

Coming and Going: A Narrative Inquiry into Women's Stories of a Partner's Temporary  
Interprovincial Labor Migration

by

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## Abstract

Narrative inquiry provides a methodological framework and philosophy to guide the research process, as well as directs the methods that may be used (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The purpose of this narrative inquiry research was to increase both understanding and awareness of the experiences of four women who were left behind while their partners engaged in temporary labor migration in another Canadian province. The following questions framed this inquiry and were used to elicit stories reflective of the women's experiences.

1. What stories are women telling about themselves during the experience of being left behind as their partner leaves home for employment in another province?
2. What stories are women constructing in regards to who they are and who they are becoming as they experience a partner's employment outmigration? Do they include in these stories how they think this is changing other women's views of themselves?
3. What stories are women constructing regarding their perceptions of health and how they perceive their personal health to be impacted as a result of their husband's coming and going for employment outmigration?

In review of literature, policy, and position statements, I have learned of the emphasis placed on economic development and labor market trends within the Atlantic Region. However, temporary labor migration and the experiences of those left behind have been overlooked. Further lacking is an understanding on how this phenomenon impacts those who are left behind, particularly women who remain behind and care for children.

Digitally recorded conversational interviews and photographs provided glimpses into the stories lived, told, relived, and retold by women who were left behind in rural communities and experiencing a partner's temporary interprovincial labor migration. Women recruited for this

inquiry co-participated in 5 or 6 conversational interviews. Each co-participant had experienced the coming and going of their husbands for employment out of province for between 6 and 12 years. Conversational interviews lasted between 1 and 2½ hours. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. To gain a deeper understanding of how women experience the coming and going of their husbands due to labor migration, the participants were invited to share personal photographs. These photographs offered a visual representation of the women's storied lives. Analysis of data occurred through an interpretive process of moving back and forth between field texts, interim research texts, and research texts shaped by questions of meaning and social significance.

In shaping field texts into research texts, nine overarching narrative threads emerged and revealed the women's perceptions regarding identity: who they were, who they were becoming, and how they thought they were perceived by others as they experienced their husband's inter-provincial labor migration. These narrative threads were organized under the headings: Being—The Married Single Mother, Fulfilling Roles and Responsibilities, and Imagining Networks of Support; Becoming—Family Evolution, Family Reunification, and Importance of Communication; and Belonging—Unsupportive Community Relations, Faithfulness and Commitment to Marriage, and Self Isolation. Alignment of these narrative threads with research and other theoretical works including the *Circle of Health PEI's Health Promotion Framework* (Mitchell & Beattie-Huggan, 2006), PEI Department of Health and Social Services and Community Services (2003), and The Quaich Inc. (2011) provided an additional lens to understand how the coming and going of a loved one for labor migration shaped identity construction and perceptions of health for women left behind.

This narrative inquiry research contributes to the development of knowledge in the area of temporary labor migration and the experiences of women left behind. To date, this research has been disseminated locally, regional, and internationally. Sharing this inquiry with others has led to an increased understanding and awareness about the phenomenon of temporary interprovincial labor migration and contributes to a greater awareness of the strengths and challenges women who live in rural communities and care for children while their partners are temporarily employed out of province experience. Future dissemination of this research will be shared in various forums in the hope of influencing nursing practice, policy, research, and education.

## **Preface**

This thesis is an original work by Christina Faye Murray. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received ethical approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name: “Coming and Going: A Narrative Inquiry into Women’s Stories of a Partner’s Temporary Interprovincial Labor Migration,” No. Pro00027206, March 12, 2012. Ethical approval was also received from the University of Prince Edward Island, March 28, 2012. No part of this thesis has been previously published.

## Acknowledgements

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I often say, “I am just a girl from the Piusville Road who was lucky enough to love school and wanted to go to university when I grew up.” Being from rural PEI and surrounded by potato fields and water, going to university was something that many girls in my community did not have an opportunity to achieve. My love of school was instilled by my grandmothers, Vera Murray and Ethel Williams, who stressed from the time I was 5 years old the importance of women going to university so that they could have a career and earn enough money to be self-sufficient. This is a life lesson I took to heart. I miss you both and cherish the years we had together.

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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1 – Introduction .....	1
The Phenomenon Under Inquiry .....	2
Coming to the Inquiry .....	3
Considering women .....	4
Epistemological Assumptions and Methodological Considerations .....	6
Justifying the Inquiry - Connecting my Narrative Beginnings .....	7
Community nursing .....	8
Rural life .....	11
Being left behind .....	13
Conclusion .....	14
Chapter 2 - Selecting the Literature .....	17
Outmigration in the Context of Atlantic Canada .....	17
Contributing Factors Associated with Outmigration .....	22
Educational opportunities .....	22
Employment and economic opportunities .....	24
Outmigration and Women .....	28
Role identity .....	28
Outmigration and health .....	31
Potential Contribution of the Inquiry .....	34
Conclusion .....	36
Chapter 3 - Methodology and Methods .....	38
Locating Feminist Epistemology in Narrative Inquiry .....	39
Discovering Narrative Inquiry as a Research Methodology .....	39
The Three-dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space .....	41
Continuity – Past, present, and future .....	42
Interaction – Personal and social .....	42
Situation - Place .....	43
Coming Together - Negotiating Research Relationships .....	44
Eliciting the Stories of Women – Participant Recruitment Considerations .....	45
Methods .....	47
Interpretive analytic considerations .....	47
Turning inward, watching outward – Composing field texts .....	48
Reflexive field notes .....	49
Conversational interviews .....	51
Photographs as field texts .....	53
Turning inward, watching outward - Composing research texts .....	54
Shaping photographs into research texts .....	56
Laying research texts alongside other research and theoretical works .....	57
Ethical Considerations .....	58
Issues of Rigor .....	61
Conclusion .....	62

Chapter 4 - Entering into a Research Relationship with Laura .....	64
Labor Migration Across Multiple Generations .....	68
Making the Decision to Leave .....	70
Perceptions Regarding Marriage and Family .....	72
A Snapshot of Life - Building the Family Pool .....	73
Day-to-Day Management of Multiple Households .....	74
“Who’s Got it Worse?” A Question without an Answer .....	76
The Commuter Father .....	77
The Fluidity of Role Transitions .....	79
A Snapshot of Life – Coming and Going: My Life through a Windshield .....	80
Marital Challenges .....	81
A Snapshot of Life – Vacationing Together .....	83
Home as a Location .....	84
A Snapshot of Life– An Empty Chair at the Family Table .....	85
Communicating from a Distance .....	87
Perceptions by Others of Women Left Behind .....	90
Coming, Going, and Women’s Health .....	94
Final Reflections .....	99
A Snapshot of Life – A Blurred Photograph of a Blurred Life .....	102
Conclusion .....	102
Chapter 5 - Entering into the Research Relationship with Patti .....	105
A Life of Unpredictability .....	1088
Perceptions of Marriage – Dreams versus Realities .....	112
Challenges to Maintaining Marital Relationships .....	115
The Impact of Coming and Going on Families Left Behind .....	1199
Perceptions from Others in the Community .....	123
Considering the Economy of Rural PEI .....	127
A Snapshot of Life - Designing a Home Away from Home .....	131
Coming, Going and Women’s Health .....	133
Taking a Break .....	139
Experiencing the Experience of Being a Narrative Inquirer .....	140
The transformational power of narrative inquiry .....	142
Final Reflections .....	144
Chapter 6 - Entering into the Research Relationship with Helen .....	149
Deciding to Live Apart .....	150
Perceptions of Home - Life in Rural Communities .....	153
A Snapshot of a Life - Three Men in a Truck .....	157
Changing Family Dynamics .....	159
Presents in Lieu of Presence .....	164
Children’s Perceptions of Relationships .....	168
A Snapshot of a Life - Heavenly Rainbow .....	170
A Snapshot of a Life - Peaceful Gardens, Potato Rills, and Salmon Sunsets .....	172
Coming, Going and Women’s Health .....	176
Women Need to be Supported .....	177

Reflecting on the Past.....	181
Hopes for the Future.....	183
Final Reflections .....	185
Chapter 7 - Entering into a Research Relationship with Amber.....	190
Making the Decision to Leave for Employment.....	191
To Move or Not to Move: That is the Question.....	193
Impact of Coming and Going on Children.....	196
Lost Christmases .....	199
Being Together yet Living Apart - Family Evolution.....	201
The Coming and Going of a Husband and Son .....	204
Maintaining a United Front.....	207
Fostering Communication and Connection.....	20909
Snapshots of Life.....	213
Perceptions from Community Members .....	215
Supporting Women Left Behind .....	219
Exploring Women’s Health.....	224
Strategies to Promote Women’s Health .....	229
Envisioning the Future .....	232
Conclusion.....	233
Chapter 8 – Final Synthesis and Discussion.....	236
Deconstructing Narratives of Being.....	236
Being – The married single mother.....	237
Being – Fulfilling roles and responsibilities.....	2399
Being - Imagining networks of support.....	241
Deconstructing Narratives of Becoming.....	244
Becoming – Family evolution.....	245
Becoming – Family reunification.....	249
Becoming – Importance of communication.....	252
Deconstructing Narratives of Belonging.....	256
Belonging – Unsupportive community relations.....	256
Belonging – Faithfulness and commitment to marriage.....	259
Belonging – Self isolation.....	262
The Circle of Health (COH) – An Overview of PEI’s Health Promotion Framework.....	263
Considering Physical, Emotional, Mental and Spiritual Health.....	264
Aligning the COH – Strategies for Women’s Health Promotion.....	270
Creating supportive environments.....	270
Strengthening community action.....	272
Developing personal skills.....	273
Re-orientating health services.....	274
Building healthy public policy.....	276
Aligning the COH – Collaborating to Improve Women’s Health .....	279
Aligning the COH – Examining the Social Determinants of Health .....	280
Gender.....	281
Early child development.....	283

Aligning the Values of the COH.....	284
Final Reflections – Revisiting the Past, Considering the Future.....	285
Recommendations for nursing practice.....	288
Recommendations for education.....	288
Recommendations for policy.....	289
Recommendations for research.....	290
Conclusion.....	291
References.....	295
Appendix A: Participant Information Letter and Consent.....	311

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

In this narrative inquiry research, I co-participated with four women living in rural Prince Edward Island, Canada who were experiencing being left behind as a result of their husband's participation in interprovincial labor migration. Through conversational interviews and the sharing of personal photography, I was interested in understanding women's identities; who they were, who they were becoming, and how they thought others viewed them as they lived out this phenomenon. I was interested in understanding women's identities by considering *identity* as a narrative construction – a story that women were living their lives by (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Together we co-constructed life narratives reflective of these women's marital and parental roles and perceptions regarding health.

Through a review of literature, policy, and position statements, I discovered that there was an emphasis on economic development and labor market trends within the Atlantic Region. However, temporary labor migration and the experiences of those left behind had been overlooked. Further lacking was an understanding of how this phenomenon impacted those who were left behind including; particularly, women who remained behind and cared for children while their husbands engaged in employment out of province. Prior to entering into this narrative inquiry research, I had multiple conversations with women left behind as a result of their husbands' labor migration and became attuned to how this had been experienced during periods of time when they had been left behind and became as a result, lone caregivers to children, and also how their husbands' return to the home following a work term had been experienced. Specifically discussed at length were the challenges women faced as they experienced cyclical patterns of having their husbands come and go for employment out of province.

In this chapter I introduce interprovincial labor migration and the factors that led me to want to explore this further in my doctoral research. Secondly, I examine the epistemological assumptions and methodological aspects underlying this narrative inquiry. In justifying the personal, practical, and social significance of this inquiry, I present three narrative beginnings which offer examples of personal life history experiences that prompted my interest in conducting this inquiry. I conclude this chapter with an acknowledgement of social and practical considerations and how these will be presented in this dissertation.

### **The Phenomenon Under Inquiry**

Atlantic Canada includes the provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, and Prince Edward Island. In this region, two societal trends have been noted in regards to interprovincial labor migration – permanent and temporary. Permanent interprovincial labor migration occurs when a person chooses to leave their province of origin to permanently reside in another province or country. Temporary interprovincial labor migration occurs when a person does not permanently move away from their homes. Rather, they participate in intermittent or temporary migration primarily for the purpose of employment or economic opportunities (Meyer & Whitcamp, 2008; Ward, 2012). This results in scheduled or intermittent patterns of coming and going from their home province to another province for employment. It is the intermittent or temporary labor migration which is the focus of this narrative inquiry research. Due to net population losses and a reduction in skilled workers, outmigration has been recognized as a significant issue threatening economic growth and development within the Atlantic Region, and in particular within Prince Edward Island (Province of Prince Edward Island Department of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Rural Development, 2009; Province of Prince Edward Island Office of the Premier, 2009).

Within the Atlantic Region, it is predominantly men who participate in interprovincial labor migration (Atlantic Evaluation Group, 2009; Beale, 2008; Harding, Forbes, & O'Connell, 2006; Keller, 2007; Pan Atlantic Repopulation Committee Rural Secretariat Atlantic Region, 2006; Province of Prince Edward Island Department of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Rural Development, 2009; Province of Prince Edward Island Office of the Premier, 2009; Tam, 2008). Often, before employment begins, the duration of employment and when men will be returning to their families may or may not be known. As men leave for employment opportunities, women, children and families are left behind. Due to the Freedom of Mobility Act, statistics are not known or kept regarding the total percentage of people leaving the Atlantic Region for temporary employment in another province. Without these data, it is difficult to understand patterns related to this phenomenon of temporary inter-provincial employment and how it is experienced by those who leave and those who are left behind.

### **Coming to the Inquiry**

Prior to entering into this narrative inquiry research, I reflected on the stories that had been shared with me by women who experienced their husbands' temporary employment in another province. I was intellectually struck by how open and honest women were. These stories were divulged in a variety of settings including coffee shops, grocery stores, ferry boats, fitness centers, in my office, and on the sidewalks of downtown Charlottetown. In learning about the experiences of being left behind, during these conversations women shared that in order to pay their mortgage, prevent bankruptcy, and cope with the financial stress they as a family unit were experiencing, their partners had to leave their families and communities behind for temporary employment in another province.



### **Considering women.**

Originally I had considered examining the phenomenon of temporary interprovincial labor migration from the perspective of the men who engaged in this type of employment, their partners and families who were left behind, and members representing various sectors who could speak to how the phenomenon of temporary labor migration impacted their communities at large. However, as I began doctoral course work I realized that eliciting the perspectives of all would result in a study too large in scope. As a doctoral student, I would need to narrow my focus and scope to something that would be more manageable.

Although outmigration, including temporary interprovincial labor migration has been recognized as a significant issue influencing economic growth and development on Prince Edward Island, little attention has been paid to this phenomenon. As I considered moving forward with this doctoral research, I recalled the many stories I had heard from women. In my earlier conversations about the phenomenon of interprovincial labor migration and its potential as an area for doctoral research, women wanted to share their stories of experience with me. They were extremely receptive to openly and candidly sharing intimate details of their personal experiences of being left behind as their husbands were temporarily employed in another province. Women shared the challenges that existed when their partners left for employment and they had to manage multiple responsibilities alone. As well, they spoke about experiences of stress, anxiety, and unhealthy and ineffective lifestyle choices as they tried to balance family roles and responsibilities in their husbands' absence.

The more I discussed the phenomenon of interprovincial labor migration with women, the more it became apparent that they had stories that they wanted to share. The desire to undertake this narrative inquiry research stems from the multiple conversations I had over the

past 7 years with women living in rural communities throughout Prince Edward Island. It was these women who suggested that I focus my doctoral research on women's experiences of being left behind while their partners were temporarily employed in another province. Four women were recruited for this narrative inquiry research. These women were recruited using a combination of direct convenience and snowball sampling. Each woman met with me on five or six occasions for conversational interviews lasting between 1 and 2½ hours.

Narrative inquiry is a relational methodology that emphasizes the development of collaborative partnerships between the participant and inquirer (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Due to the multiple conversational interviews per participant that would be required and the relational nature of narrative inquiry research, the sample size for this inquiry needed to remain small. Women participating in this inquiry lived in rural communities throughout Prince Edward Island and had between two and six children living at home. They had experienced the coming and going of their husbands as a result of labor migration for between 6 and 12 years. While their husbands' pattern, of labor migration were initially seasonal, within a few years all but one had accepted full-time employment out of province. This, in turn, resulted in frequent coming and going commuting patterns whereby husbands would leave for employment out of the province and sporadically return home and reunite with their families. At the time when conversational interviews were conducted, husbands were at home with their families approximately 60 days per year.

The purpose of this narrative inquiry research was to increase both understanding and awareness of the experiences of four women who were left behind while their partners engaged in temporary labor migration in another Canadian province. The following questions framed this inquiry and were used to elicit stories reflective of the women's experiences of being left behind.

1. What stories are women telling about themselves during the experience of being left behind as their partner leaves home for employment in another province?

2. What stories are women constructing in regards to who they are and who they are becoming as they experience a partner's employment outmigration? Do they include in these stories how they think this is changing other women's views of themselves?

3. What stories are women constructing regarding their perceptions of health and how they perceive their personal health to be impacted as a result of their husband's coming and going for employment outmigration?

### **Epistemological Assumptions and Methodological Considerations**

This narrative inquiry research arose from the stories that had been previously shared with me by women who had been left behind while their partners participated in temporary interprovincial labor migration. As I reflected deeply on past conversations I had with women left behind and their desire for me to conduct research, I was drawn to a quote taken from Denton, Hajdukowski-Ahmen, O'Connor, and Zeytinoglu (1999). They wrote, "Women can be at the center of knowledge making about their own lives through setting their own agenda about what needs to be researched, how it needs to be researched and what needs to be changed" (p. 17). This quote aligned with my philosophical assumptions and guided how I engaged with women who chose to participate in this narrative inquiry. As our research relationships developed, stories were shared, told, and retold by both women as participants and myself as the inquirer and co-participant. In my desire to partner with women and illuminate their stories of being left behind, the experiences of women became central to this inquiry. As such, I was mindful of feminist epistemological assumptions and methodological considerations underlying this inquiry.

The readings of Campbell and Bunting (1991), synthesized from the work of de Lauretis (1986), Hartsock (1981), and Wheeler and Chinn (1984), enriched my understanding of feminist epistemology. These authors wrote about the assumptions that recognize and value women's experience as a legitimate source of knowledge, participants as experts in their own lives, subjective data as valid, and recognition of knowledge as relational and contextual. In consideration of the feminist epistemological assumptions outlined above, Campbell and Bunting also offer methodological considerations that a researcher needs to examine when conducting feminist research. These considerations include that:

Research should be based on women's experiences, research should address questions women want answered, the researcher's point of view should be described and included as part of the data, research should be nonhierarchical, a partnership between the researcher and participant should exist, interpretation by the researcher should be validated with participants. (p. 8)

Based upon these feminist epistemological assumptions and methodological considerations, I believe that narrative inquiry is an appropriate methodology for exploring the stories lived and told by women left behind due to their husbands temporary employment in another province.

### **Justifying the Inquiry - Connecting my Narrative Beginnings**

In justifying narrative inquiry research, personal, practical, and social significance must be articulated. Prior to beginning a narrative inquiry, an inquirer needs to recognize and articulate their personal experiences in relation to the proposed inquiry. Through personal reflection and reflective writing, the personal significance of the inquiry can be articulated. These reflective activities are known as narrative beginnings (Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray-Orr, 2007). In narrative inquiry, the researcher's own experience is considered to be as important as

that of participants. Narrative beginnings can help to clarify the researcher's own stories of experience as they relate to why they wish to pursue a specific phenomenon for further investigation in narrative inquiry. In justifying personal significance, the inquirer not only offers personal experiences in light of the phenomenon to be explored, but also addresses why this phenomenon resonates with them and what life history has shaped their desire to highlight or raise awareness of the phenomenon. As I considered this inquiry in light of personal significance, I reflected on my narrative beginnings from both a professional and personal lens.

### **Community nursing.**

As a practicing community health nurse and nurse educator specializing in the area of community development and community health nursing, my practice is embedded in health promotion, the social determinants of health, and working with individuals, families, and communities. Through clinical practice experiences I have become acutely aware that the health of people, families, and communities is impacted by social and economic factors. These factors are known as the determinants of health and include employment and working conditions, income and social status, education and literacy, gender, early child development, physical environment, social environment, culture, genetic endowment, social support networks, personal health practices, and coping skills and accessibility to health services (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010; World Health Organization, & Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008). In particular, I have witnessed how poverty, unemployment, and underemployment can affect one's access to food security, safe and adequate housing, health services, and other resources to promote and support health and wellbeing for community members and their families.

Research and policy recommendations (Baum, Begin, Houweling, & Taylor, 2009; Marmot, 2007; Raphael, 2010; Reutter & Kushner, 2010; Senate Sub-committee on Population Health, 2009; World Health Organization Europe, 2003; World Health Organization Social Commission on the Determinants of Health, 2008) have repeatedly identified that when large income discrepancies exist between and within countries, higher proportions of the population will experience health inequities. To reduce health inequities and improve a population's health requires committed action on the determinants of health, with attention being paid to the socio-political and environmental factors that influence health. Researchers have found a relationship between unemployment, underemployment, and negative health consequences (Ahs & Westerling, 2005; Gien, 2000; Ommer, 2009; Safaei, 2008; Samuels-Dennis, 2006; Snow, 2009). Being without a job or being underemployed creates significant psychological and emotional stress on community members and their families. I learned, through conversations with women, that often men who engage in temporary inter-provincial migration are experiencing financial stress as a result of being unemployed or underemployed. This financial stress may lead to increased anxiety, worry, and depression (Ahs & Westerling, 2005; Gien, 2000; Ommer, 2009; Safaei, 2008; Samuels-Dennis, 2006; Snow, 2009) as they struggle to pay for the necessities of life such as housing and food security.

