insinuating that she needed my protection. I wanted her to have a smooth transition as she was trying to move forward in spite of her addictions and her criminal record. She was so enthusiastic when we first started out. I could see the need for connections and resources because I had none to offer. Without knowing where to look and who to ask about available housing for this specific situation, we seemed to be without a clear destination.

After two hours of searching, I felt depressed and frustrated. Her optimism had been so encouraging, but I found myself doubting that it was even possible for her to get an apartment on her own. When I told her how I felt, she said, "*I can't give up. I have to stay positive.*" I



wondered how she was able to stay positive when things around her seemed so dismal -- or at least they seemed dismal to me. (Fieldnotes, January 16, 2013)

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Caris told me that she is worried about her upcoming court appearance. She is not sure what it is about, nor is she sure if she will have to go back to jail. After I dropped her and Josh off at the shelter, I continued to think about her. She had only one more week before she had to leave the shelter she was staying at. It had not been a fruitful afternoon; we did not find any potential places to live. Today was the second time we looked, and there was nothing we found. I worried about her son, and what would happen if she did have to go back to jail. I drove around and called a couple more places. They were either too expensive or did not have any vacancies. I felt deflated. She had been so positive, telling me that we couldn't give up. (Fieldnotes, January, 2013)

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We tried finding an apartment, but time had run out -- she had to move out of the shelter where she was staying. Fortunately, she was able to get a subsidized apartment, and I helped her move. Now, after a month, we were able to finally sit and delve into a deeper conversation. We were in a restaurant having breakfast. Caris's greatest challenge was the difficulty of going through cycles -- needing to juggle her past and present involvement with the law, as well as caring for her son and dealing with her addictions. She continued to struggle with temptations to drink, and she had a court date coming up where she would receive her sentence for her most recent offence. Her lawyer said she might have to go back to jail, which meant her son would have to go into temporary custody again. For Caris, going to jail was not her greatest

fear, her greatest fear was losing her son. Caris worried about the distress her baby would go through if he had to live with strangers. Like with housing, there were a number of the complexities with being involved in the CJS as a mother of young children. (Fieldnotes, February, 2013)

### **Balancing Act<sup>19</sup>**

having a kid,  
then having to deal with the law --  
at the same time

just trying to... get by living I guess  
with a kid

that's my cycle.

then having to deal with my old charges,

and then trying to understand  
how my behavior is  
so I can keep myself in control

but still take care of my kid at the same time

and not get so stressed out

that's my cycle.

that I feel that I have to use addictions  
to help me forget about all my stresses

me, going out drinking,

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<sup>19</sup> This found poem is from a transcript excerpt of a conversation with Caris on February 28, 2013.

and then going to jail for some reason,  
and then I am back in the court cases again  
and still, do all my programs that my probation officer wants me to do,  
and I still have to do stuff for my kid too...

and it's hectic- all the time, it's hectic.

that's my cycle.

so I am trying to get away from the system,  
and trying to do stuff for me, and my son  
and trying to focus on us,

but still I have to deal with it because it's there....

they are asking for two months, and who's gonna watch my kid?

Nobody.

he's going to have to go into foster care,  
so I am trying to do programming,  
help me recognize I have a problem

and going and changing,  
getting away from the addiction part,  
so I don't go back to it all over again,

that's my cycle.

This 'cycle' of caring for her son, keeping up with programs and pleasing her parole officer (PO), going to court for past offences, and having the ongoing cravings and temptations of her addictions was a like a balancing act. I wondered how Caris was able to resist the temptation to drink. Caris said she felt trapped with the limitations of probation while caring for her son and fulfilling her conditions. I wondered how she was able to keep up with the requests put forth by her PO, her social worker, and her lawyer. She says that she was aware of the

danger of losing custody of her son so she is just trying to make sure she does everything they ask, to complete her programs and comply with her probation conditions. She said she was taking it day by day and doing what was expected of her. My perception of Caris was an independent, confident, and stable woman who seemed to handle the pressures around her with ease. Much later while re-reading the transcripts of our conversations and reflecting on my understanding of Caris, I realized that my sense of Caris was based mostly on my interpretations and assumptions, rather than on Caris' words and circumstances. I could see how difficult it was for Caris to get an apartment, and I knew she worried about losing custody of her son. She was in a shelter after leaving her boyfriend because he was abusing her. Why had I failed to see the struggles Caris faced?

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### **Looking Backward, Looking Forward....**

Our first two meetings were in the car as we drove around searching for an apartment. The third time we met we were able to have a longer conversation and there was space to explore some of her childhood memories. I thought that hearing about her past would help me understand her present experiences differently. However, we first started with a conversation about what was happening now. She said that she had an upcoming trial that she was anxious about, and she knew she would have to fulfill certain conditions to satisfy the court. When I asked her what her conditions were, she listed some of them. One condition was to complete a treatment program. She shared a story that quickly moved us from the present into her past, and she ended up sharing about her family and her childhood.

*I went for 42 days, but I have been going to treatment since I was like 20, and I only like completed it twice though. But I kept on like going back to it, because like, there is always like the little... I would listen to the people talk and listen to like little things that they would say and at first I was like, I am just doing it for court, I was like, aww I don't really need this, and blah blah, but then I was just gonna go and drink again, but slowly then things started changing and my life started changing and I started seeing how like sobriety can be a better way of living and stuff like that, and not be so hectic all the time because growing up I was used to it being hectic all the time...and so to me like that was normal, but actually, like living like a sober life has taught me, you can have a stable life, you know, instead of a hectic life, and it's less stressful and stuff like that. Like it must have been hard for my mom cause she had four kids and we were all really bad kids. (Caris, February 28, 2013)*

I thought her realization that sobriety offered a sense of stability and assurance was profound. It raised questions in my mind about what a stable life meant to her and if she was able to have that kind of stability now that she was sober.

*Yeah, [my mom] drank a lot and she like partied a lot and stuff like that...and then finally she gave it up and became a Christian and stuff like that, and then we got to see kind of how her lifestyle changed in that sense too? I was already like a teenager at that time so I was like, well I had a shitty life why do I have to change, why do I have to go to church and why do I have to listen to you? And like it wasn't like this for most of my life and now you want me to pretend like I'm a perfect little kid when really I have all these problems...(Caris, February 28 , 2013)*

As she told me about being exposed to drugs and alcohol, I imagined a chaotic and volatile childhood from an early age. She said things were hectic all the time. I could see her

and her siblings running around playing, but also getting in trouble and being yelled at. I have four sisters and our house was loud and lively when I was growing up. The norm was to have people constantly coming and going, a lot of yelling, and periodic bouts of fighting. I pictured Caris' house to have a similar level of activity. I wondered what her mother had experienced to 'become a Christian' and change her lifestyle. Caris' talked about her shitty life and I wondered, 'What did a shitty life mean to her?' She did not go into detail about being abused, she mentioned that her mom hit her and her siblings, but she did not want to talk about it. In her silence, her words 'bad kid' and 'perfect little kid' echoed in my mind.

## **Family**

Caris has 3 siblings. She speaks of her younger sister, Meagan, with pride. Meagan currently lives in the city with two kids, and as Caris put it -- has gotten her life back on track. Her sister had also been involved in the criminal justice system. Now, she is going to college and attending Aboriginal ceremonies. She does not drink or use drugs. For Caris, this sister is a significant support and in many ways a role model. They talk and see each other regularly, and Caris hopes to go to sweats with her one day. Her younger brother is also in Edmonton with one child. They see each other and talk occasionally, but she doesn't talk about him too much. He has been involved in the criminal justice system for many years and when I spoke with Caris in later months, she said he was in jail. Her older sister and mom live up north. Her mom comes to visit periodically, or Caris goes to visit her. I asked if any of her siblings had FASD, and she said no. During our conversation about her family, she did answer all my questions, but she answered in short sentences without any details. She said that she wanted the stories to be about her and not about her family. I understood that although she did not talk a lot about her

family, they were extremely important to her. She never spoke of them in detail, and I waited, hoping she would one day want to share more. I knew that even though she said she wanted to focus on ‘her stories’, that the stories of family also shaped her identity.

## **Identity**

The first time we met, she spoke with such confidence and enthusiasm about moving forward that I assumed that she was no longer struggling with her addictions. I had somehow placed her into the category of ‘recovered.’ However, the more we met, the more I could see that substances were still obstacles in her life; she was constantly tempted by friends and family. She struggled to stay sober because she wanted to spend time with them, but she did not want to relapse. Initially, I thought Caris was only dealing with alcoholism. However, after we talked a few times, I learned that she was also battling addictions to marijuana and cocaine. I thought about my own battle with alcohol. Addictions did not simply go away. Why did I think it would be different for Caris? I forgot that Caris story was still being lived out. Addictions were a significant part of her past and present even though she and I did not talk about it. Whenever I asked her if she was tempted to drink, she said no. She mentioned that she had a slip up once, but did not tell me the details. When I reconnected with Caris after losing touch with her, she said she didn’t want to talk about her experiences during our time apart.

## **Snowy afternoon**

There was a particular story that I continued to replay in my mind. Sometime in February 2013, during one of our visits, maybe the third or fourth time we met, she was quiet and withdrawn, and I wasn’t sure if something had happened to upset her. We had been driving around a bit looking for an apartment. Josh had fallen asleep in the back, so we turned

off the radio. It was cold outside, which seemed to mirror the tone in the car. When I asked her if everything was ok, she said she wasn't feeling well because she had had an abortion only a week before. I was stunned. I gasped in surprise, and I scrambled to find the right words to say. I was surprised that she had still agreed to meet with me, and even more surprised that she was sharing such a private story with me, after only meeting me a couple of times. I ended up asking her if it was Nate's baby. She said yes. Nate was Josh's father. She had recently left him and was living at a shelter. I asked her why she decided not to keep the baby. She said she had too much going on in her life right now to deal with, but she was still sad. Then, I just sat there next to her in the car. I was not able to comfort her, and I could not seem to find any words that I thought would be fitting. I felt helpless and powerless as we sat in silence, where the pain and sadness floated between us.

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A year later, I reflect back on that cold day. I remember the snow falling. I remember feeling confused because I had suddenly seen Caris differently. She had seemed so optimistic about finding a place and said we should not give up. Then, only about a month later, Caris seemed so different, more delicate and vulnerable. In that moment, however, I felt myself being cautious and reserved rather than sympathetic and compassionate. I became conscious about who I was as a researcher, and I did not think I was qualified to offer her support. Today, I wonder if she still thinks about that time in the car a year ago. I know I do. I think about how she felt when she got the abortion. She told me that she went alone. I wish I could have been more mindful of the pain she must have felt, both physically and emotionally. I wish I could have been more comforting so she did not feel alone. I remember thinking that I could not just



turn away and pretend I had not heard her stories or asked to become part of her life. I had wanted her to open up to me, thinking I was in a position to support her, but suddenly I felt ill-equipped. I knew I had a certain responsibility to do something. I reached out to her, and I told her I was there for her. Her silence suggested that there was nothing I could do. But now I wonder if she had been reaching out to me, without wanting me to do anything or fix anything. The day she told me about her abortion, it was like she decided to let me in for a moment, but then closed up again. When I called her to see if she was feeling better, she didn't answer her phone or respond to my text. I never had the chance to talk to her about it. (Fieldnotes, March 2014)

### **Places and People**

When I first met Caris, I told her that I would like to spend time with her, not only to talk, but also to do things together – whether it be going to appointments, or going to the playground with her son. After meeting twice, she called me asking if I would go with her to meet with her probation officer. I was happy to take her. She seemed willing to let me be a part of her present life, which was something I had hoped for.

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It was overcast that morning, and although it was not too cold, the clouds made the day feel gloomy. I picked Caris up and she told me where to go. I had never been to a probation office before. The waiting room was a windowless rectangle with chairs all around the outside facing inward, and an empty space in the middle. At the front desk, the receptionist sat behind a glass wall. We waited until her name was called, and then we went through a heavy door into the office spaces. We sat down and her probation officer, Andrea, asked who I was. Caris

introduced me; she said that I was a university student and she was helping me with my research. She reminded Andrea of the video she had made for the judge, and said that she was sharing her story with me in a similar way. Andrea said it sounded like a great project for Caris to be a part of. I liked being someone Caris could introduce to others with confidence; I felt like I had a place in Caris' life.

Caris had to meet with Andrea weekly, as a 'check in.' Andrea asked, "How are things going?" Caris replied that everything was good. They talked about finding housing. Caris said she had been looking. Andrea was concerned because Caris had to move out of the shelter by the end of January which was in a few days. Andrea mentioned a place that was 'transitional housing' and subsidized. Caris wanted her own apartment and told Andrea we had been looking. I think we all knew it would be difficult under the circumstances, especially now that there was so little time.

Afterwards, I asked Caris if she got along with Andrea. She said that Andrea had been her probation officer for a long time and she was ok. I wondered what other meetings were like. We were only there for about 10 minutes, but Caris seemed eager to get through the meeting and leave. She was quiet, and only answered Andrea's questions with a short comment or a quick yes or no. When we got back into the car, Caris asked if she could turn on the radio. She did not seem to want to talk. We drove back to the shelter with the music filling the silence. I wondered why Caris had asked me to go with her. (Fieldnotes, January, 2013)

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Caris asked me to take her and Josh to Community Dreamers. She went to a weekly parenting program there. This was also a place where Caris hung out when she was bored, and

she said she sometimes helped mentor other young people who also hung out there. When I asked her what she did as a mentor, she shrugged and said, *“I just try to help them feel better and tell them about the stuff I went through.”* I could imagine her talking to a frightened teenage girl who was dealing with charges and court, reassuring her that she was not alone. When we went inside, I could tell Caris felt at ease. She walked in and said hi to some of the workers. Anne came out of her room and we sat with her to chat for a bit. Josh sat and drew for a few minutes and then just wandered around. Caris’ confidence radiated as she spoke cheerfully and enthusiastically. She talked about Josh and about her new place. She ended up going into subsidized housing and I helped her move in the week before. Anne was happy to hear about all of the progress. I wondered what kind of relationship Anne and Caris had. Anne was not her social worker, but she did seem like a mentor for Caris. I later asked how long she and Anne had known each other. She started the parenting program with Anne several years ago, and she liked it so much, she just kept going. She said, *“Anne does more for me than any of my workers do.”* Anne was someone she could call at two in the morning if she needed to. I wondered if Caris was trying to be a mentor to others like Anne was for her.

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I was so glad to be able to see Caris interacting with others, and to meet the people who were a part of her life. Yet, during these different encounters, I often felt like an outsider. I wasn’t sure if I was just seeing different sides of her, and actually getting to know her at a deeper level. I wondered why she asked me to go with her to these places, whether it was to give her a ride, or if she wanted to spend time together. At the time, I was not able to ask her about my wonderings. I did start to feel myself losing faith in my research and our relationship.

I thought I was getting closer to her, but then I would not hear from her for two weeks. It was difficult for me to get a sense of how our relationship fit into her life. I had hoped to meet Caris' friends and spend more time with her, doing 'ordinary, everyday things' on a regular basis. I would not hear from her for several days, and we would make like going to the store, or taking Josh to the library. However, I had a hard time getting in touch to make plans to meet but then she would cancel. Our relationship did not flourish as I had hoped. We did not meet as often as I planned, and when we did meet our conversations would often be filled with more silence than words. (Fieldnotes, June 2014)

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### **A Place to Call Home**

There was a short period of time in February and March, when Caris lived in an apartment. Although she and I tried to find a place independently, she was also put on a wait list for subsidized housing. In the end, she had to take the subsidized apartment because she had to leave the shelter. I helped her move, and even got some houseware for her. During this brief period of time, it was much easier for me to get in touch with her and meet up. The stability that came from having a home was palpable. When I was envisioning the research project, I never considered place of residence to be an issue. I assumed that the participants would all have a home.

As I was helping her move into her apartment, I asked her about some of the artwork she hung up on her walls. She said she painted them for her son and herself, to remind herself of who she is. They were colorful pieces with words of encouragement painted randomly on the canvas. She said that she mostly painted when she was at Community Dreamers to keep

herself busy, but that she was not an avid painter. She said that she preferred to write poems. I asked her if I could read some of her poetry. She said yes. She shared one piece with me about a year later, and I wished I could have read more.

***My heart- note to self***<sup>20</sup>

*As i stand here looking into a mirror i realize the person i see isn't really me - a heartless soul stands in front of me how did i let myself stagger so far from who i can really be - this time i really need to stand tall i let my knees buckle and fall tears trickle down my face fuck this pity shit -- time to dust off this broken self i see do what i need to every day a new beginning a brand new start so i say no more cause in this life i live i will always need one thing and that's my heart. (Caris, October 29, 2013)*

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<sup>20</sup> Caris gave me permission to share this poem in April, 2014.

I was so moved by her words and the way they flowed with so much emotion and power. Through this piece I was able to feel her pain, frustration and hopefulness; through this poem, I saw Caris in a new light just as our research relationship was ending. Caris had seemed stoic and uninterested many of the times I met her. She told me that her FASD made her seem uncaring and indifferent. I nodded when she told me, but I failed to make the connection and consider that she might be feeling more than what I perceived.

### **Jail**

When I asked Caris about her experiences in jail, she shrugged and said *“I dunno. I have been in and out of jail since I was 13.”* She spoke nonchalantly as though being incarcerated was not a big deal to her. While she was there, she said her ways of coping were to keep to herself and to only have a small group of friends. She also participated in programs or went to church to stay busy.

*I dunno, I never really had a problem going to jail. Probably because I mostly kept to myself and I was only friends with certain people, and the rest of the people I just never really talked to, I didn't even really acknowledge them. It's just kind of hard because you can't show too much emotions or that kind of stuff with other people. You can't show that you have like any kind of weakness right? So for real, only sometimes, like maybe when you do one on one programs, or you are just like the kind of person that doesn't care what other people think, then you can get help. A lot of people they put on fronts, like to get people to get like references and stuff like that. (Caris, February 28, 2013)*

Caris said she had been in four different correctional centres. I asked her if she noticed any differences among them. She said they were all pretty much the same, except that once she was an adult it was a bit stricter.

*You just get more programming in the young offender centre, and you get to go to bed later when you are in adult, so... not a big difference. Guards are meaner in adult jail. They are just mean. Guys and girls. Most of the girl guards are meaner. They are really corrupted too. Lots of people don't talk about it though. Yeah like if you go into jail with jewelry or nice clothes then stuff will go missing...that happened to a lot of my friends, they would go in with rings and then they would say like - I don't know what happened to them, and stuff like that. (Caris, February 28, 2013)*

When I had first met Caris, she had been released from jail and was awaiting trial. I remembered my experiences volunteering at the provincial court house and meeting frustrated people who had to reappear in court several times because the lawyers would ask for extensions and the process would take from several months up to a few years, depending on the charge. Caris pled guilty to her charge, and yet she still had to wait seven months before the trial and her sentence was given. She got two years on probation. She told me that probation made her feel trapped, even though she is not in custody.

### **Nate**

Caris was willing to talk about being incarcerated, but she did not like to talk about her relationships and other people in her life. Similar to when we talked about her family, when I asked her about Nate, she responded with vague, short answers and quickly changed the subject.

Nate was Caris' ex-boyfriend and Josh's dad. When we first met, she said he was in the past, and she wanted to move on. She had left Nate because he abused her and she was living at a shelter. They used drugs and drank together. Our first in-depth conversation about Nate was in May. I had not been able to get a hold of Caris for three weeks. She finally called me and told me she was living with Nate again. I never told Caris about how I was feeling, but I had a difficult time listening to her without letting my presumptions take over.

*Nate called me and I told him to stop bothering me. He was crying and saying, "Don't say that, we're still a family." I was saying, "Don't call me, I'm babysitting." He wouldn't stop calling me, and he was crying. I said, "Really I don't want to be with you anymore."*

*And then I decided to go visit him, and then, I don't know, I just never left.*

*He's going to do programs for Josh, because I did it.*

*We met his worker, and I told her that we were living together. So I told the worker that he still has to do stuff because it's not fair. I told him that if he really cared about me and Josh he has to do these programs. And I was really worried for like a week because I was thinking, "Oh no, what if they take Josh away because of him?" And I was telling Anne about that and she was like, "Don't worry, Josh will be ok. You're still doing everything you're supposed to be doing, and as long as Nate is willing to then it should be ok." So I met with his worker- I was like, "Hi, I never met you before." And she was ok with it. I told her all this stuff that he's willing to do, and I told her that we would work together and go to counseling. (Caris, May 2013)*



Nate had physically abused Caris, and there was a court order saying he was not to see or talk to her or Josh. From what she initially told me about no longer being with Nate and wanting to surround herself with women because guys “just got her into trouble,” I got the impression it was not an amicable break up. I wondered about the history of their relationship, but she did not want to talk about it until May, once she and Nate were back together.

*It's just feelings about what he did. Like him cheating on me before and stuff like that. 'Cause I never cheated on him. And I was really loyal to him, so that's probably what hurts the most is, it sucks to know that you are capable of doing that, and how much pain it brought me. Especially when your trust is broken, like before I didn't really get into relationships, I didn't bother before. And then I met Nate and I had strong feelings, and I was like, I am not going to cheat on him or nothing, and I would be the good person I am supposed to be... and I know I was depressed, like I had post-partum (depression) after I had Josh and stuff, and maybe I put a lot of pressure on him..., and it annoys me sometimes, I'm like, I just want him to take responsibility. That's what bugs me. I take responsibility for my own stuff, like when we are fighting and stuff, but I guess he will do it in his own time. (Caris, May 2013)*

We were sitting at a fast food restaurant and Josh was playing in the little indoor playground. Talking with Caris about Nate for the first time was challenging for me because when I first met her, she seemed eager to forget about him, and I devoted my time, resources and energy into helping her move forward. Although she did not want to talk about their relationship, I knew she left Nate because he had hurt her. I was upset and a little distressed by her nonchalant attitude about moving back in with Nate. I did not know much about their relationship; my frustrations were based on what I knew about abusive relationships in general.

I asked her why she decided to get back together with Nate. She believed that he was different now, and he seemed motivated and prepared to make changes in his life for his family.

*I don't know, it seems like he is a lot different from before. Before it seemed like he was really angry and didn't want to do anything, he wasn't motivated to do anything. And me, I wanted to do lots of stuff, not just stay at home with Josh. I was feeling like I was stuck all the time. Now, I don't know, he is willing to get up and do stuff with us, I don't know, he seems more happy. I think that two of his friends dying, that had a lot to do with it. He looks at life more seriously. He used to think, Caris will take care of it; she will take care of everything. (Caris, May 2013)*

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After I dropped Caris off at Nate's, I parked my car on the side of the road. I needed to take some time to process what just happened. Caris decided to move back in with Nate after he had abused her and cheated on her. I wondered why I was so upset. Was it because I was concerned for Caris' safety, or because I felt like everything we had done to help Caris move on had been in vain? I took some deep breaths. I felt helpless. I was not in a position to tell Caris what I thought she should do. I had to remind myself that I had only known her for a short time, and we were not friends. (Fieldnotes, May 2013)

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It was difficult to get a hold of Caris. I thought she might be busy with Nate, and I had become accustomed to our sporadic communication. A month passed before I heard from Caris again. I finally got in touch with her and we set up a time to meet. She was no longer living with Nate and was staying at another shelter. She could not tell me where the shelter was for security reasons, so we met in the Stadium parking lot. She was going to a sweat with Anne that

afternoon, so she did not have a lot of time to talk. I was glad to see her smiling and full of energy, but it reminded me of when we had first met. She said she was doing well and just keeping herself busy. At the shelter, they provided childcare so she could go out when she needed to. Having childcare had been so good for her because when she was with Nate, she was watching Josh all the time. She was feeling really isolated, and she was cutting herself again, something she hadn't done for a long time. I wanted to ask her more about what happened with Nate and about her cutting, but she did not dwell on the subject. She said it had been about four months since she had alcohol, and she didn't have the urge to drink. And she hadn't been smoking pot, so she was able to go to this sweat. She said that she was waking up early, going out and staying out until late. In the back of my mind, I was worried for her because I thought Nate was able to get back into her life in the past. (Fieldnotes, June 2013)

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I met with Caris again briefly on July 25, 2013, and it was the last time we saw each other before I lost contact with her for seven months. I thought about the last two times that Caris and I met before we lost touch. Both times our conversations were brief, and I could feel myself wanting to hear more about what she was thinking and what had been happening in her life. I could also feel her pushing me away with her curt, vague responses. When I asked her if everything was ok, she said yes. There was nothing more I could do or say.

### **Insecurity and Instability**

During the time Caris and I met, I felt a strong sense of insecurity. We did not communicate with each other as often as I had anticipated, nor did she seem to open up as much as I had hoped she would. I attributed it to her complicated life, but I think it was also

because of the expectations I had of our relationship. I would call her and text her without hearing a response for days or weeks. I would start to create horrible scenarios in my head, that something had happened or that she was trying to avoid me. When she did eventually get back to me, she would explain that she had been busy, or she had misplaced my number. It took a few months for me to realize that I was always jumping to unfounded conclusions.

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After going through week after week of not hearing from her, I developed a sense of uncertainty that continued to grow inside of me with the passing days and months. Then, as if a light bulb went off, I was suddenly aware of why I was feeling so insecure. I had an epiphany! **Her life does not revolve around me and my research project!** What a revelation!! She is still willing and wanting to work with me, but it may not be according to my plan. It may not be a systematic and detailed account of her life from start to finish. It is messy and at times extremely frustrating for me because of my personality. What I have to do is let things go- be awake and attentive, but realize that I might not see her or talk with her every week. It doesn't mean she doesn't want to be part of this project. I have to be ok with uncertainty, or I cannot do this work. (Fieldnotes, June 2013)

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This uncertainty became even more pronounced as I wrote the narrative accounts. Because Caris was my first participant, I was still learning. I did not document or date my early conversations with her. I had to recount from memory, often days or weeks later, what had been said and what happened. Our meetings would be scheduled and rescheduled, so dates became a jumbled mess. I learned as I faced certain snags and hitches, the importance of

writing things down as they happened and trying to use the recorder whenever possible. I moved through the file in my mind to recall our conversations, and I noticed that the details had become blurry with the lapse in time.

### **The gap widens...**

Even during the months I was not meeting with Caris, from August 2013 to February 2014, she was still a part of my life. I asked Anne to relay my contact information, and I just kept hoping Caris would try to get in touch with me. I constantly wondered if she remembered me and the stories she had shared.

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Yesterday I happened to drive by the first place I went to meet up with Caris, at the shelter. I remember getting lost trying to find it that first time. Since that day almost a year ago, I have gone past here so many times without realizing it was the same place. Today, this street looked so different, much more familiar to me. Looking back, I realize that I have changed since last January and I wonder if I would have approached our relationship differently today. I realize that I was trying too hard. I wanted to help and I kept offering to do things without considering how Caris felt or what she wanted. I wonder if I ever made her feel uncomfortable. Reading the notes from our past meetings and conversations, I see a lot of holes and missing pieces. I hope we will be able to meet soon. (Fieldnotes, October 2014)

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By November, 2013, I had almost given up on the possibility of seeing Caris again. Not only had several months passed since we talked, Caris was going through a rough time. Anne said that Caris had been struggling, that she had given Josh up and was staying with her mom. I

was glad to hear she had been in touch with Anne. I was relieved to be able to get information through Anne, and I just told her that I would be willing to meet with Caris whenever it worked for her. Caris and I met again in March 2014, but the uncertainty did not go away. I wanted to see Caris to share the narrative accounts I had written based on our conversations and meetings. I did not expect to meet with her more than a few times, and I felt anxious every time I tried to get a hold of Caris that she was gone again.

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### **Our Relationship**

I felt like I had put in a lot of ‘work’, like I had put much more effort into this relationship than with my other participants. What did that mean? What was the ‘work’ I was doing? After months of silence between us, Caris and I were like strangers again. I felt like any connection we had was no longer there. I did not feel comfortable asking personal questions, nor did I think she remembered what we had talked about. (Fieldnotes, March 2014)

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As I re-read the transcripts and my fieldnotes, the presumptions I had made about our relationship were much more obvious. I expected Caris to be able to meet with me on a regular basis. I expected her to keep in contact with me and let me know what was going on in her life. I expected her to be grateful for my help, and I expected her to be eager to participate in this project. When things did not seem to go as I had expected, I kept trying harder, and I pushed more. After we had lost touch for many months and then re-connected, I asked her again if she was willing to meet with me. She said that sometimes things happen in her life that makes it difficult for her to meet, but she was still interested in being part of this research. I finally

realized that Caris was not pushing me away, but she was dealing with challenges in her life that she wanted to work out.

## **Epilogue**

It had been fifteen months since I first met with Caris. During our last meeting, I showed her the narrative accounts I compiled using transcripts, fieldnotes and reflections. After she went through the pages, she said she liked the way I wrote them. She did notice and spoke to my comments about her aloofness and reserved demeanor. She said that she often closed up during difficult times in her life. However, she added that she told me more than she told other workers or researchers, and she had a tendency to refuse help or support when going through a tough time. She said when she was doing well, she was in 'her element' and she came out of her shell. Caris explained to me that she tends to push people away and isolate herself when she is depressed or struggling financially. She likes to do things on her own rather than asking others for help, and she will often wait until she gets paid or she feels better before she opens up again. She said that after reading through the narratives I had given her, she realized I had listened to her.

She told me what she had learned from the past year. She knew that her son grounded her and helped her stay focused on her life goals. She knew that she wanted to live a better life because of him. She had been working toward getting him back for the past three months and that was all that mattered to her right now. (Fieldnotes, March 2014)

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Caris' narrative account includes cycles of disruptions and connectedness both in the living and the telling of experiences. Just as I didn't know if she would show up for our meeting,

I was not sure where she would be living, and how things would be for her whenever we planned to meet. I think back to that cold January afternoon, over a year ago when I left the Community Dreamers after meeting Caris for the first time. I could feel the crisp air on my hot cheeks, and I was brimming with hope and anticipation. So much has changed in my life since that day almost three years ago; I wonder how things have continued to unfold in her life as well.