Often, when discussing this research, I was questioned about how this was a nursing issue or why I wanted to investigate it. Registered Nurses strive to promote health and prevent illness, injury, and disease. To accomplish this, nurses must practice from a holistic perspective. To comprehensively address the holistic needs of clients, whether they are individuals, families, or communities, nurses must explore multiple factors that impact physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health and wellness. Being unemployed, underemployed, or working for a wage that

does not adequately allow for one to provide for the necessities of life affects health. According to article 23 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Unicef, 2004) “everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and the protection against unemployment” (p. 9).

Striving to meet this declaration is often a challenge to many residents of Prince Edward Island due to their employment in seasonal industries such as fishing and farming. These industries create cyclical patterns of unemployment and a dependence on Employment Insurance for income supplementation. From a holistic health perspective unemployment may lead to increased physical illness due to an inability to pay for necessities of life. Being without a job or having one that does not provide a living wage creates significant psychological and emotional stress on individuals and families. These combined factors have the potential to cause feelings of hopelessness and helplessness and, in turn, affect spiritual health. Families who experience out-migration are faced with the potential of new stressors and challenges that can impact health. Families experiencing the temporary labor migration of a loved one have shared with me their experience regarding loneliness, stress, use of ineffective coping strategies such as drugs and alcohol, and marital infidelity which occurred during or were attributed to out-migration. Each of these in itself could be viewed as a significant health issue requiring further research.

While research has repeatedly denoted an association between decreased employment opportunities, lower socioeconomic status and negative health outcomes for individuals, families and communities, the inverse became evident in this narrative inquiry. By listening to women share their storied lives, illuminated was how having partner with full time employment out of the province, (and having annual incomes double or triple what the family had earned prior to participating in labor migration) did not prove to be health protecting. Rather, the added roles

and responsibilities accompanied with being left behind and caring for children led to women reporting increased feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and being overwhelmed. As a result of their husband's employment and subsequent improvement in family incomes, women chose to isolate themselves from other and social activities in the community. This was done as a means to reduce the potential risk of being gossiped about as a result of being left behind and their having their family's improved finances known.

Reflecting on past nursing practice experiences and the results of my review of the literature, I have become acutely aware of the social determinants of health and how these social and economic factors may affect the health of families and communities. Through these practice experiences and understanding of the determinants of health I have been changed. My understanding about the social determinants of health is no longer limited to nursing practice or education, but is a lens by which I view the world and think about daily life experiences and how these may influence others. I offer below a reflective piece of writing which speaks to my personal narrative beginning. Had I not been aware of the social determinants of health through my professional nursing practice, I question whether my personal experience articulated in the following narrative beginning would have sparked my interest in researching interprovincial labor migration and the experiences of women left behind.

### **Rural life.**

In 2007, my husband and I made a decision to move from Calgary, Alberta and "try life" for a year and live in a rural community in the Western Region of Prince Edward Island. Seventy percent of the population living in the Western Region of Prince Edward Island are seasonally employed in the fishing and agriculture sectors and earn 50% less annually in comparison to those who live in the urban centers of Summerside and Charlottetown (Atlantic



Evaluation Group, 2009). I am originally from this region of Prince Edward Island and had moved away 11 years earlier for employment opportunities. The pace of our lives in Calgary had become chaotic as we strived to juggle high pressured careers while also raising a young child with no extended family support available. Growing weary with the pace of our lives and yearning to slow down and reconnect with family again, we sold our home in the city and decided to take a year off and move back to Prince Edward Island.

This year was in all ways a complete contrast to the life I had led in the city. The rush and intense pace of work and traffic were absent, as was the ability to access things I had taken for granted. Going to a major grocery store or to a movie now required a journey of over 100 km. During this year, I was overwhelmed by the kindness shown by others and the sense of community that existed. Many people went out of their way to get to know my husband, daughter, and me. Having registered our daughter in a pre-kindergarten program in the community, we were able to connect with other parents and our daughter made friends easily. As time passed and fall turned to winter, I repeatedly began hearing of married men who were making plans to “go out west” to Fort McMurray to work in the oil and gas industry after Christmas.

When I took my daughter back to her pre-kindergarten class following Christmas vacation, six out of the 15 children’s fathers had left the community and were now temporarily working in Fort McMurray. They were gone for 4 to 6 weeks for work, returning home for 1 week. This cycle was expected to last until the spring when lobster fishing would begin again. While living in this community I became friends with many of the women whose children attended the same pre-kindergarten class as my daughter and had husbands working temporarily in the oil and gas industry in Fort McMurray. I would hear about their experiences and learned

about increased family responsibilities a woman must take on while their partner was working in another province. My interest in this phenomenon was cemented after I heard a story shared by a woman whose husband had recently returned to the community following a work term in Northern Alberta. I learned that, unbeknownst to her, her husband had been using drugs while out of the province working. While home he had found a local dealer who was supplying drugs to him and had incurred a large debt that he was unable to pay. The drug dealer wanted to collect and went to the family home and demanded payment. When they were unable to pay, the dealer physically assaulted the man in front of his wife and family in the living room of their home and then took the keys to their vehicle as payment.

Hearing about this woman's experience affected me profoundly. I began to reflect on temporary inter-provincial labor migration and the experiences of those who leave, as well as those who are left behind. I began to think about this phenomenon in light of the social determinants of health. I questioned how women managed multiple roles and responsibilities as the sole care providers for their children during periods of time when their partners were temporarily employed in another province. It was hearing these stories that ultimately led to my decision to explore this phenomenon further through doctoral studies.

### **Being left behind.**

In the spring and summer of 2012, I engaged in conversational interviews with co-participants. At this time, I could not have imagined that I, too, would soon live the phenomenon of being left behind by a loved one gone for employment in another province. In December 2012, my father accepted employment in Northern Alberta and thus began his cyclical patterns of coming and going for employment. In July, 2013, my mother flew with him and the two lived in Fort McMurray until November 2013. He returned again in January and my parents left again

in April 2014. I moved to PEI to be close to my parents and wanted our children to grow up with them physically present in their lives. However, I had become an adult daughter left behind while my parents came and went for employment in Alberta. Each time I watched them leave, I selfishly thought that this was not what I had envisioned for my life when my husband and I moved from Alberta. Each time my parents came and went for employment, I was the one who booked their flights and took them to the airport. I was also the one left behind to comfort my daughter after she said goodbye to my parents at the airport and cried on her way home.

As I reflected on these personal experiences and my life history, I thought about how different my life was only a few years ago when I entered into this narrative inquiry research. At that time, I could never have imagined that in the not-so-distant future, this phenomenon would be lived out in my own life. While I recognize that the context of this was different and that I am an adult daughter and not a wife who was being left behind, I believe that this life history has given me a deeper appreciation and sense of empathy towards women who are left behind due to a loved one's participation in interprovincial labor migration.

## **Conclusion**

In justifying the practical and social significance of a narrative inquiry the researcher needs to identify what is known, what is not, and what the inquiry can offer to others in explaining or increasing understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray-Orr, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Freeman, 2007). In this dissertation, I will address the practical and social significance of interprovincial labor migration and the experiences of women left behind. Beginning with a comprehensive literature review in Chapter 2, I provide an overview of the factors contributing to outmigration away from the Atlantic Region. This is followed by a critical analysis of literature reviewed in

light of women's role identity and health. In Chapter 3, I introduce narrative inquiry as a research methodology, its alignment with feminist epistemology, and provide a rationale to explain why conversational interviews and personal photographs were selected as methods to elicit women's storied experiences.

In developing research relationships with women co-participating in this inquiry, I came to the decision that I would not engage with another participant until I had completed the series of five to six conversational interviews with each woman. This, I believe, was valuable to our research relationship and allowed me to deeply reflect on each woman's experiences and stories as they were unfolding. While some similarities were noted in the experiences of all co-participants, I decided that I would develop a chapter for each co-participant which would reflect their unique experiences and storied lives. These are presented in Chapters 4 through 7.

Chapter 8 is the conclusion of this dissertation and in it I reveal the overarching narrative threads uncovered within this narrative inquiry research. Through deconstructing these narrative threads, women's perceptions of identity—who they were, who they were becoming, and how they thought they were perceived by others as they experienced their husband's inter-provincial labor migration—were revealed. Further analysis, construction, and deconstruction of these narratives also illuminated how having a husband come and go for employment out of province shaped women's perceptions of health. Alignment of these narrative threads with theoretical works including the *Circle of Health PEI's Health Promotion Framework* (Mitchell & Beattie-Huggan, 2006; PEI Department of Health and Social Services & Community Services, 2003; The Quaich Inc., 2011) provided an additional lens to understand how the coming and going of a loved one for labor migration shaped identity construction for women left behind.

When I initially embarked on this journey of discovery, I received an email from a woman who had heard about my desire to go forward with this research. She granted me permission to share an excerpt from her email message:

*I was speaking with two women at my daughter's birthday party who will now be in the "husbands needing to go out west to work" phase of their life journey. One is the principal of my daughter's school. Everyone here is affected. You are doing amazing work and I can only begin to understand the emotion as these women feel the need to share their story and desperation and fear and loneliness (I have goose bumps). Thank-you for embracing your beautiful mind, and helping tell their stories in your research. Knowledge is awareness, awareness leads to possibility.*

As I reflect on the phrase, "Knowledge is awareness, awareness leads to possibility," I look forward to the future and the possibilities that may come as a result of this narrative inquiry research. This narrative inquiry has been, and will continue to be, disseminated through knowledge-sharing activities such as presentations, meetings, and scholarly publications. Sharing this inquiry with others has led to an increased understanding and awareness about the phenomenon of temporary interprovincial labor migration and the experiences of women left behind. Findings from this narrative inquiry will lead to new possibilities, new discoveries, and new questions. This narrative inquiry research contributes to a greater awareness of the needs of women left behind in rural communities and caring for children while their partners are temporarily employed in another province. Future dissemination of this research will be shared in various forums with others in the hope of influencing nursing practice, policy, research, and education.

## **Chapter 2 - Selecting the Literature**

Although much has been recently written regarding outmigration and its economic impact on the Atlantic Region (Atlantic Evaluation Group, 2009; Pan Atlantic Repopulation Committee Rural Secretariat Atlantic Region, 2006; PEI Statistics Bureau, 2013; Prince Edward Island Fisheries, Aquaculture and Rural Development, 2009; Province of Prince Edward Island Office of the Premier, 2009), current government policies regarding outmigration have failed to recognize the experiences of women left behind when a partner engages in temporary employment in another province. In this chapter, I examine historical and current factors that have contributed to outmigration away from the Atlantic Region. Secondly, I explore the issue of outmigration, specifically from the perspective of women, and include literature from national and international sources. I conclude this chapter with a discussion regarding how this narrative inquiry research contributes to the development of knowledge in the area of temporary labor migration and the experiences of women left behind.

### **Outmigration in the Context of Atlantic Canada**

Outmigration from the Atlantic Region has been commonplace over the past century as residents from the region's four provinces have historically left for other regions of Canada and the United States in search of new opportunities. Veltmeyer (1978) profiled outmigration by Atlantic Canadians and identified decreased employment opportunities in the agriculture sectors as a catalyst for outmigration in the early 1900s. He reported that from 1900 to 1931, over 300,000 residents left the Atlantic Region in search of "productive employment," with over 150,000 of the "region's most productive (skilled) workers" (p. 98) leaving from 1921 to 1931 (Veltmeyer, 1978). Another significant period when outmigration from Atlantic Canada was prominent occurred during the 1960s. During this time, an estimated 150,000 people, ages 15 to

34, left the region in search of employment. This outmigration was deemed to be ironic in light of an increase of 113,000 paid positions in the Atlantic region during this time frame (Veltmeyer, 1978).

In recent decades there has been a marked rise in the rates of outmigration from Atlantic Canadian rural communities. From 1997 to 2007, 14% of Atlantic Canada's population moved away from the region for employment in another province. This resulted in a net population loss of 72,500 people, 70,000 of which were between the ages of 15 and 34. The majority of Atlantic Canadians who moved away from the region during this time moved to Alberta. Although numbers of migrants vary from year to year it was reported that in 2006-2007 alone, 21,000 people moved from the Atlantic Region to Alberta in search of economic opportunities (Beale, 2008). One community particularly effected by outmigration in recent years is Marystown, Newfoundland. This rural fishing community lost 19% of its total population from 1996 to 2006 as a result of the moratorium on the Newfoundland cod fishery (Brautigam, 2008). Over 2009–2010, there was a reverse population trend in the Atlantic Region with all provinces experiencing net population gains ranging from 60 people in PEI to 1,030 in Newfoundland. In 2010–2011, this trend reverted once again to net population losses for PEI, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. Newfoundland was the only Atlantic province in the region experiencing a net population gain of 30 people (Statistics Canada, 2014). This negative migration trend continued and was particularly concerning for PEI during the period of July, 2012 to June 30, 2013, when the province experienced a net population loss of 1,252 people. This was the highest rate of outmigration from the province since 1981. The majority of these people between the ages of 18 and 64 were migrating to Alberta, Ontario, and Nova Scotia for employment opportunities (Prince Edward Island Statistics Bureau, 2013).

All levels of government have voiced concern regarding youth outmigration, decreased population growth, and increasing age of those who are remaining in the Atlantic Region. Of particular concern is the potential lack of skilled workers that may be available to replace those who are retiring from the workforce. Also concerning is the potential services that will be required as the population ages. Decreased population growth results in a decrease in government tax revenues and creates challenges in government's ability to sustain both currently, and in the future, publically-funded services such as hospitals and schools (Atlantic Evaluation Group, 2009; Beale, 2008; Harding, Forbes, & O'Connell, 2006; Keller, 2007; MacDonald, 1998; Pan Atlantic Repopulation Committee Rural Secretariat Atlantic Region. (2006; Province of Prince Edward Island Department of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Rural Development, 2009; Prince Edward Island Statistics Bureau, 2013; Tam, 2008; Vera-Toscano, Phimister, & Weersink, 2001).

Attention is currently being focussed on the demographic, economic, and social challenges facing rural Atlantic Canada and how these are contributing to outmigration. Within Atlantic Canada, net population decreases are primarily attributed to lack of immigration, declining birth rates, death, and outmigration. In 1851, 89% of all Canadians lived in a rural community. However, by 2011 this percentage had dropped to 19% with four out of five Canadians living in urban settings (Statistics Canada, 31 December, 2012). In contrast, Beale (2008) identified that 46% of Atlantic Canadians lived in rural communities. In contrast to these national and regional averages, 53.8% or 78,607 of Prince Edward Island's population of 146,105, currently live in a rural community (PEI Statistics Bureau, 2013).

For this inquiry I have chosen to adopt the definition of rural provided in the research paper prepared for Statistics Canada by du Plessis, Beshiri, and Bollman (2001). They identify



that rural communities are those that have populations of less than 10,000 people and are geographically located outside of large urban centers that have populations in excess of 10,000 people (du Plessis, Beshiri, & Bollman, 2001). Vera-Toscano, Phimister, and Weersink (2001) have discovered that rural Canadians are often poorer than Canadians who live in urban centers. Rural communities tend to rely on seasonal industries such as fishing, agriculture, or construction for primary sources of employment. Multiple authors have reported that dependency on seasonal industries as primary sources of employment is associated with lower personal incomes, increased rates of unemployment, lower individual educational attainment, and increased rates of outmigration (Atlantic Evaluation Group, 2009; MacDonald, 1998; Pan Atlantic Repopulation Committee Rural Secretariat Atlantic Region, 2006; Province of Prince Edward Island Department of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Rural Development, 2009; Province of Prince Edward Island Office of the Premier, 2009; Prince Edward Island Statistics Bureau, 2013; Status of Women Canada, 2005; Vera-Toscano et al., 2001; Wray, 2012).

A reliance on seasonal industries for employment also contributes to higher rates of unemployment, a dependence on Employment Insurance benefits, and increased rates of poverty for residents of rural Atlantic Canada when compared to urban cities within the region and Canada as a whole (MacDonald, 1998; Pan Atlantic Repopulation Committee Rural Secretariat Atlantic Region, 2006; Status of Women Canada, 2005; Veltmeyer, 1978; Vera-Toscano et al., 2001). These findings have been echoed by du Plessis et al. (2001) who found that in comparison to urban Canadian communities, rural communities have higher rates of unemployment, lower incomes, and a higher proportion of children and older adults who are dependent on others for care.

The decision to leave one's rural community, regardless of reason, often involves considerable thought and discussion prior to actually making a move to another province for permanent or temporary employment. As previously written, due to the Freedom of Mobility Act, specific statistics are not known nor kept regarding the actual percentage of people leaving the Atlantic Region on a temporary basis for employment in another province. Regardless of the province in which employment was secured and income generated, if a resident files income tax in their home province they are considered a resident of that province and according to current statistics compiled, did not participate in outmigration (20 January, 2012, personal communications, C. Mosley and J. Mallard, Population Secretariat Province of Prince Edward Island).

There is a lack of data specific to temporary inter-provincial employment patterns in Canada. This is problematic as it is difficult to gauge how many people are claiming permanent residency in one province yet employed on a temporary or full-time basis in another. Without having measures in place to quantify population trends specific to temporary labor migration, understanding the magnitude of this phenomenon, the number of people leaving for employment, and the numbers who are being left behind is near impossible to comprehend. Often this information is offered as an anecdotal estimation shared by community members as they discuss who is coming and going, how this is impacting their lives, and the rural communities in which they are living.

Probing this further, I have discovered two vastly different reports regarding temporary interprovincial labor migration specific to the province of Newfoundland. The government of Newfoundland has loosely estimated that at any given point in time 6,000–9,000 residents are temporarily employed in the province of Alberta (Brautigam, 2008). In contrast, a *Global News*

documentary aired in March 2008 reported that of the estimated population of 80,000 living in Fort McMurray, Alberta, 25,000 of these residents were from Newfoundland. These residents chose to either permanently or temporarily move away from Newfoundland to this city for employment purposes. Within the context of Prince Edward Island, a study commissioned by the local economic development agency revealed that between 2005 and 2009, 54% of men aged 18 to 55 left the Western Region at least once for employment out of province (Atlantic Evaluation Group, 2009). This region comprises one third of the geographic area of Prince Edward Island and is comprised of only rural communities.

### **Contributing Factors Associated with Outmigration**

Taking a closer look at outmigration from the Atlantic Region, two patterns appear to exist; leaving for educational opportunities or leaving in search of employment and economic opportunities (Atlantic Evaluation Group, 2009; Beale, 2008; Brautigam, 2008; Corbett, 2005, 2007; Harding et al., 2006; Keller, 2007; Pan Atlantic Repopulation Committee Rural Secretariat Atlantic Region, 2006; Province of Prince Edward Island Department of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Rural Development, 2009; Province of Prince Edward Island Office of the Premier, 2009; Roger Pitblado, Medves, & Stewart; 2005; Tam, 2008; Vallerand, Hiscock, & Berthelot, 2007; Vera-Toscano et al., 2001; Wray, 2012). A brief overview of each of these is presented.

#### **Educational opportunities.**

In Atlantic Canada those who live in rural communities and wish to pursue post-secondary education must often leave their communities to do so. The desire to attain post-secondary education and subsequent employment is a primary factor contributing to outmigration in the Atlantic Region as many of the youth who migrate to urban centers to attend post-secondary institutions do not return to the rural community. Multiple reasons exist for this.

For many, employment specific to their post-secondary education does not exist should they wish to return to their communities of origin. Additionally, a person may have met a partner while away at school and decide not to return to their community of origin to establish their life together (Atlantic Evaluation Group, 2009; Corbett, 2005, 2007; Harding et al., 2006; Keller, 2007; Pan Atlantic Repopulation Committee, 2006; Province of Prince Edward Island Department of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Rural Development, 2009; Province of Prince Edward Island Office of the Premier, 2009; Tam, 2008; Vallerand et al., 2007).

Corbett (2005) explored the issue of education and outmigration among community members living in rural coastal communities in Nova Scotia that were heavily reliant on seasonal employment. His study reflected both personal perceptions and demographic trends regarding education and outmigration over a 30-year time period. Shared in this study were the perceptions of participants who were employed in the community's primary industry—fishing. Corbett's (2005) findings revealed that the majority of these participants did not complete high school nor did they see the relevance of high school or post-secondary education in light of the work that they were involved in (Corbett, 2005). A similar finding was reported in a study conducted by the Atlantic Evaluation Group (2009), indicating that within the Western Region of Prince Edward Island, the majority of the population were employed in seasonal industries such as fishing and farming and 38% of these people did not complete high school (Atlantic Evaluation Group, 2009).

Corbett (2007) further explored the issue of outmigration as it specifically related to women living in rural Nova Scotia communities. In this study he examined factors that contribute to outmigration for women living in rural coastal communities dependent on the seasonal fishing industry. He writes of employment in the fishing industry in these communities

as being a “gendered occupation (p. 431) “whereby women do not have equal opportunity as men to be employed in the fishing industry (Corbett, 2007). As fishing in these communities is often a male dominated industry and the primary industry of the region, women in these communities know from an early age that they will have decreased opportunities for employment should they wish to stay in the community upon graduation from high school. Corbett’s findings revealed that between 1963 and 1998, 40.5% of men stayed in rural communities upon completion of high school, whereas only 16.9% of women remained in these communities following completion. Of those who moved away from the community, 33.3% obtained post-secondary education in comparison to 4.1% for people who remained in the community. His findings also revealed that women who remained in the community and were not employed in the fishing industry earned 50% less than the men living in the community (Corbett, 2007). This raises additional points for consideration in regards to the educational attainment and income of women who are left behind while their partner engages in temporary interprovincial labor migration.

#### **Employment and economic opportunities.**

Seasonal employment and subsequent unemployment and reliance on Employment Insurance as a source of income supplementation may lead to precarious financial situations for individuals and their families. It is currently estimated that the annual average individual income for people living in rural Prince Edward Island ranges from \$17,000–\$21,000 per year. Of this amount, it is estimated that 68–69% of the dollars are actual income earned through paid employment. The remaining 31–32% is obtained primarily through bi-weekly Employment Insurance benefits paid to individuals during periods of unemployment (Atlantic Evaluation Group, 2009; Prince Edward Island Fisheries, Aquaculture and Rural Development, 2009).

During this time, those unemployed receive 55% of their insurable weekly wages to a maximum of \$514 per week. In 2009, Islanders received \$220 million in Employment Insurance benefits (PEI Statistics, 2013).

The government of Prince Edward Island recently reported that there were 83,700 people participating in the workforce; however, only 42,000 had full-time, full-year employment. The majority of people who were employed on a full-time, full-year basis were not employed in rural communities. For example, the average annual income (based on all Islanders currently employed in the province) is \$28,400. However, for those who have full-time full-year employment their annual average income is \$40,400 per year (PEI Statistics, 2013). This contributes to wide discrepancies in individual incomes between those who are employed seasonally and living in a rural community and those who are employed full-time, full-year and working in cities such as Charlottetown and Summerside.

While the average unemployment rate for the province of PEI was 11.5% in 2012 and 2011, the average unemployment rate for rural Island communities was 15% and some communities experienced an unemployment rate in excess of 20% (PEI Statistics, 2013). This resulted in a higher than provincial and national average unemployment rate, decreased labor force participation, and decreased overall individual and family incomes. In a study conducted by the Atlantic Evaluation Group (2009), participants revealed that they felt despair related to work opportunities in the area and that they would stay in the region if there was work that offered a cost of living wage. Underemployment and dependence on Employment Insurance may contribute to individual and family feelings of frustration and increased stress as a result of decreased income, which may lead to difficulty in paying monthly household expenses. It is these financial challenges that are often the catalyst behind one's decision to leave their family

for temporary employment in another province. Rooks, Dooley, and Catalano (1991) studied the effects of a husband's unemployment on the emotional health of their wives. They discovered that a husband's experience with job stress or unemployment can impact a woman's emotional health, as women strive to provide support to their husbands experiencing unemployment or job stress while continuing to care for their families and deal with financial challenges (Rooks et al., 1991). These findings were similar to what was found in research conducted by Gien (2000), as she examined the health of individuals and families following the closure of the cod fishery in rural Newfoundland (Gien, 2000).

In 2012, the federal government instituted changes to the Employment Insurance program resulting in reduced weekly benefits paid for repeat claimants, a reduction of five weeks of benefits per claimant, a reduction to 50% of earned income while claimants were in receipt of Employment Insurance benefits, and a requirement to travel up to 100 km one way for an employment opportunity that may only pay minimum wage (Service Canada, 2013). This federal decision had a devastating impact on many seasonally employed residents living in rural PEI. Many residing in rural communities have worked for generations in primary industries such as fishing, farming, or tourism. These people depend on Employment Insurance for income supplementation during periods of time when seasonal employment is not available in these industries. Decreased benefit rates coupled with a reduction in the number of weeks being paid per year, resulted in further economic depression in rural communities. Many Islanders, politicians, and news reporters believe that these changes to the Employment Insurance program were the catalyst behind more than 1,200 people permanently moving away from PEI in 2012. While this statistic was calculated and reflected a marked increase in permanent migration, the

numbers of individuals who chose not to permanently migrate away from the province, but rather began participating in temporary interprovincial labor migration, remains unknown.

While living on PEI, as well as conducting this narrative inquiry during the time when Employment Insurance reforms were being implemented, my awareness was heightened to how these changes were affecting rural communities dependent on seasonal industries as primary economic generators. During this time the phenomenon of interprovincial labor migration and leaving women and children behind for “work out west” in the oil and gas industries of Northern Alberta appeared to become more prevalent. Many men who left felt that the drastic changes to Employment Insurance left them with no choice but to leave the province in search of employment elsewhere over the winter months when they were unemployed and could not fish or farm. While employed out of province, people quickly realized how markedly different wages and employment opportunities were in Alberta as compared to PEI. Wray (2012) compiled an analysis of hourly rates of pay for tradespersons working in the oil and gas industry in Northern Alberta and discovered that tradespersons earn an average hourly wage of \$37.40 (Wray, 2012). In comparison, people employed in the trades on PEI presently earn on average, \$14.47 per hour (PEI Statistics, 2013). In addition to this wage discrepancy is the number of hours of work per week available for tradespersons employed in Alberta as compared to PEI. Often, those employed in the oil and gas sectors of Northern Alberta have an opportunity to work in excess of 40 hours per week, resulting in overtime pay often doubling the earned hourly wage of \$37.40 per hour. These substantial financial incentives encourage these workers who to work as many hours as possible in during the time they are employed out of province.

Also during this time news agencies began to report more stories regarding temporary interprovincial labor migration and how this was impacting Prince Edward Island. These stories



often reflected perceptions from politicians, men who were leaving, and the impact this was having on rural communities. I noted however, that coverage in the media specific to the experiences of women left behind and caring for children while their loved one participated in temporary labor migration was absent.

### **Outmigration and Women**

The primary purpose of this proposed narrative inquiry was to elicit stories of women who experience being left behind while their partner engaged in temporary employment in another province. Particularly, I was interested in exploring, through narrative inquiry, women's perceptions of who they were, who they were becoming, and how they thought they were perceived by others as they lived out the phenomenon of temporary interprovincial labor migration of a partner. Prior to engaging in conversational interviews with women choosing to co-participate in this narrative inquiry, I reflected deeply on the goal of this research and the overarching questions that would guide it. To address the goal and questions that would guide this inquiry, I recognized that an additional review of literature would be required. To further expand my knowledge, I looked to literature pertaining to outmigration within the context of women's experiences, with a focus on role identity and women's health.

#### **Role identity.**

McGuire and Martin (2007) examined migrant families and the experiences of women left behind. Written from a nursing perspective, they conducted research with women living in Mexican communities bordering the United States. Participants in this study expressed hope in the economic security that would come for the family as a result of their husband's migration for temporary employment. Yet at the same time they acknowledged that they were fearful for their partner who was employed in the United States. Similar to what I am discovering regarding

catalysts behind temporary labor migration within the Atlantic Region, McGuire and Martin (2007) write of men needing to leave their families for temporary employment in another country due to not having other employment options available within their local community. By examining literature on labor migration and the experiences of family members left behind, I noted that the rationale for leaving their loved ones was always to access improved economic opportunities elsewhere (Abrego, 2009; Boehm, 2008; Hoang & Yeoh, 2012; Maharjan, Bauer, & Knerr, 2012; McGuire & Martin, 2007; Parrenas, 2001, 2005; Sternberg, 2010; Taylor et al., 1985; Wray, 2012). Research conducted by Boehm (2008), McGuire and Martin (2007), Wilkerson et al. (2009) in Mexico; Maharjan et al. (2012) in Nepal; and Parrenas (2001, 2005) in the Philippines revealed that the sacrifices they were making by working away would lead to improved economic status for their families and greater opportunities for their children. Boehm, (2008); Maharjan et al. (2012); McGuire & Martin, (2007); Parrenas, (2001, 2005); Wilkerson et al. (2009), also reported that families who were left behind were now able to afford material assets for their children. However, the person responsible for improving family finances rarely was at home to witness how their employment away was benefiting their families.

McGuire and Martin's (2007) write about the "migration cycle" (p. 182) explained as the coming and going of a loved one for employment purposes and how this cycle impacts the functioning and perceptions of identity for family members who are left behind. These researchers discovered that having a husband participate in temporary transnational migration impacted every aspect of a woman's life and was fraught with mixed emotions. Participants in their study identified concerns in regards to family cohesion and stability as a result of their loved one being physically absent from the family while temporarily employed in another country (McGuire & Martin, 2007). Wray (2012) also identified challenges that exist for women

left behind who live with frequent cycles of “absence and presence.” In this cycle, they continually renegotiate life as a one-parent family while their husbands are away, and then reunite as a two-parent family upon his return.

Women in McGuire and Martin’s (2007) study identified “excessive burdens of responsibility” (p. 183) as a result of a husband being employed in another country. They identified challenges experienced as they became the lone caregivers of children and managed employment responsibilities in the agriculture industry while their husband was temporarily employed in another country (McGuire & Martin, 2007). Also identified were the feelings of sadness, distress, and anguish experienced by both the women left behind and their children during times when their husband or father was away, and the feelings of jubilation experienced upon reunification. Reflecting on this a participant shared:

When he returns it is a joy for me because I don’t have to assume all the responsibilities alone anymore . . . we enjoy it to the fullest. He tells us what he saw, my children tell him what they have learned, they chat with him about school. For us, the couple, it is a re-meeting. (McGuire & Martin, 2007, p. 183)

Wood (2012) explored the gendered aspects of women’s identities and pervasive cultural narratives by which they were defined. She examined the “can-do discourse,” which purports that women can and should do it all when it comes to home and employment responsibilities, without expecting their male partners to share equally in these responsibilities. Wilkerson, Yamawaki, and Downs (2009) discovered that there is a change in gender role ideology as a result of labor migration, with women’s roles in the family needing to adapt as they fulfill roles that their husbands would have attended to if they were still at home and with the family (Wilkerson et al., 2009). Drummet, Coleman, and Cable (2003) have also examined gender role

ideology in light of military families who are left behind as a result of frequent deployment of a loved one. These authors identified the “honeymoon effect” (p. 282), whereby a family member’s return was highly anticipated but challenging as the couples re-negotiated boundaries and family roles. These researchers discovered that challenges can arise as loved ones renegotiate roles and responsibilities during times when they are separated from their loved ones and also upon their return to home.

Literature reviewed addressing role identity and confusion parallel what I have heard by women left behind as a result of their husband’s interprovincial labor migration. During conversational interviews, women spoke at length about their experiences of being left behind and how this had shaped their role identity. All women spoke about continually needing to re-negotiate their roles within their families during periods of time when their husbands were working away and also upon their return to the family. Prior to leaving the province for employment, a partner may have participated in the daily activities of managing the home, such as with childcare and household chores. However, once they had left the province for work, it became the woman’s sole responsibility to manage independently what may have once been shared by two parents.

### **Outmigration and health.**

As I considered the determinants of health in light of this narrative inquiry, I had expected to notice income and social status, social support networks, education and literacy to be predominant in the storied lives of women left behind. I had not considered role overload as a potential determinant of health that must also be taken into consideration when conducting research with women. Glynn, Maclean, Forte, and Cohen (2009) analyzed the social determinants of health in relation to gender and role overload. These researchers discovered that

women feeling overwhelmed as a result of fulfilling multiple role expectations can affect women's mental health more profoundly than other determinants, such as employment, working conditions, income and social status.

Wilkerson et al. (2009) also wrote about the negative health impacts women experienced as a result of increased role demands during periods of time when their husbands participated in labor migration. They discovered that Mexican women experienced a change in gender roles and gender ideology as result of their husbands' labor migration to the United States. While left behind, women had to expand their roles and responsibilities within their families and adopt an androgynous model of role identity. In their husbands' absence from the home and family, women no longer could align and complete tasks that were traditionally deemed to be female roles. Women left behind needed to complete all roles, regardless of whether they had been traditionally associated with being male or female. Wilkerson et al. found that these additional role demands and role ambiguity resulted in women experiencing a decrease in mental health. Prior to reviewing these studies I had not considered how perceptions of role overload could affect women's mental health.

As I continued to examine the literature, I discovered a study which aligned well with this narrative inquiry. Taylor, Morrice, Clark, and McCann (1985) researched the experiences of women left behind in Great Britain whose husbands came and went for employment in the oil industry. While this study was dated, it is of value and informs this narrative inquiry as it is one of the few discovered that specifically addresses intermittent labor migration of a partner and the health of women left behind. These researchers found a higher incidence of stress-related illnesses, alcohol use, marital conflicts, and loneliness as compared to women whose husbands were employed in occupations where they returned to the family home at the end of their

employment shift. They also discovered increased rates of anxiety and depression among women during periods of time when their husbands were absent from the home (Taylor et al., 1985).

In reviewing the literature further, Bojorquez and Casique (2009), Maharjan et al. (2012), McGuire and Martin (2007), Taylor et al. (1985), and Wray (2012) have also discovered that, as a result of being left behind, women can develop an increased sense of autonomy and independence within their families. This was attributed to the geographical location of their husband's employment and infrequent opportunities to communicate while they were away. Due to time sensitive issues that arose for the family, women had to make decisions without consulting their husbands. As a result, the women often carry the role of primary decision maker in the family.

As I recalled how I came to this research interest in my narrative beginnings, I thought about the many anecdotal stories women who had a husband coming and going for employment had shared. Although these women did not co-participate with me in this inquiry, their stories influenced my desire to conduct this narrative inquiry. Throughout conversations with women left behind while a partner is employed temporarily in another province, I learned about drug addictions and increased and excessive alcohol consumption which began, unbeknownst to women, while some of their husbands were employed out of province. Increased drug and alcohol usage significantly impacted the family upon their loved one's return. As I further considered health from the perspective of inter-provincial labor migration, I was drawn to the work of Goldenberg, Shoveller, Ostry, and Koehoorn (2008) who examined the health of temporary migrant workers employed in the oil and gas industry. These researchers discovered an increased participation in unhealthy personal practices by temporary oil and gas workers such

as binge drinking, illegal drug use, and high risk sexual behaviors. Unhealthy and risky practices, such as alcohol and drug use and engaging in extra marital sexual relationships with others, have the potential to impact the health and wellbeing of women and families upon a husband's return following a work term.

Goldenberg et al.'s (2008) study also revealed that rates of sexually transmitted infections are rising among men employed in the oil and gas industry in Fort McMurray, Alberta and Fort St. John, British Columbia. They have found that often those who contract sexually transmitted infections are temporary workers, coming to the communities from elsewhere in Canada, for employment purposes. Due to intensive work schedules, these workers have limited time off to go to a health clinic for testing and treatment of a sexually transmitted infection. As a result, an infection may go untreated and subsequently infect future sexual partners who may be living in Fort McMurray or Fort St. John or to those who live in the temporary worker's community of origin. This creates challenges for those working in public health in terms of contact tracing and surveillance (Goldenberg et al., 2008). A man returning to his community of origin with an undiagnosed and/or untreated sexually transmitted infection can impact the health and wellbeing of others living in the community. Often, public health nurses are tasked with communicable disease screening and contact tracing. In conversations I have had recently with public health nurses working on Prince Edward Island, they have shared their concerns regarding the increase prevalence of syphilis and Chlamydia among married women who have husbands working for periods of time in Alberta.

### **Potential Contribution of the Inquiry**

In examining the phenomenon of interprovincial labor migration in Canada to date, I have found that the majority of information is found in mediums such as national and local

newspaper articles, documentaries prepared for television news broadcasts (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Global News), and through personal experiences uploaded and shared through social networking mediums such as You Tube and Facebook. As a result of not having statistical data providing information regarding the numbers of people participating in temporary labor migration from PEI, it is unknown how many women are being left behind while a partner is employed temporarily in another province. This could be one reason why the experiences of women left behind are not visible in current literature focusing on temporary inter-provincial labor migration.

Another reason why the experiences of women left behind may not be acknowledged might be due to the historical patterns of outmigration that have occurred within the Atlantic Region. For centuries people have left rural Atlantic Communities, both permanently and temporarily, to secure employment. As such, being left behind may be viewed by some women as commonplace and something that must be done for the financial security of their families. For some Island families, the coming and going of a loved one is something that may have been experienced for many generations. As such, the expectation has been that women will be left behind to care for families while their husbands go away in search of employment and better economic opportunities.

The Canadian Institute for Health Information (2007), Corbett (2007), Roger Pitblado, Medves, and Stewart (2005), and Statistics Canada (2002) have all identified that there is a need for further research exploring migration patterns and their impact on rural communities. Roger Pitblado et al. write “Across the country there is an information gap when it comes to migration in general and internal migration in particular” (p. 104) and Rothwell, Bollman, Tremblay, and Marshall (2002) offer “to date, there has been little analysis of migration patterns and their



influence on rural and small town areas” (March, 2002, p. 1). In recently published research examining the health status of temporary foreign workers in Canada, Preibisch and Hennebry (2011) concluded that studies pertaining to temporary migrant workers in Canada are lacking and that there is a need for further research examining the social context, which could impact the health of migrant workers. In particular, they write that there is a need for future research that examines the “diverse premigration histories, the circumstances under which migration occurs, and distinct realities of employment and resettlement” (p. 5).

From a review of the literature, it has become apparent that permanent outmigration from the Atlantic Canada is well documented. However, gaps exist in relation to temporary inter-provincial labor migration and how this is experienced by those who temporarily migrate for employment purposes and their families who are left behind. In examining national and international sources, I have found that research specific to interprovincial labor migration and women (Corbett, 2005, 2007; Pavlish, 2007; Roger Pitbalado et al., 2005) and, in particular, the experience of women leaving or being left behind (Bernhard, Landolt, & Goldring, 2008; McGuire & Martin, 2007; Ward & Styles, 2005, Wilkerson et al., 2009; Wray, 2012) is lacking. Corbett (2007) acknowledges that there is “relatively little research that attempts to understand the microdynamics of internal migration patterns in Canada, especially in rural areas” (p. 432).

## **Conclusion**

Examining literature specific to historical and economic factors contributing to interprovincial labor migration provides a contextual basis for understanding why people are temporarily or permanently moving away from the Atlantic Region. While multiple factors exist, interprovincial migration can often be associated with two primary drivers—relocating for school or for employment. Within the context of temporary interprovincial labor migration

within a Canadian context, research specifically examining the experiences of women and families left behind is lacking. A review of the literature specific to role identity and health has informed this inquiry.

Through the elicitation of women's stories of experience in this narrative inquiry research, others will gain a greater understanding of the pre-migration histories of the family unit and the circumstances which led to the decision to seek temporary employment in another province. Particularly, this narrative inquiry research contributes to a greater understanding regarding women's perceptions of identity: who they are, who they are becoming, and how they think they are perceived by others as they live out the phenomenon of temporary interprovincial labor migration of a partner. Additionally, this narrative inquiry research will contribute to a body of knowledge and help heighten awareness regarding interprovincial labor migration and the health of women left behind.

### **Chapter 3 - Methodology and Methods**

In this chapter, I examine narrative inquiry as a research methodology. First, I introduce feminist epistemology, its philosophical assumptions, and how I view these to align with this narrative inquiry research. Second, I reflect on how I came to select this methodology. I probe deeper into the relational aspects that underline narrative inquiry research by offering an overview of how I approached participant recruitment and the processes mutually determined as women and I became co-participants throughout this inquiry. Thirdly, I present an overview of each of the three methods used to compose initial field texts: reflexive field notes, conversational interviewing, and personal photography. This is followed by an analysis of how these field texts were later shaped into final research texts and laid alongside other research and theoretical works. I conclude this chapter by reflecting on issues of ethics and rigor that must be taken into consideration when conducting narrative inquiry research with women.

Prior to beginning this narrative inquiry research I had conversations with women who had experienced the temporary interprovincial labor migration of a partner. I was intellectually struck by the openness and depth of sharing that occurred. Whether in coffee shops, in my office, or on a ferry boat, mentioning this phenomenon led to conversations with women who wished to share with me personal details about their experiences of being left behind. One woman shared that speaking with me was almost like opening a floodgate where she, for the first time, could honestly speak to what she was feeling regarding her husband “going out west” for work. I recalled her sharing that until our conversation, no one had ever expressed an interest in hearing what it was like for her to be left behind and care for her family while her husband was temporarily employed in another province. In discussing this phenomenon as a potential doctoral study, I received overwhelming support from women. They viewed this to be an area

that should be researched further so that others would become aware of women's experiences of being left behind. One woman described this phenomenon as the "elephant in the room—everyone here knows that this is an issue but no one wants to talk about it or do anything to support women who are left behind."

### **Locating Feminist Epistemology in Narrative Inquiry**

Feminist epistemology recognizes that knowledge is relational, women-centered, contextual, and views both cognitive and affective ways of knowing to be important (Campbell & Bunting, 1991). In this proposed inquiry women's experience was central to the inquiry. Denton et al. (1999) wrote that women can be the center of knowledge-making about their own lives through setting an agenda about what needs to be researched, how it needs to be researched, and what needs to be changed (p. 19). Knowledge gleaned from this inquiry reflected the stories of experience as co-constructed by both the women participating in the inquiry and myself as the researcher. Through sharing, "researchers can encourage women to bring their lives to the forefront by supporting them in taking their daily lives as the starting place for research" (Denton et al., 1999, p. 17). For this inquiry the starting place was women's experiences of a partner's temporary interprovincial labor migration.

### **Discovering Narrative Inquiry as a Research Methodology**

For this research, I chose a form of narrative inquiry as presented by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Narrative inquiry is a reflective and relational qualitative research method focused on understanding or explaining the meaning and significance of experiences through stories. Narrative inquirers acknowledge that people live storied lives and that these stories are influenced by historical and social conditions that shape who people are and who they become (Atkinson, 2007; Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Bell, 2002; Chase, 2005; Clandinin, 2007, 2013;

Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray-Orr, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) write that “narrative inquiry is a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorying as the research proceeds” (p. 4). In listening to women’s stories of being left behind due to a partner’s temporary interprovincial labor migration, I have learned of multiple social conditions that have led to the decision of their partner to engage in temporary employment in another province. These factors predominantly relate to precarious financial situations arising as a result of cyclical seasonal employment in the fishing and agriculture industries.