## Tasha

### Shopping for Groceries

She asked if we could go to the store because her son needed a winter coat. It has been a really cold November. She also has to shop for groceries. As we walk around the grocery store, Tasha asks me questions about what I cook for my children, and how I come up with ideas for meals. As I am talking with her I realize that I have little advice to give. I laugh and admit to her that I am a terrible cook, and I am not creative when it comes to food for my children. I try to imagine her going shopping in the middle of winter, her 2 year old son in tow without a car. Kevin might go with her. They might take a cab. It would be expensive. She said it's hard to go shopping in the winter and she will try to get groceries after she finishes work since she is already there for her job. But she takes the bus so she can't buy a lot. I think of the things I have always taken for granted. We walk up and down the aisles. She wants to make a nice meal for dinner, and she tries to think of something that Kobi will eat. In the end, she decides to try Hamburger Helper.

Kobi likes milk. *He drinks a lot, so we buy a lot of milk.* She says *he's a picky eater.* He doesn't seem to like anything. I know how hard it is to make sure our children get all the nutrients they need. I get frustrated and stressed out when my children refuse to eat. I wonder if she worries about Kobi in the same way.

I am so glad we went shopping. There is a huge snow storm outside, and it is getting worse by the minute. She would have had a tough time going on her own. We load the car with groceries

and go back to her place. I tell her that I will take her shopping whenever she needs to go. She says, 'ok,' and I think she is grateful for the offer. (Fieldnotes, November 2013)

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### **Introducing Tasha**

I think about the way I want to introduce Tasha in this narrative account. I did not expect our relationship to grow as it did because it seemed like we did not have a lot in common. There were times when she was upset because of something that happened, like when her apartment was broken into, or when she and Kevin, her boyfriend of four years, fought and broke up. She said that she did not drink even though she wanted to. Her ability to resist the temptation to drink and stay sober has been so remarkable and encouraging for me. I wondered if she was reminded of the depressing and unsettling experiences she had in the past as she shared stories with me -- stories about abuse from her mother or stories of her Kokum's (grandmother's) passing. It seemed that rather than dwell in darkness, she chose to see hope and promise for a better future, and she kept reminding herself of how far she had come.

The first time I met Tasha at 'Community 4 Me'; she was part of a program and I was attending one of the sessions, as a volunteer. She was wearing a dress, hair and makeup all done up, and she said little throughout the session. She seemed emotionless. I introduced myself and the research project. I asked those who were interested to stay after the session so we could exchange contact information. To my surprise, she approached me after the session was over and expressed interest in participating.

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It was a cold winter morning. Tasha, Kobi and I were in a diner having breakfast. I told her about my misconceptions when I first met her, and she laughed saying she is really shy in group settings. I felt a pang of guilt when I realized that my first impression of her was based on superficial preconceptions. Her makeup and clothes, combined with her seemingly cool manner led to my rash judgment of who she was. As she started to open up about her childhood and her struggles with alcohol, I was able to see a different side of Tasha, past a seemingly indifferent exterior.

Today is the sixth time I have seen Tasha, and it has been almost three months since our first encounter. The first few times we met our conversations were brief and the subject of our discussions were mostly about our children. Her one year old son, Kobi, was always with us and we spent most of our time playing with him. She told me that she didn't like to talk. I said we could just get to know each other better and I was happy to answer any questions she might want to ask me. I said we didn't have to talk about anything she didn't want to talk about. After several conversations, Tasha seemed to be much more comfortable and talkative. When we started talking about her childhood, however, she lowered her eyes and became quiet. She told me that she had never talked about her past like this before. She said she wasn't even sure what to say, and it was hard for her because she has kept it all inside for so long. I wondered if she was holding it in because she was afraid that telling her stories would be like reliving traumatic experiences from her past, preventing her from staying focused on the present and being positive. I wondered if she had kept her memories inside for so long, and they were buried so deep, she could no longer reach them. (Fieldnotes, January 2014)

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During our conversation about drinking and going into treatment, she said she considered getting an abortion when she was pregnant with Kobi. She was eighteen.

*When I found out I was pregnant, that's when I put myself into treatment. I wasn't even going to have him. Just 'cause Kurt, [my older son], was in the hospital; I didn't have custody of him. I felt like I couldn't take care of him or myself. I dunno I was just tired. And then I felt really guilty... I even went to the abortion clinic. When Kurt was taken from her, she drank even more. She felt such a deep sense of defeat, and she did not know how to deal with it. In the midst of this pain, she could not imagine having a baby, and possibly losing custody of another child. But I am so happy I didn't. I don't think I would ever get an abortion, either. And then I am happy I went to treatment. I thought with him, I thought it was my second chance to be a mom. And then everyone I see who was there, relapsing. I think I am the only one who got sober.*

*(Tasha, February 2014)*

Tasha tells me that she wants to be a role model. She wants to be someone that other women can look up to. She doesn't feel sorry for herself. She does not try to excuse her past. She knows there is a lot to be done, but she just takes it day by day to reach her goals. *"I think I just want to be a successful person that people want to be. It just feels like such a slow process. But I know I will get there eventually. I'm still 20"* (Tasha, March 2014).

As I reflect on our conversations, I think about what I was doing when I was 20. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, and I was still trying to figure out my place in the world. Tasha seems to be much more mature than I was. At the same time, she has a carefree and energetic youthfulness about her. She says that she feels like she wasted her teenage years. I sense her impatience and eagerness to move forward when she talks about how it will still take

a few more years just to get her GED (high school equivalency). She knows that if she had continued going to school, she would have gotten her high school diploma two years ago. However, she says that she is glad to finally be in school and she is proud of herself for being able to go back after dropping out in grade seven, almost eight years ago.

When I think about Tasha's strengths, staying positive was an attribute which stood out for me. The first time I met her she hardly spoke or even looked up. However, after meeting several times, she smiled and laughed often. She said she was proud of herself for staying sober and going back to school. Although there were times she has wanted to drink, she is able to resist the temptation by thinking about how far she has come.

### **Wanting to forget**

*I started drinking when I was 13, and I would drink all the time. The first time I drank I blacked out. I dunno why I drank, I think it was because I always felt sad and neglected. And I didn't know how to deal with my feelings. And now I am learning. I think it's just like, being a mom, I don't want to be like my mom. Like I remember I used to always cry for my mom, all the time. Not so much my dad because he was in jail, but I wished I had parents...*

We were meeting for lunch before her class. Kobi was at daycare, and she and I were sitting in a restaurant near her school. She had opened up more during the past few conversations, and I realized that she was no longer the quiet, standoffish girl I first met five months ago. Tasha had been more open to talk about her childhood with me. I tried not to push or ask too many questions, and I told her that I was grateful that she was willing to share her stories with me. We started to talk about adolescence and drinking. I asked her if any specific memories stood out for her. She told me what she remembers most.

*I used to have a bad reputation. Like every time I drank I messed around with someone's boyfriend. I was a slut like that. And plus I always drank, and I always hang out with a bad crowd. I would always bum off my friends. And when I got money I would try to be smart with it, but I would always spend it. I was always broke. I had everything I needed, my social worker, [Karrie], would give me vouchers, but I rarely had money. I look back at how I was before and think -- I can't believe I was like that, like there are some things I just want to forget. Like this one time I remember I got so drunk, I was with a group of friends, and I came to the stairs of this apartment with no shoes. And I don't know, I didn't know where I was and where everyone went. I walked from 107 to the east end of Jasper Ave, almost ten blocks, with no shoes. Just ugly things like that I just want to forget. And like when I would get in fights I wouldn't remember. Yeah, I remember this one girl I beat her up and she bit my nail off, I had fake nails. My hair was backcombed, and my back comb was pulled to the bottom of my hair. And I barely remember that fight but Angela told me, and when I came to, I was in handcuffs. (Tasha, March 28, 2014)*

As Tasha recounts stories from her past, I notice that she is unemotional and her tone of voice is neutral. I look at her with big eyes and a shocked expression on my face. She laughs at my reaction, and I can almost hear her saying, "There is even more I am not telling you." From 13 years old, she drank heavily until she blacked out. I have a hard time linking the stories I hear to the woman sitting across from me. I wonder whether she even feels a connection to the girl she talks about because she seems to have changed; I see that she has changed. (Fieldnotes, March 2014)

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*And I always blacked out. I drink until I black out. I don't know why. I liked blacking out.  
...Yeah, I didn't really care. I think blacking out just took me away. It was a way of escaping....  
But it's so different now. I have kids, and I am actually wanted. I was a loner. I had no one. And  
drinking was a way to escape that loneliness. And then I just got addicted. (Tasha, February 13,  
2014)*

Reading the transcripts of Tasha speaking about her blackouts reminded me of the humiliating experiences I had when I was drinking. I knew how hard it was to resist that temptation. Without knowing what it felt like to be addicted and without knowing how difficult it was to stay sober, Tasha's accomplishments may not seem impressive. My personal struggles had contributed to my sense of respect for Tasha. I admired her maturity and ability to stay sober at such a young age.

### **Years Wasted<sup>21</sup>**

I used to drink until I couldn't remember,  
I just had nothing at the time, so I drank

I used to always drink  
all my teenage years  
I think it was just the abandonment  
to drown my feelings and stuff

Me and my boyfriend were so unstable  
fighting all the time  
He used to hit me a lot  
and cheat on me a lot

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<sup>21</sup> This found poem is taken from our conversations in October 2013, December 2013, and January 2014.

he beat me up real bad

He went to jail

I found out I was pregnant

And I wasn't sure

Keep it or have an abortion

I put myself into treatment

I felt like such a bad mom

I lost my first kid

I was drinking most of the time

He went into social services

**I wanted to stop drinking for him.**

If I did relapse,

I would want to do it again and again,

because I would just think,

'What's the point?'

I'm happy that I know that about myself

I have been sober over two years.

**I am so proud of myself.**

It was subtle, but I realized that in our earlier conversations Tasha had not said much about her boyfriend in terms of being a support or a reason for staying sober. When Tasha told me she had met her boyfriend four years ago, I assumed that they had a stable relationship because it had lasted so long. It took several months before I learned about the layers below the surface.



## **Me and Kevin**

Kevin was the father of Tasha's two sons. He and Tasha had been together for four years, and they had both quit drinking at the same time – Tasha went into treatment, and Kevin went to jail and then into treatment. I asked Tasha if she wanted me to meet Kevin, and she said no. She wanted to keep this work separate from her relationship, and I respected her desire for this. From what Tasha had shared with me, their relationship was strong; they lived together with Kobi and he worked while she took care of the baby.

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I told Tasha I would pick her up at her apartment. We were going to have breakfast together before her class. She got in the car, and she looked distracted and tired. I turned off the engine and I asked her how she was doing, if everything was ok. She quietly said that Kevin hit her again. She broke up with him and kicked him out again. She said she felt like it was her fault -- that she had let it happen. I tried to be supportive and encouraging. I said she should not blame herself; she did not plan for things to turn out this way. I wondered why she was being so hard on herself.

She admitted that when it happened a week ago, she wanted to drink. It was just her and Kobi at home, and she felt so awful and alone. When I asked her why she didn't call anyone, she said it was because she felt embarrassed; she had done the same thing so many times before. She even compared herself to the boy who cried wolf, and she thought that people were going to stop giving her sympathy because she kept taking Kevin back and things would get out of hand.

I was glad to hear that she didn't drink. I think about how hard it must have been for her to resist the temptation. When I asked her what stopped her, she said she felt so bad for Kobi because of what happened -- the police were involved and now child services would be in his life. She knew drinking would just make things worse, yet she wanted to drink again on the weekend. (Fieldnotes, April 2014)

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After I met with Tasha that morning, I thought about our first conversation in October. She had talked to me about Kevin, but I had not been attentive to what she was telling me, and I had made the assumption that Tasha was in a stable relationship. Her and Kevin had been living together with their baby, Kobi; he worked from Tuesday to Saturday, while she watched the baby during the day. He would come home at six and they had supper together. Kevin took care of Kobi on Sundays and Mondays when Tasha worked. They seemed to have a nice routine. She had talked about being abused by Keven in the past, but I assumed that it only happened when they were drinking.

*Me and Kevin's relationship, for the first year was pretty bad. I was the one who stuck around for it. He used to cheat on me and beat me up all the time. And then, after my oldest son was sick and was in the hospital, I don't know, I just gave up and went drinking. I was drinking for a week. And I cheated on him and all this stuff, and I think that's when he realized that I wasn't going to take his shit no more. At that time, I went to see him and we got into another fight and he beat me up, and the ambulance and cops came and he went to jail for a month. And then I put myself into treatment at that time. At the treatment centre; that's when I found out I was pregnant. ... I have to get my head out of the past. And every time we fight I still think*

*about it. But I still don't trust him. And he doesn't trust me because I cheated on him. (Tasha, October 2013)*

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I tried to remember more about that meeting, but after five months, it was a blur. I could not recall if she seemed happy or upset, and if the tone of the conversation was optimistic. When I re-read what Tasha said in October, I was frustrated with myself for missing something so important. I may have been more focused on the fact that they decided to get sober and she was pregnant with Kobi. I may have assumed that drinking was the cause of the problems in their relationship, so after they quit, they no longer had the same issues. I had not considered the possibility of a break up, and I had seen Kevin as the main support for Tasha. The recent incident did not fit the story of Tasha and Kevin I had created in my mind. I had put Kevin in a box marked 'stable support' and did not think to question their relationship.

(Fieldnotes, April 2014)

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Kevin had been abusive; he was more aggressive when he was drunk, but there were at least three incidents in the past two years when the police were involved and he had not been drinking. Tasha seemed to be growing and changing, while Kevin had just stayed in the same routine, without any aspirations or plans for the future. At least that was the story I heard. Kevin was recently charged with disorderly conduct and has a 'no contact order' with Tasha and Kobi. Tasha started talking to him again, only one month after the incident. He did not help care for their sons financially, and he had not been a reliable support for her.

## Home-less

During one conversation she brought up that she was thinking of moving. Although she and Kevin talked about living in a nicer place, she knew she could not depend on him for financial support, so she only considered places that she could afford on her own. There was a certain area of the city she wanted to live in, but she knew that it was unlikely she could find a place that fit her budget. She had been living at the same apartment for over a year, but the rent kept going up, and she was looking for a change. I asked her about what home was like for her when she was younger. When Tasha moved into the city, she was initially living with her mom, but quickly left home.

*I think when my grandparents passed away I started to feel resentment toward my mom. And then she was supposed to take care of me but she didn't, she just left me in Edmonton. And I got into social services when I was 13. I stopped going to school. I would be in group homes. And then I would go to friend's houses, I was just all over the place. Some were ok, but they were all independent. I had no choice because I had no place to stay. I used to always stay at Hope Place, I really liked it there. I was first there at 15, and then I would come and go. And then I would go out and drink, and then they would take me back.*

Tasha mentioned that she ran away from home when she was 13. She said she had been in and out of group homes. I had a difficult time getting a sense of what 'home' was for her from when she was 13 until now. When we talked about home, she seemed to have a sense of home in childhood living with her Kokum and Mosom. She said she was happy when she was younger; her Kokum loved her and cared for her. When her grandmother passed away, she said

she 'just wandered off.' I wonder if she felt displaced because her grandmother had kept her rooted within her community.

*I remember a few times I had to sleep at the Conference Centre downtown. But I wasn't living on the streets. I remember I used to tag along with my friend Angela, when I was 15, and then she would get sick of me so I would have to find someone else to tag along with. Yeah, and she would have boyfriends to go to and stuff like that. ...I had been at City Shelter (a group home) a few times, but I would get kicked out, if you miss 2 days. I stayed at Hope Place (a group home) a lot. After 2 days, they would pack up my stuff, I would still be gone, but then I would go back. And they always let me go back. And that was kind of homeless, until I met Kevin.*

*When I was 14,15,16, I was in City Shelter, and another group home, and then I remember my social worker at the time tried to put me into a 3 month treatment program. I did 2 months of it. And then I went back to my home community and I drank even more. And then I came back and went to Hope Place. And then I was put in the High Risk Unit, with Karrie, my worker. But at first I never communicated with her. I would just get what I needed from her. I would go drink, and then go to Hope Place. It was like a cycle... (Tasha, February 13, 2014)*

As I talked with Tasha, I could tell that Karrie was an important person in her life. She said that she would call Karrie if something happened to her. Karrie helped her find an apartment to live in when she was pregnant and living in and out of group homes. She also helped Tasha get a job. Initially, Tasha said that when she turned 22 (about two years later), she would no longer have Karrie as her worker, and she had expressed concern about how she would cope. A year later, Tasha told me that Karrie was moving and she would get another

worker. Karrie had been a part of Tasha's life for four years. I wondered how she felt about the transition. Tasha just shrugged her shoulders and said that it would only be for a short period anyway and then she was on her own.

### **Changing and Growing**

Soon after Tasha had moved into the city and away from what she had known to be her home, she started getting involved with the criminal justice system. At thirteen years old, she was living in and out of group homes, and she had stopped going to school. She recalled how her experiences with drinking often involved police officers and detention. Tasha had been arrested for shoplifting, being intoxicated in public, and stealing cars, but had never been incarcerated for more than a week at a time. She did not have much to say about her experiences of jail because she said that she would keep to herself and just stay quiet while she was in there. She was detained at the local youth correctional centre a few times, and she had been on probation at different times over the past seven years. She recently finished her six month probation period for shoplifting back in April 2013, and she had her last meeting with her probation officer on January 2, 2014. When we met, she told me how happy she was to be able to move on after her probation ended and her criminal record was cleared. She did not see herself as a criminal or feel judged based on her history of being arrested multiple times. Her drinking and involvement with the justice system were clearly linked, but it was evident that she did not want this part of her past to define who she was in the present. (Fieldnotes, January 2014)

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## Un)ambiguous racism at work

Tasha is visibly Aboriginal, and I wondered if and how being Aboriginal may have shaped her experiences. She did not talk about how she felt until I introduced the topic in conversation.

Tasha mentioned her Aboriginal heritage as she spoke about her childhood, being raised by her grandparents and growing up in an Aboriginal community. I asked her if she felt connected to her culture today, and if she attended any ceremonies. She shrugged her shoulders and seemed to be hesitant to answer. She said she felt like being Aboriginal was a burden that made it more difficult for her to reach her goals. *That's my big problem, well, not a big problem, but that's how I feel when I go to job interviews, or when I have a hard time finding a place. I just like feel like... I don't know. Cause some people think badly of us. Yeah, I don't like [being Native]. I don't feel like I have strong roots, no, my grandparents raised me with six other kids together, and then my grandma passed away when I was like, 9 or 10, and then after she passed away, I just left. And I stayed with my mom and then I started drinking, and that's what messed me up. ... I was in group homes. Until I got pregnant when I was 17. You could stay at the group home, but my social worker wanted to get me out of that. She told me to look for an apartment. It was easier to find a place back then because I was pregnant, and I had a housing worker, and they are all White, so that's how I got my last place and that's how I got this place. (Tasha, October 31, 2013)*

Until December 2013, Tasha was working two days a week. She said it was a break from Kobi for her, and she liked her job. She handed out samples at a large supermarket. When I met with her before Christmas, she told me about an incident at work.

*I worked Thursday, Friday full. And then on Saturday I was working and I was on my break. And me and this guy were looking around, and we got told to leave the store - they called us back to our stations, and then she told us to leave. And I didn't know why. And then my boss called me on Monday or Tuesday and told me that the supervisor said we are not supposed to be walking around, while we are working or something, cause that is supposed to be shop lifting or something, and the other guy was taking too long breaks. And then I guess that girl doesn't want us working there, in that store anyway.*

We were sitting in Tasha's apartment. Kobi was at daycare. When I heard her story, I was frustrated and angry. I reacted with strong emotion because I thought that her boss was being unfair and making assumptions based on what the supervisor of the store said, and not asking Tasha what happened. I could not understand how her boss could have been so quick to judge. Yet, I too judged her boss based on what Tasha shared with me. Then she told me another story to help explain why she thought she was told not to return to the store. It was the night before her last day at work.

*It was so dumb. My mom was parked in front, and then I had a basket and I bought some groceries. And there was a guy beside us, and I put my basket down, and then we drove away because they honked at us to leave. And then later he came up beside us and starting yelling at us because we left the basket there. And he was an old white man and he was calling us racist slurs and stuff. And then I felt real bad after, and then my sister in law went in[to the store], and he was trying to accuse her of shoplifting. ...Yeah, before he came to yell at us he said that he went inside to report her for shop lifting. I dunno. He must have identified both of*



*us, and they know me there, so I kinda think that's why [my boss] doesn't want [me to work there], but I dunno...but we didn't take anything. (Tasha, December 2013)*

She was calm when she talked about it, but I could tell she was upset by the way her eyes watered up. I stood up and gave her a hug. She said she thought that the man in the parking lot had talked to her boss, and influenced her decision to fire Tasha. I was upset. I wished I had been there to defend her. I would have talked to the man. I might have talked to Tasha's boss. I am not sure why I thought I could have made the situation better, but my gut reaction was to confront. I just couldn't understand why the man thought they had shoplifted. I couldn't understand why Tasha was accused of shoplifting when she was simply walking around the store on her break. Of course, I knew little about the situation beyond what Tasha had shared with me. I wondered how many times Tasha has experienced this kind of racial discrimination. I thought again about how she wanted to be a role model for other young women. Did she hope she could empower other women to stand up against these kinds of injustices? Did she hope that one day she could stand up against people like the man in the parking lot?

In April 2014, Tasha was trying to get a summer job. She had gone to a job fair at Home Depot, and dropped off her resume at a few different places. She said it was discouraging for her to go for interviews or meet with prospective employers and then not hear back from them. I could see that she was making an effort, but she lacked confidence in herself. During one of our first conversations, I remembered what she had said about finding an apartment. *I dunno, it's just such a big hassle, and it's just stressful. ...I dunno, I go to these viewings by myself, and I dunno, I just don't feel confident. I just feel like they look at me, and they don't*

*consider my application. And I never got a call back from them (Tasha, October 31, 2013).* I thought about how things ended at her last job. I could see why she felt stressed and unsure of herself. I could see why she felt discouraged. She never did get a call from Home Depot.

Although implicit, the connections in Tasha's stories were important to consider in understanding how Tasha perceived herself and others around her. Tasha's experiences in the criminal justice system, dealing with racism, and having learning difficulties did not seem related when she shared her stories. Yet, I knew that there was an over-representation of Aboriginal women in the CJS. I also knew that she felt a lack of confidence when trying to find a job or get an apartment, and I wondered if her learning difficulties affected her confidence levels.

### **Learning Difficulties**

Stories about learning difficulties were based more on her present experiences with school. Tasha had not been in school for seven years, since she was 13, and when she recently had an assessment done, her math and reading scores were quite low. She knew she wanted to go to school so she could get a better job, or rather a career, but she was afraid of taking the test again because she thought she would fail. *"I am happy about going back to school, but I am nervous because it has been so long. And even when I took the first test I felt so dumb. And then when I took the second test I was scared I wasn't gonna pass"* (Tasha, December 12, 2013).

Tasha did not feel confident because she received low scores on her assessment. She had been enrolled to begin in January, 2014, but she knew it will be challenging because she had to get up early every day, take her son to daycare, and then go to school. She had become

accustomed to waking up late, and just staying at home with her son, so she worried about all the adjustments she would have to make.

Until now I had understood learning difficulties as stemming from either neurological/biological or social issues. Tasha may have been born with learning difficulties, or they may have developed from experiences in childhood and adolescence. Yet, to pinpoint the actual cause of her learning difficulties seemed impossible because of the complex combination of circumstance and neurological impairment.

*I kind of questioned if my mom drank when she had me because I had trouble, well, I never had trouble in school but now I do, but I think it's just cause of the alcohol, because I drank. And I even told Karrie (my worker) about it. I wonder if that did impact. If there is something wrong with me. But she doesn't think so, just 'cause I have been drinking a lot, I don't know. I never learned from anyone. And no one taught me anything. (Tasha, February 2014)*

She said she did not remember how she did in school academically before she had dropped out, and after drinking heavily for five years she felt like she had trouble learning and understanding. *...Yeah, that's what I think because I can't focus in school, ...and I have to read things over and over again to understand, I just feel like I have a learning disability. Like I do want to know. I just don't know how to access. (Tasha, February 13, 2014)*

For Tasha, school was not only about attending classes and getting her high school diploma equivalency, it was also about being more confident and sure of herself. She had to juggle school work, childcare, and financial stresses which made school much more complicated for her now than it had been in the past.

*I like school, it makes me feel smart, and I am so proud of myself. I feel more confident in myself and more independent. And I just can't wait to get my education rolling so I can go on. ...Alberta Works will cover it all. But if you mess it up, you have to wait four years. And you have to go every day. If you miss 5 days at school, then you get kicked out. If you get kicked out, you can't go back. It is stressful now because what if I don't get childcare for February? (Tasha, January 17, 2014) This kind of stuff is sort of easy. It's just hard to work on my own. I just need to know I am on the right track. I know I am going to need help in math. ...It's just like I don't know what I want. I have a hard time making decisions. There's like so many things. I don't know specific things. I know I want to work with helping people. That's kind of what my plan was, to finish school and go to Esthetics College. And then I could always go on to other stuff. (Tasha, February 13, 2014)*

Tasha was motivated to get her high school equivalency diploma because she wanted to pursue a career. She had mentioned wanting to be a role model, and I wondered who her role models were. She spoke about her grandmother with reverence. I could see how deeply Tasha had been touched by her Kokum.

## **Family**

Tasha had only a few stories of childhood, and they all included her grandmother. Her grandmother had kept the family together. Tasha spoke about her grandparents in a loving and respectful way, and she said they were great caregivers.

*My grandmother raised me, because my mom just gave me to my grandmother out of the hospital. And then my dad was in jail, most of my childhood. It was just me, her, my late Mosom (grandfather) and my uncle, and all my other uncles were older. And then when I was*

*around six years old, my late auntie passed away in a car accident, drinking and driving. And she was in the back, without a seatbelt. And she had 6 kids, and my late Kokum took them. We shared rooms- my cousin was a few months older than me, and then my other cousin was a few years older than me, I dunno, we were all close together, and the youngest was a baby at the time. Ever since I started drinking I just became distant with my whole family. Because I moved with my mom, and I lived in Edmonton, and they lived on the reserve. And when both my grandparents passed away, everyone split up. (Tasha, October 31, 2013)*

**My best memory...<sup>22</sup>**

I remember with my late Kokum,

I remember this trip.

She took all of us,

Her kids and her kid's kids.

She took us all to BC.

But my dad was in jail so he wasn't there.

There was so many of us.

I remember we went to hotels, and we went swimming.

I was like 5 years old.

I felt loved

And my late Kokom,

She was the one who kept us all together.

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<sup>22</sup> This found poem is from our conversation on December 12, 2013.

## **My mom**

Tasha's mom just had a baby -- she is 40 and has 4 boys now. They are 8 years old, 5 years old, 3 years old and now a newborn. And she has just recently come to Edmonton to have the baby. She's going to be living in a hotel so Tasha is helping to take care of the kids. Tasha and her mom don't have the best relationship, but she worries about her younger brothers, and she thinks she is responsible for their care. Tasha is only 20, and she has her own sons, one who is three and a baby who is only 17 months old. (Fieldnotes, December 2013)

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*And my little brother is starting to fight in school. We all have different dads and now she is by herself. I remember she used to pick her guys over us. I think I resent her for it. The only reason I talk to her is for my brothers. I love her and stuff, but I don't like her telling me what to do, and what I should be doing. That just gets me mad because she was never there. We talk, but she isn't really there for me now either. (Tasha, March 28, 2014)*

Tasha had a complicated relationship with her mom, one that she had not talked about with anyone. She said she used to feel angry but now she just didn't really care. She said her mother did not raise her, her grandparents did, and she wanted to be different with her kids. *Well, my mom used to hit me...my late grandma never did. I remember my Mosom did, like with a willow, but for discipline. My mom, she used to just hit me with anything. Yeah, a few times, because I would want to sleep with her, and I was jealous of her boyfriends. I would be crying and stuff. I remember she hit me with a hanger and with a cord. And I remember this one time she locked me in a room in the dark, and then she hit me with I think it was a hanger. I*

*remember I missed my mom so much and then when I would be with her she would do that.*

*(Tasha, March 28, 2014)*

I was surprised that she had been able to maintain a relationship with her mom. During one of our conversations I asked her if she forgave her mom, and she said, *“I don’t know, I don’t think I care anymore. It’s weird talking to her now. There’s no talking with her. She doesn’t take responsibility. She doesn’t think it’s her fault, she’s so stubborn. I don’t want to be like her”*

*(Tasha, January 2014)*. Looking back at our conversation a year later, I wondered how Tasha felt talking to me about her mom and grandparents.

*And she (my mom) would come get me whenever she wanted. ...And then my grandma, she and my late Mosom used to fight because my Kokum wasn’t sure if she wanted to let me go with her, and then my Mosom was just telling her to let me go. My grandparents had custody, but my Kokum wanted me to know my mom. And I was really attached to [my mom], I don’t know why. I used to love her so much. Like on the ride home (to my grandparents’ house) I would ask her if I could spend one more night with her. And I would cry. And then as I got older, I got resentful for her not loving me back, and now, if it wasn’t for my brothers I wouldn’t talk to her. She used to always like, pick her boyfriends over her kids. She gave me over to my Kokum when I was born. My dad was in jail and she used to live with my Kokum until I was born and then when she had me, she left. (Tasha, January 17, 2014)*

I had to re-read the transcripts of conversations we had about her mother to understand the different emotions she felt from remembering her mom as a child and seeing her mom today with four sons, Tasha’s younger half-brothers. Tasha told me that she kept it all inside and tried to forget. As I read through our conversations, I was impressed with Tasha’s

sense of responsibility to her half- brothers. She kept in touch with her mom, so she could stay close to them. However, Tasha had learned from her past not to depend on her mom for support.

### **Uncovering the past**

As we talked about her family, Tasha also shared recent stories about where she lived and about one of the last times she drank. It was two years ago, and Tasha tells me this story as a part of the past. She has not gone back to her old community and does not want to. Although she sees herself as a different person today, her experiences have shaped her sobriety and her family values.