The process of telling stories is common to the human experience of being in the world and relating with others. Stories shape who we are, who we become, and are dependent on memory and the perceptions we have of our lived experiences (Atkinson, 2007; Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Bell, 2002; Chase, 2005; Clandinin, 2007, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray-Orr, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006; Freeman, 2007; Pellico & Chinn, 2007; Poirier & Ayres, 1997; Riley & Hawe, 2005; Rosenthal, 2005). With this in mind, I am drawn to the work of Dewey (1938, 1998) and his theory of experience. A Deweyan view of experience is central to how narrative inquiry has been presented by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Dewey views experience to be a “constant stream characterized by continuous interaction of human thought with our personal, social, and material environment” (Dewey as cited in Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 39). Dewey views human experience as continually occurring over time with experiences growing out of experiences and recalled in light of present and future experiences. He ascertains that knowledge is pragmatic and that personal experience is reflected in the representation of knowledge. These experiences lived out

within the personal, social, and material environment influence how the experience will be “constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 43).

Narrative inquirers are concerned with coming to know lives as lived (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxii). We come to understand lives as lived through the living, telling, retelling, and reliving of stories shared by both the participant and researcher. It was through the sharing and co-constructing of stories with women that I came to know women’s lives as they lived the experience of being left behind while their partner temporarily left the family for employment in another province. Through this narrative inquiry research, I gained a deeper understanding of women’s storied experiences as they lived out the phenomenon of their partner’s labor migration. In hearing and reflecting deeply on stories lived and told, new understandings of experience were brought to light. This led to new understandings about the meaning and significance of experience for both women as co-participants and I as the inquirer. Through the co-creation of stories we came to new insights which led to new understanding regarding personal stories of lived experience, how these have been interpreted, and may be told in the future (Atkinson, 2007; Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Bell, 2002; Chase, 2005; Clandinin, 2007, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray-Orr, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006; Freeman, 2007; Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007; Simpson & Barker, 2007).

### **The Three-dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space**

In narrative inquiry a researcher needs to examine stories lived, told, and retold in light of a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly, & Clandinin, 1990). Building on the work of Dewey (1938) and his theory of experience, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) offer three dimensions that require consideration. These dimensions

include continuity, interaction, and situation. In attending to the three-dimensional inquiry space, the researcher needs to simultaneously and continually reflect on these dimensions throughout the inquiry (Atkinson, 2007; Chase, 2005; Clandinin, 2007, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Freeman, 2007; Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007).

#### **Continuity – Past, present, and future.**

Continuity acknowledges that both events under inquiry and the people who participate in them have a past, present, and future. Their lives and the events that shape them are always in transition (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In this inquiry, women's stories reflected continuity as they shared why their partners engage in temporary labor migration, their stories of being left behind, and how these are embedded within their identity construction. Continuity was also reflected in stories co-participants imagined for the future of the families.

#### **Interaction – Personal and social.**

Interaction considers both the personal and social conditions that influence the lives of both participants and researcher (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray-Orr, 2007; Connelly, & Clandinin, 1990, 2006). Clandinin (2013) and Connelly and Clandinin (2000) have recently acknowledged the research relationship that develops between the participant and the inquirer as an important element that requires deep consideration within the dimension of interaction. Through the living, telling, and retelling of stories specific to the experience of being left behind, personal and social conditions affecting women's lives were illuminated and new meanings uncovered for both the participant and inquirer. In eliciting women's stories of being left behind, I also considered how personal and social conditions could be aligned with the social determinants of health. By examining

interaction through a lens of health and well-being, I gained a deeper understanding of how health is experienced in the storied lives of women left behind as a result of their partners' coming and going for employment out of province.

### **Situation - Place.**

The third dimension of narrative inquiry is situation. Situation includes both the physical place where the research is taking place as well as the place where experiences have occurred and come to life through stories. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) acknowledge that the description of place is sometimes overlooked or minimally addressed by researchers. Many authors write how place is crucial not only in providing context for where events have been experienced, but also the impact that a place may have in the construction of meaning within that experience as expressed through stories (Atkinson, 2007; Bender, Clune, & Gruge, 2007; Berman, Mulcahy, Forchuk, Edmunds, Haldenby, & Lopez, 2009; Clandinin, 2007, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray-Orr, 2007; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Connelly, & Clandinin, 1990, 2006; Freeman, 2007; Pavlish, 2007; Rosenthal, 2005; Simpson & Barker, 2007). At the time of this narrative inquiry research, all co-participants were living in rural communities throughout Prince Edward Island. In this narrative inquiry, I was mindful of the importance of situation as a narrative dimensional space and recognized that the co-construction of women's stories had been profoundly shaped as a result of living in their respective communities. I recognized that place was central to the construction of women's storied lives. Women's experiences in their communities were often embedded within the context of the stories that they lived, told, relived, and retold.



### **Coming Together - Negotiating Research Relationships**

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stress the importance of developing and fostering research relationships. They write of the commitment required by narrative inquirers to their participants and that this is a collaborative, nonhierarchical relationship that must be continually negotiated. The research relationship evolves as both participants and the inquirer come together and get to know each other over time. Stories of experience are lived, told, retold, and relived as the collaborative relationship between participant and researcher is co-constructed over time through multiple meetings. As research relationships are developed and nurtured, an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under inquiry can be illuminated. To gain an in-depth understanding of stories lived, told, retold, and relived over time, sample sizes in narrative inquiries are often small (Bell, 2002; Chase, 2005; Clandinin, 2007, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray-Orr, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006; Craig & Huber, 2007; Pavlish, 2007; Riley & Hawe, 2005).

As I considered how I could develop and foster research relationships with women participating in this proposed inquiry, I reviewed the work of Gottlieb and Feely (2006). They identified six essential ingredients required when developing collaborative partnerships. These include; power sharing, being open and respectful, being nonjudgmental and accepting, being able to live with ambiguity, and being self-aware and reflective (Gottlieb & Feely, 2006). In this narrative inquiry opportunity existed to develop research relationships that reflected these essential ingredients of collaborative partnerships (Gottlieb & Feely, 2006). As this inquiry unfolded, co-participants and I often discussed how our research relationship was developing in light of the essential ingredients of collaborative partnerships. Clandinin (2013), Clandinin and Connelly (2000), and Connelly and Clandinin (1990) identify narrative inquiry as a relational

methodology built on a foundation of intimacy, trust, collaboration, and equality. As narrative inquiry is a relational and reflective research methodology, the coming together in a nonhierarchical manner over time, as well as the sharing and reflections by both participants and the inquirer, was paramount (Bell, 2002; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray-Orr, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

### **Eliciting the Stories of Women – Participant Recruitment Considerations**

Recognizing the importance of relationships and the time needed to develop these, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the stories women live and their life narratives, a small sample size was necessary. Prior to beginning this narrative inquiry research, I spoke with Jean Clandinin (personal communication, June 28, 2011) about the potential sample size for this inquiry. She recommended that no more than three or four women be recruited. She cautioned against recruiting any more than three women for this study and identified that having a sample larger than this could run the risk of being superficial and lack the level of depth that could have been achieved with a smaller sample.

Direct contact was used to recruit a convenience sample of participants for this narrative inquiry. As I reflected deeply on how to proceed with recruiting women, I recalled the many casual interactions and conversations I had with women, whom I had not previously known, who had experienced being left behind as a result of their husband participating in interprovincial labor migration. During these informal conversations, women expressed an interest in future research regarding this phenomenon and a desire to participate in it, should I move forward with it in the future. Prior to beginning this narrative inquiry research, I had interactions with approximately 15 women; six, in particular, gave me their contact information. They shared that when I was ready to begin this research they would like to be part of it. They expressed a strong

desire to participate and wanted to share their stories of being left behind while their partners were temporarily employed for periods of time in another province.

After receiving ethics approval from the University of Alberta (12 March, 2012) and the University of Prince Edward Island (28 March, 2012), I contacted these six women by telephone and discussed this narrative inquiry research. I explained that I was now in the process of recruiting women to participate in the study and was wondering if they were still interested in participating and if so, determined whether they met the recruitment criteria. The criteria for participation in this inquiry included: having a husband working for periods of time out of province, being over the age of 18, living in Prince Edward Island, and still having children living at home. I had not had contact with any of these women since our one and only interaction, when we discussed the experiences of women left behind as a result of a partner's labor migration, and our shared interest in this topic for future research. During this telephone call, I stressed to the women that there was no pressure for them to participate in this study. I reminded them of our past interaction and informed them that I was now at the point of beginning data collection; and wanted to follow-up with them to see if they were still interested in participating in this research as they had previously indicated their desire to do so.

Two out of the six women I contacted met the recruitment criteria and were receptive to participating. They were given an information letter which explained further details regarding the study. The remaining four women contacted no longer met the recruitment criteria as their partners were no longer employed out of province. As I could not recruit all women through direct sampling, I also used a snowball approach to sampling. During my initial telephone calls I asked women if they knew of other women who might be interested in participating in this research. These women identified three additional women who met the recruitment criteria.

They were receptive to sharing an information letter with these women. I asked them to have these women contact me directly should they want further information or wish to participate in this inquiry. Two out of these three women contacted me and agreed to participate in the research.

In this inquiry, I co-participated with four women who had children living at home and residing in rural communities throughout Prince Edward Island. Each woman had experienced the coming and going of a husband for employment in another province for between 6 and 12 years. As narrative inquiry is a relational methodology, I recognized that I would need to establish close, intimate research relationships with participants, in order to allow for the sharing and co-construction of stories reflective of their experiences of being left behind. To gain a deep understanding of the storied lives of women left behind, I knew it would require time and multiple meetings. Women recruited for the inquiry were willing and able to participate in 5 or 6 conversational interviews. Each interview lasted between 1 and 2½ hours.

## **Methods**

### **Interpretive analytic considerations.**

As participants were recruited and we came together and experienced the living, telling, retelling, and reliving of stories, a “growth and transformation in the life story that we as researchers and our participants author” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 71), occurred. In planting the seeds for growth and transformation I needed to “walk into the midst of stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63). Entering into these storied places I needed to construct field texts that would offer detailed descriptions reflective of the stories lived, told, retold, and relived within the three dimensional narrative inquiry space. Field texts allow for memory accounts of events and can lead to growth and change for both the participant and researcher

involved in the narrative inquiry. In constructing field texts, narrative inquirers experience events as they are lived and shared through stories co-constructed by both participants and the inquirer (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Central to the development of field texts is the ability to understand and make meaning of experience as they are shared.

Dewey (1938) identified that a person's perception of experiences is a function of the interaction between what was experienced in the past and what is being experienced in the present. Reflection on these experiences can lead to new insights around the meaning of experience. This understanding can lead to enhanced personal growth. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) further offer that the "enhancing of personal and social growth is one of the purposes of narrative inquiry" (p. 85). Being a reflective researcher, I needed to "both lead a life and reflect on it" (Schon as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 82). To reflect on the experience of being in the field and the stories of experience that were shared by women participating in this research, I had to "slip in and out" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 82) of the inquiry in order to reflect deeply on the stories being lived, told, retold, and relived.

### **Turning inward, watching outward – Composing field texts.**

There are multiple ways to compose field texts in narrative inquiry. These include: field notes; autobiographical writing; interviews; personal journals; letters; conversations; family stories; personal, family or social artifacts; photographs; and other documents such as emails or newsletters (Bach, 2001, 2007; Bell, 2002; Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray-Orr, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006; Freeman, 2007). Although multiple approaches to constructing field texts can be used by both the participant and researcher in narrative inquiry, in this narrative inquiry my field texts included: reflexive field notes, conversational interviews, and photographs.

*Reflexive field notes.*

Reflexive field notes were constructed and detailed the day-to-day activities that occurred as I entered into relationships with participants and shared in the co-construction of stories.

While in the field I experienced being a researcher and also a co-participant with women as they lived, told, relived, and retold stories of experience that reflected who they were, who they were becoming, and how they thought others perceived them during periods of time when they were left behind and their partner was temporarily employed in another province. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe field notes as the “ongoing bits of nothingness that fill our days” (p. 104).

Reflecting on stories shared, lived, told, and retold must occur in all phases of narrative inquiry research; from determining the phenomenon of inquiry, negotiating entry and establishing research relationships with participants, working in the field with the participants, developing field texts, and constructing final research texts (Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006). In each phase of narrative inquiry both participants and researchers try to “make sense of life as lived” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 78). Through continual reflection throughout the inquiry both the participant and inquirer come to new questions, clarify the meaning behind stories shared, and gain an increased understanding about the phenomenon under inquiry (Atkinson, 2007; Chase, 2005; Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Freeman, 2007; Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007; Poirier & Ayres, 1997).

Throughout this proposed inquiry I created field texts reflective of my personal experiences as a researcher as I tried to make sense of stories lived, told, and retold. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write that narrative inquirers must be able to turn inward while also

watching outward. In this inquiry I continually reflected on the experiences that I was having as a narrative inquirer but also watched outward, reflecting on the inquiry itself as it unfolded. My reflexive field texts were developed in two ways. Immediately following each conversational interview, I spoke aloud into a digital recorder about my experience being a narrative inquirer. I reflected deeply on the interview itself and how I felt it had unfolded. I also reflected on the stories that had been illuminated during each conversational interview and further areas that could be explored together as the participants and I continued developing in our research relationships. These field notes became my research reflections and were transcribed verbatim using software that had accompanied my digital recorder. These research reflections were then printed off and reviewed prior to my next scheduled conversational interview. In addition to using a digital recorder to capture my research reflections, I also had a notebook. As thoughts and questions regarding the inquiry came to mind, I jotted these down in my notebook and reflected on these and the meaning behind them.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) view the combination of using both field notes and personal journaling helpful in providing a “reflective balance” (p. 104) of the research experience. Interpreting and reflecting on what has been constructed through field texts can lead to new questions and new insights. These, in turn, can be brought back to the participant for further discussions. In turn, these discussions can lead to new insights and interpretations of stories by both the participant and researcher, which may lead to greater clarity and new meanings attached to the stories of experience shared (Bell, 2002; Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray-Orr, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006; Freeman, 2007; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

Reviewing my personal reflections helped me to identify points requiring further clarification and areas where further questions around meaning were required. Reviewing these reflexive field notes also helped both me as inquirer and the women as co-participants in this research to uncover new meanings about the stories that were being lived, told, retold, and relived throughout the inquiry. This led to a deeper understanding regarding the women's stories of who they were, who they were becoming, and how they thought others viewed them as they were left behind while their partners were employed in another province. Continually composing and revisiting these field notes also led to deep reflection regarding my evolving role as a narrative inquirer, the research process as it was unfolding, and the thoughts, feelings, questions, and tensions that I experienced; as I came to research decisions and participated with women in the co-construction of stories lived, told, retold, and relived.

### *Conversational interviews.*

For this proposed inquiry I also constructed field texts using conversational interviewing. I met with each co-participant five or six times, in a location of their choice, and at a time that was convenient for them. During these meetings, participants and I engaged in conversations about who they were, who they were becoming, and how they thought others viewed them as they were left behind and experienced their partner's interprovincial labor migration.

Conversational interviewing invites equality between researcher and participant. Rather than an inquirer entering into a research relationship with a predetermined and prescriptive set of questions used to gather specific information that they are seeking, conversational interviews allow for mutual sharing and co-construction of stories by both the participant and inquirer. In conversational interviews there is a fluidity, flexibility, and openness as stories are lived, told, relived, and retold (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In coming to conversational interviewing as a



way to elicit women's stories of experience, I was drawn to the work of Hollingsworth (1992) and Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007). These authors acknowledge the importance of relationships in narrative inquiry and view conversational interviewing as aligning well with this methodology.

Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007) identify eight principles to consider when using conversational interviews in narrative inquiry. These include:

a) develop trust and listen in a nonjudgmental manner, b) if necessary in the initial conversation provide structure and establish norms for working together, c) encourage conversations about topics that are controversial and difficult, d) allow the conversation to develop, e) value different discourse styles, f) articulate and acknowledge the learning that occurs in the conversations, g) examine personal assumptions, g) be mindful of issues of power in the research relationships. (p. 166)

I considered each of these principles within this narrative inquiry. During our first meeting I invited co-participants to share their thoughts and ideas of how they would like to work together during our conversational interviews. I recognized that the topics that might be discussed during our interviews could be controversial and/or difficult for women to share, especially as they spoke about the challenges that they have experienced during periods of time when their husbands left them behind for employment out of province. Stories shared during our conversational interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. When possible these transcriptions were completed immediately after the conversational interview and reviewed prior to my next scheduled conversational interview. Reviewing these transcripts led to further research reflections which raised additional questions, tensions, or points of clarification. These

were brought forward and discussed with co-participants in subsequent conversational interviews.

In my desire to emphasize a collaborative, nonhierarchical research relationship with participants, I invited women to also reflect on their experience participating in this research and what had been shared during our time together. After our initial interview I opened subsequent interviews broadly by asking co-participants what it was that they wished to discuss during our time together. This often led to co-participants directing the conversational interview and offering their reflective insights. Exploring these insights together stimulated further discussion and ensured that what women felt was meaningful and significant in their storied lives became illuminated during our time together.

***Photographs as field texts.***

The final way in which I constructed field texts in this inquiry was through the sharing of personal photographs. Bach (2007) wrote that, “photographs, whether those of common places, of common events, or the uniqueness of events, are a way of sharing experiences—the everydayness of lived experience” (p. 282). Photographs were taken by co-participants and offered another way to elicit further stories and understand more deeply how women conceptualized their storied lives as they experienced their husbands’ labor migration. In creating a visual representation of their experiences, I invited co-participants to take photographs that conveyed who they were, who they became, and how they thought others viewed them as they were left behind. Bach (2007) writes that when eliciting stories of experience through photography, narrative inquirers should consider the following questions: “What is the content of the photograph? What does the photograph communicate? What is missing? What are they trying to tell? Who needs to know this and why?” (p. 293). As we discussed the women’s

photographs during our last or second last conversational interviews, I was mindful of the questions posed by Bach (2007) and the three dimensional narrative inquiry space. Women often viewed their photographs to be an ordinary picture taken to reflect their lives. However, as each woman participating in this inquiry and I came together to view their photographs, new insights and meanings were uncovered.

### **Turning inward, watching outward - Composing research texts.**

While composing research texts I had to step away from storied lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and renegotiate my relationships with co-participants, as well as distance myself away from the close research relationships that had been established during our conversational interviews. At the beginning of this narrative inquiry research, I informed each participant that we would be meeting on five or six occasions. Women were informed that after our last conversational interview, I would no longer be collecting information regarding their storied lives. Rather I would be working with the information that they had shared and shaping this into research texts. Although the conversational interviewing aspect of this inquiry would conclude, I asked participants if they would be receptive to me following up with them in the future, as I wanted to ensure that the interim research texts I constructed represented what had been shared during our time together.

As I stepped away from the storied lives of the participants and the research relationships I had built with them, I began the process of transitioning from field to research texts. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote that narrative inquirers cannot stop their inquiry with the construction of field texts, but that these field texts must be reconstructed into research texts; whereby the narrative inquirer delves further and addresses questions of meaning and social significance. As I began this process, I reviewed my reflexive field notes and all transcripts of conversational

interviews that had been conducted with co-participants. As I read and re-read these field texts individually and collectively, additional stories reflective of experience within the three dimensional narrative inquiry space were constructed. These new stories reflected knowledge, context, and identities embedded within our individual multi-layered existence that became illuminated for both participants and myself, as a result of the experiences and the stories co-constructed during our conversational interviews.

While reviewing field texts, I began to narratively code these as I discovered themes, patterns, and outliers. Through experimenting with writing research texts, I examined both the individual and entangled stories that women shared. In doing so, new meanings were uncovered about who the women were, who they became, and how they thought others viewed them as they were left behind and experienced their partners' interprovincial labor migration. Through the co-construction of stories lived, told, retold, and relived through this inquiry, I prepared research texts reflective of my understanding of the women's identities by considering identity as a narrative construction of how women lived their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

As I composed research texts I ensured that what was being constructed and presented was reflective of the storied lives and experiences shared by participants. This process involved multiple writings of the research texts and continued negotiation with participants; to ensure that what was being presented as research text was reflective of what was shared during our conversational interviews. As themes and patterns (or narrative threads) came to light and were uncovered and shaped into research texts, I considered how these related to other research and scholarly works. In composing final research texts, I considered questions of meaning and social significance within the three dimensional narrative inquiry space as these are what "ultimately shape field texts into research texts" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131).

In narrative inquiry as conceptualized by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), there is no single, defined approach to transforming field texts into research texts. Rather, the inquirer experiments with multiple forms of writing interim texts that are then shared and negotiated with participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The construction of research texts required much reflection, thoughtfulness, and experimentation with writing prior to tangible analytic-interpretive understandings coming to light. I examined all field texts composed in this inquiry both individually and as a composite. It took deep reflection, multiple readings of field texts, as well as writing and experimentation with writing to gain clarity and uncover meanings regarding who women were, who they were becoming, and how they thought others viewed them as they experienced their partners' interprovincial labor migration.

I also looked to scholarly literature specific to narrative inquiry as a research methodology. As I read the works of other narrative inquirers and their presentations and representation of final research texts, I came to the decision that each woman would have their own chapter in this dissertation that reflected their storied lives, and that there would be a final synthesis and discussion chapter which would present the overarching narrative threads, reflective of the predominant themes and patterns that had been illuminated throughout this narrative inquiry.