*In the community where I used to live, we went through a lot, and I just don't like it anymore. The last time I really visited was when I was 18, and I only went there to drink. And I ended up in the drunk tank (at the police station). And my dad was in there too. I was all hung over, and drunk, and I didn't remember where my baby was. I didn't even remember how I got there. So we both got out of there at the same time, and we went back to where the party was, and that's where he (my baby) was. So I just went back to Edmonton, and my boyfriend was really mad because I had been away for 2 days and my phone was dead so I had no way of texting him. It was only supposed to be a one night visit, and no drinking, so we broke up but only for a few days. (Tasha, October 31, 2013)*

She looked back even further and talked about one of her most distressing experiences. Her childhood memories also included alcohol and trauma. As she talked about her past, she seemed to also have wonderings about the way things were.



*All my aunties and uncles drank, and I don't know why because my late Mosom, I never seen him drink. So it's weird... I never seen [Mosom and Kokum] drink before. But I was too young to ask questions like that and understand, but thinking now, I wish I knew. But I dunno. I didn't have a rough childhood, but I did see some things that I think might have messed me up...that scared me.*

*Auntie's trailer<sup>23</sup>*

*on fire*

*all her kids*

*Pulled out two of them*

*Big fire*

*Twins*

*only found one*

*smoke was so bad*

*couldn't see*

*one of the biggest traumatizing things in my life.*

*My brother passed away*

*Two weeks after*

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<sup>23</sup> This found poem is from our conversation on March 28, 2014.

*There's been so many deaths in my family.*

*But I do miss them*

Tasha seemed to love her family, and she had mixed emotions about her past. She kept in touch with some cousins, aunties and uncles, but she also felt sad and upset when she recalled memories from the community she grew up in. Often when I met with Tasha, she had family members staying with her in her small two bedroom apartment. She would let them stay whenever they needed a place to sleep. I wondered if she learned from her grandmother and from growing up on her reserve, the importance of receiving family.

### **Epilogue**

Tasha's life over the past eight months has been unpredictable. Our conversations were mostly about all the unexpected challenges she faced each week. Kevin, the father of their two children, no longer lived with her. Her friend Angela moved in, but only for three months, and she was helping her with childcare while Tasha first started going to school. Tasha admitted that they had a better friendship when they are not living together. Tasha has experienced many difficult challenges throughout her life, and even in the past year I have seen how much her circumstances have changed. Yet, there is perseverance in Tasha that seems to keep her grounded. She speaks about her grandparents with reverence and gratitude, and I imagine their teachings have been passed onto her, even if she cannot explain it in words. Tasha has been an example for me, in her maturity and quiet resistance against the expectations of relapse and

failure that seem to continue to haunt her. She has had to face obstacles in her schooling and learning, but she refuses to give up and she strives to be her best. (Fieldnotes, May 2014)

## **Lina**

When I met Lina I was participating in a program at 'Community 4 Me'. There were about seven people in the group, with two facilitators. I joined in on one of the sessions to get comfortable with the women before I introduced myself. Lina was telling the group about the tough week she had gone through. She was feeling extremely depressed and ashamed. She had gotten caught shoplifting and that was why she was there. She was being criticized by her mother, sister and boyfriend who all said this arrest was the last straw and they were not willing to give her any more chances. On top of everything else, her eating disorder was being triggered by the incident, and she was binging and throwing up. As I sat and listened, I felt like I could relate to her. When she talked, I felt a connection and hoped she would be willing to participate in this research.

After each person in the group did their 'check-in,' it was my turn to share. I told them that I was a volunteer for Community 4 Me but also a graduate student. I had been involved with Community 4 Me for over a year, so I was well acquainted with the facilitators and the program. I spoke about the research project and asked if those who were interested in working with me could talk to me at the end of the evening so we could arrange to meet privately. I thought that participating in the session by sharing some of my own experiences was important to see who I was. I kept looking at Lina during the session, believing I could telepathically convince her to work with me. She and another woman (Tasha) came up to me after the session and gave me their phone numbers. I was eager to meet with Lina again.

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I met Lina alone for the first time today at a coffee shop. It was nice to be able to relate. I was trying to make a connection by sharing some of my stories, but at the same time I just wanted to show her that I understood what she was going through. I think I often come on too strong trying to make the other person feel more comfortable. I do feel a need, in terms of building a relationship with participants, to share about myself. I ask them to become so vulnerable and to divulge so much about themselves that I feel a moral obligation to reciprocate to some extent. Although I had heard Lina sharing with the group at Community 4 Me, I made assumptions that we had a lot in common based on what little I knew. We talked about having a distorted perception of ourselves and having a hard time letting go of the desire to be thin at all costs. I said that I could relate to her when it came to low self-esteem and body image issues. We both recognized the internal battle to accept and embrace ourselves without reproach. (Fieldnotes, October 2013)

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At the time, I thought I could empathize with Lina because we had both had experiences with eating disorders. I only later recognized that I was trying hard to fit her into a box- into the same box that I put myself in. I molded her into something based on my assumptions and my 'expertise' rather than really listening to what she was telling me about who she was.

If I met Lina for the first time again, I would try to be more mindful of the preconceptions I formed based on our first encounter at Community 4 Me. I heard the words eating disorder, addictions and disappointed family, and I thought I knew exactly how she felt and what she was going through. I wanted her to participate in this project because I thought I

could relate to her so well. I assumed I knew what she was thinking and feeling because I believed it was the same way I felt.

Now, I know that I had placed expectations on Lina, based on the person I presumed her to be, tinted by my own experiences. In hindsight, I am disappointed for failing to recognize how skewed my perception of the situation had been.

## **Family and Childhood**

### **Dad**

Lina and I are sitting in the food court of a shopping mall, drinking pop and talking. She confesses that she had a messed up childhood and it would take hours to unpack all the stories of her family and extended family. When I ask her about her relationship with her parents, she begins by talking about her parents' divorce. She tells me about the last time she saw her father, in the hospital two years ago, when she was receiving treatment for anorexia. Then, she reminisces about the trips she and her dad took just the two of them.

*But it was ok, I dunno. And his job was a truck driver, so he was on the road a lot, and I understand it was a stressful job, but... that's the only good thing I have about my father, the road trips we took. This was when I was in Grade nine to eleven, we would go to Arizona, Utah, Florida, Idaho, and all those places, just the two of us, and he wouldn't hit me, he would yell at me some times, but it was just interesting. It's heart breaking because... Because you know what, my dad was there for me, I understand that he was trying to be the best father he could be, I had those experiences, but when I turned 18, he did become someone that he wasn't and he became someone that is not a father anymore. And I knew that because he was not the same man who raised me in a way.*

Lina was still working through the knots in her relationship with her father, and I could see that she felt an internal tug of war as her memories of her father and her present knowledge of him contradicted each other. Her recounting of fond memories suggested that she wanted to see him again and she wanted a relationship with him, but she was still hurt from what had happened in the recent past.

*And it hurts me now when I see my sister meeting up with him a lot, she goes and sees him every second weekend because he works up north and he does trucking up there. And she says, "I have a great relationship with him after the divorce, I don't understand why you don't understand them." When I was older, my sister would travel, go to Vancouver for two months, and she would always be out, when they fought, and I would have to stay home, I always felt this guilt that I had to be there for my mom, I had to make sure that she was ok, and in some situations, thank God I was there, or she would have gotten killed. (October 31, 2013)*

There were specific memories that seemed especially difficult for her to share. Yet, Lina described her childhood memories as what was 'normal' for her.

### **Normal**<sup>24</sup>

Everything was normal in my life.  
I thought your father's supposed to hit you when you're bad.  
Your father is going to fight with your mom and throw a rage.  
You have to hide under a blanket,  
It was normal.

When I was 12, and right to when I turned 18 and left high school,  
there was always abuse  
and I never understood it.

When I turned 18, my dad went insane.

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<sup>24</sup> This found poem is from a conversation on October 31, 2013.

I don't know how it all really started.  
It felt like a tsunami right on my house,  
like everyone was hit  
and I just felt so caged up.

But nothing's perfect.  
They said my dad is an abuser,  
What is that?  
I was in shock, my world was flipped.  
It's not normal to hit and beat your child up with a belt until they bruise?

Lina felt a bitterness and resentment toward her father for the way he treated her and her mother, and as she spoke about it, she noted that her low self-esteem and distorted body image may have stemmed from her experiences with her father.

*And my mom sees me as my father's daughter, I look so much like him... And she says I have a lot of my dad's tendencies. And my dad's tendencies are like ADHD, like hyperactive, and he too was very skinny. And I think he had body image issues, he would try to gain muscle, and he had low confidence as well. My dad had a very interesting lifestyle. He did have a really shitty childhood and stuff. [My dad's] dad used to beat up his mom and rape her to have children. And he would push my dad down the stairs. ...They lived in a horrible state. These are the things he described. At least I knew where it stemmed from. I guess deep down I hope I don't turn out to be like my dad. That's my #1 hope- I don't want to lie, I don't want to steal, I don't want to use people. (Lina, October 31, 2013)*

In April, 2014, Lina met with her dad for the first time in over two years. She said it was as if no time had lapsed. They met frequently and talked on the phone daily. Yet, from the way she spoke about their relationship, it sounded like he was emotionally abusing her all over



again. She said he would say things to belittle her and put her down, but she did not know how to cut ties with him because he was jobless and depressed. She did not want to keep meeting with him, but she felt this sense of obligation as his daughter. I wondered if the control he had over her as a child and teenager continues to be difficult for her to resist. It seemed as if she does not want him in her life, but at the same time she could not separate herself from him.

## **Mom**

Lina spoke about her mom often. They seemed to have a bond that continued from when she was a child. She referred to her mom as her best friend and her worst enemy. Lina longed for a close and honest relationship with her mom, but she felt like when she tried to be herself, her mom refused to accept her. Lina and I were in a coffee shop. It was our first private conversation, but because she had shared about herself at Community 4 Me, I knew a bit about her current challenges and we seemed to be able to converse easily without feeling awkward. I turned the recorder on and asked her about her week.

*I told my mom on Thanksgiving about my shoplifting and everything. That was really hard, with my mom and my sister. I do these things that make me feel really selfish, because I don't think about their feelings. It was a big hit of reality, they were like, "You have been so selfish with everything, you just say, oh it's my eating disorder that caused me to steal and do all this, but, we get that, that you are struggling, but you never ask us how we're doing, you just kind of blurt it out, you don't think of how it is affecting our day to day, and we are going through other things as well."*

*...It does make sense, I have been selfish, that is true, like I haven't taken their feelings into account. So I do need to make a change in my life about that. I have been taking the steps, but*

*it's hard because no one really believes me. I have lied to them so many times saying, oh I'm fine, I'm fine, and then I relapse or I do something stupid like this... so it's going to take a lot of work to gain their trust again, but it's worth it because I know I need to change, and find out who I want to be and what I want to do in my life. I don't want to go down this path, if I were to go down this path, I don't know where I would end up. (Lina, October 16, 2013)*

As Lina talked about confessing everything to her sister and mother, she reflected on how their words have affected her. They told her she was selfish and inconsiderate for stealing and struggling with her eating disorder. In the end she lied to them so she did not have to deal with their berating, or feel bad for disappointing them. Yet, the guilt continued to mount as she realized she had let them down and lost their trust.

*[My mom] gets me to a point but then she does not get me at all. She thinks with my eating disorder, I don't value myself and I have tattoos and piercings to look unpretty, she's thinking that I think I don't look pretty like this, and she's like, "You're hiding behind a mask, people do that, that's why they dress like this." Yeah, but my reason is not that. I do it because I like it, and I do think it makes me a little more beautiful. I love these tattoos. I like the way they feel and I love the way I look. And when I feel like I want to change it I will, because it is my body. She doesn't get it. She blames it on the medications I am on, or the doctors - she can never just be relaxed, and be like, "I understand." ...Because I love her so much, but then I hate her so much. We're the worst enemies, but we're the best friends, you know, and it's just like, I don't know. (Lina, October 31, 2013)*

I imagine it must be difficult for Lina to feel good about herself when her mom is so critical. I wonder if the cycles of her eating disorder, shoplifting and drug use are exacerbated by the pressure she felt from her mom.

*She wants us to live the life she didn't live. She would prefer if I do everything right now, but do it her way. She needs to move on, she can't hold onto the past. And I need to move on too, or I will get sick. Really sick. She's gotta change so that I don't get sick around her, or else I just can't be around her... That's what she says, I will love you when you are better... and healthy and don't look like the way you look now. I know and it hurts. (Lina, February 13, 2014)*

From adolescence, Lina was told that her mom 'would love her when'... with conditions of not being depressed, not having an eating disorder, and of looking a certain way. She was hurt by her mother's disapproving words and inability to accept her for who she is, and she knew that she would not be able to meet the expectations her mom had placed on her.

### **Learning Difficulties**

Lina and I did not talk about learning difficulties until five months after we first met. Although she had talked about being diagnosed with ADHD in school during our first meeting, our conversations did not move in that direction. I was not sure whether learning difficulties were a significant part of her life. Finally I asked her explicitly why she thought she had learning difficulties, and how her school experiences affected the way she perceived herself.

*Um, it was in Gr. Six, my teacher, well, actually it was before Gr. 6, I was actually a really bad kid. I actually hit my teacher and I kicked one teacher in the crotch, and I got put into this carpet room, like where the special needs kids go, yeah, I was an out of control maniac. It was because of my family. I asked my counselors and they were like, yeah, it's due to your family*

*environment, but I also had ADHD on top of that. Yeah, so in Gr. 6, my teacher, her kid had ADHD so she recognized that in me, and it was just my focus, and I still have that today but I am trying. You focus on the board, or what they are talking to you about, but I start to drift... it's not as hyper anymore. I had to be on Ritalin until Gr. 8. It helped for two years. I am glad I am not on it anymore. People say, you should read, and I do read, but I can only read for like 20 minutes, and then I am like, in my head, butterflies...*

*So after school, after class, I would get an extra hour with the teachers. I got that. For me, I didn't like it because my friends, so I hid it, I would say, 'oh I just have to ask the teacher something,' and then they would go out, and I would stay. But they would sit with me, I remember that. Mrs. Richmond, I loved her. She knew I had a problem with math, she would sit there and she would correct it and correct it. And in high school, they would help me too. They would hide it under the cover, but they were really nice. I always feel that people can grasp things, and for me it takes a little longer, and it's a bummer, but I don't let it. I just.... And I just know it takes a little longer to get things, so whatever.*

When I asked Lina what motivated her to continue on with post-secondary education, she scoffed and said that her father played a significant part in her ability to keep going and get her certification as a personal trainer.

*It had to do with the abuse from my father. It's kind of an emotional subject for me. He drilled into my head, he doesn't know how to talk to people, and he just said, in his words, I can see you being bare foot and pregnant when you are 21. And not having a career. And you are going to be on the streets. My dad told me that when I was 20. I was just out of high school. And I was trying to see what I want do, He said, you're not going to be anything. That hurt me, but I*

*took it the opposite way, ah fucking, letting that affect me. "You fucker, I am going to prove you wrong", and I proved him wrong. And I am going to keep doing that. There's no chance that my feet are going to be barefoot, and be pregnant. I guess in a way, it was like hard love, it forced me to motivate myself. (Lina, March 17, 2014)*

When she talked about her dad's way of motivating her, she described it as "hard love." Yet, she also knew his words were emotionally abusive and hurtful. Learning difficulties were part of Lina's childhood, but with extra support in school she was able work through the challenges to graduate and get her high school diploma. She says that it is not part of her present life; she works as a personal trainer. She noted the struggles she faced in school, but now that she is working, she no longer seems to identify with having learning difficulties.

### **Romantic Relationships**

Lina mentioned during one of our first conversations that she had always been in a relationship from as far back as she could remember, many of them abusive. We talked about her struggles with loneliness and her desire to fill that hole in her life. She said she did not want to be in a relationship and wanted to focus on herself, but the desire for affection and attention seemed to be much stronger. During the eight months we met, she was in three different relationships. As I reflect on her experiences, I wonder if her relationships were somehow connected to her issues with body image and self-esteem.

#### **John**

*John will leave me.*<sup>25</sup>

*"I am struggling,*

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<sup>25</sup> This found poem is from our conversations on October 16, 2013 and January 3, 2014.

*I want to lose weight.”*

*“No, no, no, stop it!*

*You are beautiful the way you are.”*

*“Maybe we should take a break.*

*I want to discover who I am.”*

*I had to get an abortion with John.*

*He didn’t want me to get rid of it.*

*“Ok, forget what I said, we’ll be together.”*

*I sucked it up and put a smile on my face.*

Lina and John seemed to have the ideal relationship. Her mom and sister loved him, and thought he was the ideal partner. She said he treated her with love and kindness. They had talked about getting married, living in a nice house with a picket fence, and eventually having a few kids running around. He wanted to have this life with Lina. And initially, Lina thought that she wanted this life as well. However, all of these plans started to unravel, and Lina realized and admitted to me that she was not ready for the life John had mapped out. She said she needed to discover who she was before she could commit to a life with someone. She was afraid of losing John, but she was also afraid of moving ahead and regretting it.

Lina expressed a fear that she would not find someone who loves her and who she could be with. She worried that by breaking up with John she would yet again disappoint her mom and sister. She hesitated to be out of her comfort zone. She wavered between staying with John who was stable and familiar, and being true to who she really was, someone who did not fit into John's world.

### **Mike**

When she met Mike at the hospital in the eating disorder outpatient program, her relationship with John was already unstable. She did not feel the same connection with John that she felt with Mike. She knew she was being unfair to John and she had to end the relationship, despite her mother and sister's wishes for them to stay together.

*[Mike] has actually been really good for me, but he doesn't like his body. He thinks he's fat. We joke about it, we know what our triggers are, but I like that. I actually like that more than when John kept saying, "Shut up, shut up, I don't want to hear you." With us, we support each other because we understand what we are feeling and then we calm each other down, and I think, 'Ok, I can breathe.' So he feels that I am attractive, and obviously I feel he's attractive, so we're good. I don't know. And other girls are like, I would never be able to date someone with an ED, and I was like that too, but I don't know, it seems to work. Things that John and I used to fight about, we laugh about, I don't know. (Lina, November 20, 2013)*

Lina's relationship with Mike only lasted a few months. He was extremely insecure and she felt uncomfortable with the direction the relationship was taking. She did not want commitment, and he was telling her he loved her and would die without her. She thought he had a drinking problem, and he was too emotional for her.

*Mike told me that he loves me. After knowing me for two months. And I know he wasn't. That's why I don't want to date right now. I don't know what I want. I am just thinking about my future and I think, well, who would I want to be with, and now I am like, I feel like- I am stuck between the new guy who is really nice and he really does care about me. But my mom is right he does have an eating disorder, I met him on the unit; he used to have a really heavy cocaine addiction. And then there's John, who is innocent, the perfect stable... but the connection and the love is not there. (Lina, January 3, 2014)*

### **Keith**

Lina met Keith at a party in January, and she said they decided to be friends, not romantically involved. She was still seeing Mike, but felt more relaxed around Keith.

*He's a very established person. He is one year older than me, he's got a car, and a job, and a house and a dog, it's sort of like another John version, sort of. I dunno. And I pretty much hope he doesn't break my heart. In the long run I always thought he was not into me. He said he wanted to patch things up with his ex-girlfriend. But I guess that's changed. And he does want to see me at least once a week, we're both busy, we are both trainers. Yeah, we smoke pot all the time. That's fine. But he does do cocaine. But he told me he won't do it around me. And he's not out of control. He's not addicted to it. And we are having a sober month, so we haven't been drinking at all. That's why I am thinking he is so different from Mike, who would drink all the time. (Lina, February 13, 2014)*

In April, 2014, Lina told me that she had broken up with Keith just before Easter. He had been treating her badly for some time, being disrespectful and inconsiderate. She learned that his cocaine use was much more serious than she had initially perceived; they would get high



every time they were together. She said they had trouble talking unless they were high on drugs. She told me that Keith had been lying to her and was sleeping with other women while they were dating. He was not the person she thought he was.

Lina stated a number of times that she did not want a serious relationship. When we first met, she had been with John for two years. He wanted to get married, but she was not ready. She realized that she needed to focus on herself and her health. She dated Mike and Keith, with both men triggering her addictions in different ways. During one of our last conversations, she spoke about the need to be independent and to learn to love herself before pursuing romantic relationships.

### **Shoplifting**

We were in a coffee shop chatting, and she explained that shoplifting was an addiction for her -- that when she went into stores, she would automatically plan to shoplift. She had just been arrested for shoplifting and assaulting a peace officer. I asked Lina if being arrested and going to court made her feel like a criminal, like she was being judged. She said that was a really interesting question and she had never really thought about it.

*You know I did feel like a criminal a few months back, when I was just starting to get out of it. I would be like... And the way I dressed and my piercing and stuff. I noticed people would look at me in stores, and I know I'm not going to do anything, but... it's funny, 'cause they would be like... but now, I don't. I don't feel like a criminal. I want to blend in. I am trying to just be part of society. (Lina, March 28, 2014)*

*I did a lot of stealing when I did not look like this.* <sup>26</sup>

*And people say anyone could be a shoplifter.*

*'They notice me, let's not do this.'*

*I got caught*

*When I was 12, then 14, then 16, then 19.*

*And now I am 23.*

*I would plan days and exactly what times to go,*

*What time of day.*

*I thought I was invincible.*

*It was a wake-up call,*

*A huge wake-up call*

### ***I AM OUT OF CONTROL.***

When Lina said she was out of control, I did not take the time to ask her what she meant. I assumed she was talking about her shoplifting, but after meeting with her a few more times and talking about her eating disorder and drug use, I was not sure. She said that shoplifting was her way of coping with her eating disorder because she had been able to do it without having to face any serious consequences.

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<sup>26</sup> This found poem was from a conversation on October 31, 2013.

*...And the lawyer represented me to the judge telling them why I should not go to jail and get a criminal record, and tell them that I am moving forward, and he has the information, then it is up to the judge. It's all in his hands. And so far, I have been blessed and lucky. They have been like, give her a chance. ... 'Cause they can't really do anything when you are under 18, right. And I went to court and all that. (Lina, March 27, 2014)*

I was surprised when Lina told me that she had not felt tempted to steal. Although she had shoplifted for over ten years, since she was twelve years old, she knew that she would have to face jail time if she was caught again, so she was able to stop herself. She did not want to shoplift, but she admitted that she would replace one addiction with another. She perceived certain addictions as being more acceptable by society. As we talked about shoplifting and drugs, I realized that we had lowered our voices. I am not sure if we did it consciously, but I think we may have suddenly been more aware of all the other people around us.

### **Drugs and Alcohol**

*I am worse when I am not on drugs. That's how I feel. My [eating] disorder is worse. Like when I am not high. When I am high I am a lot calmer, I can think straight, I can eat. I don't think about things as much. My anxiety is gone. Everything is just zoned out and I am in my own place. Everything is so mellow, I'm happy, I feel self-confident. Everything that I want, I feel when I am high. And that's why it's a problem because how else can I get that without being high? That was the biggest mistake I made, I think was going into drugs while I was in recovery for my eating disorder because I learned to attach myself to that, so it's like my go to when I need to eat or feeling depressed. (Lina, October 31, 2013)*

When I first met Lina she told me she was struggling with drug and alcohol addictions. She also talked about 'moving from one addiction to another'. In one conversation she would tell me that things were awesome, but then talk about feeling depressed and suicidal. After reading the transcripts of our conversations, I wondered if she was masking her emotions and trying not to be negative, rather than being open with me and letting me see what was really happening inside. I think that in some ways she had become accustomed to saying what pleased others and hiding her emotions, as she did with her mom and sister, so she was not used to being herself.

### **Eating disorder (ED)**

During one of our conversations, she said she thought it was more socially acceptable to have an eating disorder than have a drug addiction. I knew from my experiences that talking about eating disorders could be a trigger, so I did not ask specific questions. Although I could relate to her struggles with bingeing and purging, I tried not to say too much. When she brought it up, I had to make an effort to stay quiet.

*It was really hard yesterday, I was three months without throwing up and I relapsed. And I felt so ashamed. I binged on Halloween candy that I saw in my house and I am just not in control anymore. It gives you this high- that's what happened yesterday, it was two chocolate bars, but then it became four, and then other things, and then I felt so sick, but thought, 'I am going to keep eating and torture myself later'.... It's when I need that impulse I go to shop lifting sometimes, but I can't now, so.... It just sucks. Because I know if I tell my boyfriend he will not talk to me, and my mom. Everyone just reacts, but if I don't tell them, it's just... Yeah, but I feel like [my therapist] still judges me too. But she knows that I do slip up and it's part of recovery.*

*So I keep telling myself, get back on that horse, you slipped up, but that is ok. (Lina, October 31, 2013)*

I wondered if her therapist said anything to make Lina feel like she was being judged. She had said that having an eating disorder seemed to be more accepted than having a drug addiction, but she was still afraid talk about it with those who are closest to her.

On the last day we met, Lina gave me some of her writing. She told me that she liked to write; it was my first time reading her work. I had not expected to read about such an intense internal battle with her eating disorders because our conversations had been so positive, and she seemed to be more confident and healthy. I felt like she was showing me another side of her, but we never had the opportunity to talk about it because I could not get a hold of her again.

### **ONE DAY in the life of a sufferer of ED (eating disorder)<sup>27</sup>**

*12:00- wake up noon, awesome, morning gone.... Food- less to count. 'Let's go move those legs, get up you FAT ASS.' I need something inside... last night I B/P (binging/purging) so much my stomach feels shriveled and my muscles so weak can I even get out of bed? **Safe foods** choose only the safe foods, low calorie, coffee to start your engine and nothing else for the Rest of the day. Stay busy... or you will have ANOTHER day of B/P. You want to restrict, look on the scale look at that number. That number is your life. ED loves the numbers game, and loves putting me down. 'Smoke another cig Miss, go ahead, now walk for 2 hours.' Bedtime- hungry, sad, lonely,*

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<sup>27</sup> The structure of the writing is kept from the original pieces (July, 2014).

*ED took my positive emotions and replaced them with negative. Ok, go Binge- only on safe binge foods that are easily purgable, ice cream, yogurt, chocolate, cake- go on you deserve it.*

*PURGED*

*I feel worse, ashamed, sick, tired, and afraid of not waking up. I lay in bed, scared to die, hearing my heart pump, as if it's the last pump as ED cries out inside my stomach, the empty sick hungry feeling is me applauding you. You did wonderful, but you can do better tomorrow. Go weigh yourself before you sleep. Oh that's a shitty number, you suck, you are FAT, and ugly. Ugh, STOP EATING your fasting three days as of tomorrow. I hate myself. **Lights go off**, but remain in my head thoughts **NEVER TURN OFF**.*

**"ED"**

*The night is too long*

*These words are wrong*

*There's no hope for me.*

*Day comes, as does boredom*

*So why did I even get up?*

*My head, my world is grey*

*And blurry, I am not who I am anymore.*

*A living corpse waiting for the day to end.*

*"Crying, lonely, sad,*

*Bored, hurt, unattractive”*

*Perfection is in your reach,*

*Just let ED be your teach,*

*Those pretty eyes are ugly with*

*The hidden truth that lies behind.*

*ED*

*When will this end?*

*“Never,” whispers ED.*

*Let’s get high to numb the pain to get rid of all the troubles in your life. Repeat when the drug effects are through, you will ALWAYS rely on addiction to hide your true self from addictively loving yourself for you, that will never happen when ED’s in your life, making sure you’re with the wrong boys, relationships, work place, etc. Everything is his way or nothing – wait. Nothing is great, okay pop this pill, drink this drink and I promise to give you your wish of nothing my dear. “Ok.”*

**My life begins with ED**

*1 in 4 they say,*

*I am that 1 in 4.*

*Statistics are shocking,*

*Every time I am in a group*

*I feel that number staring me down... telling me I am the fuck-up, I am the crazy mental one. I will suffer for the rest of my life. I become anti-social, low-confident, unable to breathe around social situations because ED has his grip around me, all the time. 'Breaking Free' seems like a joke, have the therapists and doctors really experienced ED? NO. The mental workout every day, I want to be in a different body a different world, a different life where there are NO statistics, Judgments, thoughts, Just peace. Drugs were my 'place' to escape its only temporary... Just like my life.*

These three pieces were intense depictions of what was going on inside for Lina, and I compared them to what I had perceived during the months we had met. When I met with Lina, I had not seen the layers below the surface. She sounded so sure of herself; she seemed aware of her weaknesses, even though she continued to express feelings of depression and worry about the future. She talked about how sick and unhappy she was when she was at her 'goal weight.' Unlike the times I had met with the other young women, Lina and I would rarely have a meal together. She admitted that she had binged and purged a few times over the eight months that we met, but I was hesitant to dwell on the subject. I had focused more on her drug addiction; like her family and friends, I too had seen it as a more serious problem without realizing it. When I read Lina's writing I was able to see how much her eating disorder affected all areas of her life, and I realized how much she had been suffering in silence.

### **Our Lives Intertwined...**

From the start we connected through our common struggles with an eating disorder and alcohol addiction. I thought I could understand her much better because I had some similar experiences. At the same time, I grappled with the ethical dilemma of how much I should share



about myself. It was difficult to keep myself at a distance when I was asking her to tell me her private stories.

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Lina struggles to accept the concept of being healthy and loving herself because she does not want to simply eat what the hospital gives her and gain weight in order to be at an 'appropriate' weight. As I can imagine for most people with eating disorders, the idea of eating to gain weight repulses her. She feels the need to restrict herself, over-exercising and purging. She talks about 'torturing herself' but as a coping mechanism. She told me that she used to cut herself as a way of coping. (Fieldnotes, January 2014)

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I met with Lina today. Our meetings are very reciprocal; she teaches me a lot when we talk and when I hear her stories. Even though I feel the need to distance myself, I have a hard time creating boundaries and separating the work from other areas of my life. I guess I am now realizing that I am never completely separated from my participants. Just seeing how Lina has been struggling with her addictions and with her eating disorder did force me to reflect on my own life. I think about how she sees me as someone who has completely recovered, and of course I still have struggles. I mull over how I can tell her that I will always have a complicated relationship with food. It is great to hear that she is going to AADAC again she's going to do that treatment for month. I am really hoping that she'll come to know for herself what she wants and needs. (Fieldnotes, January 2014)

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Lina always asked me how I was doing. I did open up to her on a few occasions, but I also found myself holding back because I knew this relationship was not simply a friendship. I thought about the boundaries I tried to maintain during our time together. Yet, I also knew that having a meaningful relationship was important.

*If we didn't have a relationship, and we just met a few times our relationship would be superficial. It would be very shallow, and I would be guarded. People are really guarded about their eating disorders. I think of you as a friend, I also think I am helping you out with your research. I feel like we can relate to each other. I think of you as one of my good girlfriends. I don't feel awkward at all. (Lina, January 28, 2014)*

## **Epilogue**

The last time we met in June, 2014 she returned her narrative accounts and shared some personal writing. I gave her a gift card as a token of appreciation. When I first met Lina, I thought we had so much in common. However, after meeting regularly for about four months our relationship quickly fell apart, as I noticed myself losing the sense of connection with her. Although we had many similar experiences, we were not the same. I learned about the way commonalities can initiate a relationship, but can sometimes create a superficial connection that is not sustainable on its own. I am not sure why our relationship faltered, but I do continue to think about Lina and how she is doing since we last met. She said it was hard to read about herself and about her experiences, and she made comments in the margins to express her opinions. Our last conversation was short, and she was quiet. I wondered if the narrative accounts I shared with Lina were what she had in mind.

## Chapter 3

### Experiences of People with Learning Disabilities in the Criminal Justice System<sup>28</sup>

There is unequivocal evidence that persons with learning disabilities are over-represented in the prison population. To date however, few studies have investigated their first-hand experience, including their experiences of being interrogated, of standing trial, serving time, and transitioning back into the community. The purpose of this review is to draw what insights we can from the limited available data and to identify directions for future research.

#### **Background**

Prevalence studies in the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and the United States (US) have consistently found that persons with learning disabilities are over-represented in the prison population (Hayes, Shackell, Mottram & Lancaster, 2007; Loucks, 2007; Murphy & Clare, 1998; Shelton, 2006). Prevalence estimates range from ten per cent to sixty per cent depending, at least in part, on how learning disability is operationally defined (see Table 1). Studies that have used psychometric testing to identify persons with learning disabilities have generated mid-range estimates. In the UK, for example, Hayes et al. (2007) administered the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS-III) and the Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scales (VABS) to a random sample of 140 men in one correctional facility. Based on the WAIS-III test results, an estimated 30.7% of the prison population had moderate, mild or borderline learning disability.

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<sup>28</sup> This chapter has been published. Hyun, E., Hahn, L., & McConnell, D. (2014). Experiences of people with learning disabilities in the criminal justice system. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 42(4), 308-314. The formatting of the chapter reflects the journal's guidelines.

Persons with learning disabilities tend to commit less serious crimes and therefore serve shorter sentences (Hayes, 2007; Zhang, Barrett, Katsiyannis & Yoon, 2011). However, they are also more likely to experience multiple prison stays. The rate of recidivism among persons with learning disabilities is reportedly higher than it is among their non-disabled counterparts (Cowardin, 1999; Hayes, 2007; Zhang et al., 2011). This ‘revolving door’ relationship with the CJS may begin in their youth. In New South Wales, Australia, the Young People in Custody Health Survey found that 77% of youth in custody had significantly below average cognitive ability, as measured by the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scales (WAIS-IV) (Indig et al., 2011). Similar findings have been documented in the US, where an estimated thirty to fifty per cent of juvenile offenders have learning disabilities (Mears, Aron & Bernstein, 2003; Oshima, Huang, Jonson-Reid & Drake, 2010; Rutherford, Bullis, Anderson & Griller-Clark, 2002, Schroeder, Guin, Chaisson & Houchins, 2004; Shelton, 2006).

Many factors may contribute to the over-representation of persons with learning disabilities in the criminal justice system. Persons with learning disabilities may be more likely to commit a crime, due to chronically poor life conditions and/or negative peer influence (Fitzgerald, Gray, Taylor & Snowden, 2011): Individuals with learning disabilities often enter the system with preset disadvantages such as fewer social supports, lower rates of education and employment, and lower socioeconomic status than the general population (Oshima et al., 2010). Alternatively, or in addition, persons with learning disabilities may be more likely than their non-disabled peers to be caught, to stand trial, and to be sentenced and incarcerated. Several scholars have argued that persons with learning disabilities are relatively disadvantaged by criminal justice processes and procedures that fail to accommodate their particular information and support needs (Holland, Clare & Mukhopadhyay, 2002; Loucks, 2007; Murphy & Clare, 1998).

In other words, the over-representation of persons with learning disability in the criminal justice system may have as much or more to do with disparate access to justice (social and legal) as it does to underlying rates of crime.

In the criminal justice system, the voices of persons with learning disabilities are rarely heard (Loucks, 2007; Talbot & Riley, 2007). Unfortunately, the same appears to be true of research about the criminal justice system. In this study, we set out to learn what we could from the limited available research about the first-hand experiences of persons with learning disabilities who are caught up in the criminal justice system. The main research question is how do people with learning disabilities experience the criminal justice system? Our method is a systematic search and meta-synthesis of personal accounts published in peer-review journals.

### **Method and results**

A systematic search of the literature was conducted using the EBSCO search engine, Sage Research Methods Database, and Proquest. The search was limited to articles in English published since 1985. The key search terms, used in various combinations, were learning disabilit\*, intellectual disability, mental handicap, mental retard\*, delinquen\*, criminal, offender, qualitat\*, narrative, grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography, case stud\* and experience\*. Separate searches were also carried out on relevant journals to decrease the risk of missing pertinent studies.

A total of 768 matches were found, including replicates. Article titles and abstracts were reviewed to determine relevance. Potentially relevant articles were then read in detail to determine whether they included the perspective of persons with learning disabilities. Only articles that documented ‘insider’ accounts of persons with learning disabilities who have been

caught up in the CJS were retained for analysis. Ultimately, four studies were retained for this review. A summary of each of these four articles is presented in Table 2.

One study captured experiences of people with learning disabilities before sentencing (Leggett, Goodman & Dinani, 2007), while the remaining three studies looked at post-sentencing experiences in prison (Talbot, 2010) and community settings (Hagner Malloy, Mazzone & Cormier, 2008; Unruh & Bullis, 2005). Two studies were conducted in the United Kingdom with adult participants (Leggett et al., 2007; Talbot, 2010), and two were conducted in the United States with a focus on the youth population (Hagner et al., 2008; Unruh & Bullis, 2005). A total of 232 persons with learning disabilities participated in these four studies. The gender of most participants was unspecified. In the two studies where gender was specified, 13.3% (Leggett et al., 2007) and 21% (Unruh & Bullis, 2005) of the participants were female.

### **Thematic analysis**

Two of the authors (EP & LH) independently reviewed each of the four articles using the guidelines for meta-synthesis developed by Sandelowski and Barroso (2007). The first step involved reading each article and extracting methodological details including target population, sampling strategy, and interview process and procedures. The data (i.e. the personal accounts documented in each article) were then pooled and a thematic analysis was undertaken. The two reviewers then met to discuss and integrate their findings. Integrating the findings was straightforward as the two reviewers had independently reached similar conclusions. Three common themes were identified.

### **Common themes**

From the four studies (Hagner et al., 2008; Leggett et al., 2007; Talbot, 2010; Unruh and Bullis, 2005) three common themes were identified: (1) study participants did not understand

what was happening to them, or why; (2) they felt alone, and they did not know where to turn, or to whom for support; and, (3) they were uncertain about what to say or do. The overarching theme was isolation, as participants were isolated prior to involvement in the CJS and were further isolated as a result of their experiences.

*Theme 1:* Study participants did not understand what was happening to them, or why. Some did not know exactly what they had done wrong, or rather, why they had been arrested. At the time of arrest, many did not fully comprehend their plight, including the possibility that they may be incarcerated. And under interrogation, many did not fully understand what the police were saying or asking of them, or the fact that anything they said might be used against them. With uncertainty came fear. However, participants talked more about their anger over the way in which they were treated by the police than they did about their fear of consequences.

“I told them I was partially deaf but it made no bloody difference. I couldn’t hear one bloody word they were saying. The two officers what was doing the interview was not letting me calm down and they got me uptight and annoyed and stuff. I was pissed off seeing as at the time I wasn’t thinking straight and they made out like it was all my fault” (Leggett et al., 2007, pg. 172).

“They were shouting at me. I don’t like people shouting at me and they got a bit nasty towards my mum. They treated my mum a bit wrong because my mum never did nothing wrong so I don’t agree with that” (Leggett et al., 2007, pg. 171).

*Theme 2:* Participants felt alone, and they did not know where to turn or to whom for support. When in custody, participants wanted someone to talk to and somewhere they could go to ask questions. “We should have somebody who has time to come over and find out what’s happening and talk to us rather than just being put in a suicide cell” (Talbot, 2010, pg. 38). One

participant expressed a lack of support by saying, “I don’t get anything offered and I never ask” (Talbot, 2010, pg. 37).

Participants who were serving time were aware of some of the things they would need to learn when released from prison, but they were not sure where this support would come from. One participant expressed “[I will need help] making my own food and like just going outside, being in public, job applications . . . just simple things. They’re going to be hard, like even doing my own clothes; it’s going to be hard ‘cause I haven’t done it in a long time” (Unruh & Bullis, 2005, pg. 74). Talbot (2010) observed that persons with learning disabilities were generally uncertain about where they would go for help as they prepared to leave prison, and some had “high expectations of the kinds and extent of help they might expect from probation/criminal justice social work, to the point that many had expectations that were unrealistic” (pg. 39).

For previously incarcerated youth, succeeding in school and resisting negative influences were primary concerns, and many felt that more or different support was needed. These youth had to overcome their own and other’s negative expectations, including the negative expectations of some teachers who viewed them as troublemakers destined to failure (Hagner et al., 2008). And they had to overcome these negative expectations with limited support. One participant explained that the “crowded, chaotic atmosphere of the high school environment provided too many distractions from his assignments and responsibilities” (Hagner et al., 2008, pg. 243), yet no accommodations had made, such as the provision of a quiet place to study. One participant summed up the experience for many, observing that it is easy to “get lost” in a large high school.

*Theme 3:* Participants were uncertain about what to say or do when in the police station, in prison and/or back in the community. One participant, in prison at the time of the interview, was asked what he would do if he didn’t understand a question addressed to him. He said “I



wouldn't do anything really; I'd be too scared to ask, so I'd do nothing" (Talbot, 2010, pg. 36). Another was asked how he knew what the prison rules are. He responded, "That's easy. You know the rules when you break the rules" (Talbot, 2010, pg. 37).

With uncertainty about what they should say and do there came fear of reverting to old habits and patterns. After being released from prison, one participant said "I went back to my old friends. Still seeing them. And you think, 'Do you want to smoke some weed?' or 'Do you want to do this again [be incarcerated]?' It's hard to resist when you've been friends with them ever since you were a little kid. That's one of the things you gotta stay away from, day one. Can't call them up, can't go see them, can't do things with them" (Unruh & Bullis, pg. 74). Transitioning to the community with limited support and seemingly little prospect of a better life created situations of hopelessness. When asked about his outlook two years into the future, one participant responded, "I'll probably be dead by then" (Hagner et al., 2008, pg. 243).

## **Discussion**

The first person accounts of persons with learning disabilities who have been caught up in the criminal justice system reveal their vulnerability. Participants were vulnerable before, during and after incarceration. During arrest, a majority of participants did not have immediate access to a lawyer, nor were they aware that they were able to ask for representation. The participants' vulnerability was exacerbated by the unavailability of professionals, requiring individuals to wait several hours for them to arrive. During detention, not knowing what they were supposed to do or what was happening resulted in a limited amount of social interaction and a sense of helplessness. In transition to the community, they were vulnerable to falling back into old habits and routines, and had difficulties with negative peer influences, drugs and alcohol.

The overarching theme, running across the first-person accounts, is that of social isolation. In each of the four studies, multiple participants reflected on how alone they felt. Whether they were in the police station, in prison, or transitioning back into the community, participants wished that they had someone to talk to, someone who understood them, someone who was on their side. Many had little social support before they were caught up in the CJS. And their experience within the CJS only drove them further into isolation. They were afraid and anxious, unable to voice their needs in prison, and unsure what to do when they were released.

### **Limitations and Implications**

The main limitation of this review is the dearth of published studies that describe the experiences of people with learning disabilities in the CJS. As a result, a clear depiction of what is happening at the police station, court house, detention facility, and in community transition is difficult to establish. Notwithstanding, the consistent findings across the four studies reviewed here, offer some general insights, and suggest directions for policy, practice and future research.

It is clear that persons with learning disabilities face many barriers to justice within the CJS. With little support, limited understanding of their rights, and limited insight into what is taking place (e.g., when being interrogated), persons with learning disabilities are vulnerable. The criminal justice system is poorly equipped to accommodate their information and support needs, and in turn, guarantee due process. The situation for persons with learning disabilities who are transitioning back into the community seems no less dire. Many recognize that they will need support if they are to avoid falling back into old habits and routines, and overcome the negative expectations of others, and the negative influence of peers. But most have little idea how to access such support, or whether such support will be available to them.

The ongoing high prevalence of learning disabilities in the CJS emphasizes the need for practical measures that address awareness, understanding, positive support and adaptation. Increasing awareness of learning disabilities among professionals and corrections staff; providing formal and informal support in holding cells, detention facilities and community facilities; adapting and accommodating to individuals with learning disabilities within prisons and in the community are practical changes that will likely improve the experience and outcome for those involved.

The findings clearly support the need for initiatives such the Criminal Justice Support Network, in New South Wales, Australia, which provides rights-based support for persons with learning disabilities in the police station and court house (Intellectual Disability Rights Service, 2011). The findings further suggest the need for support, or rather advocacy, in prison and in transition back to the community. Persons with disabilities who are caught up in the criminal justice system may benefit from having an advocate to ensure that appropriate accommodations are made and their rights respected, and to ensure that they gain access to the resources and opportunities they need to create a better life and avert any further CJS involvement.

### **Future Directions**

There is a pressing need for more research that will give voice to persons with learning disabilities, and shed insight into their experiences and support needs within the CJS. Further, there is need for research to understand how persons with learning disabilities come into contact with the CJS in the first place, with a view to prevention. To this end, life-history research is particularly well-suited, that is to trace and chart the narrative pathways leading from early childhood experience to CJS involvement.

In addition to this ‘discovery oriented’ research, there is a need for evaluation. More specifically, there is a need for research to evaluate support and advocacy strategies for persons with learning disabilities. Access to justice is one outcome. Strategies to build systems capacity to accommodate the learning, support and advocacy needs of persons with learning disabilities may offer the most sustainable solutions. The routinisation of practices that safeguard and advance the rights of persons with learning disabilities is critical.

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**Table 1.** Prevalence of Learning Disabilities among Youth and Adults in Prison Populations

Source	Geographical Region	Sample	Operational definition of LD/ID	Measurement/ Assessment tool	Prevalence estimate
Bell et al. 1983	USA	n=765 random sample of adult male and female inmates from 3 states	Functioning at or below a grade 5 level	TABE (Test of Adult Basic education)	42%
Hayes et al., 2007	UK	n= 140 random sample of adult male inmates of a Liverpool prison	IQ < 79 (score on WAIS-III)	WAIS-III	30.7%,
Herrington, 2009	UK	N=185 random sample of male youth, 18-21 years of age, 73% on remand	IQ < 79 (score on K-BIT2)	K-BIT2	33.8%
Indig et al., 2011	Australia	N= 312 male and female youth, participation was voluntary, over-sampling technique used to maximize number of female participants	IQ < 79 (score on WAIS-IV)	WAIS- IV	46.2%
Mottram & Langcaster, 2006	UK	Not specified	IQ < 79 (score on WAIS)	WAIS	32%
Shelton, 2006	USA	N= 350, random sample of male and female, ages 15-17 Maryland youth detention facilities	DSM-IV (1994) axis II, learning disorder	Standardized diagnostic instruments, surveys, criminal database	38%
Søndenaa et al., 2008	Norway	N=143 random sample of males and females ages 19-68	Below 85 on WASI (borderline, mild, moderate)	WASI	30.9%

K-BIT2: Kaufman Brief intelligent test, HASI: Hayes ability Screening index, IDEA: individuals with disabilities education act, LD: learning disability, ID: intellectual disability, ED: Emotional disturbance, MR: mental retardation VABS: Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scales, WAIS-III, WAIS-R: Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, Revised edition, WRIT: Wide range intelligence test, WRAT: Wide range achievement test

**Table 2. Summary of Articles**

Article	Research purpose and problem	Sampling strategy	Data collection	Data analysis	Findings	Discussion/ Interpretation
<b>Leggett et al. (2007)</b>	-To explore the views of people with ^LD about their police interviews and the *AA	Convenience sampling n=15 (13 men, 2 women) -referred to community LD service	-20-90 minute interviews -Questions provided to participants and a time for free response	- Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis -Little detail provided	-Negative attitude/behaviour of interviewer-yelled at, treated unfairly, did not listen -Criticisms about environment -Feelings-anger, frustration, fear and anxiety, boredom	- Participants had more negative or indifferent views of AAs than positive - Participants showed a lack of understanding and increased vulnerability
<b>Talbot (2010)</b>	-To share experiences of people with LD, and effect their impairments have on ability to cope with CJS process	Purposive sampling n=173, (154 LD, 19 *NLD – control group)	-90 minute interviews with breaks as needed -Semi-structured interviews	-No information of how qualitative data was analyzed	LD group was more likely to experience control and restraint techniques, to spend time in segregation (than general population), to be scared and bullied, to have higher rate of depression, decreased participation, to not access interventions for release, to worry about leaving facility, have high expectations for support in community	-Noted concern with human rights -Recognized a need for greater awareness
<b>Hagner et al. (2008)</b>	-To determine factors differentiating successful from unsuccessful outcomes as reported by youth and professionals (assessment of service model)	Purposive sampling, N=11 (3 youth from program, 8 professionals)	-20-30 minute interviews -Semi-structured interviews of youth and other stakeholders	-Qualitative analysis methods including comparison of different characteristics -Little detail provided	Support for high school completion: Alternatives, creative choices, engaging -Career and employment: Unrealistic views about work available, need to provide contacts and positive role models -Interagency coordination: inflexible or obsolete policies difficult to overcome, systems gaps -Mentorship: quality and willingness of family and friends	-Recommendations: - more prevention, early identification, and diversion programs, schools provide alternative ways to earn credits -Failures in re-entry as product of systemic and community factors
<b>Unruh and Bullis (2005)</b>	-To identify, categorize, and prioritize supportive strategies and barriers as reported by youth and stakeholders (for transition program development)	Purposive sampling n=33; youth with history in custody (26 male, 7 female)	-15-30 minute interviews -semi-structured interviews with youth	-Inductive and deductive coding method -Some detail provided	Primary strengths: family support, education and peer support, self, community support, quality of staff and mentors -Weaknesses: negative peer association, self as a barrier, lack of family support, alcohol and drug use, lack of independent living skills, lack of system consistency and social support, stigma - Two overarching themes: Support or barriers at systems-level or participant level, and the absence of a support becomes a barrier	Need to develop services in multiple contexts to support the development of positive social networks

\*AA- appropriate adult #CJS- criminal justice system ^LD- learning disability or learning disabled \*NLD- non-learning disabled

## Chapter 4

### Narrative Threads in the Accounts of Women with Learning Difficulties who have been criminalized<sup>29</sup>

#### Determination

It's really hard  
I want my kids to be bright and vivacious  
Personality shine through

*Have you thought about adoption?*  
*How can you take care of your baby?*  
*Are you having withdrawal?*  
*Will you use again?*

I gave my kids to their dad because I started using  
wanted them to be safe  
wanted to use more  
I lost all my parental rights

*No one will believe you --*  
*you're a crackhead*  
*you can't take your kids*

I will never abuse them  
I will never put a guy before my kids  
*I am going to win. They are going to win.*

Carla<sup>30</sup> is one of four women living in Alberta, Canada who took part in a narrative inquiry working with young women with learning difficulties who have been involved in the

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<sup>29</sup> This chapter was accepted and formatted according to editorial guidelines for a book chapter in the Prairie Child Welfare Consortium (PCWC) Book Series: Voices from the Prairies (vol. 5), Regina, SK: University of Regina Press. It was written in collaboration with Dr. J. Minaker, Dr. D. McConnell, and Dr. V. Caine.

<sup>30</sup> All names have been changed.

criminal justice system. This found poem (Lahman et al., 2011) was created from transcripts of conversations I (the first author) had with Carla. Carla was worried about their safety, so her older boys, Cam and Aaron, went to live with their father. When she would go to visit, their dad and stepmom call her a crackhead and a liar. Her experiences of being a mother were an integral part of the stories she shared with me.

Over a period of eight to eighteen months I met regularly with each of the four participants. Sometimes we would talk over coffee or a meal. Other times, our conversations were part of what we were doing, such as looking for an apartment, going to the food bank or meeting with a probation officer. To help me understand, the women talked about their childhood experiences, including their exposure to abuse and neglect, and the difficulties they had with learning at school; their relationships with professionals, parents, partners and (in the case of three of the four women) their children; as well as their daily lives, including but not limited to their ongoing struggles with substance use. The stories of the four women contribute to a body of feminist criminology and disability studies research that challenges “monolithic representations” of women in the criminal justice system and women with learning difficulties.<sup>31</sup>

### **Background**

The postmodern feminist perspective in particular is foundational to this study. This perspective has been discussed in relation to criminology by several feminist scholars (eg. Balfour & Comack, 2014; Burgess-Proctor, 2006; Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Harding, 1991; Minaker, 2001). Scholars note that the direction of feminist criminology has shifted as a result of postmodern influences (Balfour & Comack, 2014), and rather than looking at *why* women are

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<sup>31</sup> Refers to difficulties with learning associated with mild cognitive impairment.

involved in the criminal justice system (CJS), postmodern feminists look at *how* certain forms of “governance (in a number of different sites) work to contain, control or exclude those who are marginalized in society” (Comack, 2014, p.33). Likewise, “postmodern feminists reject fixed categories and universal concepts,” recognizing the potential for multiple truths (Burgess-Proctor, 2006, p. 29). Instead of establishing “grand narratives of the social world”, there is an emphasis on the multiplicity within women’s lives (Comack, 2014, p.32; Smart, 1990).

The book *Razor Wire Women* by Lawston and Lucas (2011) is composed of contributions from women who have been or are incarcerated. Pieces of writing and art from the women illustrate and emphasize the importance of multiple perspectives when considering their needs and aspirations which can help us move beyond harmful stereotypes to progress toward a world where “dignity and respect are fostered for all human beings” (Lawston & Lucas, 2011, p.15). To resist the “monolithic representations of incarcerated women” (p. 6), Lawston and Lucas (2011) try to ensure “the voices of women who experience incarceration are respected, prioritized and validated” (p.6). They “privilege this experiential knowledge” by purposely and strategically placing the women’s works at the front of the chapters (Lawston & Lucas, 2011, p.9).

Women who are criminalized have been categorized as being “out of control, drug addicted, unruly, and sexually promiscuous, and often these stereotypes reach beyond incarcerated women to their families, children and communities” (Lawston & Lucas, 2011, p. 7). Their children are considered ‘tainted,’ and communities where the women are from become characterized as ‘bad’ (Lawston & Lucas, 2011). By having opportunities to express themselves, the women are able to “define the terms that shape their experiences” (Lawston & Lucas, 2011, p.15). They strive to express the direct effects of being misrepresented, on their lives as well as

the lives of others who are important to them. This book shows the powerful impact that the women's stories of experiences have when interpreted through a postmodern feminist lens.

Similarly, feminist disability studies scholars have discussed the way certain constructs of disability promote the marginalization of women with disabilities by distinguishing and focusing on what they *cannot* do (Morris, 1993, 2001). A postmodern feminist stance highlights the level of marginalization women with intellectual disabilities face and the “alarming gaps in our understanding of women’s lives” (Johnson & Traustadottir, 2000, p. 12). Mayes, Llewellyn and McConnell (2006) offer an example of challenging stereotypes in a study with pregnant women who have intellectual disabilities. In contrast to the societal view that women with intellectual disabilities would not and/or should not want to have children, the women in this study show their desire and capability to be loving mothers (Mayes et al., 2006). Namely, the women are active in shaping their social connections and show a sense of agency that seems to contradict pervasive societal perceptions. Mayes and colleagues (2006) highlight the importance in hearing the experiences from the women themselves, and that failing to do so would possibly silence “the gendered experiences of women with intellectual disabilities as women and as mothers” (p. 121).

Johnson and Traustadottir (2000) illustrate the diverse experiences of women with intellectual disabilities in their book, *Women with Intellectual Disabilities: Finding a Place in the World*. The book focuses specifically on experiences of women with intellectual disabilities because they have been duly ignored in feminist literature and in disability studies discourse, leading to an absence in their voices in both areas of research. The book not only considers the challenges, but also looks at achievements for women with intellectual disabilities in different communities. For example, although some stories are about women with intellectual disabilities

being excluded from families, inhibited from forming relationships and/or having families of their own, there are stories exemplifying women with intellectual disabilities as “central figures in their families of origin; others have become lovers and parents; still others have achieved creative and fulfilling careers and many make a contribution to the disability movement and to their own wider communities” (Johnson & Traustadóttir, 2000, p.16). By providing a range of stories, Johnson and Traustadóttir (2000) point out the gaps in knowledge about women with intellectual disabilities in disability studies.

Women with learning difficulties are thought to be overrepresented in the criminal justice system, although specific rates have not been determined (Hayes, 2007). A small number of studies have investigated the prevalence of learning difficulties in predominantly male prison populations. These studies report prevalence rates typically ranging from 30-60 percent, depending on how learning difficulties is operationally defined (Hayes, Shackell, Mottram, & Lancaster, 2007; Loucks, 2007; Morris & Morris, 2006; Oshima, Huang, Jonson-Reid, & Drake, 2010; Shelton, 2006). The reasons or ‘causes’ for the presumed high rate of incarceration remain poorly understood. However, researchers have observed that women with learning difficulties are more likely to be exposed to adversities that heighten the risk of involvement with the criminal justice system, such as childhood abuse, low educational attainment, unemployment/poverty and low social support (Hayes, 2007; Morris, 1993). Further, researchers have also observed that once ‘caught,’ persons with learning difficulties are more likely to be convicted and incarcerated because the criminal justice system does not accommodate their special needs and circumstances (Covington, 2003; Hayes, 2007; Jones & Talbot, 2010).

Among adults in the criminal justice system (CJS), the proportion of women has steadily increased over the past twenty years (Balfour & Comack, 2014). Being in the CJS may involve

arrest, charges laid, sentencing in court, being held in custody, and probation, and although they are widely varying experiences, all can lead to a criminal record. Little is known about the experiences of women with learning difficulties who have been arrested, sentenced and incarcerated. A recent meta-synthesis reviewed literature pertaining to experiences of people with learning disabilities in the CJS, not surprisingly with a largely male representation (Hyun, Hahn, & McConnell, 2014). In the four studies reviewed, Hyun and colleagues (2014) found that people with learning disabilities in custody and those making the transition back into the community were filled with anxiety and uncertainty about the future. They were afraid and unsure about where to go or who to turn to when they were trying to resist reverting to drug and alcohol use because of fear of judgment and stigma (Hagner, Malloy, Mazzone, & Cormier, 2008; Unruh & Bullis, 2005). The studies reviewed all described a need for more or different support for people who have learning disabilities in the CJS (Hyun et al., 2014). This meta-synthesis review pointed to a clear need for more research that considers the experiences for women, with a focus on the interactions between the women and other people in their lives, as well as broad systems in place for support and rehabilitation.

Inquiring into the experiences of women with learning difficulties can provide opportunities to share stories that “challenge prevailing stereotypes about women with intellectual disabilities and reveal that, like other women, they lead diverse and rich lives and also struggle to achieve fulfillment” (Johnson & Traustadottir, p. 22). With the growing interest in feminist perspectives, both in criminology and in disability disciplines, there is a need for more explicit research inquiring into the experiences of women, including women with learning difficulties in the criminal justice system to fill the gaps in knowledge.



## Research Method

Narrative inquiry is a relational research methodology that aims to understand experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Feminist criminology and feminist disability scholars have noted the paucity of research that looks explicitly at experiences to better understand women, namely, experiences in the criminal justice system and experiences with having disabilities (Balfour & Comack, 2014; Johnson & Traustadóttir, 2000).

Temporality, sociality and place make up the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Temporality includes the interactions with participants which take place over an extended period of time, and reflections of earlier experiences which are shared and co-composed as part of the narrative accounts. Each participant and I co-composed a narrative account of their experiences maintaining a rough sense of the lifespan from childhood to the present and into the future. In addition, narratives show the continuous nature of experiences as they rarely have a definitive beginning or end (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Sociality attends to the inward “thoughts, emotions, and moral responses and outward to events and actions” of the participants and researchers (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 167). The participants’ relationships with others, as well as their reflections and dynamic sense of self are a part of this dimension. Place refers to the physical places as well as the social and cultural context where the inquiry process unfolds. In addition, past, present, and future stories are situated within certain settings.

In narrative inquiry, *field text* is a term used to describe the data gathered during the initial stage of the research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this study, field texts, which included transcripts of audio recorded conversations, field notes I wrote, and personal journal writings the participants shared with me, were used to create the narrative accounts, also referred

to as *interim text*. The participants and I discussed and negotiated how to present the narrative accounts, and found poetry was included because poems were able to preserve the voice of the participants, clearly articulating their thoughts and emotions. As an iterative process with ongoing negotiation, the participants were heavily involved, from composing field texts to shaping final research texts. Across the narrative accounts, significant resonances across stories are described as narrative threads (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand the experiences of women with learning difficulties who have been involved in the Canadian CJS. Furthermore, I explored the narrative threads while considering possibilities to shape policy and practice.