### ***Shaping photographs into research texts.***

As I considered how I would shape women's photographs into research texts, I reviewed transcripts specific to the photographs that women shared during our conversational interviews. Reflecting deeply on our discussions and recalling memories of photographs presented, I thought about these in light of the questions presented by Bach (2007). As photographs were shaped from field texts into research texts, I considered their meaning and social significance and

questioned: how did women interpret these photographs and how were their perceptions of self being revealed in the photographs that had been shared? These photographs became a springboard for further discussion and illuminated additional stories and a deeper understanding of women's experiences of being left behind. Labeled *Snapshots of a Life*, a description of these photographs and the stories and meanings that were elicited as these photographs were shared has been integrated into each of the findings chapters presented in this dissertation.

**Laying research texts alongside other research and theoretical works.**

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stress that in composing research texts the inquirer must: ... search for patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes that shape field texts into research texts. This is created by the writers' experiences as they read and reread field texts and lay them alongside one another in different ways, as they bring stories of their past experiences forward and lay them alongside field texts, and as they read the field texts in the context of other research and theoretical works. (p. 133)

As I shaped field texts into research texts, I began to notice commonalities in the stories that were being shared by co-participants. As I began to make meaning and considered the social significance of these stories, I noticed that these predominant narratives could be conceptualized under the headings of Being, Becoming, and Belonging. As I began developing research texts, I could see how the predominant narratives illuminated within this inquiry could align under each of these headings. Each of the narrative threads were further deconstructed and aligned with scholarly literature. As well conducting a second review of literature at this point in the inquiry helped to enhance my understanding of the meanings and social significance embedded within these overarching narrative threads. Examining stories co-constructed through

an interpretive-analytical lens led to new understandings and revealed women's perceptions of self, role identity, and health.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The ethics of doing narrative inquiry involve being in relationships with people. This requires both accountability and responsibility. As a doctoral student, I adhered to the University of Alberta guidelines for engaging in research with human beings and received ethical approval to conduct this research (Study Approval No. Pro00027206, March 12, 2012). As I co-participated with women in this inquiry, I was mindful of ethical principles of non-maleficence and beneficence, autonomy, and justice. As a Registered Nurse, I was also mindful of the ethical values guiding nursing practice as espoused by the Canadian Nurses Association (2008). These values are promoting safe, compassionate and ethical care; promoting health and wellbeing; promoting and respecting informed decision making; preserving dignity; maintaining privacy and confidentiality; promoting justice; and being accountable (Canadian Nurses Association).

Negotiating research relationships with women participating in this proposed inquiry occurred throughout the inquiry. Prior to entering into a research relationship with participants, an *Information and Consent Letter for Participants* (Appendix A) was provided and discussed. This letter and the ethics guiding the narrative inquiry were explained to participants at the point of recruitment and were revisited at the beginning of each conversational interview. I asked participants if they had any questions about the inquiry or their role in it and stressed to them that during our time together they were free to share whatever they felt comfortable with. I also stressed that they would not be pushed to share anything that caused them to feel uneasy. I mentioned at the beginning of each conversational interview that co-participants were free to

withdraw any information that they may have shared but no longer felt comfortable offering, and that they could withdraw from this inquiry at any time and for any reason.

Throughout the narrative inquiry, I strived to establish research relationships that emphasized collaboration and connection. As such, I was conscious that I must do no harm. In doing no harm, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stress that as research texts are composed, the research participant must be the first and most important audience. As such care must be taken to ensure that the text composed “does not rupture life stories that sustain them” (pp. 173–174). As I worked with women living in rural communities in Prince Edward Island, I was mindful of confidentiality and anonymity.

In my research ethics proposal I indicated that I would meet with participants at a mutually agreed upon time and at a place determined by them. Prior to recruiting participants for this inquiry, I reflected on where the conversational interviews might take place. I had expected that I, as the inquirer, would drive to various rural communities across Prince Edward Island to meet with each participant in the privacy of their homes. As this narrative inquiry unfolded and I entered into research relationships with each participant, it soon became apparent that where I had anticipated the conversational interviews to occur did not align with where the women wanted these to take place. As I entered into research relationships with each woman, all but one participant wanted to come to me for our conversational interviews. Women drove up to 100 kilometers each way to co-participate with me in this inquiry. They expressed concern that people in their communities might stop by their homes while I was there, interrupting our conversations and questioning who I was and what I was doing there. Living in a small, rural community, it would be easy for others to notice a different vehicle in their driveways and to be interested in discovering who this visitor was.



Never did it occur to me that women might want to come to me as a means to protect their anonymity in this inquiry. Thorndyke (2005) writes about the lack of anonymity often experienced by women living in rural communities. She reports that this lack of anonymity can act as a barrier for women in seeking out health services and participating in research (Thorndyke, 2005). This sentiment is also echoed by Long and Weinert (2010) who write about the lack of anonymity being “a hallmark” of rural communities (p. 11). Living in a rural community, privacy is often limited as residents are attentive to what is happening in their communities and in the lives of neighbors. As such, there is “a limited ability for rural persons to have private areas of their lives” (Long & Weinert, 2010, p. 9). This perception of being known by others and lack of privacy and anonymity may have contributed to the women’s desire to come to me for the conversational interviews. Thus, coming to me, rather than me driving to them, gave women co-participating in the inquiry the assurance that their identities would be protected and their participation would remain anonymous. Living in rural Prince Edward Island, community members are often aware of who is leaving for temporary employment in another province. In shaping final research texts, I strived to protect anonymity through the use of pseudo names and removing or making more general personal information that could potentially reveal the identity of the women co-participants. While efforts were made to protect anonymity throughout the construction of research texts, co-participants recognized that their anonymity may not be fully protected. Final research texts were shared with co-participants and they reported being satisfied with the final status of anonymity revealed in the presentation and representation of final research texts.

Issues of confidentiality were also considered in this narrative inquiry. As an ethical researcher, I would never reveal the identities of participants with whom I was working.

However, some women wanted to share with others in the community that they were participating in a research study about their experiences of being left behind while their husband was coming and going for employment in another province.

While personal photography was an excellent way to delve further into women's storied lives, I needed to take into consideration the ethics involved in using photographs in research. As I reflected on issues of ownership and consent, presentation, and representation of people and places that were shared in photographs taken by co-participants, I came to the decision that I would not collect nor obtain copies of these images. These would remain the sole property of the women participating in the inquiry. These were shared by co-participants during our conversational interviews as a means to elicit further understanding of insights into the storied lives of women left behind. Women were made aware that I would not be collecting these photographs. As these photographs would not be in my possession, I requested that each co-participant describe the image that they were sharing as it was introduced so that each photograph discussed would be reflected in the transcripts of our conversational interviews. As I reviewed transcripts of our conversational interviews and developed final research texts, I had the opportunity to reflect on the photographs that had been shared by co-participants without physically having them in my possession.

### **Issues of Rigor**

Narrative inquiry does not seek to make general or universal claims. Rather, there is a focus on increased understanding through explanation or description of a phenomenon as it is experienced, lived, told, retold, and relived by participants through their stories (Atkinson, 2007; Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Bell, 2002; Chase, 2005; Clandinin, 2007, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray-Orr, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006;

Freeman, 2007; Pellico & Chinn, 2007; Poirier & Ayres, 1997; Riley & Hawe, 2005; Rosenthal, 2005). Through rich descriptions and explanations of phenomena shared through stories of experience, achieving resonance and plausibility is possible. Resonance with others could exist as findings of the inquiry offered in research texts are presented in a way that those who read the final texts have an increased understanding and appreciation of the phenomenon under inquiry; and acknowledge that what is being presented in the research texts is plausible (Bell, 2002; Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray-Orr, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, 1990; Kohler Riessman, 2008).

My personal and professional stories have been shaped by the experiences I have had and were brought into my research relationships with participants. The two are intertwined and connected to who I am as a nurse and human being. Whether explicitly acknowledged or not, all researchers bring to the research relationship their own personal values and beliefs. In collaborating with women throughout this proposed inquiry, I acknowledged my personal values and beliefs through reflective writings and verbally during conversational interviews. In this narrative inquiry research I adopted a constructivist epistemology. Field and research texts reflected personal truth within the context of women's experience and was co-constructed through stories lived, told, relived, and retold by both participants and the inquirer. These experiences were interpreted and later shaped into final research texts.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, I have offered an overview of methodology and methods selected for this research. I began by introducing feminist epistemology and how I view this to align with narrative inquiry as a research methodology. I examined this methodology in consideration of the three dimensional narrative inquiry space: continuity, interaction, and

situation. In recognizing that narrative inquiry is a relational methodology, I reflected on the importance of, and strategies for, developing and fostering research relationships with participants. Four women were recruited for this inquiry using both direct convenience and snowball sampling approaches. While multiple and varied methods can be used to construct field texts in narrative inquiry research, I selected reflective field notes, conversational interviewing, and personal photographs. These field texts illuminated women's stories regarding who they were, who they were becoming, and how they thought others viewed them as they experienced the coming and going of their husbands as a result of interprovincial labor migration. Through a process of deep reflection and multiple writings, final research texts were composed. These research texts revealed nine overarching narrative threads and reflected women's perceptions regarding identity, roles, and health. This chapter was concluded by examining issues of ethics and rigor and how these considerations were attended to as this narrative inquiry research unfolded.

#### **Chapter 4 - Entering into a Research Relationship with Laura**

Laura was the first participant I co-participated with in this narrative inquiry research. I was referred to Laura through Anna, a woman who had previously expressed interest in the inquiry. Anna did not meet the recruitment criteria for this study as her husband was no longer participating in interprovincial labor migration. Although Anna did not currently meet the recruitment criteria, she had two friends whose husbands were coming and going for employment in Alberta. She felt that these friends might be interested in participating in the inquiry and sharing their experiences with me. She took an information letter and shared it with her friends. Within two days of sharing the study information letter, Anna's friend, Laura, called to discuss the study. Through this initial phone conversation, it was determined that Laura met all of the criteria required for participation in the inquiry. Laura and I dialogued back and forth about where we should meet for our first conversational interview. She suggested that it would be best if she came to me for all of our conversational interviews, as she had some of her children enrolled in university and others in public school. As such, the children might come home at unexpected times and she would not want them to overhear our conversations.

In determining the location for our first interview, Laura suggested that we have our initial interview at my house. As narrative inquiry is a relational and reflective methodology (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), I needed to ensure that the relationship with Laura was built on a foundation of intimacy, trust, collaboration, and equality (Bell, 2002; Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandin, Pushor, & Murray-Orr, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006; Pinnegar & Dayne, 2007). The elicitation of data from participants in their personal space is often the norm in qualitative research. I had expected that this would be the case with each of my participants and it felt quite foreign to me having

Laura suggest that she come to my home and enter into my space for our first conversational interview. In agreeing to meet at my home, I experienced some research tensions. On the one hand I felt that by having a participant come to my home, I was opening myself up to new research possibilities. Yet on the other hand, I also felt vulnerable. By inviting Laura to enter into my personal space, I was opening myself to her. Although I may be an academic and narrative inquirer, in my home these are not my predominant roles. At home I am simply Chris—Mairin and Makena’s mother and Gilles’ wife. As I reflected on this tension, I questioned issues of place and space and how these could shape the development, fostering, and nurturance of research relationships.

As Laura entered my home, she noticed various personal photographs which stimulated questions and an invitation to learn more about me. Through these questions, she learned that I was also a mother, married, and had lived in Alberta for eleven years prior to moving to Prince Edward Island. Our initial conversations were prompted by items she had noticed in my home. These personal artifacts opened the door to conversation—an intimate sharing and deeper understanding about who we were as we came together as mothers and wives.

In retrospect, I wondered what the experience would have been like had our first conversational interview been at Laura’s home? Would I have noticed personal items in her home that were reflective of stories in her life? Would these have stimulated me to ask questions from which an openness and ease between us could have formed the foundation for our research relationship? I contemplated how this foundation would have been established had we had our initial conversational interview in my office at the university or another setting, unfamiliar to the two of us. And I am not sure whether this level of intimacy would have been established so quickly. Laura probably would have noticed academic degrees, accolades, textbooks, and files.

These items are representations of my other roles which include being a doctoral student, researcher, and academic. Would she have felt as open to share her thoughts with me? Would she have seen me as clearly in my roles as mother and wife? Or would the other roles of a doctoral student, researcher, and academic take precedence and shape her view of who I was within our research relationship? Might this have led to a perceived power imbalance as we moved forward together, co-participating in this inquiry?

As I considered these questions, I was reminded of the three dimensional narrative inquiry space and the importance of negotiating relationships between participant and inquirer as we entered into the field and began to “walk in the midst of stories and storied lives” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63). An initial negotiation of our research relationship occurred when Laura asked to have our first conversational interview in my home and I agreed to this request. My home is a space and place where many of my personal and social stories have been and continue to be constructed. By coming together there for our first conversational interview, Laura was walking into the midst of my storied life. I believe this helped in the establishment of our research relationship and opened the door to our relationship developing not only from a professional stance, but a personal one as well. During our first conversational interview, we discussed some of our commonalities as wives and mothers. By having Laura walk into the midst of my storied life, a comfortable rapport between the two of us was quickly established. I believe that the way in which we negotiated our coming together for our conversational interviews may have helped flatten perceived power differences; and opened the door to mutual and authentic sharing as our research relationship continued to develop over the next four interviews.

It has been my past experience that the researcher and participant relationship is often one with definitive boundaries; where clear parameters are established to elicit information required for the study. It has little to do with fostering intimacy and relational rapport between participant and researcher, unless ways are discovered to know each other on a personal level. Although this may have been my past experience in conducting research, I became acutely aware of the importance of the research relationship within narrative inquiry. Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach (2009) acknowledge the importance of researchers striving to reduce power differences in qualitative research, as a means to encourage disclosure and promote authenticity between participant and researcher. As Laura and I moved forward, together, co-participating in this inquiry, our relationship grew through intimacy and sharing. By the end of our final conversational interviews, we mutually felt as though we had known each other much longer than a month.

Laura was the mother of six children ranging in age from mid adolescents to early adulthood. As the primary caregiver, she was busy with the day-to-day management of the household and did not work outside of the home. Laura's husband, Josh, had been coming and going to Western Canada for employment for the past six years. Laura and I met on five occasions. Each conversational interview lasted 1 to 2½ hours. The first three conversational interviews were held at my home. The other two occurred in the evening at my office. These interviews were scheduled during a time when her children were enrolled in extra-curricular activities. The reason for this change in location was due to its close proximity to where her children's activities were occurring.

This chapter presents an overview of stories co-constructed during our five conversational interviews. Laura's narratives of experience are reflected through our voices



coming together in conversation. These stories have been interwoven, where applicable, with my own stories of experience and research reflections, and aligned with current scholarly literature. As I deeply thought about these stories lived, told, and re-told, new meanings and questions emerged which were also explored. Interjected within these storied experiences are descriptions of photographs that Laura shared during our interviews. These photographs, entitled *Snapshots of a Life*, are interlaced throughout this chapter as a means to probe further into Laura's life narratives, eliciting deeper stories of experiences.

### **Labor Migration Across Multiple Generations**

At the beginning of our initial conversation, Laura shared with me that the phenomenon of men leaving their families, coming and going from Prince Edward Island for employment elsewhere, is not unique to this period in time. Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, men have been leaving the province for temporary employment. Common employment migration locations have been Western Canada and/or the North Eastern United States (Beale, 2008; Liaw & Qi, 2004; Province of Prince Edward Island Department of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Rural Development, 2009; Veltmeyer, 1978). Cyclical patterns of coming and going for temporary employment have been experienced across generations, resulting in multiple generations of families on Prince Edward Island being left behind. As Laura shared:

*This is not a new phenomenon by any stretch and it is cyclical too. My grandfather went to New York and worked. He had a brother who went to Boston. They both went away and worked and their families stayed home. They had a farm and my grandmother took care of everything. My grandfather went back and forth for work, and then my dad left when he was 18 or 19. He went to New York and met my mother and stayed there. When I first moved back to the Island in the early 1980s it was happening then. It was like, "go west young man." For the two generations before then it was go to the States and then the next generation was to go west (to Western Canada). And then in the 1990s it all kind of quieted down but now it has started up again.*

As I reflect on the historical context of men coming and going for temporary labor migration, I too have my own family history of multiple generations leaving rural Prince Edward Island for employment in Alberta and women remaining behind caring for children. I recall stories shared by my grandfather about the late 1930s and early 1940s, when he and his brothers would travel by train from Bloomfield, PEI to Fort McLeod, Alberta for employment. I recall them speaking about the high wages and how well they were treated by the farmers who hired them to work in Alberta. I found it interesting to learn that in addition to employment on these farms, my grandfather and his brothers would also break wild horses and travel with them in railcars back to PEI. They would use these horses on their own farms or sell them to other farmers in the province. The money earned through farming in Alberta and selling horses gave them the finances needed to expand their own farms, and contributed greatly to their success as farmers in rural Prince Edward Island. Many times I heard my grandfather speak fondly about coming and going to Alberta for employment. He often mentioned that if my grandmother had not been in such opposition to his coming and going, he would have done this for many more years. My father left for Alberta in the 1970s to work in the construction industry and speaks fondly about that time. Over the past two years he has returned to Alberta once again, and is now coming and going for employment in the oil and gas industry. I, too, have experienced life in Alberta. Leaving Prince Edward Island two months after graduating from nursing school, Calgary was my home for eleven years. I moved back to Prince Edward Island in 2007 and enrolled in doctoral studies at the University of Alberta in 2008. For the past six years that followed I, too, was leaving my family on Prince Edward Island, travelling back and forth to Edmonton in pursuit of a doctoral education.

## Making the Decision to Leave

Like past generations who had engaged in labor migration, numerous factors require consideration before one makes the decision to leave their family behind in pursuit of temporary employment in another province or country. During our first conversational interview, Laura openly shared with me why her husband had made the decision to leave PEI for employment in Alberta. I asked: “How did you as a family come to the decision that Josh would go away for work?”

Laura replied:

*When you live in these small communities, there's no employment, you don't have any choice in the matter. This province is not union receptive and it's often minimum wage kind of work and that's the way it is, because honestly you can't afford to pay people more than that. We would go months without a pay check because that's just the reality; it's seasonal and cyclical work in Eastern Canada. The lure to the west now is really the PEI economy. It never is really bad, but it's never really good. We fall, I'm sure, quite below the average income for the rest of the country. So you just can't make a go of it here. And you'd find the same thing in Cape Breton, Newfoundland, Northern New Brunswick. The interesting thing is you see this in depressed, third world countries where the husband leaves, or someone leaves, but the whole family doesn't leave.*

*So finally, he and a couple of guys that he worked with heard about people going away to work in Alberta. They looked into it and the three of them went off together. That was six years ago and he's still travelling back and forth. Actually there was really no consultation. It was like, “I'm going, and these are the reasons I'm going.” And I'm like, “Ok, whatever, if that's what you want to do I can't stop you from doing this if you think that's what's going to be best.” One of our boys is kind of angry and I'm sure it's because his father's away. At different times I've thought he really resents me because his dad's not here. Deep down I think that he thinks I told his father that he had to go away for work but this was all Josh's decision. I kind of bring this up every now and again. “You made this decision on your own. This was your decision. I supported this decision but it was yours.” And he's like, “Well we couldn't make it,” and I go well, “there were choices we had to make and you made a choice.” We could certainly have lived here but the kids wouldn't have been able to do the things that they're doing. We would have lived a very different life. They would have been happy and healthy, and maybe they wouldn't have had all the bells and whistles. Of course when it started out it was temporary; like everybody he was going to do it for a year, two tops and now we are into our sixth year, and there's not a lot of light at the end of the tunnel.*

I responded: “Why do you think that lots of the women who have a husband working out of province stay behind?”

Laura explained:

*Well, I think it's because of uprooting the kid; that was what it was with us. Then it got to the point where it became too late to pull them out of school. Kids adjust; they do it all the time. That was just the choice we made; let's keep them here and raise them here. I wish that we had done it then, because I would have been fine to live out there. I wouldn't live in Fort McMurray but I could live in Edmonton. And I think, too in his mind, he did not want us to go to Fort McMurray to live. Fort McMurray is not a safe place for young people; lots of drinking, lots and lots and lots of drugs, homeless guys and addicts all over the place on the road. It sounds like the Wild West to me.*

Probing further, I inquired: “Over the last eight years, has there been any thought or discussion about packing up the family and making a permanent move to Alberta?”

Pausing momentarily, Laura shared:

*Hindsight is 20/20, that's probably the choice that we should have made. And after about 18 months of the Alberta thing, I said, “Should we do this, should we make the move?” And he was like, “No. I don't want to live here. I don't want to be there.” I think that he kept thinking, in another six months it'll end, another year it'll end, another. . . you know, whatever. I think he still thinks this. The other thing, too, is I think that it's always when they go away; it's always going to be for 6 months or a year. That's it. But it's never that way. That's what keeps us at it, too. Even if Josh comes home for the summer, which he's done only twice since he's been gone, you're so broke by the end of it that you can't do it anymore so then you have to go back and make money. The prospect of staying here, you just couldn't make enough to live, and you just sit there and go, “we just can't do it.” I think that that's a lot of it, too; you think that it's always going to be temporary. And then you don't make the move because still it's always temporary. This is going to end, it's going to end, it's going to end. Really, the reality is it probably is never going to end. I don't see a light at the end of the tunnel.*

“You don't?” I asked gently. “No. Not in reality. I think that's a bit of a pipe dream that it could happen, but right now I don't. I just don't see it happening.” Continuing, I inquired, “If you were to look ahead, say five years down the road when the last girls have graduated from high school, where do you see this?” Laura replied, “God, I would hope that we'd be finished

*doing this by then. Yeah, so there is light at the end of this tunnel but it's a really, really long tunnel. There's light at the end of that one I guess."*

During our conversations, I was emotionally struck as Laura spoke about Josh's perception of temporariness; and how even after these years of being away he continues to view this pattern of coming and going to Alberta for employment to be only temporary. Listening to how Laura spoke about this and her not seeing any end to this pattern in sight, I was curious about why the family did not decide to make a permanent move to Alberta. Much was shared about this during our time together; and through our conversations I learned that this was a decision that must be considered by all families. The decision for women to remain behind with children on Prince Edward Island or to make a permanent move to Alberta as a family unit, for example, is one that not only has many pros and cons, but is profoundly difficult to make.