### **Research Process**

My research puzzle<sup>32</sup> was based on the following questions: What are the life stories of young women with learning difficulties, and how do they experience the CJS? What kind of impact do their experiences in the CJS have on their present and future stories? In what ways have their stories contributed to how the participants see themselves and how they relate with others?

From January, 2013 to June, 2014, I met with four young women: Tasha, Carla, Caris and Lina. The relationships we formed allowed opportunities to have conversations about their experiences as women with learning difficulties in the CJS. After receiving ethics approval,<sup>33</sup> I went to two community organizations I knew through past volunteering experiences. The

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<sup>32</sup> A research puzzle refers to the research questions that influence the inquiry. “Problems carry with them qualities of clear definability and the expectation of solutions, but narrative inquiry carries more of a sense for a search... a sense of continual reformulation” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 124).

<sup>33</sup> Ethics approval was from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (ID number: Pro00033756).

agencies supported me in recruiting participants. Each of the participants had been involved in the criminal justice process and had self-identified as having learning difficulties.

The participants and I met 15-25 times, about once every two weeks over a period of eight to eighteen months. We met in different settings, and our relationships developed over time. We often sat and talked over a meal or in a participant's home, but I also went places with them. Our shared experiences became another way to understand their experiences. We would go to the food bank, spend time with family members, meet a probation officer or social worker, and go to buy groceries together. Our interactions became a reflection of our lives in relation to one another. I was open with participants and shared some of my own related experiences.

## **Participants**

The participants were 20-28 years old. Two of the women were Aboriginal,<sup>34</sup> one was of German descent, and one of French descent; all of them were born in Canada. In Alberta, the over-representation of Aboriginal women in custody in 2009-2010 was a little over 50% (Mahoney, 2011). Three of the women were mothers with two or three children; none of them were married or in common-law relationships at the time I met them; two of them were initially living with boyfriends but did not stay in the relationship because they were being abused. All of them identified as hetero-sexual. The participants had been arrested and charged at least once. Their charges were for shoplifting, theft, and violating administration of justice conditions (failure to appear in court, probation breaches, etc.), which was representative of the most common offences for women according to Canadian statistics from 2009-2010 (Mahoney, 2011). Two of the women had a criminal record, and two had their records expunged under the Youth Criminal Justice Act. Three of the women had been detained in custody for at least a week with

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<sup>34</sup> Aboriginal includes First Nations, Metis and Inuit people as defined by Statistics Canada (Mahoney, 2011).

the longest single period being two months. Two of the women mentioned they had been ‘in the system,’ since they were 13 years old, explained as having many interactions with police officers and being familiar with CJS procedures. One participant stated that she was categorized as a ‘high risk’ case and assigned a specialized case worker.

Each participant identified herself as having learning difficulties; these difficulties were described as having trouble keeping up in class and having specific challenges with learning. One of the participants completed high school with additional support from teachers, and the other three women did not complete high school. Two participants left school in grade 10, and one left in grade 7. Although all of the women received a clinical diagnosis – attention deficit hyperactive disorder/ attention deficit disorder (ADHD/ADD), general anxiety disorder, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), and learning disabilities in math and reading. Their experiences as women with learning difficulties, rather than their specific diagnoses, were the focus of the study. Excerpts from the narrative accounts of participants are presented to provide a glimpse of the women’s experiences and to show the presence and significance of the narrative threads.

### **Tasha**

*I like school, it makes me feel smart, and I am so proud of myself. I feel more confident in myself and more independent. And I just can't wait to get my education rolling so I can go on. Right now, it's just English and computers. I still have to do my math probably next year. I am going to try to get into full time in September. ...But if you mess it up, you have to wait four years. And you have to go every day. If you miss 5 days at school, then you get kicked out. If you get kicked out, you can't go back. It is stressful*

*now because what if I don't get childcare for February?*<sup>35</sup> (Tasha, January 17, 2014)

At 20 years old, Tasha had returned to formal education, or school, after leaving at grade seven when she was thirteen. She began taking classes three months after we first met to upgrade so she could take her GED (high school equivalency exam). School was empowering for Tasha; she was eager to pursue a career. She had to find childcare, apply for subsidy to pay for daycare, figure out transportation and scheduling so she could get to her classes and pick her son, Kobi up on time, as well as find time to complete her homework each day. Tasha returned to school after seven years and began the long process toward her goal, despite all the hurdles she faced to continue and succeed.

When Tasha left school at age 13, she was living with her mom, but would run away and go to different group homes. She said her mom did not make her go to school, so she just stopped going. She began drinking with friends and would shoplift to survive and pay for alcohol.

*I started drinking when I was 13, and I would drink all the time. The first time I drank I blacked out. I dunno why I drank, I think it was because I always felt sad and neglected. And I didn't know how to deal with my feelings. And now I am learning. I think it's just like, being a mom, I don't want to be like my mom. Like I remember I used to always cry for my mom, all the time. (Tasha, March 28, 2014)*

Tasha has two young sons, Kurt and Kobi. When Kurt was taken from her almost three years ago, Tasha drank even more. She felt such a deep sense of defeat, and she did not know

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<sup>35</sup> Text in italics indicates voice of participants.

how to deal with it. In the midst of this pain, she could not imagine having a baby, and possibly losing custody of another child. She was eighteen.

*When I found out I was pregnant, that's when I put myself into treatment. I wasn't even going to have [Kobi]. Just 'cause Kurt was in the hospital; I didn't have custody of him. I felt like I couldn't take care of him or myself. I dunno I was just tired. And then I felt really guilty... I even went to the abortion clinic....But I am so happy I didn't. I don't think I would ever get an abortion, either. And then I am happy I went to treatment. I thought with him, I thought it was my second chance to be a mom. And then everyone I see who was there, relapsing. I think I am the only one who got sober.*

*(Tasha, February 2014)*

Tasha is visibly Aboriginal. Her childhood stories included a cultural context; her grandparents raised her in an Aboriginal community until she was thirteen, and she talked about living close to her aunts, uncles and cousins. However, she said that as an adult she did not feel connected to her culture. She told me about a recent experience at the grocery store when a stranger called her racist names.

*My mom was parked in front, and then I had a shopping basket and I bought some groceries. And there was a guy beside us, and I put my basket down, and then we drove away because he honked at us to leave. And then later he came up beside us and starting yelling at us because we left the basket there. And he was an old white man and he was calling us racist slurs and stuff. And then I felt real bad after, and then my sister in law went in [to the store], and he was trying to accuse her of shoplifting. ...Yeah,*

*before he came to yell at us he said that he went inside to report her for shop lifting. (Tasha, December 2013)*

She felt like being Aboriginal was an added barrier in certain ways because of the discrimination she experienced when trying to get a job or find a place to live.

*That's my big problem, well, not a big problem, but that's how I feel when I go to job interviews, or when I have a hard time finding a place. I just like feel like... I don't know. Cause some people think badly of us. (Tasha, January 17, 2014)*

Providing her with long term support, Tasha's worker, Karrie, had been instrumental during the past four years of her life, helping her get an apartment, a job, funding for school and advocating for her. *"I had everything I needed, my social worker, [Karrie], would give me vouchers, but I rarely had money" (Tasha, March, 2014).* Karrie was the first person Tasha would call if she was in trouble, and she knew Karrie was there for support.

Tasha wants to be a role model. She wants to be someone that other women can look up to. She said that she doesn't feel sorry for herself. She does not try to excuse her past, but rather, she is looking ahead. She wants to have a career. She realizes there is much more to be done, but she is just taking it day by day, to reach her goals. *I think I just want to be a successful person that people want to be. It just feels like such a slow process. But I know I will get there eventually. I'm still 20 (Tasha, March 2014).*

## **Carla**

*I got so many different sides to me. I have like so many different personalities or whatever. Like I am dark, or whatever, I like dark things,*

*and gothic, and I am bubbly and I like vibrant and bright. I like being mellow and quiet sometimes, and then loud. (Carla, July 2013)*

I have been able to see the different sides to Carla with each meeting and each conversation we have had. When I first met Carla she was quiet. However, after meeting a few times she was much more talkative and able to laugh at herself. There were times when she would feel depressed and wanted to stay in her apartment. She expressed loneliness and frustration with living at the recovery house. Six months after our first encounter, she admitted she was anxious that day. I had initially thought she was a shy person, but after getting to know her, I realized my first impression of her was not accurate.

*I was quiet because I was assessing the situation, like when I was in the drug scene, you just sit there and you don't say anything around certain people, you sit there and learn and get a feel for what kind of people they are, and see how much you can open up and be a dork. Like people wouldn't suspect that I was the way I am, like now I am joking around and obnoxious. Oh, no I am in everyone's face all the time, cracking jokes, making fun of everybody. (Carla, July 2013)*

I understood what Carla meant when she said people would not suspect that she likes to make fun of others and joke around. I only saw this playful side of Carla after meeting with her several times. She was confident enough in herself and comfortable enough with me to admit that she was a 'dork' and we were able to laugh about it together.

Carla has three boys and her youngest, Jake, was only one month old when we first met. Her two older boys lived with their father, but stayed with her on weekends and breaks. She spoke candidly about her experiences selling drugs and being addicted to the drug crystal



methamphetamine for five years. She told me a story about having to hide from certain gang members because her mom had spent some of the money she was supposed to give them. She also told me about giving up her apartment and all her possessions to pay for drugs. Her reason for quitting was to have a place to live for Jake. She had been couch surfing when she found out she was pregnant with Jake, and she knew she would not be able to keep him if she did not have a home. She was able to get into a program that included subsidized housing at a recovery house, as long as she stayed clean.

Carla's experiences with child protective services began when she was a child and she would call them for help.

*Child services was involved lots. I remember calling children services when I was younger; my mom just beat up my brother and me really bad, and I called and said if you don't get me out of this house I am going to kill myself. And they were like, can you wait until tomorrow? We will see you at school. And I was like, ok. (Carla, March 7, 2013)*

Now, as a mother, she had to deal with child protective services again. A month after we first met, Carla was worried that she was experiencing depression and not being as affectionate as she should be with Jake. With a doctor's referral, she went to see a post-partum specialist. Rather than giving Carla suggestions to address her concerns, the counselor suggested putting her son up for adoption. She then contacted child protective services, telling them that Carla might be at risk of relapsing or endangering her son. For several weeks, Carla received visits from a child welfare worker. Carla had reached out for guidance from the post-partum specialist, but her response was, "How can you take care of your baby?"

Carla was physically abused as a child. Her determination to be a different kind of mother to her kids was evident in our conversations. When she was involved with gangs and heavily using drugs, she gave her boys to their father as a way of keeping them safe; she did it out of a sense of responsibility and love.

*My mom was abusive. So I will never abuse them, I don't like spanking my kids, there are other ways of doing it. I just have to be stern to my kids. I will just take them into the bedroom; I will take him by the arm. I will not spank my kids. I remember I did it once and I felt so bad. I said sorry, and then I think I bought him something... And I will never put a guy before my kids. If a guy doesn't like my kids, he can leave. My mom let guys kick me out of the house or whatever. She always put guys before us. (Carla, December 2013)*

Carla seemed to have few role models in her life growing up. I asked Carla who the most significant person was in her childhood -- the person who stood out the most for her. Carla told me that she really loved having a youth worker, and felt a connection with her. Even though their time together was brief -- less than a year -- the relationship left a lasting impression on Carla.

*So at 13, I had to have a youth worker. And she would take me to do things and stuff like that. I was the only kid that they ever allowed... like my worker was allowed to take me anywhere and whenever she wanted. She'd teach me how to draw pot leaves and stuff like that. And Kenny from South Park. She was really cool. (Carla, March 28, 2013)*

The found poem at the beginning of this paper was Carla's expression of determination, an example of how Carla's experiences shaped her identity. She knew she was 'different,' but

rather than embrace her uniqueness, she tried to 'fit in' so that she would not have to endure judgment. However, she wants her children to be able to be themselves. She feels determined to give them opportunities she never had. Her devotion to her children, as well as her resolve to be a mother to them is a significant part of her identity.

### **Caris**

Caris was diagnosed with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) at 22, when she was incarcerated. She said she was relieved to finally have an explanation for why she behaved in certain ways that had caused problems for her in the past, like being extremely forgetful and acting out with aggression. Her awareness led to confidence. She was able to create a short video on how FASD has impacted her life to present to the judge at her trial. She now knew that certain areas of her brain had been affected and some of the challenges she had faced, such as anger outbursts and impulsive actions were not simply due to her lack of control. She said that knowing she has FASD has changed the way she sees her behaviour. In junior high and high school she had a difficult time academically and socially. She left school when she was in Grade 10. She has thought about going back to school to take her GED tests and get her high school equivalency diploma, but she said it would not be for a while.

Caris started drinking as a teenager and she spoke about her struggle with alcohol addictions. She said that she went to treatment several times, but only completed the program twice.

*I would listen to the people talk and listen to like little things that they would say and at first I was like, I am just doing it for court, I was like, aww I don't really need this, and blah blah, but then I was just gonna go and drink again, but slowly then things started changing and my life started*

*changing and I started seeing how like sobriety can be a better way of living and stuff like that, and not be so hectic all the time because growing up I was used to it being hectic all the time...and so to me like that was normal, but actually, like living like a sober life has taught me, you can have a stable life, you know, instead of a hectic life, and it's less stressful and stuff like that. Like it must have been hard for my mom cause she had four kids and we were all really bad kids. (Caris, February 28, 2013)*

Caris identified with being Aboriginal. She talked about wanting to attend ceremonies but being unable to for a long time. Recently, she had started to reconnect with her Aboriginal community. Anne, the community worker who introduced us, is a mentor for Caris and often invited her to attend different cultural events. Her sister, a significant source of encouragement for Caris, used to go to sweats or pow-wows with her in the past. She said she hoped to participate in ceremonies with her sister and Anne soon.

Caris has two children. When I first met her, she had just been released from jail. She was completing all the conditions set out by the court so she could regain custody of her two year old son, Josh. A week later, they were together. At the time, she was living at a shelter, and I helped her move into subsidized housing. She talked about how important Josh was to her, and how he helped her stay on track. He was an anchor in her life that kept her grounded. She had a routine, and she was trying to get a job or work toward going back to school. After we met for about six months, I could not get a hold of Caris. I was able to reconnect with her through Anne who told me that Caris had gone through a rough time. I was glad to hear that Anne stayed in contact with her regularly. Caris had relapsed, and over the winter she and Josh were homeless. She gave him over to child services because she was worried about his health and safety. When I met with

Caris again, she did not want to talk about the past few months, but she was quite upset about having to give Josh up. I asked her why she did not call me for help. She said that when she was going through tough times, she kept to herself and did not like to depend on others. Although I was able to show her the narrative account and we talked about it, the lapse in time created a noticeable shift in our relationship.

## **Lina**

Lina and I began our relationship with a connection through our shared experiences with eating disorders, which she would always refer to as ‘ED.’ I could relate on some level with her struggles, and we were able to talk openly about them. *It gives you a rush, it’s an escape and I feel like it is more socially acceptable than doing drugs. I feel like they would not be as mad [as if] I was overdosing on drugs (Lina, October 16, 2013).* Although we found similarities in our challenges with addictions and eating disorders, our experiences were different because of the distinct circumstances and relationships in each of our lives. After meeting Lina for eight months, she shared some of her writing with me. Her powerful words expressed just how much she struggled to get through each day.

### ***My life begins with ED (eating disorders)***

*I in 4 they say,  
I am that 1 in 4.  
Statistics are shocking,  
Every time I am in a group*

*I feel that number staring me down... telling me I am the fuck-up, I am the crazy mental one. I will suffer for the rest of my life. I become anti-social, low-confident, unable to breathe around social situations because ED (eating disorders) has his grip around me, all the time. ‘Breaking Free’ seems like a joke, have the therapists and doctors really experienced ED (eating*

*disorders)? NO. The mental workout every day, I want to be in a different body a different world, a different life where there are NO statistics, Judgments, thoughts, Just peace. Drugs were my 'place' to escape its only temporary... Just like my life.*

Lina's school stories differed from the other participants. She was able to find support and to work with her teachers to overcome specific challenges. Lina's grade 6 teacher recognized the symptoms Lina had presented because her own child had attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), and Lina was assessed and diagnosed. Her experiences included staying after school and receiving one on one instruction. She spoke fondly about her relationship with one teacher who was patient with her and kept her motivated.

*But they would sit with me, I remember that. Mrs. Richmond, I loved her. She knew I had a problem with math, she would sit there and she would correct it and correct it. And in high school, they would help me too. They would hide it under the cover, but they were really nice.... I always felt that people can grasp things, and for me it takes a little longer, and it's a bummer, but I don't let it. I just.... And I just know it takes a little longer to get things, so whatever. (Lina, March 17, 2014)*

Lina was caught shoplifting for the first time when she was 12 years old. Her dad taught her how to steal. She got caught several more times, with the most recent being an arrest for shoplifting and assaulting a peace officer a week before we first met. Many of the times she would get a warning, but a couple times she had to go to court.

*Yep. I spent a night downtown at the police station- that was when I was 16. That was a scare tactic. It didn't work though. They put me in a cell. Yeah, but see, I didn't even learn from it. Oh the second time it was more for, well*

*it was for shoplifting but my friends had drugs on them too, so... Yeah.*

*'Cause they can't really do anything when you are under 18, right. And I went to court and all that. (Lina, March 27, 2014)*

In terms of feeling judged or discriminated against, Lina felt like people were staring and expecting her to steal after she had stopped shoplifting. *I noticed people would look at me in stores, and I know I'm not going to do anything, but... I don't feel like a criminal. I want to blend in. I am trying to just be part of society (Lina, March 28, 2014).*

Although Lina wanted to be accepted by others, she realized that she needed to focus on her health and happiness. Her closest relationships were stressful for her, and she expressed that she wanted to be more autonomous, rather than depending on her friends and family for support. She wanted to be stronger so she would not be so deeply affected by what others said to her. *That's why I don't want to date right now. I don't know what I want. I am just thinking about my future and I am like, well, who would I want to be with. (Lina, January 3, 2014)*

Lina had been especially affected by her mother's disapproving judgments about Lina's appearance, her relationships, and her addictions.

*She wants us to live the life she didn't live. She would prefer if I do everything right now, but do it her way. She needs to move on, she can't hold onto the past. And I need to move on too, or I will get sick. Really sick.... That's what she says, I will love you when you are better... and healthy and don't look like the way you look now.... I know and it hurts. (Lina, February 13, 2014)*

Whenever I met with Lina, she would be doing extremely well, in terms of relationships and work, or she would be deeply depressed. Some of our conversations were filled with hope

and Lina was motivated to take care of herself. She felt healthy and eager to pursue a career. Other times, Lina was suicidal and did not want to talk. She felt alone, and she said she could not be honest with her family or friends. Her circumstances and her aspirations changed and fluctuated throughout the time we met, and her hopefulness seemed to ebb and flow like a changing tide.

### **Narrative Threads as Plotlines**

Narrative threads (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) are resonances across narrative accounts. Although I cannot make broad generalizations from these threads, they are valuable for gaining insight with respect to the research puzzle. The narrative threads contribute to the understanding about the participants' experiences, as well as the social, cultural and political landscapes where the stories are situated (Clandinin & Raymond, 2006). In this study four threads resonated across the narrative accounts: uncertainty and instability in circumstances, having someone to turn to, enduring judgment and stigma, and mothering and being mothered.

**Thread 1: Uncertainty and instability in circumstances.** Each of the women went through a number of transitions, facing many obstacles and challenges throughout the time I was meeting with them. Tasha and Carla were both trying to pass their GED (high school equivalency) exams, but needed to take some classes which meant arranging childcare, getting financial aid, and finding time to study. Tasha had not been in school for seven years, she felt physical and mental strain when she started to attend classes again. Caris needed a place to live in order to keep her son once she gained custody. She asked me to help her look for an apartment. We went out a few times, but could not find a place that did not require a criminal record check. She was able to get into a subsidized apartment, but she stayed for only three months, and then moved in with her boyfriend. Two months later, she was living at a shelter for



women who had endured abuse, and I lost touch with her. Her living situation had changed several times throughout our relationship.

Lina had difficulties in her relationships with the people closest to her, including her mom, dad, sister and boyfriends. During the time we met, she moved from a subsidized apartment into her mom's basement as a way to save money, but expressed that she wanted to get out because she was feeling extremely depressed and mentally unstable. Carla was living in a 'recovery house' and she noted, *"Living here, really I feel like I am crippled, I don't feel like a whole person. I dunno, it's hard to explain"* (Carla, February 10, 2014). She was looking for a new place to live, but could not find an apartment within her price range. She eventually received subsidized housing when the recovery house was shut down. Maintaining a place to call home was a challenge for Caris, Lina and Carla. The women seemed to be in a constant state of change.

The uncertainty in circumstances was important to consider when understanding how the women formed and sustained relationships, as well as in thinking about their hopes for the future. Similar to the findings in Hyun and colleagues (2014), the participants in this narrative inquiry felt anxious and uncertain about their futures. In addition, they were often worried about how they would meet daily needs such as a place to sleep and food to eat. Although they expressed the need for support, what they perceived as beneficial seemed to change based on their circumstances.

**Thread 2: Having someone to turn to.** Each of the women had someone they could turn to who provided them with a sense of stability and support. Tasha had Karrie, her social worker, Carla had a youth worker in grade 6, Caris had Anne, a parenting program facilitator who became a mentor to her, and Lina had Mrs. Richmond when she was in high school. The

way that these relationships had an obvious and lasting impact on each of the participants is significant because they did not fill a particular role, and it was not ‘part of the job.’ Rather, the support was based on a strong connection and appreciation for the women as individuals, deserving of attention and affection. Tasha admitted that initially she simply called on Karrie when she needed food vouchers, and she did not talk or open up to her. She said it took a long time for her to feel close to Karrie and establish a relationship with her. Caris had several ‘workers,’ including a social worker, and FASD worker, a probation officer, and others. However, she noted to me that Anne did much more for her than any of her workers who got paid. She met Anne years ago when she took a parenting program, and they maintained a relationship after the program ended. Anne had initially introduced me to Caris.

For Carla and Lina, their significant relationships were shorter and at an earlier point in their lives, but both women expressed the impact these relationships had. They felt empowered and more positive about themselves as a result of having someone who believed in them and focused on their strengths. Carla said that her youth worker was the most memorable person from her childhood, and Lina talked about how Mrs. Richmond played a critical role in helping her successfully complete high school. Each of the participants’ lives included a person that they could turn to, and the relationships they had, although sometimes initiated by assignment, stood out above the others.

**Thread 3: Enduring judgment and stigma.** Participants shared private stories embedded in broad social and institutional systems, such as school, the criminal justice system, and child protective services. In school, Carla and Lina talked about being treated poorly by others. They were teased and bullied for being different. Being labeled by others was a substantial part of the participants’ stories, not only through explicit experiences of

discrimination, but also in the way they internalized the labels, leading to their fear of being judged. Some of their challenges were due to prejudice in the form of uninvited and unnecessary involvement from others. Other times, they did not get the assistance they needed because they were afraid to ask for help. Feeling judged and stigmatized was a part of their lives and influenced how they perceived professionals and workers who were in positions to provide assistance and support.

Tasha had several experiences of racial discrimination that made it difficult for her to pursue her goals, such as finding an apartment or getting a job. She heard hurtful remarks from strangers at grocery stores which affected her self-esteem and confidence. She said she wanted to be a role model for other women and implied that she wanted to show others that she could be successful and have a career. Tasha's desire to be a role model was one way she was able to retell her story in a way that fit with how she perceived herself now and hoped for in the future.

Carla had an open file with child protective services<sup>36</sup> for six weeks because of the judgement she faced from a post-partum counselor. It was stressful for her because she felt she was being judged by the case worker who was evaluating her parenting abilities. She was able to show the worker her competency at mothering during home visits by talking about the strategies she used in caring for Jake, such as setting up alarms on her phone for evening baths and feedings. She created a monthly budget to cover basic necessities such as formula and diapers. She told me that the case worker was surprised with how much she had done to care for Jake.

Caris received a diagnosis of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) at a correctional centre when she was 22. Before she had been diagnosed, she struggled to understand her

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<sup>36</sup> Child protective services are under a branch of the Government of Alberta called Alberta Human Services. They ensure that the children are receiving an appropriate level of supervision in the home and are kept safe (Government of Alberta, 2015). Similar services are found in all other provinces of Canada.

behaviours and the choices she made. She said she hoped to educate and find opportunities to talk about FASD to help reduce the stigma, as well as improve awareness for professionals working with people who have FASD. Lina had difficulty opening up to professionals about her eating disorder because she did not think they would understand and would judge her based on her illness. She felt she could not be completely honest with anyone. She wanted to blend in and be an accepted part of society, and she was afraid of judgment from her family and close friends. Lina was unable to reconcile what she wanted with her actual experiences, and she would fluctuate between trying to say and do what she thought others wanted and trying to be herself.

The stories presented here show glimpses of resilience in the women. Tasha went back to school and expressed her desire to be a role model to other young women. Carla was able to impress the case worker with her ability to care for Jake. Caris saw an opportunity to educate others about FASD and she made a video for the judge in her recent trial. At times, it was difficult to stand up against stigma and they would become cynical and cautious about who to trust. Lina felt like she could not be herself without disappointing her doctor, her mom and sister. Yet, they wanted to be perceived as more than the labels other people had placed on them. The professionals who were part of their lives, from teachers to doctors, had to earn the women's respect because of negative experiences they had as children and continued to have as adults. They seemed to expect to be judged by others, and some of their stories were about conforming so they could avoid being judged. As Carla put it, "I used to be different, now I am not like that."

The participants' experiences with learning difficulties began when they were children, but became part of their experiences as women living in poverty, trying to go back to school while caring for their own children. They had to find ways to survive, while trying to resist the discrimination they faced as women who were criminalized, who had certain diagnoses, and who

had addictions. Like in the studies by Hagner and colleagues (2008) and Unruh and Bullis (2005), the participants in this narrative inquiry felt judged and discriminated against by the people who were supposed to provide support, making it difficult to trust or depend on others.

**Thread 4: Mothering and being mothered.** Three of the participants are mothers and their own needs were often an extension of their children's needs and trying to ensure they were being cared for. Tasha put herself into treatment when she found out she was pregnant because she thought she was getting a second chance to be a mom. She stayed sober for the rest of her pregnancy and was able to rent an apartment for her and her son. Carla stated that she quit using drugs so she could have a place to live and keep her son. She made sure his needs were met, and in doing so was able to meet her own needs. She was especially adamant about putting her kids before romantic relationships, and not using physical force as a form of discipline. Her experiences of mothering were heavily based on her experiences as a child. Caris was motivated to attend parenting programs because she knew it increased her likelihood of regaining custody of Josh. She was aware of how the programs could be helpful for her and her kids, but her reason for attending was her fear of losing Josh. Eleven months after we first met, Caris lost custody of Josh again and she was determined to get him back. She said it was the only thing she was living for. She realized that when Josh was with her, she was more responsible and she had established a routine that *'kept her out of trouble.'* Her desire to stay sober and maintain a healthy lifestyle was based on her desire to get Josh back.

Lina did not have any children. Her narrative account contrasted with the other participants in the sense that she did not have a person or people who motivated her or anchored her in quite the same way. Lina said she wanted to be single and learn about herself again. She thought of this time in her life as a new beginning. She did not seem to be driven to maintain a

close connection to others, but rather, she saw a potential for growth by being on her own and being more independent. Her stories contrasted with the other three participants because she did not feel an explicit and tangible need to stay out of jail or quit using drugs.

Being mothered and mothering were central to three of the participants' stories and they spoke about trying to give their children different experiences from the ones they had as children. The participants were all abused by their mothers, emotionally and/or physically. Yet, each of them had an ongoing relationship with their mothers who are an active part of their present lives. They had feelings of resentment for what happened in the past, but still loved their mothers and wanted to stay connected to them. Tasha, Carla and Caris each felt a sense of purpose from being a mother and having the responsibility to care for their children. They saw themselves as mothers despite the negative way others perceived them, seeing them as criminals and drug addicts. They expressed determination to mother their children differently from the way they were mothered, and they were able to look into the future with hope.

### **Implications**

The individual stories were situated within a lifetime of experiences of women living at the margins of and within political, social, and institutional systems. In the present, surviving each day entailed challenges that were ongoing and dynamic, including meeting their basic needs of housing and food in the midst of uncertainty, their desire for support without judgment and stigma, and their commitment to mothering their children. They talked about having to face neglect and rejection as children from their parents, especially their mothers. Their relationships and circumstances changed throughout the time we met which directly affected their needs. Having someone to turn to, who was reliable and trustworthy, had a significant impact on the participants at varying times in their lives.

The participants' desire for individualized support was based on specific situations, the need for a relational space where stories could be told and retold in different ways, and attentiveness to diverse experiences within the women's lives. Care professionals, including social workers, nurses and occupational therapists, work with women in correctional centres and transitioning into the community from prison settings (eg. Eggers, Munoz, Sciulli, & Crist, 2006; Farnworth & Muñoz, 2009; Parsons & Warner-Robbins, 2002; Peternelj-Taylor, 2004; Visher & Travis, 2003). In prisons and in the community, professionals can offer support for the women by creating a relational space and fostering relationships emphasizing trust and respect. Moreover, relationships are not only based on listening to the women's stories, but also welcoming and embracing stories as experiential knowledge (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Bruner, 1986). To recognize the women as experts in their experiences shows the significance of their stories. All four participants talked about the expectation of failure, based on the stigma they experienced, associated with using illicit substances and being labelled a criminal. The women's stories illustrated how stereotypes not only affected their own sense of identity, but aspirations for their children as well (Lawston & Lucas, 2011). Carla wanted her kids to have the freedom to be themselves, without having to fight pressures to conform as she had to do. Sharing about experiences made it possible to move past the stereotypes that labeled them.

The complexity and multiplicity of the women's lives became apparent when they had opportunities to express themselves. Through a postmodern feminist lens, the rationale for inquiring into women's experiences was the kind of knowledge they offer that challenges or re-evaluates normative viewpoints, including stereotypes and assumptions, about criminology and disability (Comack, 1996; Johnson & Traustadóttir, 2000; Morris, 1993). Rather than

categorizing the women based on specific characteristics, hearing about individual experiences was necessary to understand how the women perceived themselves and the world around them. The women in this narrative inquiry were victims of emotional and physical violence, mothers at risk of losing their children, and women in the lowest income bracket, corresponding with past research (Balfour & Comack, 2014; Hayes, 2007; Minaker, 2001; Minaker & Hogeveen, 2015). They faced discrimination and felt the stigma associated with having a criminal record, being Aboriginal, and having addictions and learning difficulties. Marginalization in the form of exclusion and limitations was a part of their stories, and focusing on how rather than why they experienced marginalization was important to maintain a postmodern feminist perspective (Comack, 2014).

It is critical to note how I selected certain stories among many; I chose pieces that I thought reflected some of the significant experiences in their lives, but these depictions are only a glimpse of the women I came to know. The stories underscore how important it is to enter into relationships aware of preconceptions or assumptions about certain experiences and to be awake to the possibilities that are within reach once we become aware of them. My hope is that the reader will see how the participants' narratives continue to evolve, and that I entered and exited in the midst of lives being lived (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

The stories that the participants shared were based on individual experiences and circumstances. When considering the stories through a postmodern feminist lens, specifically within criminology and disability studies, they show the complexity and multiplicity of lives that shape our understanding of women with learning difficulties in the criminal justice system. At the same time, the narrative threads point out the consistencies that resonate across stories. The



threads in this narrative inquiry were: uncertainty and instability in circumstances, having someone to turn to, enduring judgment and stigma, and mothering as well as being mothered. Returning to the research puzzle, I wonder how professionals who work with women involved in the criminal justice system could offer meaningful, lasting support in the midst of tumultuous circumstances based on the findings of this narrative inquiry. Building relationships and including the women who are receiving services, as experts of their lives, in the decision making process to determine what they need and want to focus on are two possible ways to embrace the complexity of the women's lives.

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## Chapter 5

### Situating Counterstories: Interpreting Stories of Resistance<sup>37</sup>

Within the burgeoning literature in narrative inquiry, the concept of counterstories (Lindemann-Nelson, 1995) has been identified as an approach for interpreting stories by recognizing how stories have the power to influence and shift the way we understand ourselves and others that does not follow established dominant stories. Lindemann-Nelson (1995) describes counterstories as stories that “contribute to the moral self-definition of its teller by undermining a dominant story, undoing it and retelling it in such a way as to invite new interpretations and conclusions” (p. 23). Counterstories are discussed in the literature from various disciplines including disability studies, education, feminist studies and Aboriginal education (e.g. Clapton, 2003; Gordon, McKibbin, Vasudevan, & Vinz, 2007; Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013; Lindemann-Nelson, 1996; McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2010; Young et al., 2012).

As a theoretical concept, the notion of counterstories in research are understood in relation to, rather than differentiated from, dominant stories (Andrews, 2004; Lindemann-Nelson, 1995). Counterstories are able to shift dominant stories by drawing on the potential within dominant stories to be otherwise (Huber et al., 2013). In other words, counterstories are knowledge in action – representing a way of living that is not in accordance with the pre-existing dominant narrative (Huber et al., 2013).

In addition to providing an ontological standpoint, counterstories have made a substantive contribution to the work discussed in this paper. I met with four participants and we shared

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<sup>37</sup> This chapter was written and formatted to submit to the journal *Qualitative Inquiry*.

stories of experiences, including stories about school and learning difficulties, as well as about being in the criminal justice system (CJS). The women told stories of resistance against the dominant stories, in the form of assumptions and stereotypes embedded within social and institutional systems which they experienced through the stigma and discrimination they faced. The findings in this research, presented as narrative accounts co-composed with participants, include examples of counterstories that tell about participants' experiences as women with learning difficulties in the CJS.

Dominant stories have been described as established components of a social and cultural setting; they are also referred to as master narratives or dominant discourses (Talbot, Bibace, Bokhour, & Bamberg, 1996). "To those who share the world-view immanent in them, these master narratives seem to be reflections of the world as it 'actually' is, rather than mediating interpretive frameworks" (Talbot et al., 1996, p. 225). As such, dominant stories are accepted and become a form of "culturally given standards," they form the backdrop used to explain and affirm "taken-for-granted notions of what is good and what is wrong" (Talbot et al., 1996, p. 225). Dominant narratives are dynamic and present in all our lives, not something that can be separated from our personal experiences. They may "serve as a blueprint for all stories; they become the vehicle through which we comprehend not only the stories of others, but crucially of ourselves as well" (Andrews, 2004, p.1). This paper explores the notions of counterstories and dominant stories as a basis for understanding the participants' experiences as stories that resist the dominant narratives.

I draw on the experiences shared by one of the women, Carla<sup>38</sup> to discuss how counterstories were a way of understanding within the context of being relational and reflexive while hearing her stories. Although I specifically allude to Carla's stories to exemplify how

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<sup>38</sup> All names and identifiers in this paper have been changed.



hearing and understanding counterstories became a critical part of the narrative inquiry process and shaped the findings, her stories resonated with the other participants. Carla shared stories of experiences that included being categorized or labeled in a number of different ways -- being a criminal, an addict, an unfit mother, and being 'stupid.' 'Othering' became a way of reinforcing the dominant narratives through stereotypes and assumptions associated with the labels. At times, Carla was able to contest and reject the labels placed on her. In other instances, she was unable or unwilling to resist the dominant stories and she was compelled to adhere to social and institutional conventions. Carla's experiences in the CJS and living in a recovery house were heavily influenced by her commitment to being a mother. Likewise, her experiences related to having learning difficulties affected the way Carla perceived herself. To provide context for this paper, I begin by discussing the dominant stories which have shaped prevailing social perceptions, including my own, about women with learning difficulties in the CJS.

## **Background**

When I contemplated how dominant stories had influenced my perceptions, I began with the notion of 'Othering,' familiar to me through reading Levinas (1985). I made connections between labeling theory (Becker, 1963) and 'Othering' as ways of distinguishing and setting others apart without any sense of understanding who the other person is. According to labeling theory, someone with the label of 'criminal' is assumed to be deviant -- a rule breaker and insubordinate -- an outsider (Becker, 1963). A deviant, as 'Other,' may be "someone we do not *want* to be and someone we never *will* be" (Krumer-Nevo, & Sidi, 2012, p. 300, emphasis in original). I was able to grasp what it meant to differentiate certain individuals as 'Other,' but I had not considered the construct of 'Other' in relation to dominant stories and counterstories. To

find a connection, I revisited ‘Othering,’ particularly in feminist criminology and feminist disability studies literature.

Feminist criminologists have recognized and emphasized the “relationship between traditional notions of crime, women and their place in the social and economic structure” (Gwynn, 1993, p. 102). The dominant stories of women in the CJS include seeing the women as ‘Other,’ not only through labeling them as criminals, but also by condemning the way they deviate from societal expectations of being a woman. Women who do not fill their “‘proper’ female role... [are] viewed as morally corrupt, hysterical, diseased, manipulative and devious” (Gwynn, 1993, p. 93). Likewise, women who are criminalized are characterized as “powerless”, “systemically condemned” and “incapable of change” (Mahoney & Daniel, 2006, p. 77). Unfortunately, this dominant story continues to be a part of their identity, even when they are no longer incarcerated (Opsal, 2011). With a criminal record, which can serve as an explicit label, women who are criminalized face discrimination beyond judgment and ridicule, including challenges with getting a job, securing housing, and maintaining custody of their children long after they have served their sentence (Opsal, 2011; van Olphen, Eliason, Freudenberg, & Barnes, 2009). The dominant story, therefore, includes the categorization of women previously involved in the CJS as ‘Other’ -- both as a criminal and as a woman as they try to reintegrate into the community.

Many women who are criminalized also have drug and alcohol addictions, with strong links noted in the literature (Covington, 2003; van Olphen et al., 2009). A criminal record coupled with issues with addictions may compound the discrimination that women face while trying to transition into the community after incarceration (Covington, 2003; van Olphen et al., 2009). Women who are ‘in recovery’ are expected to be abstaining from drug or alcohol use

completely (Laudet, 2007) while facing the challenges and burdens associated with financial strain, educational and/or vocational ambitions, and raising children. Furthermore, the dominant story attributes relapse to the individual's lack of motivation, self-control or willpower (Laudet, 2007; van Olphen et al., 2009). The incidence of relapse is used as an outcome measure indicating a break or end in recovery (Craig, 2008). Without knowing the context for relapse and recovery, it is difficult to understand the experiences of the women beyond their drug use.

A significant proportion of incarcerated women are single mothers and the main caregivers for their children prior to incarceration (Mignon & Ransford, 2012; Moe & Ferraro, 2006). Minaker and Hogeveen (2015) describe the dominant viewpoint of a “criminalized mother as an Other, outside of the ‘caring mothers’ category” (p. 6). Mothers who have been incarcerated are perceived as being unfit and indifferent mothers (Mignon & Ransford, 2012; Minaker & Hogeveen, 2015). In addition, mothers who are labeled as drug addicts are presumed to be deviant and unable to meet the needs of their children (Banwell & Bammer, 2006; Hardesty & Black, 1999). The specific needs of incarcerated women as mothers have been disregarded, only exacerbating all the challenges associated with mothering while in custody and post-incarceration (Moe & Ferraro, 2006).

‘Othering’ has also been part of the discourse in disability studies. The dominant stories of learning difficulties include an assumption of inferiority (Clapton, 2003; Stefánsdóttir; & Traustadóttir, 2015). People with intellectual disabilities are “understood as not-right Others” (Clapton, 2003, p. 542). Being disabled is part of an implicit hierarchy where “such inferior beings, which may include people with [intellectual disabilities], are the aliens, the outsiders, the ‘not-what-we-want’ way of being human” (Clapton, 2003, p. 545). Accordingly, the limitations and challenges associated with having learning difficulties is based on individual disability,

rather than a society that excludes, discriminates and stigmatizes people marked as disabled (Clapton, 2003; Stefánsdóttir & Traustadóttir, 2015).

Disability studies researchers point out how people in general and researchers in particular perceive their work with people who have intellectual disabilities through a particular lens. Traustadóttir (2001) points out that language and representation are key factors in 'Othering' when working with women with intellectual disabilities. "Instead of the traditional 'Us and Them' language" she used inclusive language when describing her work, "positioning [herself] within the groups, not Other to them" (Traustadóttir, 2001, p. 15). By using phrases such as "those of us who are disabled," she tries to establish a sense of equity within relationships (Traustadóttir, 2001, p. 15). Not only does 'Othering' become a way of reinforcing certain labels, it also contributes to the "processes by which dominant groups define themselves" (Traustadóttir, 2001, p. 14). Björnsdóttir, Goodley, and Sigurjónsdóttir (2014) discuss power differentials in research relationships and the grand theory of disability, described as a "grand theoretical narrative of pathology or deficits which serves the purpose of determining the individual's limitations and inabilities" (p. 99). Making certain assumptions about the participants they were working with and tacitly guiding the research based on these assumptions were ways that Björnsdóttir and colleagues (2014) affirmed of the dominant narrative. The need for sharing counterstories was critical for shifting my understanding of the women I worked with, especially knowing that people are often disabled by the label 'Other' that classifies and categorizes as impaired or unable.

Hearing stories as counterstories became a theoretical stance as a way of interpreting the stories shared within narrative inquiry research, but also influenced my understanding of Carla and the other participants as women with learning difficulties in the CJS. In other words, the

notion of counterstories was informing narrative inquiry as the methodology I used, as well as shaping the findings of this research to offer a substantive contribution to feminist criminology and disability studies. Over the course of this inquiry, I recognized the participants' experiences as counterstories because of the way we shared stories, as well as the stories that were shared. In some instances, the stories underscored tensions between personal experiences and dominant stories where the participants were unable to resist and did conform to pre-existing dominant stories. By drawing on the concept of counterstories and reflecting on my past experiences, I was able to see the significance of the participants' stories in shaping my understanding of who they were in relation to the dominant narratives.

### **Narrative Beginnings**

In the spring of 2009, I completed a fieldwork placement at a medium security prison as part of my occupational therapy program. When I began, I was told first and foremost by authority figures at the correctional centre what I could *not* do while I was there. I knew the restrictions were in place to ensure safety, but I often became frustrated with the serious lack of resources or autonomy to carry out any kind of interactive program or to engage in activities that were meaningful to those in custody. Because of my subordinate role in the facility as a student and an outsider, in addition to my minimal understanding of the people in custody I was working with, I just did as I was told. Although limited by my circumstances, I thought that by focusing on specific problems occupational therapists often addressed and trying to figure out ways to 'treat' the issues, I would be able to address the needs of the clients.

After my experience at the correctional centre, I contemplated what I had actually accomplished during my placement, and why I felt like I had failed at connecting with the women I worked with. I realized that I knew little about them apart from the fact they were

incarcerated. I began to wonder: what are the life stories of young women in the criminal justice system (CJS)? How do they experience the criminal justice system (CJS)? What kind of impact do their experiences have on their present and future stories? In what ways have these stories contributed to how the women see themselves and how they relate with others? The questions I reflected on became the basis of this narrative inquiry.

### **Research Method**

Narrative inquiry is relational research that aims to understand experiences and uses narratives to show the continuous nature of experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The inquiry is situated in a three-dimensional space of temporality, sociality and place (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Temporality includes the interactions with participants which take place over an extended period of time, and reflections of earlier experiences which are shared and co-composed as part of the narrative accounts. Sociality attends to the inward “thoughts, emotions, and moral responses and outward to events and actions” of the participants and researchers (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 167). Place refers to the physical places as well as the social and cultural context where the research process unfolds. In addition, past, present, and future stories are situated within certain contexts. In this inquiry, these dimensions created the framework of the narrative accounts, as the stories reflected experiences at different times, places, and interactions.

In narrative inquiry, *field text* describes the data gathered (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Field texts included transcripts of audio recorded conversations, field notes I wrote, and personal journal writings the participants shared with me. The findings, in the form of narrative accounts, were the stories negotiated with participants to form *interim texts*. Going from field text to interim texts and then *final research texts* was an interactive process where the participants and I

discussed and negotiated what to include in their narrative accounts. I included found poetry in the accounts and final research texts as a way to express a deeper sense of emotion. The participants noted that they especially liked the poetry, and readability of the final research texts was an important consideration for sharing the work with a broad audience base (Lahman et al., 2011).

### **Research Process**

Ethics approval for this research was granted by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (ID number: Pro00033756). Four women agreed to participate and I met with each of them 15-25 times, usually two to three times a month over eight to eighteen months. I connected with the women through community organizations and we met for a meal or coffee, but we also went places such as the food bank, to appointments, grocery shopping, and to community agencies. When we met, the conversations often began with present and recent experiences, and I would also share some of my experiences. The interactions varied in length and intensity, and the dialogue was informal – I tried to keep it open for the participants to take the lead. Stories were not only shared through telling, but also through living alongside the participants as I went with them to different places. The women shared stories that exemplified the challenges they had faced and continued to encounter associated with learning and the labels that were self-imposed or placed on them.

From a relational standpoint, the relationships became a critical part of the research process because they influenced the way that stories were shared and what stories were shared. As the relationships developed, stories seemed to flow naturally in conversations. As we got to know each other, we also became familiar with the people in each other's lives, which seemed to increase the intimacy of stories we shared. In some sections of this paper, my interpretations are

embedded in the stories. My reflections provide background and justification for the way the stories have been presented.

**Participants.** The participants were 20-28 years old. Two of the women are Aboriginal,<sup>39</sup> one is of German descent, and one of French descent; all of them were born in Canada. In Alberta, the over-representation of Aboriginal women in custody in 2009-2010 was a little over 50% (Mahoney, 2011). Three of the women were mothers with two or three children; none of them were married or in common-law relationships at the time I met them; two of them were initially living with boyfriends but did not stay in the relationship because they were being abused. All of them identified as hetero-sexual. The participants had been arrested and charged at least once. Their charges were for shoplifting, theft, and violating administration of justice conditions (failure to appear in court, probation breaches, etc.), which was representative of the most common offences for women according to Canadian statistics from 2009-2010 (Mahoney, 2011). Two of the women had a criminal record, and two had their records expunged under the Canadian Youth Criminal Justice Act. Three of the women had been detained in custody for at least a week with the longest single period being two months. Two of the women mentioned they had been ‘in the system,’ since they were 13 years old, explained as having many interactions with police officers and being familiar with CJS procedures. One participant stated that she was categorized as a ‘high risk’ case and assigned a specialized case worker.

Each participant identified herself as having learning difficulties<sup>40</sup>; these difficulties were described as having trouble keeping up in class and having specific challenges with learning. One of the participants completed high school with additional support from teachers, and the

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<sup>39</sup> Aboriginal refers First Nations, Metis and Inuit people as defined by Statistics Canada (Mahoney, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> *Learning difficulties* is used to encompass mild intellectual and/or other disabilities that have resulted in significant challenges in learning as identified by the women themselves.



other three women did not complete high school. Two participants left school in grade 10, and one left in grade 7. Although all of the women received a clinical diagnosis – attention deficit hyperactive disorder/ attention deficit disorder (ADHD/ADD), general anxiety disorder, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), and learning disabilities in math and reading -- their experiences as women with learning difficulties, rather than their specific diagnoses, were the focus of the study.

**Carla.** Carla spoke candidly about her experiences in the criminal justice system, including being incarcerated. She shared about selling drugs and being addicted to the drug crystal methamphetamine for five years. A year before we met, she had been couch-surfing and using drugs when she found out she was pregnant. She knew she would not be able to care for her baby, Jake, if she did not have a home. She was able to get into a government funded recovery program that included subsidized housing at a ‘recovery house,’ as long as she stayed clean. She had three boys and Jake was only one month old when I first met Carla. Her two older boys lived with their father, but they stayed with her on weekends and school breaks.

When I went to her apartment for the first time, she took me on a tour, showing me the common spaces, and telling me about the ‘recovery program’. There were mandatory weekly meetings when the residents could talk about their struggles and concerns, and meetings were usually the only time Nancy was at the house. Nancy was the program coordinator; she would collect the rent and make sure the common places were clean and well-kept. Each of the residents was assigned specific chores, and there was a curfew as well as restrictions on who could visit. Overnight guests were not allowed. Carla said that the women living in the house looked out for each other and were supposed to be a support for one another. Attending additional treatment programs were expected, but not set up for them, so they would help each

other find programs and sometimes attend meetings together. I went to Carla's apartment regularly, and I often met other women living there. Carla was one of few residents who had been there for a year -- most of the women would relapse or 'break too many rules' within months of moving in and be asked to leave.

### **A glimpse of 'recovery'**

*Yeah, there's no way that Cynthia even could stay here, we all hate her now- she can't live here. Like what she did is not even cool. Even if we found the crack pipes and she moved out, we could have still been friends, but after trying to cause all these problems or whatever, it's just not even nice, like trying to get Nancy, the girl that runs this place, fired.... I was pregnant, and she was in drug court. She had two weeks left in drug court before her graduation. She came to me saying, "Look I used. It was just one hoot and then I left, but I need you to pee for me." So I peed in a container. .... That's the thing, I peed for her to help her out, because I didn't want her to have to go to jail for 5 years. But I was wrong.<sup>41</sup> (Carla, March 28, 2013)*

This story is an example of the drama Carla faced regularly, drama that she was more and more tired of dealing with. When I heard the story, I was not considering the situation from Carla's perspective. I interpreted her decision to help her friend as defiance and poor judgment because I was preoccupied with how the incident could have led to serious consequences for Carla. I thought she had compromised her own recovery, as well as her friend Cynthia's situation. I only later realized that Carla and Cynthia were trying to resist the dominant story of stigmatization for being drug addicts. They also felt the expectation of relapse as they saw other

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<sup>41</sup> Text in italics indicates the voice of the participants.

people living at the house relapsing and being forced to leave. Carla may have briefly considered the fact that she could go to jail for what she did, but she was willing to take that chance if she could keep her friend out of jail for one small slip-up. Carla was familiar with the unforgiving nature of the criminal justice system, making it more difficult for her to turn her friend down.

Carla said that she felt most vulnerable, not when she was stressed out, but when she hit a milestone in her recovery journey.

*Most of the days I am ok. Even on my stressful days I don't feel like using.*

*Then, there are certain times when you want to use, like dreaming about it,*

*and thinking about it lots... nine months, and a year, it was rocky times.*

*(Carla, June, 2013)*

For Carla, relapsing meant she would lose her son and her apartment, and she reminded herself of what was at stake whenever she felt tempted. As Carla's story shows, 'recovery' may look different when considered from the perspective of the woman and not the programs in place. Carla, along with the other women living at the recovery house, was 'in recovery' but her ability to recover was not solely based on her willpower to resist the temptation to use drugs. In addition to resisting temptation, she had to adhere to the rules in place and deal with the stigma associated with being labeled a drug addict. She longed for lasting relationships and support, which was difficult to find or maintain while living at the recovery house.

*Some people here, I am friends with, and that is all the people I hang out*

*with. I have some other friends, but they are in recovery too, and I feel*

*like... I want to be with normal people, but I am not ready to hang out with*

*normal people because I still talk about my addictions. I don't want no one*

*to know about it, but it's still part of my life right now. (Carla, April 2013)*

After being there for almost two years, Carla expressed that living at the recovery house had become an obstacle in terms of being able to meet new people and move on with her life. *“Living here, really I feel like I am crippled, I don’t feel like a whole person. I dunno, it’s hard to explain”* (Carla, February 10, 2014). The relationships that were supposed to provide support were causing stress and frustration. She initially moved into the recovery house because she needed a home for Jake. Her rent was subsidized, freeing up money to buy necessities. She had to be drug-free to be able to stay where she was, and yet, from a ‘recovery’ perspective, the place she was living was not a support, but a burden for Carla. She did not feel supported nor did she believe she was able to move forward while living at the recovery house. Meeting new people who were sober was an ongoing challenge for Carla, but she believed it would be easier if she was living on her own because she would be free to make her own decisions, rather than feeling constrained by rules and restrictions. Understanding what ‘recovery’ was and is for Carla required an understanding of her experiences including experiences of living in a recovery house, being tempted to use drugs and being able to care for Jake.

### **Christmas in jail**

Carla had been arrested and sentenced to custody a number of times. Maintaining her sense of identity while incarcerated was challenging for Carla. As she states, *“In jail, you get that blue outfit and that’s it.”* Carla described her most recent experience of being incarcerated over Christmas as a difficult time to be in jail.<sup>42</sup>

Arrested December 16

I pepper sprayed the law enforcement officer

My lawyer was on holidays

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<sup>42</sup> This found poem was created from our conversations about her experiences in jail.

It took a long time

I have never used a weapon

I couldn't go to jail

23 hour isolation

For my protection

I was in danger

And the guards think they are better than you

Yell at people's faces, spit on them

It was horrible

Locked me up for 48 hours

For drawing on my shoes

I liked to be different

Now I am not like that

Carla tried to be different, but she was forced to conform within this particular setting by being punished. The simple act of coloring on her white sneakers was considered insolence to the correctional officers, and they used their authority to reinforce her inferiority. She was ordered to take off the markings – an impossible task because the marker was permanent. Due to her 'refusal' to do as she was told, she was locked up in isolation. Carla attempted to maintain her individuality by trying to stand out, but she discovered that she was only making things harder for herself.

*There was this one guard, Shauna, she was awesome. She used to get us little elastics, and I would put my head upside down, and then it would come together like this like a big Mohawk. Yeah, I wore it to court like that one time, ... I did not get out. (laughs) Yeah, I don't know why I would get myself into those situations. I thought I was invincible, I was like, no one will hurt me, like I am a good person, as long as I am not ripping them off I will be fine. (Carla, February, 2013)*

Although she laughed at the situation as she talked about it, I was aware of how she noted her change from trying to express herself to being quiet and inconspicuous when she said, “*Now I am not like that.*” It had been over a year since she was released from custody when we met, but she still felt the stigma from the labels ‘drug addict’ and ‘criminal.’

*When we first met, I was quiet because I was assessing the situation, like when I was in the drug scene, you just sit there and you don't say anything around certain people, you sit there and learn and get a feel for what kind of people they are. (Carla, July, 2013)*

Carla believed that people could somehow know about her past, just by looking at her. She thought people were judging her when she went into stores and other public spaces. She was anxious about finding a place to live or looking for a job. She had learned from being in custody and using drugs for many years that “*no matter what you do, you can't win. It doesn't work out for anybody...even those on top...*” (Carla, February, 2013). She learned to always assess her environment before revealing anything about herself, cautiously determining what would be most beneficial for her.

Carla's experiences illustrate the resolve and persistence needed to resist the dominant stories of loss of identity and humiliation while in custody. She tied her hair up in spikes on top of her head for a court appearance, and she was not surprised that she was not granted probation. She thought that being "*a good person*" was enough to keep her out of trouble, but she learned that she had little control over the situation. She wanted to be different, but in the end, she realized that she could not maintain her sense of uniqueness or identity and resist the pressure to follow within the confines of the CJS. She was able to survive being incarcerated, not by fighting or resisting, but rather by following established norms of submission and conformity.

### **Being a "good" mother**

Carla considered herself a 'good' mother. She believed that people judged her ability to be a mother without knowing how much she cared for and about her children. She would get calls from child protective services<sup>43</sup>, negative reactions from health professionals, and snide remarks from the father and stepmother of her two older sons. She had been told that she was not a capable mother, but she refused to accept others' perceptions of her.

Over three years ago, when Carla was heavily involved with using and selling drugs, she knew they [her children] would be in danger if they stayed with her, so she voluntarily gave up custody of her two older boys, Cam and Aaron, who went to live with their father and stepmother. When she would go to visit her kids, she had to listen to their dad and stepmom call her a crackhead and a liar. It was especially hard for Carla because she knew her sons were able to hear. (Fieldnotes, January 2014)

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<sup>43</sup> Child protective services are under a branch of the Government of Alberta called Alberta Human Services. They ensure that the children are receiving an appropriate level of supervision in the home and are kept safe (Government of Alberta, 2015). Similar services are found in all other provinces of Canada.

Carla's experiences in childhood shaped the way she mothered. She was determined to be a different kind of mother to her children than her own mother. Her telling and her living of mothering stories demonstrated how she identified herself as a mother.

*My mom was abusive. So I will never abuse them, I don't like spanking my kids, there are other ways of doing it. I just have to be stern to my kids... I will not spank my kids. ... And I will never put a guy before my kids. If a guy doesn't like my kids, he can leave. (Carla, December 2013)*

The stories Carla shared conveyed how being a mother related to other experiences. Carla spoke about wanting to shoplift, but resisting the temptation because she knew that she would lose custody of Jake if she had to go to jail.

*But even now, I still get frustrated. yeah, like shop lifting, I don't want to shop lift when I am with him, and I am always with him, because I don't want him to get taken away by a cop... even though I know I could get away with it. (Carla, June, 2013)*

She took her responsibilities as a mother seriously. About a month after I met her for the first time, Carla's mothering abilities were under scrutiny by professionals who, according to Carla, had labeled her as a criminal with a drug addiction and made judgments based on the label. Carla thought she was not being affectionate enough with Jake, and she went to see a post-partum specialist. The counselor asked her if she was using drugs to cope, and suggested Carla give her son up for adoption. Carla said she was not tempted to use, but she was worried that she had post-partum depression. The counselor was being mindful of Jake, and her concern for his safety was reasonable. At the same time, Carla wondered, *"If she thought it was really urgent she should have called the week before, not waited a week"* (Carla, February, 2013). Rather than



seeing Carla as a mother who was reaching out for support, the counselor was concerned with how Carla might be a threat to her son. Consequently, Carla received home visits from a child protective services case worker for several weeks. Carla's experience with the post-partum specialist was consistent with the social perception of mothers who have been incarcerated or who use drugs as 'Other' (Minaker & Hogeveen, 2015).

*Especially as a mom who doesn't have your kids, you try to help other people's kids. I did that when I was using, I would try to help other people living here because I didn't have my own, and when you're a mother you wanna, your mother instinct automatically kicks in. (Carla, July 2013)*

Seeing Carla as a mother was important for understanding her stories of 'recovery', of being involved in the criminal justice system and of being a woman with learning difficulties. Carla and other mothers, who are trying to rebuild a life for themselves and their children after experiences with the CJS and while in recovery, may be measuring their success in ways that are different from what is expected (Moe & Ferraro, 2006). For the three women in this narrative inquiry who are mothers, their stories of using substances as well as of being incarcerated included losing custody of their children. Their motivation to get clean, stay sober and stay out of jail was based on their desire to be a mother and to be with their children.

### **Counterstories of learning**

When I first asked Carla if she thought she had learning difficulties, she immediately said yes. She said she had struggled with learning in school, and she received a diagnosis of attention deficit disorder (ADD) and general anxiety disorder (GAD) when she was in Grade 5. Her understanding of learning difficulties was not limited to academic performance, but also included to her ability to follow along in class and to see the purpose of what was being taught.

*Yeah, you need to know things ... even when I was a kid, I had a hard time learning because I didn't know what it was meant for. But now, I know how to do drug dealing, I know that an eighth is that much because I needed to know that... I mean sure they are bad things, but I learned it. (Carla, February 21, 2013)*

She admitted that she learned math through drug dealing because she saw a purpose to learning it. She was able to do math in a way that she knew was not conventional, but for her, the fact that she was capable of learning was important in how she perceived herself. *“I mean I am smart, I just don't know how to use my smart” (Carla, February 21, 2013).*

More recently, as Carla prepared to write her General Educational Development (GED or high school equivalency) exam, she found it difficult to stay motivated and feel confident. She felt like the people around her, even those who were trying to support her, did not genuinely understand her struggles.