### **Perceptions Regarding Marriage and Family**

During our time together, Laura shared openly about the marital and familial challenges she experienced as a result of Josh's coming and going for employment in Alberta. While some men employed out of province are on regular employment schedules where they may work in cycles of four to six weeks and then be off and return home for one to two weeks, Josh's work schedule over the past six years has always been uncertain. Laura shared that he always comes home for Christmas and for a period of time in August. However, the rest of the year his schedule is unpredictable. Over the past six years he has been home on average less than 60 days per year. This has resulted in him missing many birthdays, anniversaries, and much of the day-to-day activities that occur within their family. Laura explained:

*In the last six years Josh has really not been home. I think in the six years he has spent two summers at home, and other than that it'll be two or three weeks at Christmas. His work is sporadic. It's always been. He gets home when he can get home kind of thing.*

*Sometimes there's a stretch of three or four months that he's not home. And then he'll come home for a week or two weeks but that, too, is never consistent; sometimes it's three or four weeks. But then when he comes home we spend that time on a project, so it becomes work, work, work to try and catch up on all the things that you haven't done. He cannot sit still. I'm like, "Can we relax, please? Can we please relax?" But he's like, "Oh my god, there's so much stuff that needs to get done and I can't relax when I know all these things need to be done."*

*Four years ago we put a pool in. I'm very proud of it because we did it all ourselves. Josh came home and that's what we did. We spent the whole time working ungodly hours doing it. And all the kids worked at it too. The day we ordered the cement truck it was just kind of drizzling, which is perfect for doing cement as it keeps it from getting hard too quick. Well the truck pulled in the yard and the skies opened up. So we had our daughter who would have been 12 at the time running around with pieces of plywood, throwing them down in front of her brothers and they're wheeling wheel barrels of concrete, running. Their other brother was at the cement truck with the guy filling in the wheel barrels. And I'm down in the hole pushing the cement in. By this time it's a torrential downpour. And the kids videotaped this. We're all very proud of it.*

As I listened to Laura recall this story, I watched her face beam with pride in what the family had accomplished. This was a memory that the family would have forever—being together in a rain storm building a pool together. As she shared this story with me, I reveled in Laura's laughter and joy as she recounted how the whole family was together and all working towards a common goal of installing a pool in the yard. I could visualize the rain pouring down on both parents and their children as they poured and placed concrete, building a swimming pool together in the rain. I could envision the love and laughter shared by this family as they were outside drenched from the rain, working together as a family to achieve their goal of building a pool. This was a family memory that they could hold close to their hearts for a lifetime.

### **A Snapshot of Life - Building the Family Pool**

As Laura was sharing her story of the family coming together to build the pool, she showed photographs of the finished project. These photographs were of the finished pool, the pool house, and landscaping they had completed. Also included in the photographs were the children, smiling together on the pool deck. Noticeably absent from these pictures, however,

was Josh. As Laura was arriving at the end of sharing her story with me, she too noticed that Josh was absent from these prized photographs. She recalled a conversation the two of them had that evening, after the family had finished building the pool. Laura recalled:

*So now that I think about it, when you look back, building the pool was a good experience for our family. But then once it's done, Josh sits there and looks at it and says, "But I'm not here. I don't get to enjoy this." He always, always, always wanted a pool for our family, and now we've put one in our backyard, but he will never get to come home and enjoy it. He's only home for a week or so in the summer.*

In the re-telling of this story, Laura became acutely aware that a week here and a week there per year may be all that Josh would ever have to enjoy the pool that he had dreamed about building for his family for years. In the re-telling of this story, Laura realized that while Josh would have had the memory of the family coming together to build the pool, as long as he was coming and going for employment in Alberta, he would rarely be home to enjoy it with his wife and children. While he would hear from Laura and the children about the enjoyment they were having in the pool, he would not be present. Due to employment commitments out of province, he would be unable to participate in these family experiences and be a part of the making of family memories.

### **Day-to-Day Management of Multiple Households**

Being left behind and caring for children, Laura was responsible for much of the day-to-day management of the family's home in rural Prince Edward Island. She shared that often she felt as though she had to also manage Josh as he lived in and was employed in Alberta.

Managing multiple family members living both at home and away had resulted in increased personal challenges and stress, as Laura tried to coordinate the needs of family living in two provinces, thousands of kilometers apart. I commented, "You mentioned that you are managing two different lives in two different places? That would be really hard."

Laura explained:

*When they're out there working in Alberta, not only are you managing your home and the children here, but you're also managing him. It's kind of like up and down and yo-yo'ing all the time. A lot of times it has happened where he has told me that he was coming home and then he'd call and say to change the ticket because he was not coming home and that drove me crazy. I would say, "Don't do this to me anymore!" I asked him if he knew how cruel that was and he was like, "Oh I was busy, you don't understand!" And I was like, "Don't call me up with this nonsense, telling me that you are stressed out." He used to call and tell me he was going to quit, and I was like, "Whatever. Quit if you want to but don't call me and just say that you're quitting. There's got to be a plan." He's always talking that this is going to end, he's going to stop this cycle; and I'm like, "OK, if you want to stop fine but there has to be a plan in place, because if he all of a sudden stopped we would have no income coming in. And I am here on the phone, living here with all these balls in the air."*

Laura continued:

*I am here and I manage everything; and you don't want to drag up what has happened in the day when he calls at night, because that is the time you need to just wind down and put all that stuff aside. With the time difference, too, he's calling me at 10:30 at night and I'm exhausted. I just want to go to sleep. When he calls he'd be like, "Is there anything happening?" "No, not really." I just don't want to even go there. He doesn't call late at night anymore because it's just pointless. So it'll be day time when he calls and then you get a couple of minutes; so it's business, business, and business. Year after year after year of all business, it's hard to keep a personal relationship going when you just kind of are dealing with tasks and things that need to be done. Everything gets kind of pushed aside and nothing gets dealt with, until you explode because it's built up and built up.*

As I listened to Laura share how she tried to manage family members living both in Alberta and on Prince Edward Island, I was reminded of the parallels to my own life as I left Prince Edward Island to complete doctoral work in Edmonton. Many times I was in Alberta trying to make appointments or arrange child care for my daughter who was on PEI. I was keenly aware of the time differences and learned quickly that I could not call home too late in the evening; as family members were tired and there was little that they wanted to discuss as the evening progressed. These calls often ended up being brief and with little depth. Calls to home often became quite task orientated, focusing on reminders such as "Did you do this? Can you do



that?” I think about this now and can understand, more deeply, how challenging it would be to try and manage multiple lives in multiple provinces year after year.

### **“Who’s Got it Worse?” A Question without an Answer**

Over the six years that Josh had been coming and going for employment in Alberta, Laura noticed a change in their marital and familial relationships. On more than one occasion she spoke of how Josh’s coming and going had impacted their marriage. During our conversations, Laura repeatedly spoke about a gnawing question that came to life and created conflict every time she and Josh reunited. Who has it worse? Josh who is employed out of province and only at home and with the family sporadically or Laura who was left behind with the children? Listening to Laura share her perceptions around this tension, it became abundantly clear that this was a multi-faceted question and one without a clear answer. Laura revealed:

*I have to say, one of the big, the biggest stressors and the biggest things that we argue about is who’s got it harder. That’s what we fight about the most. He’s out there working long hours all the time and he’s there for the money. But he doesn’t see the kids. He hasn’t been able to see them grow up and see the accomplishments that they’ve made and that’s really, really hard for him. I’ve been thinking a lot as we began talking together and imagining what Josh’s perceptions are of the kids now, because he hasn’t been there to watch them grow up. In some ways it’s probably like their growth and development has been on hold to a certain extent. He’s missed out on so much of how they’ve grown and advanced and he’s not been there to witness it. And then I sit here and I go, “Well I got it harder.” We’ve been able to do things with our house because he’s been paid better money, but he doesn’t get to enjoy the spoils of his labour. So that’s tough. He gets to pack up and walk away from all of the crap that goes on; raising teenagers and dealing with lots of issues. I’m left here making monumental decisions by myself. I think, “It’s stressful enough having a marriage and raising kids when you’re in the same house, but when you’re in two different provinces and trying to raise kids together it’s really, really tough.” So I sit here and go, “Well I’ve got it worse because I’ve got the entire burden.” And he goes, “Well I have it worse because I miss out on all their stuff.”*

Probing further, I inquired: “Do you find that that leads to some resentment?”

Laura shared:

*Oh absolutely! And then you're in the kind of a constant conflict of who has it worse. I'd say that is the number one thing that we argue about. And every time he comes home it happens, every time, without fail; it doesn't matter if we're together for a week or a month or whatever. There's one big blowout and this is the core of where it comes from. There is resentment on both of our parts. He resents that I get to be with the kids and he'll say, "You get to spend the time with the kids." And I'm going, "I want to be away from them (laughs). I'd like to be on the other side of the world." He's exhausted when he comes home and I'm exhausted, and so that's one of the things that has perpetuated over the years. There's never a break for either one of us. It just goes on and on and on and on. He's mad that I get to spend time with them and I'm mad that he's out there working and that I'm burdened with all of this stuff. And then when I look for help his response is, "What do you want me to do? I'm not there. How am I supposed to help you?"*

*I remember once, there was this questionnaire the kids had to fill out and one of the questions was who's your role model? One of the kids put down that it was her father. I was so upset and was like, "Are you freaking kidding me? After all the stuff I do for you, he's your role model? I'm here in the trenches and Dad gets to come in and out. I'm the one here dragging you off to this and that and he's your role model?" I know it's ridiculous but that's what happens. You build up these resentments and it goes on and on and on.*

### **The Commuter Father**

Over the years that Josh had been away for employment, the children had grown from little girls and boys into adolescents and young adults. Laura shared how the children's perceptions of their father had changed over the years, as his coming and going to and from Alberta became part of their family's norm. She recalled how the excited children used to go with her to the airport to pick up their father when he returned home after a work term. The novelty of this has waned over the years to a point where the family equated Josh's flying to and from Alberta, as being similar to any other parent who must commute for employment. Laura explained:

*When Josh was going away at first, the children were younger and they always wanted to be at the airport to pick him up. That doesn't happen anymore. The younger ones, they were eight when he started going away. Now the children never go to the airport, not never, but very rarely. The last few times when he's gotten home, if they have plans it's*

*like, "I have plans," and they're not going to change their plans to go pick him up at the airport. They've started to detach themselves from it all. They're like, "He's going to be here for a week. I'll see him during that time. I'll see him whenever." It breaks his heart and I feel badly, but that's their norm. Their norm is that he's not there. It's almost like it has become no different than if you lived in a city, and you're going on the bus or subway for work. He just hops on a plane and he's not home every day. His commute just happens to take a whole day to do it and he crosses the country to come home. You know, we've gotten to the point where when he leaves, I drop him off and it's a kiss in the car and away he goes. I've noticed just in the last couple of months, that's how it has become.*

Discussing Josh's commuting patterns with Laura, I questioned the uncertainties that must exist for families with loved ones coming and going for work who do not know when their loved one will be coming home and when they will have to leave again. Listening to Laura discuss how the children's perceptions of Josh's coming and going have changed over the years, I sensed that this was something that had saddened her. She felt as though time and distance had contributed to their children becoming indifferent to their father's coming and going. I thought about Laura and her desire to promote a relationship with the children and their father; yet she had also witnessed a change in their children's relationship with their father over the six years that he was employed out of province. My thoughts also went to Josh. I questioned how he must have felt as he looked forward to coming home and being with his family, only to arrive and have none of his children waiting at the airport to greet him. I wondered if he secretly hoped that his family would be there to see him each time his plane landed.

As Laura re-told this narrative, I questioned how much of the children's feelings of indifference towards their father coming home were directly related to the length of time that Josh had been coming and going for employment in Alberta. Over the years that Josh was away, the children had matured into adolescents and young adults. Perhaps these feelings of

indifference could also be attributed to their stage of development, characterized by egocentricity and an increased focus on peer relationships.

### **The Fluidity of Role Transitions**

During our multiple conversational interviews, Laura shared at length how their family had transitioned over the years that Josh left the province for employment in Alberta. Particularly, she spoke at great length about how her roles as parent and partner had changed over the years that Josh had been away. She focused on the evolution of her roles as a mother, as a co-parent with Josh who was parenting from a distance, and her metamorphosis into a role that she felt had become her new norm—that of being both mother and father. Laura described her perceptions regarding parenting and being a wife; and what this looked like during periods of time when Josh was at home with the family and also when he was away for work. Laura shared:

*I'm mother and father. He comes home and he's super Dad, but I'm still both the mother and father; and because I've taken on everything it's easier for Josh to sit back. For him this has been an easier transition. When he comes home, he's happy to sit back and be fun Daddy. You become the mother and father but you also are trying to parent the parent too, because you're trying to fill Josh in on what has been going on. I keep saying, "You can't just be fun Daddy all the time." But that's what happens. He comes home and to the kids he's put on a bit of a pedestal. 'Cause he's an enigma to them. He's the guy who sweeps in and sweeps out. When he sweeps in he makes everything fun and then he goes away and I'm left with the crap to deal with. And we don't actually deal with any of it, because we're trying to make everything peaceful and calm and a good experience for the kids; and a good experience for us while he's home and it's really, really difficult. With our family you get into a groove when he's not there. You do everything and then he comes home and upsets the teacart. We're in our routine and in our groove, but in lots of ways I want him to step in and take over; to take on some of the stress, and take over with some of the parenting issues. I want him to step in and be the father, but as long as it's being the father that falls in line with what I've been doing.*

Elaborating further, Laura revealed:

*You know, Josh's really parenting from away. He has missed out on all of the parenting, all of the TEEN (emphasizing the word teen) parenting. He's more like kids will be kids,*

*just let it go and things will work themselves out. And they probably will but I don't know. And then that's tough too, because you're sitting there alone with the kids and you need that kind of extra reinforcement. Josh's answer is, "Whatever your mother says. Listen to your mother." He thinks that this is right. It's that kind of, "Just do whatever your mother says." It's almost like, "Wink, wink, nudge, nudge, and listen to your mother." Because he's not here, I think it takes a lot longer for him to understand the seriousness of things. It's exhausting. I'm really a single parent. He'll be on the phone and he'll be like, "Well you have to talk to your mother about that, you know. I can't do anything for you because I'm not there." It's a lot of responsibility, a lot of weight on your shoulders. A lot of times it just does not seem fair; I'll do all this and I do that, and then the hero swoops in. But it's like you're doing all the work and taking care of everything. I know someday the children will appreciate it but you're like, when is someday going to come?*

"Do you think that the children are starting to realize what Josh has missed out on by going away for work?" I inquired.

Laura replied:

*Oh yeah for sure. All of them have expressed this in one shape or form. The older kids certainly had him around the most. And you can see that they've had more influence from him than the rest of the children. One of the younger kids, she will often say, "My dad wasn't here when I grew up. I grew up without him." The other kids are more reserved. At different times they have said, "You know, he's never been to this, he's never been to that." The boys know that Josh was never there, but won't just come out and say it. They will say little things like, "Is dad coming? Will he be home for this? Will he be home when I graduate?" Little things like that.*

### **A Snapshot of Life – Coming and Going: My Life through a Windshield**

As I listened to Laura discuss the many roles and activities she engaged in while left behind and caring for the couple's children, I was reminded of a photograph that she had shared with me during our fourth conversational interview. This photograph was one Laura had taken while in the driver's seat of her vehicle. It captured part of the steering wheel, dashboard, and a windshield that revealed an open road. There was no traffic or houses in the photograph—just pavement and a rural landscape of rolling farmland and trees. In presenting this photograph

Laura shared that it represented a large portion of her life—being behind the wheel of her vehicle and transporting the children to and from their activities.

“If somebody wanted to speak about your life in pictures, what does this represent? It looks like you snapped it from behind the wheel looking out at the road through the window of the car?” I asked. Laura responded:

*This is how I spend my life, behind the wheel of a vehicle. That’s where I feel like I am so much of the time, running the roads all over the place. It’s just crazy, just run, run, run, run. I am running back and forth, here and there and wherever. So that’s what I do most of the time. I think I don’t do a lot of driving but I do. I go back and forth to town, two to three times a day, sometimes four, five, six times. In 2½ years I just went over 100,000 kilometers on this vehicle. I know I do way, way, way too much for the kids. I will drop everything for whatever they need. And I’m here and I do it all, all of the time. I will say, “No,” to things that I am doing or what I would like to do so the kids can participate in something. And part of it is I’m feeling guilty, guilty, guilty and it’s probably because I am the only parent that’s around, and I’m not good at saying no. “Do, do, do, don’t say no. Accommodate everybody and make time for everybody else.” You’re going through your day and your day never stops, because you’re on to this and then you’re on to that.*

“Run, run so just like that picture you shared with me, the picture that you said was the symbol of your life going back and forth and being on the road all of the time,” I affirmed.

*Yeah, I remember often times there’d be three of the kids going in three different directions. One weekend I went away for a hockey tournament. Two of the kids were playing hockey out of province and a third was playing a game at a tournament on PEI. The older kids dropped him off at one rink, but he wasn’t playing here, he was actually playing in another rink, in another community, but they left him there. The manager of his team just happened to be there and she’s a neighbour of mine, so she took him down to where he was supposed to be for the game. After the game was over he didn’t make arrangements to get picked up. He was stuck at this rink. It was just a nightmare. I’m thinking this is a joke right. This isn’t real. Then when I’m driving back to PEI, I’m thinking this is the craziest thing in the world! The chaos and insanity became our norm; chaos and confusion and insanity.*

## **Marital Challenges**

As our conversation delved deeper into the topic of marriage, I was interested in learning more about Laura’s perceptions regarding her role as Josh’s wife and partner. Like parenting,

this was a role she noticed had changed over the years as Josh had been travelling back and forth to Alberta for employment. Laura spoke in great detail about the incongruence between her perceptions regarding marriage and those held by Josh. She shared how these incongruent views could lead to conflict as she transitioned from her predominant role of mother to becoming both wife and mother when Josh returned home from a work term. Laura disclosed:

*It's really, really difficult to transition from being the mother and father parent; doing everything to then go and be a wife. Marriages are work, period. The transition is really difficult. And just for him to come home, it's like he's a house guest. The kids are there and they are in your way, but they are there all of the time. But with him it's different, we both own the house, we both own everything, together; but he's not here and it's kind of like a boxing match going on for turf. When you are together doing the day-to-day you know what your job is and what you do but when he comes and goes all the time he doesn't know what his job is at home.*

*It's not like we are living the routine of day-to-day anymore. I am used to being here with half the kids in university and the other half in school. During the day, they are not all at home, so when Josh is home all the time during the day, it can be difficult and grate on your nerves. It's hard to get back into that role, too, because I am not a wife 90% of the time. I am a mother to these kids, but it is not this day-to-day relationship for the two of us as a couple; but for the most part we manage.*

I questioned: During the time when you are together, what is it like to go back to being in the role of Josh's wife?"

*It is not easy and I don't even know if I really do it. When he comes back, it's trying to figure out this co-parenting thing and being a wife falls to the bottom. And for him, he thinks everything is great and wonderful again. It takes time to get into that groove again, even physically being in the same space together. I live my routine and when he comes back he romanticizes trying to pick up where he left off when he was here last time. But you can't because he isn't here and hasn't been, to know what has happened and what to do. Sometimes I am just wiped and he's like, going to come in and all will be normal again, but it can't be because this is not normal, and he doesn't know what normal is because he isn't here.*

As Laura and I discussed the challenges that can occur during periods of time when Josh came home and was reunified with the family, I was reminded of literature aligned with this phenomenon. McGuire and Martin (2007) write about the "migration cycle," and the challenges

to family reunification that occur as a result of unpredictable patterns of labor migration by husbands who come and go to the US for temporary employment in the agriculture sector (p. 182). They identify that the migration cycle of a loved one coming and going for employment impacts family unity, family functioning, and leads to role confusion for those who are left behind. This sentiment is echoed by Wilkerson et al. (2009), as well as Vaizey (2011), who write about the challenges experienced by women during periods of time when the family is reunified after being away for employment.

### **A Snapshot of Life – Vacationing Together**

During our fourth conversational interview, Laura was keen to show me photographs of a recent vacation she and Josh took to the Caribbean. In listening to Laura describe each of her photographs; it helped me to gain a deeper understanding about her perceptions regarding marriage. As she shared these photographs and spoke about her vacation with Josh, it became clear that although they may live apart for most of the year, there still appeared to be a desire for connection and a commitment to nurturing their marital relationship. This was evident as she shared a photograph of the two of them together, smiling in front of their resort. I noticed Laura's face light up as she looked at this picture and recalled how happy they were to have arrived at the resort and to be on vacation together. As we looked at the other pictures, I thought about the dynamics of their relationship. I wondered what it had been like for the two of them when they were alone on vacation and had designated, uninterrupted couple time. Inviting further conversation regarding this, I asked:

You are used to making a lot of the decisions on your own. Josh is often working away and you are left behind doing it all. How does it work when you are together alone, as a couple on a holiday, trying to decide even simple things like, 'Should we go snorkeling or what time should we go down for breakfast? Or where are we going to go to eat?' How does that work for the two of you when you are on holidays?



Laura replied:

*Usually he is just like, “Whatever you want to do,” which is really irritating because sometimes you just want to stop being the one to make the decisions all of the time. I get tired of it. Even making the decisions about going on the trip was, “Well whatever you want to do. Whatever you want to do,” and I was like, “No. What do you (word emphasized) want to do?”*

I continued:

As we are looking at your pictures and you think back to the vacation, was there anything that you remember Josh saying, ‘Laura, I want to do this with you. I think you and I should go and do this’?

Laura recalled an experience:

*Snorkeling, he thought that that was just the most amazing thing and it was pretty cool. We went out for a while the first day and then we did it again the next day; and then the next day we went out and stayed for three hours and it was amazing but then I couldn’t do it anymore because I had stayed out so long I got a bad sunburn.*

### **Home as a Location**

Through our conversations and the sharing of photographs, I learned a great deal about Laura and her experience of Josh’s coming and going for employment. Repeatedly she spoke about home and her thoughts of what this meant. I found this to be a revealing discussion which led to greater insights for the two of us regarding what home looked like when a significant member of the family works in another province and rarely lives in the home. As we spoke about home as a place, a location, I found it interesting to hear Laura’s perceptions regarding where she felt Josh’s home was at. I inquired,

Josh is in Alberta a lot of the time, but where do you think he considers home to be? If someone said, where do you live? Would he say that he lives on PEI, or does he say that he lives in Fort McMurray? What do you think he would say?

Laura thoughtfully considered this question before she replied:

*I think he lives in Alberta. I don’t know where he would consider home. I’m sure for him home is our home but he doesn’t even have a dresser here anymore. I took all of his stuff*

*out of the dresser because it was getting musty smelling. His stuff was sitting in a drawer in our room forever and ever. I put his things in plastic bins in the garage. So he's living out of plastic bins when he comes home, when he comes home to our home. He does not live here. He doesn't live here anymore. He'll come home and doesn't know where anything is. It's really strange. It's like he doesn't belong here anymore but he doesn't feel he belongs out there 'cause that's not his home.*

Over the six years Josh had been employed and lived in Alberta for much of his life and yet his most significant relationships with his family and the stories of their lives continued to evolve in his absence, while they remained living without him in their family home on PEI. While Josh considered home to be where his family was, there had been a transition for Laura over time where she no longer identified his home as being the family home on PEI. A similar disconnect has been identified in the literature that explores the experiences of transnational mothers from the Philippines (Parrenas, 2001, 2005) and Mexico (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). These researchers discovered that although some women may have been away from their children for years at a time, they still considered their home to be back with their children in their country of origin. As we continued our discussions regarding place and relationships and how these evolved over time, Laura shared more photographs of her storied life. As we discussed these photographs, additional stories were illuminated which revealed how Josh continued to have a presence in the family home; regardless of where he was physically living as he came and went for employment, year after year. This insight was gained in the following story.

### **A Snapshot of Life– An Empty Chair at the Family Table**

*These are pictures of our kitchen. We have a big country kitchen; our crazy kitchen. Our kitchen always looks like this, dishes piled on the counters constantly, pots and pans all over the place, all kinds of things on the refrigerator. It's always crazy, crazy, crazy. Here's the calendar over here that we live and die by. The kitchen is the hub of our home. You walk right into the kitchen all the time. It is absolutely the centre of our existence.*

“As I look at the pictures of the kitchen and with it being the central hub of your home, where does Josh fit into this picture?” I inquired. Laura responded:

*He will sometimes go and sit in my chair or he will be like, “Come over and sit here with me. And I am like, “I don’t sit there.” It’s so silly to think that’s my spot, don’t sit there. He has his place at the table and everyone knows that that is his seat. Even when he is gone no one ever sits in his chair at the table. At the table he is at one end and I am at the other, and when he is not home no one sits at his seat. His place is his place; whether he is there or not he will always have a place at the table.*

As I listened to Laura describe the photograph of her kitchen and share her story of Josh always having a place at the table, I thought about the irony that existed in the telling and re-telling of her stories; regarding the evolution of Josh’s position in the family and how she saw him fitting into the family home. On the one hand, he was home so infrequently that Laura packed up all of his clothes from the bedroom and moved them into the garage. Yet on the other hand, the entire family was keenly aware that Josh still held a predominant place within the family. This was so apparent that no one would sit in his chair at the dinner table. Josh’s absence from the home was palpable; he was away so much that his clothes had begun to smell musty and needed to be moved, and yet his place at the table was always left open and waiting for him. As I thought more deeply about this, I was drawn to the metaphor of a puzzle. I questioned if a family was like a puzzle, where each person comprises a piece of the puzzle; and how can you ever put the family puzzle together so it becomes whole when one of the pieces is always missing?

In speaking to Laura about Josh and her perceptions of home, it became apparent in the re-telling of this story that she, too, was coming to new insights about Josh’s place in the home. Like me, she also noticed the discrepancy between her stories regarding his clothes being stored in the garage and the empty chair at the table.

I stated:

I find it interesting that he has no clothes in the house and all of his things are packed away in bins in the garage and yet whether he is home or not, he has a seat at the table and no one touches his seat,

Laura responded, *“Yes it’s funny isn’t it when you stop and think of it like that.”*

Through the living and re-telling of stories, new understandings can emerge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This was very evident in my conversation with Laura regarding perceptions of home and place; through which she also realized that perhaps Josh was not as absent from the home as she had thought. While he may have been away for work the majority of time, his anticipated fatherly presence in the home remained every day in a seat that others were always waiting for him to sit in at the dinner table.

### **Communicating from a Distance**

On more than one occasion, Laura expressed her concerns regarding communication patterns that she had observed between Josh and their children. Due to the unpredictability of his work schedule and a three hour difference between Mountain and Atlantic Standard Times, Josh’s conversations with the children were often limited. Laura identified that her children were like many of the current generation of adolescents who were more comfortable communicating via text messaging and social media sites rather than by telephone. Josh, however, did not embrace texting or social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter. This, coupled with his work schedule, the children’s school and extracurricular schedules, and time zone differences, created challenges for him to communicate regularly with his children. Laura felt as though she was stuck in the middle of this communication challenge. She was physically present day-in and day-out with the children, and was well aware of what was happening in their lives. Josh was away from home approximately 85% of the year. As such, he missed out on

most of the daily activities that occurred in the lives of their children. Over the years, the children had changed. Josh had not physically been at home to witness much of their development. Lack of physical presence in the home, along with infrequent communication with the children, contributed to Laura being worried that the children were growing up without a sense of knowing who their father was, or what his role was in their lives and the life of their family.

Literature specific to the experience of children left behind due to a father's labor migration is sparse. Recently, Wray (2012) examined the experiences of men leaving from Cape Breton communities for employment in the oil and gas industries of Northern Alberta. Family counselors participating in this study believed that children suffer from increased anxiety and fears of parental rejection as a result of their father's frequent absence. They have used the term "dads at a distance syndrome" to describe this phenomenon. Wray acknowledged that this is an area that has received little attention and requires further research. Bernhard, Landolt, and Goldring (2008); Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997); and Parrenas (2001, 2005) have all explored the experience of transnational mothers from the perspectives of children left behind for years at a time, and cared for by other family members. Like Josh and Laura, women participating in these studies all expressed loss in missing the day-to-day functioning of their families and watching their children experience life. Some women had been away for so long that they did not recognize their own children upon reunification. Although the children in these studies could rationalize the economic reasons why their mothers were away, they had difficulty processing the emotional toll being away from their mothers for years at a time had taken on them. They expressed sadness growing up in a family where their mothers were not physically

present; and found it difficult to develop nurturing, intimate relationships with their mothers the longer they had been away.

Laura was concerned that a lack of communication between Josh and the children was contributing to a sense of disconnect within their family. She stressed to Josh the importance of making a stronger effort to communicate more regularly with the children while he was away; and viewed communication to be an opportunity for him to nurture his relationship with their children. Josh listened to Laura's concerns; and at the time when these conversational interviews were conducted had recently begun communicating with his children via text messaging. Laura expressed her appreciation of this and shared:

*He's just started texting. So he's kind of excited about that. I think he texts them every day now. And that was actually a big, big, big, battle. I said, "You don't communicate with the kids." He said, "I talk to them all the time." And I said, "Honey you don't talk to me all the time and you talk to me 10 times more than you speak to them. You might talk with our daughter once a month on the phone." With the kids, if he called in the evening it would be whoever happened to be home and a quick chat with them. "They're not phone people so they don't use the phone. You need to communicate the way they do." And he was like, "I hate computers. I hate everything about them. I don't want to use them." And I'm like, "Well then you're not going to communicate with your kids. If you want to you need to text" but the phone he had he couldn't text with. So I was like, "I'll pick up a lap top for you, set it all up for you, and you can Skype with them." But he was like, "I hate that. I don't want to do that." And I'm like, "We'll that's how they communicate, they instant message, they Skype." So now he's started texting and he's actually texting me a lot too which is good, because then at least you're kind of connecting and stuff. But then he goes, "They don't write back to me. They just write ha, ha, ha, lol, k." And I'm like, "Well that's how they talk!!! (laughing). And he's like, "But they don't say anything," and I'm like, "No but that's how they talk and they're listening to you." In the last couple of weeks one of the girls had lots of stuff going on and he texted her writing, "Good for you, keep it up, you know, stay strong, just like let things settle and it'll all be ok." That was good. I was like, "Thank you for doing that."*

Parrenas (2005) examined how families can continue to nurture relationships and foster intimacy between transnational parents and their children. In exploring patterns of communication between Filipino parents engaged in labor migration and the children left behind,

she found that technologies such as cell phone usage and text messaging can help to promote relationship building when parents are not able to be physically present. Similar to what Josh and Laura were experiencing, Parrenas (2005) also found that there can be challenges for parents and children in terms of keeping the lines of communication open when a parent is away for extensive periods of time. However, diverse modes of communication are essential if investments in the parent-child relationship are to occur. Although logistics such as time zone changes, cellular phone reception, and internet access may present barriers to communication, being able to connect instantaneously via phone calls and text messages can allow children to experience their parents' presence regardless of their physical absence (Parrenas, 2005).

### **Perceptions by Others of Women Left Behind**

While living in a rural community on Prince Edward Island, there is often a perception that people know their neighbors and that there is support for one another during both good and challenging times. Over the past generation in particular, many would argue that this perception is a fallacy. Changes in agricultural practices and urbanization have led to the demise of some rural communities on the Island. The elements which once contributed to economic and social development of communities and that enriched the lives of community residents have been lost or eroded. Gone are the stores, schools, and churches that once contributed to the life blood of many rural communities. Local independent grocers have closed their businesses in light of large grocery chain stores moving into the urban centers of Summerside and Charlottetown. At one time, people would not consider driving up to 100 km each way to get groceries. Now this has become a weekly outing for families, with some even leaving the province to go shopping in larger stores in New Brunswick or Nova Scotia.

Laura shared a lot about living in a rural Prince Edward Island. In particular, she shared how she felt she was perceived by community members as a result of Josh working in another province and her being left behind to care for their children. By living in a rural community, there was a sense that “people want to know your business” and that families living this phenomenon are talked about by those in the community who remain and are employed on PEI. As I have explored the experiences of women left behind for this narrative inquiry, I have been intellectually struck by the perceived commonness of what seems to exist in regards to men leaving their families for temporary employment in another province. Often referred to as “going out west,” men leaving their families behind for work in the oil and gas industries of Alberta has become so common that it is often treated in the same vein as if these men were commuting on a daily basis for employment in other regions of the province. In many rural Prince Edward Island communities, one could have a discussion regarding who is “out west working, who is going out west for work, and when someone is coming home from out west.” This is a phenomenon currently being experienced by many families, although statistically we do not know exact numbers. In many ways it has become commonplace for men to leave their families for temporary employment in another province. I was curious to hear Laura’s thoughts regarding how many women she thinks may be left behind and caring for children while their partners are employed in another province. She explained:

*It’s a lot. I think on the low end you’re probably looking at 10%, and on the high end maybe as high as 25 or 30%. I’m just thinking, I just rattled off myself, Renee, Karen, Tracey, and then I was talking about my cousin, he was away, he’s back home now. His sister, her husband was away for a while. They do it for stints both Karen and Renee; the majority of their marriages, their husbands have been away. For the last 4 years Tracy’s husband has been away most of the time. And then my friend Kathy, her husband went away last year. On my son’s hockey team, there are 19 kids and three out of 19 husbands are gone. So you’re looking at 15 percent there, just on that one team.*



While Laura and I discussed at length the experiences of women left behind, she shared a great deal regarding how she thinks she and her family are perceived by others in the community, as a result of Josh's coming and going for employment in Alberta. Specifically, she shared her perceptions regarding the need for support for women and families left behind. She felt that with Josh being gone for so long, she had evolved into a married single mother who had many balls in the air. Being left behind, Laura did not have a partner to co-parent and share the responsibilities of managing both children and the home. Due to the many negative comments she had received from others in the community directed towards her because of Josh working away, Laura had learned not to ask for nor rely on others for support. She explained:

*You become very isolated because you're so busy. You're running all this stuff and you don't connect with people. I sit here and I talk about all these friends that I have that are in the same boat as me but we're all running so crazy busy that we don't get time to kind of connect. Yesterday I actually went to lunch with one of my girlfriends whose husband has been away most of their marriage. We had kind of gotten into a habit of doing breakfast every other Monday and we haven't for quite a number of months now, and we did yesterday. We were sitting there and having breakfast, connecting and talking. Then one of my cousins walks in to where we are and he's like, "Oh yeah, ladies of leisure are ya, out eating while your husbands are hard at work?" And I just wanted to say, "Go bite me buddy. Yeah, we're ladies of leisure; go to hell in a hand basket you jerk. I'm getting together for breakfast with my girlfriend that I hardly get to see." And I'm probably being overly sensitive too but I just thought you're a jerk.*

She continued:

*I find this even sometimes among people who've done this before too. They'll go, "Oh, you have no idea." And I'm going, "Oh really, I have no idea, are you kidding me?" And then she'll kind of stop herself and go, "Oh no, I guess maybe you do understand what I'm talking about." And you're going, "Do you think you could give me a hand?" But you really just don't even want to ask because you're tired of being told, "Oh I've got something else coming up. Oh I'm busy I can't really help you out." And you're like, "Ok right whatever, good for you.*

*Lots of times someone will say, "If you need a drive or if the kids need a ride let me know." I'll reciprocate too. But then, you know, lots of other times it's, I don't really have anybody that I would call on to say, "I'm stuck. Can you do this?" You know, this has been going on for so long too, so sometimes I'll call one person in particular up and she'll go, "Oh I've got this going on, or that." And then you just go, "Oh forget it. I*

*can't be bothered," and you're thinking, "I never ask, and when I ask it means that I'm desperate for help." You know, you kind of have to beg sometimes, "Could you please come in and do this for me?"*

When living in rural communities on Prince Edward Island, people are often aware of who is employed in the province and who is working away. And yet there appears to be a tremendous lack of support for women who are left behind while their husbands are out of province working. Rather than supporting women who are left behind, there is an overwhelming sense by women that they are being talked about negatively by others in the community, because their husbands have left the family for employment elsewhere. Women have felt judgments from others in the community and have found that there is a perception that because your husband is away he is making lots of money; therefore you can afford whatever you want so don't complain about how hard you are having it when you are left behind. These perceptions from others became acutely clear throughout the conversational interviews with each woman who co-participated with me in this inquiry. They shared comments directed at them by neighbors, extended family members, co-workers, and health care professionals. Laura's perceptions of how she and other women who have partners working out of province are being perceived by others living in the community are shared below.

*The other day when we were finished talking, I had a conversation with a friend whose husband's away too. She's talking about how to try to juggle her work and stuff, and so I asked, "How do you find the support is?" And she said, "Yeah, I don't have any support at all really." I said, "And what about from the community and stuff?" I said, "Do you feel like people in the community almost have resentment towards us?" And she said, "Absolutely!" And I said, "Because people look at you like ok, well, you know he's away, and you're making a pile of money and stuff. And so, you don't need help. You're living the life of Riley." I asked her if she felt that and she said, "Absolutely."*

*I've noticed that people kind of check you out and you get this talking like, "Oh you're doing this, or oh you're doing that." And we both said we're living pay check to pay check; you live within the amount of money that you have. But in saying that too, it's interesting, because it was her husband that was saying to others that my husband made \$300,000 a year because he was going away. And I was like, no he doesn't. And he*

*goes, sure he has to. And I'm like, "No, not even close to that kind of money. But then people are sitting there probably going, "Oh my god; he's probably making \$200,000." So then you can see how people would just think, "She doesn't need help, she's got piles of money, what does she need help for? Oh they don't need anything, they're rolling in money." As if that means that you don't need support in lots of other ways, right? The difference between years ago and now though is dramatic. Back then when a husband left, the community pulled together to keep things going. Now we're so isolated and insulated. We don't even know who our neighbours are anymore. I think the women now have a much more difficult time because today you are really on your own.*

Exploring this further I commented:

I'm really interested in hearing more about how you think others see you in terms of the life that you're living with Josh being gone? I think to what you have just shared, having someone in your home mentioning how much money he thinks Josh is making working away.

She replied:

*It's shocking actually and it's very, very subtle; and you just wonder, what are people thinking about you? You do feel like you're being judged, so it's easy to be sensitive. Comments like, "You don't need him around because he puts money in the bank." Or "You're here living the life of Riley." Maybe it's more us reflecting on what we think people are thinking, because you hear lots of people go, "Oh you must be raking in the dough or it must be nice to put a pool in your backyard, must be nice to fix your house up, must be nice to go on a vacation, must be nice." I often feel like I'm defending myself because of the things we are able to have now that we couldn't have before."*

### **Coming, Going, and Women's Health**

During our time together, Laura repeatedly mentioned how stressful it was to be left behind and become the lone caregiver responsible for children and the home. I wondered how she managed her stress and whether she felt that being left behind had an impact on her health. We spent much of our final conversational interview speaking about Laura's perceptions regarding personal stress, health, and well-being. Through the sharing of these stories of experience, Laura recalled past experiences she had with health care providers. She expressed concerns regarding their lack of caring, support, and acknowledgement, and the lack of empathy towards her; as she tried to explain how stressful it was to be left behind and to care for children

while Josh was away for employment in Alberta. As we engaged in this conversation, Laura imagined practical ways that women left behind could be supported by health care providers.

Laura explained:

*I can't speak for all doctors but I think mine is just like whatever. He's actually said to me, "Geez, you have nothing to complain about, you guys are probably making more money than I am." I just want to kick him and go like, "Yeah really, we probably are" (said sarcastically). I don't think that they even make a connection between how I'm doing and the stress of all of this. He'll say to me, "Oh yah you're doing great with all these kids," and you're just kind of like, "Oh really, you think so, I'm ready to rip my hair out of my head." I've taken antidepressants before and he's good to write a prescription but forget all about follow up on how you're doing. It's not worth trying to take something if you feel worse and when it's not helping to address the actual issues.*

Probing further, I questioned: "With Josh coming back and forth and your responsibilities of doing it all, do you think that that has had an impact on health?"

Laura revealed:

*Absolutely, I know my personal stress level is enormous. At times you feel the physical effects of it. When someone says you've got the weight of the world on your shoulders, it's because you physically feel like you've got the weight of the world on your shoulders. Sometimes I get so stressed out about whatever is going on you physically feel ill. And you know you're not the priority. Everybody else is the priority. So you don't take care of yourself. I know for me this absolutely weighs on my health. I feel like I'm running 24/7, there's no down time. I took up tennis this year and that was because my husband's like, "Will you go, why don't you go?" And I'm going, "How can I do that?" But again I have to schedule that in. You know you feel like you're not deserving of it. So you have to kind of make that time for yourself 'cause you just get lost in all of everybody else's needs. You have to schedule times for yourself to do things.*

Interested in learning more about this, I inquired: "How do you take care of you?"

*You don't because you're just the bottom of the priority list. I take care of everything. I book his flights to come home and then he'll call and go, "You have to change my flight." Then two hours later it's like, "Oh no, don't bother." If he was doing these things himself then I wouldn't even know. And even just the parenting stuff, it's 100% of all the parenting and then it's kind of he pops in and pops out. So you don't take time for yourself. It's exhausting. It's absolutely exhausting. I go and get my hair done once a month, which is something that I didn't do for years. I used to color my own hair. I go now and I get somebody else to do it and I don't feel in the least bit guilty about it. And I get my nails done every 3 weeks. But I'll get it all the time from other people, "Oh look*

*at your nails” and I’m like, “Are you kidding me?” Are you really going to give me a hard time about this? Please give me a break.*

I asked, “Is there anything that you would love to do if you had the time?” Laura’s face lit up as she shared:

*I’d paint. I haven’t painted in years and years. I’ve gone out different times and bought stuff, but I just haven’t taken the time to do it, or to set up a place to do it. I’ve been kind of thinking about it again just recently. I used to go to the art gallery at the Confederation Centre all the time. I used to just go by myself. I haven’t been in there in years. I kind of forgot about doing those kinds of things but I think I’m going to start painting again.*

“When you were playing hockey and now when you play tennis, did you find that these activities helped with your stress?” I asked.