*And it's hard because you are constantly classified as being stupid, you know what I mean? People say- you don't need meds, you can do it without meds, just watch what you eat, and ADD is not really there, just do this and do that-- but they just don't understand, it is there. I can't just focus without meds, I need meds. But it doesn't matter- everyone is different. ... So you sit there and you can't be like everyone else and you can't study like everyone else. It is a barrier. (Carla, January 2014)*

Carla knew she had been “*classified as being stupid,*” but also recognized that “*everyone is different.*” Carla's stories were examples of how she resisted the dominant narrative of inferiority (Clapton, 2003) by believing and maintaining that her learning difficulties were part

of being different, but not inferior to others. She had difficulties with school, not because she was unable to learn, but because she had been told she was inferior or unmotivated. Carla was able to recognize the social barriers that affected her success, and she was determined to reach her goal, despite the obstacles.

### **Considerations**

The six weeks I had spent at the correctional centre as an occupational therapy student gave me the opportunity to hear stories from women who were incarcerated. Yet, I realized that I did not understand what it meant ‘to know’ the women (Vinz, 1997). I was oblivious to the needs of the women I met at the correctional centre and to what the four participants needed. I limited my understanding of the women with a false sense of ‘knowing,’ and I continued to live by the dominant narratives that viewed women in the CJS as ‘Others’ (Balfour & Comack, 2014). The stigma attached to CJS involvement is based on the label of ‘criminal:’ a “menace to society” (Opsal, 2011, p. 139). Reinforced by the gendered nature of criminology and perceptions of women in general (Gwynn, 1993), I had formed opinions of the participants as being ‘helpless’ and ‘stuck’ before I knew them as individuals. Vinz (1997) discusses the need to become proficient in ‘unknowing’ and making space for other understandings in place of our viewpoints. She urges us to “push at the boundaries of definition,” and she points out “that un-knowing and not knowing are literacies that we can learn for ourselves and in so doing, can help others” (Vinz, 1997, p. 139). Without realizing that I placed myself in a position of power when I was working with the women in the correctional centre, I was forming a story that limited, rather than one that developed my understanding of the women I had met. I wanted to hear about experiences that fit with my own perceptions of what life would have been like for them, and I went into the relationships with a certain story in mind.

Addictions and recovery include support programs for recovering drug users as places of growth, encouragement, and hope (Laudet & White, 2010; van Olphen et al., 2009). A recovery house is expected to be a safe place for people who are trying to ‘rehabilitate’ and move on with their lives (D'Angelo, 2002). Recovery and relapse are terms interpreted within the dominant discourse and are not typically challenged. Yet, the assumptions associated with living in a recovery house based on the dominant discourse did not align with Carla’s stories. Her stories of recovery included feeling restricted because of where she was living in terms of the pressure to stay clean while living with other women who were also struggling with addictions. Although Carla did not relapse, she felt tempted and did not receive support from others in recovery or professionals she turned to. She also expressed feeling “*crippled*” by where she was living and seeing little hope for progress while she stayed there.

In past research, some women who were incarcerated identified themselves as good mothers, with the ability to look beyond the negative label of criminal providing a kind of hopeful resilience (Moe & Ferraro, 2006). Resisting the dominant story of being an unfit mother was possible for mothers who had been stigmatized by focusing on the relationships they had with their children and seeing themselves as worthy mothers. Hardesty and Black (1999) noted that their participants, mothers who had drug addictions, “did not measure their success in recovery by counting the number of meetings attended or days of sobriety. They measured their success relationally; they watched for, kept track of, and felt joy in their children’s loving actions toward them” (p. 616). For the mothers in that particular study recovery included “recovering the role of mother” (Hardesty & Black, 1999, p. 615). In addition, in order to maintain their identity as mothers, the women “had to reject others’ standards of mothering and to avoid facing the label of bad mother” (Hardesty & Black, p. 610). Carla believed she was a good mother. She vowed

not to hit or spank her kids, and she was determined to stay out of jail for them. Being a mother was empowering and motivating for Carla, giving her a reason to resist the temptation to relapse or shoplift. Clearly, recognizing the role of mother for women in the CJS is a noteworthy consideration in developing programs and offering meaningful support in medical, mental health, legal and social services (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Mignon & Ransford, 2012).

When Björnsdóttir and colleagues (2014) realized that they had an expectation of certain stories from participants with intellectual disabilities based on their own cultural and social experiences, there was a shift in how they understood the stories. Rather than embracing the grand theory of disability that focuses on deficits to determine one's inabilities, they were able to understand the stories they heard as counterstories of disability. In the same way, I was able to recognize how Carla was resisting the dominant story, and how she was being disabled by others not by her learning difficulties. Carla said that she was able to learn, but in different ways. Even though she was labelled as being '*stupid*,' she was able to see past the label and focus on her strengths.

The participants talked about their interactions with social and institutional systems, and their stories showed how they were able to resist the dominant narratives in certain circumstances. Having brief encounters with women in the correctional centre during my placement had given me insight into their lives, but I was still seeing them through a particular lens, as 'criminals' who had to be 'fixed' through interventions and programs. I had viewed them as 'Other' by categorizing them outside of the roles I would consider for women such as mother, daughter and lover (Minaker & Hogeveen, 2015). I subsequently realized how I had made restricting assumptions about the participants, akin to the labels given to them by professionals that contributed to social stereotypes. When I initially contemplated how to situate this study

within a broader scope of scientific and scholarly work, I had focused on how research could contribute to ‘fixing’ persistent and pervasive problems, including drug use and criminal behaviour, based on the “fix and serve” mindset that is common among healthcare professionals (Steeves, 2006, p. 105). I, as an occupational therapist, narrowly targeted challenges and issues that affected their health and well-being without recognizing the need to understand who the women were and their experiences.

### **Implications**

Cultivating a relational and reflexive context was important in creating opportunities for counterstories to be shared and heard. I reflected on how our relationships and my understanding of the women had influenced the way I interpreted the stories as counterstories. The transcripts and field notes offered different perspectives that I considered as we co-composed the narrative accounts. The participants told stories of living in a way that resisted the dominant narratives and were trying to become more than what has been offered to them. Thinking back on the relationship between Carla and me as it unfolded was different from the actual experience of interacting with Carla and being in a relationship with her. My perception of the participants changed over the course of our relationships. Being aware of stories that did not fit my preconceptions was necessary to compose narrative accounts that reflected the women’s counterstories. At the same time, I knew my experiences had brought me to have certain wonderings and have an interest in this area of research.

Counterstories are understood as a way of resisting dominant stories when they are shared in spaces “that allow communities of choice to challenge and revise the dominant stories of the ‘found’ communities in which they are embedded” (Lindemann-Nelson, 1995, p. 24). ‘Found’ and ‘chosen’ communities (Friedman, 1989) are described respectively as “communities

of origin” (p. 285) such as family members or classmates, and “communities or relationships of choice” (p. 295) such as friendships or voluntary interest groups. The difference between found communities and chosen communities is level of choice and equity. When a person willingly joins a support group to share about struggles and accomplishments, she becomes part of a chosen community. Although relationships within a family may become part of a chosen community, it is initially a group that someone is involuntarily a part of with explicit roles and a clear hierarchy.

Chosen communities allow individuals to explore and develop their identities by opening up to others and freely discussing ideas and opinions (Friedman, 1989). Relationships within these communities emphasize equity, rather than social expectations or demands (Christians, 2015; Friedman, 1989). In this work, the women and I established relationships where we connected and openly shared about our experiences, similar to what Friedman (1989) describes as chosen communities. Although I had a specific purpose for meeting with the participants, I was also cognizant of the relational space, a space which required mutual respect and trust. The participants expressed that they felt comfortable opening up to me. Carla stated in one of our early conversations, *“It’s nice to know that someone ‘normal’ goes through the same struggles.”* We did not talk about what normal meant to each of us, but I recalled her mentioning that she considered herself to be ‘different’ in multiple conversations. By being transparent, we were able to form a connection as women and as human beings while still acknowledging our differences and individuality. I also became aware that chosen communities were a notion of privilege. Chosen communities may not be readily available to the participants; they had few opportunities to find or maintain relationships that fostered trust and mutual respect. They had relationships with professionals as an obligation set by institutional organizations such as with case workers,

probation officers and program facilitators. Therefore, meeting and having conversations without obligation, stipulations or power differentials were a critical part of establishing relationships with participants. Forming chosen communities where we could share and encourage counterstories was not a simple task, but required effort and investment in the relationship.

Appreciating the continuous and ongoing nature of the participants' stories was a critical component to seeing the possibilities in them. Temporality, as part of the three dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), became a central component to understanding Carla's counterstories of recovery, of being a mother and of having learning difficulties. Her stories continued on after our research relationship ended and she moved out of the recovery house; her children got older and her responsibilities extended to being a role model to them on top of providing basic needs. Carla was able to get her GED (high school equivalency) diploma, but it required persistence and determination. She had to contend with medical insurance providers and with government agencies to get funds and medication. Likewise, Carla's stories often overlapped and intersected with one another. Narrative inquirers emphasize that narrative accounts are not the beginning or the end of the participants' stories (Clandinin et al., 2010). Dominant narratives are dynamic and unfixed, always offering spaces for other stories to enter (Lindemann- Nelson, 1995). The importance of counterstories is that they can offer meaning to our lives and our experiences in the potential for something more than what the dominant stories dictate. Many of the stories that Carla shared could have been interpreted as common, everyday struggles with meeting basic needs, finding and pursuing a vocation, and being a single mother. Carla presented stories of being a competent and loving mother as an opportunity to redefine dominant stories of mothers who have been incarcerated and who face addictions. On the other hand, Carla's story of being incarcerated showed an



example of circumstances where the dominant narrative seemed more fixed than open, revealing that certain dominant stories may be more difficult to shift, if the stories of resistance are suppressed or rejected.

## **Conclusion**

Narrative inquiry is an approach where relationships are central to the research itself (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Counterstories are taken up as a way to understand the stories participants share. Counterstories were shared as part of the women's experiences of recovery, criminality, as well as of being a mother and having learning difficulties. With insight into counterstories as another way of understanding and offering the potential to shift dominant narratives (Lindemann-Nelson, 1995), I could see how establishing meaningful relationships with the participants and being reflexive helped create a context where counterstories could be heard. Likewise, as we continued to meet and share experiences, our dynamic relationship led to changes in understanding. In this narrative inquiry, I found that having prolonged engagement and sharing stories in meaningful relationships were significant factors for being able to 'hear' counterstories. Researchers and professionals need to recognize counterstories for what they offer – the potential to shift the dominant stories, and in doing so expanding upon what we know and hope to learn.

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## Chapter 6

### Ethical Tensions as Educative Spaces in Narrative Inquiry<sup>44</sup>

*From the beginning, I<sup>45</sup> wanted Caris<sup>46</sup> to like me, partly because I anticipated that we would be working closely together for several months, and partly because I wanted a meaningful relationship with her. I felt compelled to develop a relationship with Caris before asking her more personal questions or inviting her to share her story. I had a strong desire to ensure reciprocity within the relationship; I wanted her to tell her story and to want me to be a part of her life, if only for a short time. I envisioned us meeting weekly and having great conversations, but also going places and meeting her friends and family. Without asking her, I had set plans for what should happen in the coming months.<sup>47</sup>*

This excerpt is part of field notes I wrote while meeting with participants. I entered the lives of participants as a stranger and over time realized how unfamiliar their worlds were to me and how I world travelled with arrogant perceptions (LUGONES, 1987). Maria LUGONES (1987) called me to attend to notions of world traveling, but also to the importance of attending

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<sup>44</sup> This chapter was written in collaboration with Dr. V. Caine, Dr. D. McConnell, and Dr. J. Minaker, and formatted to be submitted to the journal *FQS: Forum: Qualitative Social Research*.

<sup>45</sup> "I" is used in reference to the first author of this paper who carried out the fieldwork.

<sup>46</sup> All names and identifiers have been changed.

<sup>47</sup> This passage was written after I wrote Caris' narrative account and shared it with her. I did not come to this realization until our research relationship ended.

to processes in research. When I began this narrative inquiry, the research puzzle<sup>48</sup> focused on: *What are the experiences of young women with learning difficulties<sup>49</sup> who have been incarcerated? How did their learning difficulties shape their experiences with the criminal justice system (CJS)?* As the participants and I inquired into their childhood experiences, as well as present and future stories, complex layers of learning difficulties, addictions, criminalization, child and social welfare interactions, violence and daily struggles emerged. Much like in the initial field note, my interactions with the participants called me to wonder about the research process and in particular my commitments and responsibilities. Influenced by Hannah ARENDT (1958) I was called to question “what are we [am I] doing here?” (p. 5). The purpose of this paper is to make visible how I make sense of the ethical tensions I encountered.

Narrative inquiry is “a way of understanding experience” (CLANDININ & CAINE, 2013, p. 166). The inquiry process takes place through negotiations as stories are told and lived. Relationships are fundamental to narrative inquiry, as they shape the way participants and researchers negotiate the inquiry process, phenomena under study, and as they begin to co-compose narrative accounts and final research texts. Being accountable to the participants is an ethical responsibility which stems from an understanding that lives are intertwined, calling for a deeper consideration of what we are doing in relation to others (ARENDT, 1958).

As I met with participants, the need to continuously negotiate roles and responsibilities as part of the research process *and* in the relationship became evident. In narrative inquiry, relationships are not independent of the research process, but rather are central to the work

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<sup>48</sup> The term puzzle is used to emphasize that the research aim is not to answer questions, but rather an opportunity for further exploration.

<sup>49</sup> *Learning difficulties* is used to encompass mild intellectual and/or other disabilities that have resulted in significant challenges in learning as identified by the women themselves.



(CLANDININ & CONNELLY, 2000). Participants and researchers become part of the “web of human relationships” (ARENDT, 1958, p. 181), where action is situated and immediate consequences can be felt. Our interactions, “whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life,” (p. 9) connect us to each other as part of the human condition. Hannah ARENDT’s (1958) proposition that we “think what we are doing” (p. 5) is a reminder that as human beings, actions are always in relation to those we interact with and part of an intricate matrix. I became increasingly wakeful that decisions were not based solely on any one individual, but were made by “the individual as interconnected and intertwined in meaningful relationships with others” (LARKIN & SCHOTSMANS, 2008, p. 235).

To situate this research within relationships required a major shift in my thinking from participants as subjects who are passively being investigated, to co-researchers who are an active part of the process. With time I paid particular attention to the dynamics of the relationship in terms of power differentials and a sense of equity. As human beings we are distinct in our experiences, described by Hannah ARENDT (1958) as human plurality. Plurality is revealed through speech and action, the distinction between human beings and other beings or objects in the world (ARENDT, 1958). Being able to recognize and understand distinctions without losing the sense of humanness became a central ethical issue.

Research, as a public endeavor, also raises questions about whose voices are being introduced into the public space. “Every time we talk about things that can be experienced only in privacy or intimacy, we bring them out into a sphere where they will assume a kind of reality which [...] they could never have had before” (ARENDT, 1958, p. 50). Although participants and I negotiated the telling of private stories, we were conversing in a public realm, that is, we were bringing our experiences forward to become part of our common existence. The “space of

appearance” (ARENDR, 1958, p. 200) is the public space where people live together, and power is present as the “potentialities of action” (p. 201). In telling their and our shared and co-composed stories, experiences became potential sources for action.

## **Background**

The context of ethical practices in academic institutions, described as “doing good and avoiding harm” (ORB, EISENHAUER, & WYNADEN, 2001, p. 93), are based on the standards reinforced by Research Ethics Boards (REBs) in Canada.<sup>50</sup> Researchers are expected to protect the privacy of participants and maintaining confidentiality (HAMMERSLEY & TRAIANOU, 2012; LAZARATON, 2013). A term used to describe standard ethical practices is ‘procedural ethics,’ the ethical guidelines that “[remind] the researcher to consider such issues as the potential risks to participants,” along with confidentiality, consent, and accessible summaries of the research project for participants (GUILLEMIN & GILLAM, 2004, p. 268). These procedural considerations are helpful when designing and planning a research project, but are not able to address the “everyday ethical issues that arise in the doing of research” (GUILLEMIN & GILLAM, 2004, p. 263; GUILLEMIN & HEGGAN, 2009; LAZARATON, 2013).

Beyond ‘procedural ethics,’ there is an emphasis on the ethical responsibility toward participants in qualitative research<sup>51</sup> (CHRISTIANS, 2011; DENZIN, 2003; GUILLEMIN & GILLAM, 2004). Likewise, the kinds of interactions between researcher and participant in research vary based on the kind of relationship which forms. The hierarchy implicit in research relationships may lead to ethical concerns with power and manipulation (COHN & LYONS,

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<sup>50</sup> Tri-council policy guidelines are used in Canada. Found at:

[http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/pdf/eng/tcps2/TCPS\\_2\\_FINAL\\_Web.pdf](http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/pdf/eng/tcps2/TCPS_2_FINAL_Web.pdf)

<sup>51</sup> Ethics in qualitative research has been discussed extensively and within a wide range of disciplines including education, psychology, nursing, and rehabilitation medicine (i.e., BRINKMANN & KVALE, 2005; DOWNEY & CLANDININ, 2010; ORB, et al., 2001; PHELAN & KINSELLA, 2013).

2003; KVALE, 2006; PHELAN & KINSELLA, 2013). An understanding of ethics as a behavior or attitude toward participants is one possible way of addressing ethical concerns in qualitative research (JOSSELSOON, 2007). Rather than a list of conditions to fulfill, ethical decisions are based on “a stance that involves thinking through these matters and deciding how best to honor and protect those who participate in one’s studies while still maintaining standards for responsible scholarship” (JOSSELSOON, 2007, p.538).

### **Relational Ethics**

Relational ethics is part of looking closely at the “web of human relationships” (ARENDRT, 1958, p. 181), focusing “on people (whole persons) and the quality of the commitments between them” (BERGUM & DOSSETOR, 2005, p. 8). An ‘ethic of care’ perspective (BERGUM, 1994, 2003; GILLIGAN, 1994, 2011; NODDINGS, 1986, 1998) highlights that “fidelity [to individuals] is not seen as faithfulness to duty or principle but as a direct response to individuals with whom one is in relation” (NODDINGS 1986, p. 497). To attend to the participants requires a “relational space (not the space where one or the other lives but the space that occurs between them) [...] where personal meaning is awakened” (BERGUM, 2003, p. 125). In addition to relational space, interdependency and fostering authentic dialogue are two key concepts underpinning an ethic of care perspective (AUSTIN, GOBLE, & KELECEVIC, 2009; GILLIGAN, 2011). Relational spaces, interdependency and dialogue are fostered in order to cultivate openness and trust, where ethical tensions are taken up as part of experiences (NODDINGS, 1986).

Carol GILLIGAN (1994) speaks of the ‘ethic of care’ within the “ideals of human relationship – the vision that self and other will be treated as of equal worth” (p. 63). She emphasizes the need for relationships to be nonhierarchical; like Hannah ARENDRT (1958), she

too uses the “image of web,” which “changes an order of inequality into a structure of interconnection” (GILLIGAN, 1994, p.63). Her use of the metaphor emphasizes the intricacies, while Hannah ARENDT (1958) adds the characteristics of intangibility and fragility within a web of relationships. Nonetheless, relational ethics are about human connections and asking difficult questions in messy, ambiguous spaces where relationships develop.

Ethics in narrative inquiry builds on relational ethics and has been described in detail by Jean CLANDININ, Vera CAINE, and Janice HUBER (in press).<sup>52</sup> Narrative inquirers acknowledge the presence of power differentials in research and have emphasized ways for participants and researchers to be engaged and part of the process (CLANDININ & CAINE, 2013). In narrative inquiry, the emphasis on negotiation and collaboration reinforces the importance of reciprocity and equity (CLANDININ & CAINE, 2013). Being together “with others and neither for nor against them – that is, in sheer human togetherness” (ARENDT, 1958, p.180) is a way to consider relational ethics. When “people are only for or against other people,” that is, when there is a specific end in mind, “human togetherness is lost” (ARENDT, 1958, p. 180). In this narrative inquiry, ethical questions emerged from the struggle in maintaining “human togetherness” and resisting the tendency to see people with arrogant perceptions (LUGONES, 1987). As I began to comprehend the role of relational ethics in this work, there was a shift in the way I approached the research in relation to participants.

### **Narrative Inquiry as Relational Research**

Narrative inquiry begins with an appreciation of experience as being understood and expressed narratively, as well as embracing narrative as a way of negotiating and co-composing knowledge and presenting this knowledge to others (CLANDININ & ROSIEK, 2007); narrative

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<sup>52</sup> See “Ethical Considerations Entailed by a Relational Ontology in Narrative Inquiry” (CLANDININ, CAINE, & HUBER, in press) for a detailed discussion of ethics in narrative inquiry.

inquiry in this way is both a methodology and the phenomena under study (CLANDININ & CONNELLY, 2000). Narrative inquirers are mindful that they are entering in the ‘midst of lives,’ lives that began long before and will continue long after a research project ends (CLANDININ, MURPHY, HUBER, & ORR, 2010). The relationships that develop shape the way experiences are shared and understood. As Mark FREEMAN (2007) notes, “Relational thinking seeks to shift the angle of vision and thereby open up new, more fully human ways of figuring human lives. This aim is its great challenge and its great promise” (p. 11). Thinking relationally is a critical part of narrative inquiry. “Without living in relation in wide-awake ways... we cannot know, feel, understand, and recognize tensions” within lives and relationships (CLANDININ et al., 2010, p. 83). Tensions “we experience as researchers alongside participants as we live on their landscapes” (CLANDININ et al., 2010, p. 83) develop as part of the narrative inquiry process.

The ontological and epistemological commitment to understanding experiences in relational ways influences the way narrative inquirers approach research. Interactions within this methodology are not structured as interviews with a list of questions, but rather as conversations (CLANDININ & CONNELLY, 2000). Conversations are open in that they do not have a distinct agenda and are negotiated by participants and researchers. Accordingly, to “live alongside, to become part of lives, theirs and ours, in motion” is a critical part of the narrative inquiry process (CLANDININ et al., 2010, p. 83). Working with participants in this way takes time and often requires researchers to be flexible in the field.

‘Field texts’ refer to the transcripts, field notes, reflections, and participant’s writing gathered during the initial stage of ‘being in the field’ (CLANDININ & CONNELLY, 2000). Field texts are inquired into as whole pieces, rather than separated and categorized during the

analysis. Field texts are used to develop interim research texts, also called narrative accounts (CLANDININ & CONNELLY, 2000). The narrative accounts of participants represent experiences, and are also shaped and influenced by the relationships being experienced. Final research texts develop from the narrative accounts, but are written with a broader audience in mind (CLANDININ & CAINE, 2013).

Ethical tensions emerge throughout the research process. Seeing tensions as educative opportunities involves acknowledging and creating space for meaningful conversations and explorations, rather than keeping uncomfortable thoughts hidden (CLANDININ et al., 2010; HUBER et al., 2006). When personal narratives ‘bump up’ against dominant social or institutional narratives, these tensions can lead to greater understanding and a shift in perspective for researchers, participants, professionals and policy makers (CLANDININ & RAYMOND, 2006; CLANDININ & ROSIEK, 2007).

### **Research Process**

The women were 20-28 years old. Two of the women were Aboriginal<sup>53</sup>, one was of German descent, and one of French descent; all of them were born in Canada. In Alberta, the over-representation of Aboriginal women in custody in 2009-2010 was a little over 50% (MAHONEY, 2011). Three of the women were mothers with two or three children; none of them were married or in common-law relationships at the time I met them; two of them were initially living with boyfriends but broke up with them because they were being abused. All of them identified as hetero-sexual. The participants had been arrested and charged at least once. Their charges were for shoplifting, theft, and violating administration of justice conditions (failure to appear in court, probation breaches, etc.), which was representative of the most common offences for women according to Canadian statistics from 2009-2010 (MAHONEY, 2011). Two

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<sup>53</sup> Aboriginal includes First Nations, Metis and Inuit people as defined by Statistics Canada (MAHONEY, 2011).

of the women had a criminal record, and two had their records expunged under the Youth Criminal Justice Act. Three of the women had been detained in custody for at least a week with the longest single period being two months. Two of the women mentioned they had been ‘in the system,’ since they were 13 years old, explained as having many interactions with police officers and being familiar with CJS procedures. One participant was categorized as a ‘high risk’ case and assigned a specialized case worker.

Each participant identified herself as having learning difficulties; these difficulties were described as having trouble keeping up in class and having specific challenges with learning. One of the participants completed high school with additional support from teachers, and the other three women did not complete high school. Two participants left school in grade 10, and one left in grade 7. Although all of the women received a clinical diagnosis – Attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD/ADD), general anxiety disorder, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), and learning disabilities in math and reading -- their experiences as women with learning difficulties, rather than their specific diagnoses, were the focus of the study.

From an ‘ethic of care’ perspective, the relationships with participants were paramount to the way I understood ethical tensions. I became wakeful to these tensions as I lived alongside participants in the field. I initially struggled when facing difficult questions regarding research relationships and boundaries because I was not courageous enough to speak out about the challenges I faced. As I sought out opportunities to talk about the tensions, with participants and colleagues, spaces opened up to grapple with the tensions. The ethical questions that surfaced were complex, multilayered, and called forth questions of commitment and responsibilities. While the research involved four participants, in this paper I will focus on one participant, Caris.

**Meeting Caris.** In the following segment I introduce Caris. Her narrative account was composed as text, which included found poems. Found poems are formed using fragments of actual transcripts and field notes and placed together as poems that are evocative and reflect some of the emotional experiences.

**Balancing Act**<sup>54</sup>

having a kid,

then having to deal with the law

at the same time

just trying to... get by living I guess

with a kid

that's my cycle.

then having to deal with my old charges,

and then trying to understand

how my behavior is

so I can keep myself in control

but still take care of my kid at the same time

and not get so stressed out

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<sup>54</sup> This found poem is from a transcript excerpt of a conversation with Caris on February 28, 2013.



that's my cycle.

that I feel that I have to use addictions  
to help me forget about all my stresses

me, going out drinking,  
and then going to jail for some reason,  
and then I am back in the court cases again  
and still, do all my programs that my probation officer wants me to do,  
and I still have to do stuff for my kid too...

and it's hectic- all the time, it's hectic.

that's my cycle.

so I am trying to get away from the system,  
and trying to do stuff for me, and my son  
and trying to focus on us,

but still I have to deal with it because it's there....

they are asking for two months, and who's gonna watch my kid?

nobody.

he's going to have to go into foster care,

so I am trying to do programming,  
help me recognize I have a problem

and going and changing,  
getting away from the addiction part,  
so I don't go back to it all over again,

that's my cycle

### **Commitment**

Meeting Caris was more than finding and recruiting a participant (CAINE, ESTEFAN, & CLANDININ, 2013). Hannah ARENDT (1958) aptly describes the delicate and somewhat ambiguous nature of research relationships as a web. “We call this reality the ‘web’ of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality” (ARENDT, 1958, p. 183). I still recall introducing myself to Caris as a student and researcher with a distinct focus, but I also emphasized my desire for a prolonged relationship. Tensions formed as I thought about who I was trying to be in her life, not only as a researcher, but also as a person – each calling forth a different commitment. The tensions I felt between professional and personal boundaries became educative opportunities to ask myself who I imagined I would become in her life. There were tensions because our interactions led to places that seemed to be at the margins of research and more akin to friendship. Rather than limit our relationship, I focused on my commitment to Caris when considering how to act in these liminal spaces.

Caris was the first participant I met. When I began this narrative inquiry, I was unable to picture her life outside of this research project. I was not attentive to who Caris was in her

multiplicity because I had certain expectations of what the research process would look like, including what my relationship with Caris would entail. When Anne, a community worker, introduced me to Caris, I was eager and excited about the relationship we would develop. I indicated to Caris that I wanted to meet with her several times, and I ask her to confirm that she would be available for a year or so. The “intangible quality” of the “web of human relationships” (ARENDR, p. 183) became a tension. I realized that I could not fit my roles into neat little boxes that I was able to keep separate. I felt pulled by a sense of commitment to Caris as I expressed a desire to have a relationship with her, while also feeling pressure to focus on being a researcher.

*I have trouble keeping my research separate from other areas of my life, and I would think about Caris while I was shopping for groceries or playing with my children. ...I was negotiating how I could be a part of Caris' life. I wanted to live alongside to share experiences, not just hear about them. I helped her move and I drove her to her appointments. (Fieldnotes, February, 2013)*

Even though I talked with participants about the importance of forming and maintaining a meaningful relationship, I failed to consider what it meant to them. During the fifteen months that I met (or tried to meet) with Caris, I struggled to understand why our relationship did not unfold as I had hoped. It became apparent only after our research relationship ended that this tension formed partly because I had never asked her what a meaningful relationship looked like for her. Yet, it was also more than this. Maria LUGONES (1987) makes me see that if “we learn to perceive others arrogantly or come to see them only as products of arrogant perceptions and continue to perceive them that way, we fail to identify with them – fail to love them – in this particularly deep way” (p. 4). My commitment was shaped by tension called forth by my failure

to love in this deep way, and instead I was concerned most of all with the outcome of the research. As I reflect on my relationship with Caris, like Marilyn FRYE (1983, as cited in LUGONES, 1987) I too can see that “one must consult something other than one’s own will and interests and fears and imagination” (p. 8). In these moments of reflections, I could see that narrative inquiry called forth a commitment to world travel to Caris’ world, in ways that were hard and long term work for me.

### **Showing Commitment to Multiplicity and Complexity**

Human plurality connects us as human beings while distinguishing each of us as unique (ARENDR, 1958). “Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live” (ARENDR, 1958, p. 8). In co-composing the narrative accounts, I was attentive to the diverse stories Caris had shared and wanted to include. These were more than the stories of experiences in relation to the criminal justice system or challenges due to learning difficulties. I had to be careful not to reduce Caris’ life to particularly experiences or to categorize her experience. Vera CAINE and colleagues (2013) explain how stories foster development of identity and “this cannot be achieved by treating stories as reductionist artifacts of a research process” (p. 583).

A tension formed during the analysis process. I had been taught to organize and collate in order to make sense of the research findings. I wanted to keep the messiness and multiplicity that were true to the individual participants and their experiences, but I was concerned that the reader would interpret such narratives as lacking purpose or consequence. Limiting Caris’ narrative account to a few pages focusing on my own research interests and conclusions would not reflect my commitment to her, it too would limit others’ understanding of who she was and was

becoming. Whether it is regarded as good research practice or a commitment to be alongside participants in loving ways, there was a tension between what experiences would become publicly visible and keeping a sense of plurality.

Caris had been in and out of correctional centres for ten years from when she was thirteen. Yet, when I asked her to tell me about her experiences, she shrugged her shoulders and said,

*I dunno, I never really had a problem going to jail. Probably because I mostly kept to myself and I was only friends with certain people, and the rest of the people I just never really talked to, I didn't even really acknowledge them. It's just kind of hard because you can't show too much emotions or that kind of stuff with other people. You can't show that you have like any kind of weakness right? So for real, only sometimes, like maybe when you do one-on-one programs, or you are just like the kind of person that doesn't care what other people think, then you can get help.*

*(Caris, February 28, 2013)*

Caris had significant insights into her experience in jail, yet there were also many silenced and untold stories. After reading and reflecting on Caris' narrative account, I could see how she had learned how to survive and get through her time in custody. Contemplating multiplicity in lives required a change in focus from what I expected as stories of the criminal justice system to actually listening to Caris' told and untold stories. When a question was met with silence, I had missed the opportunity to talk about what mattered to her. When Caris said, "I dunno," I interpreted her words as rejection, rather than a possible starting point. Perhaps Caris

too recognized that I was not at ease in her worlds and that I was not a fluent speaker (LUGONES, 1987). Though a commitment to world travelling, other stories could have emerged; perhaps I would have come to know other stories of Caris, stories that showed plurality (or different access to the world) or love of a world that was foreign to me. Although I later realized the importance of plurality, Caris and I never had the chance to experience this as part of our relationship before we lost touch with one another.

### **Responsibilities**

Hannah ARENDT (1958) describes actions as a series of chains, so that when we act, there is a reaction. There is a “boundlessness of human interrelatedness” (p. 190) in our actions, particularly when we are together without being “for or against each other” (p.180). “Action [...] always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries” (p. 190). This action also calls forth responsibilities as a narrative inquirer. Caris talked about being abused, losing custody of her children, and being discrimination. Many of Caris experiences were marked by violence. This violence for Hannah ARENDT (1958) would have called forth a citizen responsibility, called forward action against misery. I was mindful of Caris willingness to share such private stories with me, but I was unsure of how to act. I thought I was getting to know Caris, but I failed to see how my own actions and inactions were closely linked to responsibilities in the way Hannah ARENDT thought.

The most intimate exchanges Caris and I had were in the car or sitting on a park bench. We went places together and talked about our lives in different settings. I got to know Caris in relation to other people in her life. At the same time, there were a number of occasions when I would go to the designated meeting place, and Caris would not be there. I would call and leave messages for a week before hearing from her. In those moments, I could not make sense of her

absences and missed calls. I had this persistent fear that I had done something wrong, that I had not cared enough. I had to take a step back to realize that there was so much I did not know about Caris. I learned that trust and respect were critical elements of being in relational spaces. I had to trust Caris and accept uncertainty as part of our relationship. When I thought about how my actions did not foster “human togetherness” I could see how I had created limitations (ARENDR, 1958).

The ambiguity in who I was in Caris’ life and who she had become in mine pulled us apart as neither of us seemed willing to talk about how the relationship had shifted over fifteen months. I had become aware of how my expectations of the relationships with participants impacted the research itself. Jean CLANDININ and Michael CONNELLY (2000) refer to the formalistic view that emphasizes “the formal structures, by which things are perceived” (p.39). Only when I learned to recognize how my expectations were influencing our research relationships and the way I was interpreting the experiences. This tension helped me re-consider responsibilities within the context of actions.

### **Representing the Participants in Research Texts**

Representing the participants was an important part of negotiating and writing Caris’ narrative account. Narrative inquirers attend to both the participants as well as the public audience as they consider what stories are shared and how they are shared (CLANDININ & CAINE, 2013). I had to remind myself that I was not trying to “make these stories fit” into the research, but to stay with the “unfitting story” (CAINE et al., 2013, p. 581). “Representation, as the act that arises from our relational ontology, necessitates our living with the unfitting story rather than with attempts to tame, sanitize, or analyze” (CAINE et al., 2013, p. 581). I was attentive to the possibility of losing Caris’ voice if I did not discuss with her the way her

experiences would be presented. Negotiating the narrative account with Caris was imperative to faithfully portray how she perceived herself and others around them.

Margarete SANDELOWSKI (2006) discusses the ‘crisis of representation’ that has been a growing concern in qualitative research where the researcher does not give “voice to the voiceless” but replaces their voice (p. 10). She warns against “the dangers of misrepresentation” (p. 10) which is a potential problem in qualitative research when negotiations with participants are not central. Caris was willing to share her experiences publicly, but I knew that due to different interpretations and perceptions within the public realm, the original stories could lose their authenticity, and their unique reality (ARENDR, 1958). I experienced significant tensions when I thought about my responsibilities of representing Caris in final research texts.

Researchers are increasingly using other ways of presenting the research, such as poetry, plays and photographs (SANDELOWSKI, 2006) to show participants’ perspectives and to express greater emotion (RICHARDSON, 1993). Found poetry<sup>55</sup> was a way to approach my concern of representation and to ensure that Caris felt her words had been heard. Emotive and evocative, the words were their own, expressed in powerful ways. The tension of presenting pieces of the narrative accounts in a way that maintained the ethical responsibility within our research relationships was addressed by using found poetry.

The ethical responsibility of representing participants included allowing the reader the opportunity to come face to face with participants and offering Caris a voice within the public sphere (ARENDR, 1958). In the “space of appearance,” the public space where power is found as the “potentialities of action,” the authenticity of experiences can get lost (ARENDR, 1958, p. 201); researchers strive to interpret and analyze as a way of making the research meaningful, but

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<sup>55</sup> This term is used to describe the poems created by taking words and phrases from transcripts and intentionally placing them in a certain way on the page (BUTLER-KISBER, 2002).



risk losing the actual meaning of the work as expressed by participants. Here then responsibility is closely linked to accountability.

## **Discussion**

Contemplating ethical tensions, in relation and to commitments, as educative spaces called forth difficult questions. At the same time, exploring the tensions opened up opportunities for growth and understanding. The “web of human relationships” (ARENDR, 1958, p. 183) is not meant to be untangled, but embraced as intricate. Seeing human relationships *as they are* is necessary to understand why tensions form and why research is messy. In establishing relationships with participants, showing plurality in their stories and representing them in final research texts, I thought about who was and am becoming in the lives of participants, and what my responsibilities are. Rather than finding ‘right’ answers, I had to learn to accept ambiguity and uncertainty as part of the nature of relational ethics in narrative inquiry (CLANDININ et al., 2010; HUBER et al., 2006).

**In the midst of lives being lived.** Negotiating the relationships was important when entering into the midst participants’ lives. When I met with Caris, I had not taken time to negotiate with her what it meant to engage in relational research and to share both told and lived experiences. Uncertainty in our relationship became a tension because I initially did not see Caris in the midst of her life, and struggled to world travel to a world that was foreign to me. During the seven months that Caris and I lost contact, her life circumstances significantly changed. Joanne MINAKER (2001) describes the constant flux in needs and the dynamic nature of interactions for women with similar experiences. This constant flux, which was also present in Caris’ life, awakened me to how I initially had taken up dominant stories in my relationship with Caris. Being cognizant that “we enter in the midst of lives, our lives and participants’ lives, and

into the midst of ongoing institutional, cultural, linguistic, and social narratives” was necessary to understand that Caris was unique and that I need to attend to her experiences directly (CLANDININ et al., 2010, p. 87). To seek and find “more fully human ways” to work with participants (FREEMAN, 2007, p. 11) may change the way we approach research and understand the participants living in larger social and institutional landscapes (CLANDININ & CONNELLY, 2000).

In this way a narrative account is never the final word on someone’s experience, but rather is always provisional (FRANK, 2005). Attentiveness to the tensions needed to be situated in this understanding that lives continued in diverse and unexpected ways (CLANDININ et al., 2010). The aim was never to “fix” the issues that Caris faced. Seeing how our lives intertwined with one another and with broader narratives was significant for understanding who I was in relation to Caris. Although we cannot give definitive statements on what will become of the participants, we highlight the ways that relationships and interactions shape and shift the lives that are being lived (CAINE et al., 2013).

**Reflexivity.** Being reflexive while interacting with participants also became a way to recognize and explore the tensions as educative spaces. Reflexivity was a way for me to come to terms with ethical concerns and to navigate through the process of this study (ETHERINGTON, 2007; FINLAY, 2002; GUILLEMIN & GILLAM, 2004; PHELAN & KINSELLA, 2013). As I continued to meet with participants, I understood the importance of being present with a sense of openness and curiosity that ultimately fostered a sense of commitment and action. During the time when Caris and I had lost touch, I repeatedly thought about her role in the narrative inquiry. I felt a sense of weariness when I thought about possibly losing Caris as a participant. The

inquiry process was significant for me and it was only when I looked back that I noticed how I had wrestled with tensions.

From an ethical standpoint the transparency inherent in reflexivity is necessary for understanding how research texts have been created and co-composed (BISHOP & SHEPHERD, 2011; RILEY et al., 2003). Indeed, “it is only through systematic, ongoing reflexivity, however—including a continuing examination of personal subjectivity—that we can avoid self-indulgence” (BISHOP & SHEPHERD, 2011, p.1284). Rather than denying who I was and am becoming within the work, it is my ethical responsibility to recognize and address the tensions that arise.

### **Conclusion**

The ethical tensions in this narrative inquiry were called forth as I began to make sense of who I was in participants’ lives. These tensions were explored and turned into opportunities for understanding, I was able to think about the participants as part of the web of human relationships that we are all part of and in which I carry commitment and responsibilities (ARENDR, 1958). Acknowledging the plurality of human beings was important when considering my ethical responsibility to the participants. Representing participants in the public realm was a way of acknowledging the potential power inherent in stories that can become sources of action.

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## Chapter 7

### Implications and Significance

The contribution of a narrative inquiry is more often intended to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic, than it is to yield a set of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to the knowledge in the field. The narrative inquirer does not prescribe general applications and uses but rather creates texts that, when well done, offer readers a place to imagine their own uses and applications. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42)

Creating “a new sense of meaning and significance” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42) regarding the experiences of women with learning difficulties in the CJS involved a shift in how I understood and interpreted their stories. Rather than using the stories to prove an existing theory or to create a new one, I recognized the meaning in the women’s stories as distinct and complex. I began this inquiry with questions that formed a research puzzle, and sharing stories led to more questions, opening up different spaces and moving in different directions. To imagine diverse possibilities is one of the outcomes I anticipated for this research.

Through this narrative inquiry, I learned about the power of stories as a way of communicating and understanding one another (Bruner, 1986). Stories are powerful because they are a way of knowing that brings people together irrespective of classifications such as age, level of education, criminal history, and disability. Experiential knowledge is not based on how old we are, what grade we completed, and the labels we may have been given. Carla, Caris, Tasha and Lina offered their experiential knowledge that could not have been read in a textbook or learned



in a classroom. Sharing stories was a way of expressing experiential knowledge that was interactive and enriching. In addition, being reflexive about the way I interpreted stories and how my preconceptions impacted the research findings shaped the way the narrative inquiry unfolded. I had to intentionally and continuously think about the way I was interacting with participants and interpreting their words when we negotiated and co-composed narrative accounts, as well as when I drew from the narrative accounts and wrote the research texts.

### **Re-turning to the Research Puzzle**

Re-turning to the research puzzle, I think of Hostetler's (2005) words. "The 'answers' to research questions do not end things but offer new circumstances for exploring the persistent question of what is good for people" (Hostetler, 2005, p. 21). The research puzzle began with an interest in "what is good" for the women at the correctional centre. I looked to the literature to learn more about the experiences of women with learning difficulties and involvement with the criminal justice system (CJS). A paucity of research led to the research puzzle in this narrative inquiry. The question of "what are the life stories of young women with learning difficulties in the CJS?" was significant because the stories were unknown, as if they had not been considered important to know. Although I wanted to inquire into experiences, I found myself listening to their stories with a preconception of women with learning difficulties in the CJS based on what I had read. I had to 'unknow' what I had learned (Vinz, 1997). The women's stories were not meant to 'fit' my perceptions, but to help form new interpretations and to ask more questions. Thinking about who I was in the women's lives, and who they were in my life became part of the stories because they shaped how I understood and made sense of our co-compositions.

Meeting with participants over an extended period of time reminded me that I was entering in the midst of lives, as our experiences continued to shape us. Our stories – of the past,

present and future -- shifted with us. I realized that our lives were constantly in motion, even after our research relationships ended. In the introduction, I mentioned the need for narrative inquirers to be 'awake' to the stories that have yet to be experienced (Greene, 1995). Bateson (1990) refers to life as "ongoing improvisations, quite ordinary sequences of day to day events" (p. 241). Although I knew more about the participants after spending several months with each of them, I would not be able to say how their lives continued to progress. Being in the midst and being committed to lives in motion were two touchstones<sup>56</sup> I was able to reflect upon in retrospect as part of this narrative inquiry. Another touchstone I contemplated was the personal, practical and social justifications for this study (Clandinin & Caine, 2013).

### **Personal Justification**

How I have come to think about research within the public realm of human interactions, where relationships and experiences shape our stories to live by summarizes the personal significance of this work. I continue to think about Rose<sup>57</sup> from the correctional centre where I did my placement. I wonder if Rose even remembered me or our conversation. What did I want for Rose? What did I want for the women I worked with in this narrative inquiry? I wanted them to have a chance, to have the opportunity for a good life. My narrative beginnings were of having little money and material things. At that time, I thought a good life meant having money and 'fitting in.' Is the good life something that we individually strive for? Is it possible to separate the good life from our circumstances, our histories, and our relations? The participants and I never talked about what a 'good life' would be for them. They told me a little about their aspirations, but the stories about their present struggles seemed to take up most of our conversations.

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<sup>56</sup> See Chapter 1 for a description of touchstones in the section Quality in Narrative Inquiry.

<sup>57</sup> See Introduction for a detailed description about meeting Rose.

I now better appreciate the way my own experiences; my views and perceptions affected *how I understood* the participants' individual stories. For example, as a mother, I have thought about what it would feel like to have my children taken from me, although I know I would never be able to fully understand. I also spent time at a correctional centre, and when the participants described their encounters with correctional officers or with other women in jail, I pictured what their experiences may have looked like based on my own experiences interacting with corrections staff and people in custody. When I referred to experiences in this dissertation, I was talking about experiences as I had perceived them. I was unable to understand their stories, although unintentionally for the most part, I had preconceptions which filtered my view. Being transparent about the interpretive process has been a critical part of this narrative inquiry. We discussed and negotiated the narrative accounts, and I wrote the research texts by drawing on the narrative accounts.

I have changed because of the relationships with the women and the experiences we shared. The 'web of relationships' (Arendt, 1958) that we were a part of as researcher and participant included the differing ways I perceived myself within the women's lives. I felt a sense of responsibility in our relationship, not out of obligation, but as part of an ethic of care (Bergum, 1994). Consequently, I am much more conscious of the interactions I have with others, and I am more intentional in being open with others, to try to meet them without assuming I *know who they are*. I am attentive to the inconsistencies in what I say and do. I cannot simply take off my researcher hat, and put on other hats, as if they are separate from one another. I see how the work has become a part of who I am, and the way I want to live. As I look ahead, I think about my children and about Caris, Carla and Tasha's children, as we strive to raise our children with love and dignity. I think about what 'the good life' means to each of us

individually and collectively, and how we can work together to have ‘a good life.’ The sense of responsibility and commitment I feel toward the women extends beyond the narrative inquiry itself. I continue to meet with Carla and Tasha, and I hope to re-connect with Caris and Lina. We are no longer part of a research relationship, but they are and will continue to be a part of my narrative.

### **Practical Justification**

In pondering the practical significance of this work I am reminded of Carla’s story when she was given a public transit ticket and dropped off at a public light rail transit (LRT) stop. Before I met Carla, I met a young woman who, upon release, was dropped off at a downtown LRT station without a coat; it was a cold winter night with strong winds. She went to the local emergency shelter and although it was closed, they let her in as she had nowhere else to go. I met her the next day at a clothing room where I was volunteering. There, she was able to get a coat and some clothes. During a brief conversation with her and her mother, they shared a bit about the many challenges they were facing. The young woman’s mother was trying to help her during this time of transition, but neither of them had a place to live or a job, and both of them had problems with their physical health.

The participants have faced various challenges when released from custody, from lack of clothing and shelter, to lack of social supports and healthy relationships. As experiential knowers, they have been able to share stories about their experiences and provide insight into different possible ways to address certain difficulties. For Carla, the absence of immediate options available was a significant barrier, and she talked about going back to her dealer’s house when she was released from jail. She stated that there was nowhere else to go, suggesting a gap in the support that has significant consequences for people transitioning from incarceration.

Caris also had few options when she left her boyfriend who was abusing her and she went to stay at a shelter where she was given three weeks to find her own housing. Tasha struggled to find childcare when she went back to school, but could not miss classes if she wanted to retain the funding she received that made it possible for her to pay her tuition. The hurdles have been identified, but possible strategies for getting over these obstacles seem less clear. Each of the women found temporary solutions for the issues that were directly in front of them, but they expressed desperation and frustration with how difficult it was to progress and reach their goals. Their experiential knowledge about being involved in criminal justice system and challenges with transitioning into the community presented some gaps in current practice as well as the tangible effects these disparities have had on the women's lives.

To work with people in a valuable and beneficial way, professionals need to strive for equity and mutual trust within relationships. As the participants in this narrative inquiry shared, their challenges were complex and interconnected -- difficult to address as distinct and separate problems. Likewise, their experiences of being judged by others, including professionals, led to a lingering sense of doubt. I had made an assumption, from my own experiences, that professionals would be respected based on their status and title. However, I could see how negative experiences could cause apprehension in subsequent interactions. Carla, Caris, Tasha and Lina provided an important perspective about their lives within broader systems such as what resources they accessed for support, what they perceived as being support, and how they experienced the supports in place. Through conversations with the women, I learned about experiences in relation to institutional systems, including correctional centres, community organizations, health care providers and child protective services. By drawing on expertise from the women and working in partnership with community organizations, this research can have an

impact at a grassroots level by building on their experiences as they transitioned into the community to discuss possible strategies that offer effective and lasting support.

### **Social Justification**

The margin is the context in which those who suffer injustice, inequality and exploitation live their lives. People find themselves on the margins not only in terms of the inequality in the distribution of material resources, but also knowledge production is organized so that the views of a small group of people are presented as objective, as “The Truth.” The majority of people are excluded from participating as either producers or subjects of knowledge. (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 33)

In the participants’ stories of experiences, the women expressed they felt marginalized at times, and I noticed how experiences of ‘Othering’ contributed to the sense of marginalization embedded in their lives. Being set apart affected daily challenges because of the limited resources available in terms of basic needs as well as social support. They struggled to care for themselves, and for three of the women, their children, because they had few options available to them. In addition, the absence of the women’s voices in research has meant being excluded from contributing to the knowledge that directly affects them, including the programs they are part of, the services they receive, and the policies that are in place to support them. They were “on the margins” in terms of being able to share their opinions and express their concerns (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 33). Continuing to inquire about experiences from women with learning difficulties can shed insight into their needs while in the CJS and transitioning back into the community (Hayes, 2007). The social model of disability emphasizes the social, cultural, historical and relational influences in understanding disabilities and the way they are perceived

(Goodley, 2001). By hearing stories about interactions situated within social and institutional systems, we were able to focus less on individual disabilities, and more on *how* the women *experienced* disabilities in different contexts and circumstances. When I first talked to Carla about having learning difficulties, she told me about her past experiences in the classroom and a more recent conversation with a friend who could not understand why she was unable to focus. For Carla, as well as the other participants, learning difficulties were expressed through stories rather than specific symptoms and characteristics, revealing the complexity of interactions between context and individual from a social model of disability standpoint.

The narrative accounts point out the lasting impact of experiences in school; however, the participants' stories were not about what interventions they received or the programs in place, but how they were bullied, excluded, as well as the interactions they had with peers and teachers. Although discrimination and stigma may be present in the women's lives, the experience differed depending on the individual. Likewise, the difficulties they encountered in caring for their children could include some or all of many factors such as lack of resources, need for child care, and issues with their own addictions, criminal justice involvement and relationships. As I experienced in this narrative inquiry, ongoing interaction with participants was critical to see the multiplicity of their lives as they unfolded. The interactions with broader social, cultural and political systems as well as within personal relationships were part of their experiences but were not apparent until we shared our stories. Being a part of each other's lives over an extended period of time made it possible for our relationships to develop as they did; our interactions influenced my understanding of the participants, and may have influenced the stories we shared. Building upon this research is necessary to show the importance of preserving the complexity of lives as part of knowledge. In turn, broader systems can draw on the awareness that develops

from sharing stories to influence policies and practice that are a critical part of the intricacy of the women's lives.

### **Moving Forward**

There remains a gap in research which focuses on the past experiences of women with learning difficulties – experiences that *precede* CJS involvement, with an emphasis on prevention. The participants' childhood stories were only a small part of this narrative inquiry, but could have been explored further. As participants talked about their childhood, I wondered how their relationships with family, friends and professionals as children and youth impacted their experiences today. Carla talked about interactions with child protective services as a child, and Tasha spoke about leaving home and school when she was in grade 7. When she was a child, Lina thought that it was 'normal' to be beaten with a belt, and Caris referred to her childhood as being 'hectic.' Developing a research puzzle around childhood as a retrospective narrative inquiry could provide opportunities to contemplate the participants' experiences with a specific focus on protective or preventative measures.

The over-representation of Aboriginal people, including Aboriginal women, in the Canadian CJS is a significant issue (Cunneen, 2005; Perreault, 2009). This study included two Aboriginal participants and explored some of the impacts of systemic biases and racial discrimination within their experiences. Tasha felt like her Aboriginality made it more difficult for her to get an apartment or a job. Cultural context did not seem to be a predominant theme in the participants' narrative accounts. Although Caris and Tasha spoke a little about being Aboriginal, we did not explore deeper into culture because they had not brought it to the forefront. Although I was not sure about how to approach cultural pieces within this narrative inquiry, I would like to collaborate with researchers who are Aboriginal and look at the



experiences of women who are Aboriginal, have learning difficulties and have been involved in the CJS would help to understand how cultural influences in their lives have affected their past, present and future stories and their relationships with others.

Looking back at the past four years, and reflecting on what I hope for the future, I am acutely aware of how much I still have to learn. I ask myself, how might I do things differently? Firstly, I realized that being awake to possibilities means much more than being open-minded. Forming relationships, asking for consent and protecting participants' identity do not automatically translate to ethical research. I expressed the desire to have meaningful, lasting relationships with participants without getting their input on what these relationships might look like to them. I have learned to use the ethical tensions as educative opportunities for reflection. Rather than avoiding the uncomfortable questions about the research relationship and ethics, I hope to try to create relational spaces for discussion with colleagues and with participants by being open about challenges or struggles. A group which gathers weekly on campus, 'Research Issues,' was a space where I was able to speak freely. Establishing relational response communities, one of the twelve touchstones, is a vital part of narrative inquiry. I have learned that reciprocity is a fundamental aspect of meaningful relationships. I realized that just as others do not know me, I do not know them, and I cannot assume that I know. Being a part of response communities offers opportunities to talk about difficult situations and challenges in research, including ethical questions.

Before this narrative inquiry, I perceived occupational therapy as a healthcare profession through an interventionist lens; I thought that my role as an occupational therapist was to assess and treat problems or disabilities. I have shifted in the way I consider occupational therapy treatment and interventions. I value the emphasis on relationships that is part of occupational

therapy practice, and I am reminded of the book by occupational therapist, Renee Taylor (2008), *The Intentional Relationship*. She highlights the importance of contemplating relationships within occupational therapy and how they facilitate and enable the therapeutic process. She also points out the issues and tensions with relationships that may arise during the therapeutic process. I re-evaluate the sense of hierarchy experienced by participants in research, and clients in healthcare settings. I also contemplate how different experiences of relationships with professionals may influence the way clients subsequently perceive researchers and professionals and form relationships with them. Wonderings around client-centred practice (Sumison & Law, 2006) and personal practical knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) have emerged from this narrative inquiry. Honoring stories within healthcare practice has been discussed by Coles (1989) as well as Charon and Montello (2004). As I look deeper into the concept and practice of client-centredness, or person-centredness, I see how exploring counterstories as well as contemplating the ethical tensions within relational research can contribute to being more person-centred in practice. I have wondered about the experiences that Carla, Caris, Tasha and Lina have had with professionals in their lives, and if they have worked with occupational therapists. I also wonder what they envision as the ideal relationship with professionals.

I am composing and recomposing my narratives, as a researcher, a woman, a mother, and so on, yet always connected. My narratives cannot be separated into categories, but are intertwined. I ask research questions based on my experiences, not only my experiences as a researcher, but in multiplicity. Clandinin and colleagues (2006) remind us of the need to “stay wakeful to the multiplicity of our identities, to the multiple identity threads each participant [is] negotiating, as well as to the broader social, cultural and institutional plotlines at work in our and participants’ contexts” (p. 26). Multiplicity is not limited by our roles, but also extends to our

relationships, our aspirations and our perceptions. When I think about what my program of research looks like, I know that the experiences I have had in this doctoral program will influence and shape future projects – projects that expand on the work done in this narrative inquiry.

Research has become a more human endeavour. In qualitative research, a more caring and sympathetic approach to research is not necessarily free of judgment or unethical actions. As I met with Caris, Carla, Tasha and Lina, I learned to be intentional in pursuing research with humanity to align with an ethic of care, always in relation to others. The private stories they shared with me about their experiences as children with learning difficulties, being in the criminal justice system, and trying to resist the challenges and struggles they face on a daily basis were a part of our relationships that were built on mutual respect and reciprocity. The power of stories, shared by participants in public spaces, is that the stories continue to shape and shift identities and perceptions. There is a need to consider how we hear stories, in relationships and found communities, as well as the way we interpret stories, as counterstories, or in other ways.

### **Going back to the beginning...**

Four years ago, I began this narrative inquiry with questions that emerged while I completed my occupational therapy placement at a correctional centre. The questions also led to reflections about my past. My own childhood memories were of financial strain, of being bullied at school, and of low self-esteem. As I revisit the painful memories of being bullied and rejected, I can see how these experiences have impacted who I am today. I carry them with me, not as a burden, but as a way of understanding myself and shaping my stories to live by. In re-telling the stories, I am able to see the significance and purpose of certain experiences that had seemed

unjust and distressing. The participants' narrative accounts have also become a part of the stories I share as my own narrative. Robert Coles' (1989) words come to mind: "Their story, yours, mine – it's what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them" (p.30). As I continue to seek new ways of thinking with stories, I see new possibilities in the stories we are telling and the stories we are living.

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## Appendix A

### Participant Information Letter for Narrative Inquiry

Researcher: Ms. Elly Park (Hyun), PhD student, Phone 780 492 1626, email: elly1@ualberta.ca  
Supervisor: Dr. David McConnell, Phone 780 492 7475, email: David.McConnell@ualberta.ca

You are invited to participate in a research project for my doctoral studies at the University of Alberta. The purpose of this project is to learn about the lives and experiences of young women who have had some struggles with learning and have been caught up in the criminal justice system. This knowledge will be used to better meet the needs of young women in the justice system.

#### What will we be doing

- I (Elly) will be meeting with you and 1 to 4 other young women who may have similar experiences to you.
- I will be asking you questions about your life in general, past and present experiences. The meetings will be tape recorded so I can listen to what you have said.
- We will meet at different times to build an account of your life story. These meetings will take place at different places that are comfortable for you, such as coffee shops, parks or libraries.
- The study will likely require a time commitment of up to one year. We will meet about eight to ten times for about one hour each at times that work best for you.

#### Benefits

I hope this study will give you a chance to think about your life, to understand yourself better and to gain a sense of confidence. However, you may not receive any direct benefits from this study. Your input may help to develop services and provide support for young women who are facing similar challenges and struggles now and in the future. You are welcome to give your opinion and offer ideas at any time. I will cover all expenses during our meetings, such as drink, food, travel and other materials.

#### Risk

I understand that there are possible risks to being in this study that are unknown. There may be times when you will be emotional and upset. You will always be able to take a break or stop if you want to. If you do need more assistance, a support worker from E Fry can provide support and make sure you are okay.



### Why should I take part?

Your input is extremely important. You will be able to share your experience in your own way. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If any questions make you uncomfortable, you do not have to answer them. You will have a chance to review what I write about your life story. You will have the chance to make any changes. At any time up until after you review my writing from our final interview, you can ask for your information to be removed from the project. I will not use any information you do not want me to include.

### Sharing of information

- The information you share will remain anonymous. I will ask you to select a code name or nickname that I'll use in my writing. Your nickname will be used in all of the reports or presentations of the findings.
- All the recordings and writing will be kept private. Only my supervisor at the University and I will have access to it.
- Other researchers may listen to interviews in order to transcribe them. They will sign a form to ensure confidentiality.
- The **results** of this study **may be shared with others** in the following ways: directly to participants of the study, in the thesis presentation and dissertation, presentations at conferences and meetings, and published scholarly articles.

### Further information

- If you have any questions regarding this study, or wish for more information, or if you want a final copy of all my writing please contact Elly at (780)492 9675.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

## Appendix B

### Consent Statement

By signing this consent I acknowledge that I have read and understood the attached information letter for the study, A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Young Women with Learning Difficulties involved in the Canadian Criminal Justice System being conducted by Elly Park (Hyun).

I understand that what I share will be kept confidential.

I understand that I will be respected as a participant in the research being done.

I have had a chance to ask any questions about this study.

I have been told that I can change my mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time.

I have been given a copy of this agreement.

I understand that I am not giving up any of my legal rights.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.