Laura offered:

*It does. It doesn’t help as much as I wish that it would. But being physically active, that’s a big thing; just getting out. I did yoga a few years ago and that was great, I really enjoyed that. You have to make an appointment to do it, right. I think that’s why tennis is good for me because it’s a set time; it’s a class that I have to go to. The last few days I haven’t been sleeping well too. I keep waking up at 3 o’clock in the morning and I’m wide awake. And then I usually fall asleep at 5 to 7 when I need to get up. My mind finally settles then and I fall asleep, and then I have to get back up.*

Elaborating on this further, I questioned: “Is there anything on your mind that’s making you wake up at night?”

She replied,

*Oh yeah, everything. It’s the kind of loop of I need to do this and I need to do that. You play the battle in your mind. There are quite a few people I know that are in this situation, and they are all very stressed because they deal with everything on their own. I’ve got quite a few friends that are doing this. And they’re all stressed; they’re all stressed out.*

As we explored women’s health together, Laura talked about her perceptions regarding the correlation between stress experienced as women were left behind and the impact this had on mental and physical health. Glynn et al. (2009) have discovered an association between role

overload and negative mental health for women. They identify role overload as “the extent to which a person feels overwhelmed by their total responsibilities” (p. 217). They discovered that women who experience role overload also perceived their mental health to be poorer when compared to other women who felt that their multiple day-to-day roles were manageable. As I listened to Laura share stories specific to her experiences of juggling multiple roles within the family, I questioned Laura’s perceptions regarding the health and well-being of women who were left behind and asked: “I’m thinking about mental health and physical health and emotional health and how you do everything for everyone and may not have somebody you can talk with. I’ve been wondering how you cope with everything?”

Pondering this question, Laura revealed:

*You sit there and you have a glass of wine, or two or three and I’m like God, do I have a problem? I’m sitting here by myself drinking wine on a Thursday because you’re alone so much. The loneliness is awful; it’s not having that person to sit down with and even if you say nothing, just to be in the same space together. You think back and wonder is this what my life was going to be like? I sit here now and I worry, “Are we growing apart?” I don’t know. I don’t really know because we don’t spend enough time together to know that. I know my husband loves me dearly and I love him. But we don’t spend enough time together and when we do it’s the pressure cooker and the stress.*

Laura continued:

*Obviously your mental health is going to be tested the most because of all the responsibilities. It’s taxing because you’re the only parent and with all of the stresses that you have to deal with. I was even thinking from a physical standpoint too, just having to be physically there to take care of all of the things when you don’t have a partner around repairing the house, putting the garbage out, things like that. Just the physical demand on your body of doing two people’s jobs at the same time, too. If you’re run down physically you’re going to be run down emotionally, and the other way around too. So absolutely, I don’t know how it couldn’t affect you. When you started to ask the question I flashed back and was thinking about my grandmother who had spent a lot of her life with her husband away too. My image of her when you started to talk is of her up and down the stairs, up and down the stairs doing a gazillion things, waiting on all these people. It was my father who actually pointed it out one day, “My god, she runs up and down the stairs a hundred times a day,” and almost without exaggeration; down into the*

*cellar, upstairs, out the back door, doing this and doing that. That's kind of what flashed in my head and then I started to think, "Yeah, I do all of that stuff too."*

*And that brings in your mental health and the worry, worry, worry. I know I worry way too much. You feel like you're the only one who's doing all the worrying and you worry about everybody. I worry if something were to happen to the kids, about telling him, about him not being around. Which is kind of a silly thing but you just kind of think about those kinds of things; what if something were to happen to one of them and he's not here? That's kind of a crazy, irrational fear but it's a bit of a stressor. Nobody's had any real issues. So really that fear that I have is kind of unfounded. But I started thinking what if something were to happen to the children. I don't want to have to pick up the phone and tell their father that something horrible has happened to them. I wouldn't want to have to deal with that.*

Continuing with this discussion, I asked: "Could you talk to me a little bit about how you see that connection between mental health and physical health?"

Laura replied:

*If you're stressed all the time then you're physically exhausted, and it is a lot of stress. Then it disrupts your sleep pattern. It's a vicious cycle. I think it's trying to juggle everything and trying to be super human and thinking that you have to do everything well. But what ends up happening is you really do nothing well, and that creates more stress. I'm here trying to juggle all these balls in the air and make everyone happy and no one is happy in the end.*

I inquired:

From what I hear you saying, stress seems to be common among women who are living this. How do you think that women are coping with the stress? I have thought a lot in terms of what this is like for women and how health care providers support women?

Laura shared:

*I don't think doctors care; you're in and out. You can discuss one issue when you go in and that's it. This is our reality. So you just don't go. I don't go to my doctor. That's probably where your nurse practitioners could kind of step in, where you go to them. I've gone to a naturopathic doctor, but you go in and you're paying for every minute you're in there. Every visit is over an hour and my insurance only covers 20 bucks or something. At least with them they're delving into more with you than just scratching the surface and writing a prescription. It'd be just great to have that kind of happy medium; somebody who's able to kind of follow you along a bit better and has more than just five minutes. There's not a lot of time for them (doctors) to delve into what's really going on, what's at the root of this. And really, there's nothing out there, nothing for women. I think if we started licensing nurse practitioners in this province, it would certainly take*

*the stress off of the load that the doctors have in dealing with common ailments. It would mean that the clinics wouldn't have to be staffed with an MD, or you could have one MD and several nurse practitioners. My mother, in New York, used to go to a woman centered health clinic. In it there'd be nurse practitioners, OBGYNs, it was all women centred where they were able to specialize on issues. I think that is what we need here, a women's health clinic, focused on the whole family, and family health. They'd have to be run by women so you didn't have that intimidation. I have a mammogram every year and they don't make you feel like a number when you go in there. They make you feel better because you walk in and the little waiting room is pretty and the volunteers are women and they're kind. From the receptionist right through to the technician they just kind of get it. Just thinking about a women's health clinic and doing these kinds of things would be a wonderful way to support women and just to be able to talk and share in a non-judgemental kind of way.*

Laura's suggestion for a wholistic women's health center run by women for women was excellent. On PEI, services specific to women's health are lacking. A clinic such as the one proposed by Laura could become an excellent resource for all women and specifically for those left behind. It could become a place to raise awareness, encourage support, and address the needs of women with children who are left behind while their husbands are coming and going for employment out of province.

### **Final Reflections**

As our final conversational interview came to a close, Laura and I recalled many of the stories lived, told, and re-told that had been illuminated during our time together. We re-visited what it was like for her to be left behind and how she felt that women had a "much more difficult time of it because you are on your own." We spoke in depth about transition and role identity and how this was shaped by periods of time when the family experienced reunification, and more often than not, the periods of time when she was left behind while Josh was away from the family and employed in Alberta. Josh's coming and going over the years had shaped Laura's perceptions of family and marriage. She reiterated that Josh was away for work simply due to the economic climate on PEI, and that even with four red seals in various trades; there were no



employment opportunities available for him that offered sufficient monetary compensation to sustain their family. As a result he had been working in Alberta for the past six years. By being away, Josh had been able to support his family financially. However, this economic gain had come at a familial cost. He had not been present to witness his children grow up and had missed out on many of their life accomplishments. As our time together was coming to a close, I was curious to learn more about Laura's perceptions of family; and how these notions had been shaped over the years while Josh had been participating in interprovincial labor migration. I asked her, "Do you think living this life with Josh always coming and going has changed what your ideas are around family?"

Laura immediately replied:

*For sure, that whole sense of family is kind of a bit of disappointment, to be perfectly honest. Because this is it; it just feels like everything is so task oriented and there's not a lot of time to sit back and smell the roses and enjoy things. I would love to kind of go back and capture when they (the children) were little and we were all at home, because that was when it was family. That's when you sat down and we were all together.*

As I listened to Laura share her ideas around family and how these had changed over time as Josh has come and gone for employment, I questioned how much of Laura's disappointments were grounded in the social construction of what it means to be a nuclear family living in North America. I thought about perceptions and ideas of congruence and incongruence in role construction and, in particular, that of the role functioning within a nuclear family. The norm of a nuclear family has been constructed to include father, mother, and their children living together, day after day under the same roof. Repeatedly during my time with Laura, I heard her comment that their life was not the norm; rather, chaos and being apart had become their new norm. For families who are living apart due to the labor migration of a partner, I now question if

these feelings of abnormality stem back to society's interpretation and perpetuation of what a "normal" nuclear family looks like. Any deviation in regards to the composition and form of the nuclear family may be viewed as being abnormal. As I have co-participated and explored perceptions of family with Laura in this narrative inquiry, I now question whether her views regarding family were shaped in response to societal expectations around the nuclear family. I also question how this might also be at play in the perceptions held by others in the community about women and families who were left behind due to a partner's labor migration.

As we came to the end of our time together, I was curious about the main ideas Laura wanted me to understand about her experience of being left behind and caring for children while Josh was coming and going for employment in Alberta. I wanted to ensure that I understood what it was that Laura wanted me to take away and share with others. Laura and I had shared so much together through our conversations and personal photographs. In closing our final conversational interview, Laura offered:

*People need to know that this issue is very isolating for women. You are so busy and you don't have time to do anything. And there's that kind of judgment you feel that you're getting, whether it's actually happening or it's perceived by the person; that you're better off financially so you should be able to handle all this stuff on your own. That's a real big one for me. And for women that are left behind too we need to be able to accept help when it's offered. There is probably a notion that we've imposed on ourselves is that we have to do it all. We have to have a career and we have to be super moms and we have to be the best wives and the best cooks and the best decorators. We have to have the nicest yard, we've got to have the best kids, and everything has to be absolutely perfect. It's the Martha Stewart-ization of us all. So we have to have it all and be perfect in all of it. And we can't do that. We have to stop being so damn critical of each other too. Just be kinder to each other. We have to take time to take better care of ourselves; we have to make ourselves a priority. We underestimate or under report our issues when it comes to health and we will ignore what's going on with us because we'll kind of push things off. Whether it's because you don't want to know what's going on, or you just don't have the time or you're not a priority. I'm sure I'm my own worst enemy, as most women are. We want it all, and we work so hard to have it all, and we can't have it all. We can't. There's not enough hours in the day, not enough days in the week, you know, and on and*

*on and on. We can't have it all, but we think that we have to. And if we're not perfect in everything then we're failures.*

### **A Snapshot of Life – A Blurred Photograph of a Blurred Life**

As our time together came to a close, I reflected once more on the photographs Laura had shared with me during our time together. She shared one photograph in particular that was taken by accident; her finger had slipped and had covered over the lens, resulting in a picture that was out of focus and a complete blur. By taking an initial glance of this photograph it could have easily been disregarded. There was no visible image; nothing tangible at all was in this photograph. However, rather than dismissing the photograph, Laura and I spoke about the representational meaning behind the blurred image. Laura found personal meaning in this photograph. She identified with the image and found it to be symbolic of her life; a life that she commonly viewed as being blurry and lacking focus as a result of the many role demands she experienced during periods of time when Josh was at home and also when he was away working.

### **Conclusion**

While Josh was employed out of province and provided financially for the family, Laura had been home day-in and day-out providing love, nurturance, guidance, discipline, and stability for the family. Being left behind, Laura had witnessed the evolution of her family. She had noticed over the six years, while Josh had been coming and going for employment that their children had grown up without him. And so the question continued to loom, who really did have it worse? Laura who had been left behind and raised the children day-in and day-out as a self-professed married-single mother or Josh who had been away from the family for years working in Alberta? As time continues, this question may never be answered. However, with each passing year, it became more apparent that Josh's being away had taken a toll on Laura and the

family. Being talked about or having subtle and not so subtle comments directed towards her regarding the family's finances and material possessions had contributed to Laura's feelings of isolation and lack of support.

Laura shared that the loneliness, isolation, and increased stress would be common experiences among women left behind. She identified how important it was to be able to have someone to talk with about the stress and multiple roles women were expected to perform during periods of time when a husband was away and also when the family was reunified. As Laura shared her stories of seeking out health care services to address her stress and feelings of not being well, it became apparent that her experiences with health care providers were not sufficient in meeting her health needs. Laura and I discussed how the phenomenon of women being left behind with children was not new; it has been happening for generations and today is impacting families in every community on Prince Edward Island. Although it is well known that men are leaving the province for employment elsewhere and that families are being left behind, there are currently no resources in place to support these women and their families. Laura's vision for a women's health center is excellent and would address a current gap in the PEI Department of Health and Social Services system.

It was an honor and privilege to work with Laura. Through our time together, she shared intimately about her family, her roles, and responsibilities. Evident was the tremendous love that Laura had for Josh and her children. Her life priority was her family, even though this led to increased stress and perceptions of negative health. Laura's stories of experience have helped to increase awareness about women's experiences of being left behind. Also illuminated were stories that reflected how she had been treated by others in the community as a result of Josh going away for employment. These narratives offered new insights into how women left behind,

due to a husband's temporary interprovincial labor migration, were perceived by others living in the community. Through our coming together and sharing stories of experience lived, told, and re-told, deeper understanding was gained regarding specific women's role identity, perceptions by others, and health. In the re-telling of stories, further insights were gleaned and together, new meanings were uncovered.

## **Chapter 5 - Entering into the Research Relationship with Patti**

Patti was the second participant I co-participated with in this inquiry. I was referred to Patti through Laura. From the first time we had met, Laura had spoken to me about this friend whose husband had been coming and going for employment out of province over the past 12 years. Laura had shared with Patti that she was co-participating with me in this inquiry. And Patti had expressed an interest to Laura about being in the study and sharing her experiences with me.

In my proposal for this narrative inquiry research, I had indicated that I wished to co-participate with four women who lived in rural communities throughout Prince Edward Island. Although Laura and Patti knew each other, and both lived in the Kings Region of the Island, they did not live in the same community. At this point in my recruitment process I had a clear understanding of who I would be co-participating with in the Prince and Queens regions of the province, but was unsure from which region of the province I would recruit my last participant. As Patti was expressing interest in the study and asking for more information, I passed along an information letter to Laura who shared it with Patti. I asked that Patti call me directly after reading the letter, should she still be interested in participating. Within a week, Patti called to discuss the details of the inquiry. Through this phone conversation it was determined that Patti met all of the criteria required for participation. After discussing the study in greater detail, a date, time, and location for our first conversational interview was determined.

Patti and I dialogued back and forth by phone on two additional occasions prior to our initial conversational interview. In determining the location for our interviews, Patti suggested that we conduct all of the interviews at her house. She was the only participant that I worked with in this inquiry who indicated that I come to her home for each interview. Patti indicated

that this would be the best location for her, as she worked from home and meeting here would be more convenient. Each of our conversational interviews was scheduled during the day while her children were at school.

When entering Patti's home, I was keenly aware that I was in her personal space. This was quite different compared to my experience with Laura, who had requested to come into my home for our conversations. With Laura, I was the one who made the coffee and answered questions posed to me as she looked at personal photographs and belongings in my home. These personal artifacts opened the door to conversation, resulting in an intimate sharing and deeper understanding about who we were as we initially met each other and discovered our commonalities as wives and mothers.

While I had initially experienced tension in having Laura come to my home for our conversational interviews, I was now experiencing new tensions as I explored my own feelings of how I would enter into this new research relationship with Patti. As I prepared for my first interview with Patti, I reflected on how quickly the commonalities were uncovered between Laura and me as we discussed personal artifacts in my home. I thought that perhaps this might also be a good approach to begin Patti's and my initial coming together. Recognizing narrative inquiry to be a relational methodology that evolves over time between participant and inquirer (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), I needed to reflect on how I could support and nurture relationship building as I entered into Patti's personal space. I reflected on how our relationship could be negotiated as we came together and began walking into the midst of her stories and storied life (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In driving to Patti's home, I noticed the ruralness that existed. She lived on a road surrounded by trees. Her two-story country home was located on the top of a hill surrounded by

farmland. A driveway framed with mature trees lined the property that led to her home. As I arrived at Patti's home for our interviews during late March, April, and May, I was awakened to the changes in the land that were occurring as winter gave way to spring. From her kitchen window, I could see how the vast beauty of the land was apparent.

As I walked into Patti's home, I was also entering a space and place where many of her personal and familial stories had been and continue to be constructed. As I got out of my vehicle, I was initially greeted by Patti who was in the yard taking clothes off the line. The temperature that day had been abnormally high and it was a great day for washing clothes and hanging them on the line to dry. As we engaged in initial introductions, I noticed a playhouse nestled between two large oak trees. I commented on it and learned immediately about her children and how it was once a well-loved play house that their grandfather had built them when they were small. Smiling, Patti recalled how she and the children used to spend hours together playing in the house. This initial conversation led to much sharing and illumination of life narratives as our relationship grew while coming together for conversational interviews.

Patti is a mother to three adolescent children. Like Laura, she was the primary caregiver when her husband, Jeff, was working out of province working. Patti was also busy with the day-to-day management of the household, as well as with the development of a small business. Jeff had been coming and going to Western Canada for employment for the past 12 years. Patti and I met on five occasions. Each conversational interview lasted one hour. The following chapter presents an overview of stories co-constructed during our time together. Patti's stories of experience are reflected through our voices coming together in conversation. These stories are interwoven where applicable with my own stories of experience and research reflections, as well



as aligned with current scholarly literature. As I thought deeply about these stories lived, told and re-told, new meanings and questions emerged which I explore in this chapter.

Patti was invited to share personal photographs with me, reflective of her life experiences of being left behind while Jeff came and went for employment in another province. While Patti was initially receptive to sharing photographs, this did not occur during our time together. As our research relationship developed, Patti questioned the types of photographs she should select that would be representative of her life and personal experiences. As we discussed this, Patti shared that she was too busy with her children's activities and her work. She felt that she did not have time and did not want to participate in the projective photography aspect of the inquiry. Being mindful of Patti's time constraints, I did not want her to feel additional pressure and so did not mention the photographic aspect of the study again. As our time together progressed, Patti found an article which resonated with her and that elicited additional narratives reflective of her experiences of being left behind which she wanted to discuss with me. The article included photographs and was shared during our fourth conversational interview. This article and the photographs illuminated her perceptions about employers who actively recruit married men for employment in the oil and gas industry. An overview of the article and a description of the photographs are included later in this chapter.

### **A Life of Unpredictability**

During our initial conversational interview, Patti shared with me much about her life with Jeff, their courtship, and marriage, as well as the multiple factors that contributed to making the decision for Jeff to work in the oil and gas industry 12 years ago. The two of them met during their first year of college. At the time of our interviews, they had been married almost 25 years. This anniversary was fast approaching and, as such, Patti was reflecting a lot on her life with Jeff

and their marriage. As she thought about her marriage over the past 25 years, she was struck by the realization that Jeff has been coming and going for employment over half of their married lives. She spoke about her life with Jeff and the factors that contributed to him deciding 12 years ago, that he would leave the family for work in the industrial sector. Patti explained:

*We were college sweethearts. I'm from out of province and when we got married we moved here. And then we took over his family's farm and got into financial difficulty. We took over his family's potato farm and also grew other vegetables. Then we switched for some stupid reason into hogs. At the time there were 800 hog farmers. Then the whole industry collapsed, it was the lowest price in 40 years and we had just reached our peak at that time so we had maximum debt and maximum bills. That was our downfall for sure, when the prices collapsed, that was the straw that broke the camel's back. We teetered on the edge of bankruptcy, sold off all of our land and equipment. We had no income because of the industry and you don't see a lot of help wanted ads for farmers. The farming occupations that are available are usually quite low paying unless you are self-employed. That's how we ended up in this situation. So my husband took a course to work on the drilling rigs and immediately got work out west on the rigs. We got out of farming in 2001 and he has been going out west ever since.*

I asked: "Since Jeff started working away in 2001, what has this been like? Has he been away for work year round or seasonally?"

*Before he left in 2001, we farmed full-time together and were together all the time. So that was a big transition when he left because he was my best friend. He still is. It's tough now. I remember when this first started, I was terrified. I don't have any family here except his. We had his sister and his mom and dad; his dad has since passed away. That's it and we're not close. So, it was lonely. In terms of his work he's definitely seasonal. When there's work here, he'll stay here. And when there isn't work here, he goes out west. It's mostly been kind of in the fall until early spring. And then he's been gone in the summer too working in the off shore drilling rigs. If there's work on the ship he'll take work on the ship, if there's not, he goes to the land rigs. On a ship, there is no option of staying on during your scheduled time off so then they would fly him home. But he could never get regular work doing that. There's never been a real pattern to the work; the oil industry seems to be terrible at how they treat their employees in terms of work continuity. He's gone out west before, and they say there are all kinds of work and then after a couple of weeks there's nothing.*

*He doesn't want to be away from home. It's always just been something to bring in money. I think it is easier now that some guys have jobs where a person is on a regular rotation; away for x number of weeks and then home for x number of weeks. I*

*think that is much easier on a family versus the way that we've always done it; when desperation truly kicks in he goes out west and stays until he can't stand it anymore and then comes home for a while. He's not on a rotation. He works every day of the week, 12 hour days, and 7 days a week. The longest he ever did it was 5 months straight. He's tough as nails, but it's just crazy to do it that way.*

Continuing I inquired:

From what you are saying, because your husband's work is so unpredictable, you often do not know when he's going to walk in the door and come home. What is it like for you those times when he's gone and the times when he's at home?

Patti replied:

*Well, there's always a big adjustment period and always a transition period. He's starved for affection and I'm not ready for that right away, so then he thinks that I'm rejecting him, and in some ways I am. But I need some time to kind of get back to feeling emotionally attached to him. Then when he tells me he's going again, I start withdrawing emotionally a few days beforehand to try and prepare myself, otherwise it's just too emotional when he leaves. So it's hard transitioning. It's almost easier when he's gone, as sad as that is, I try not to think about him when he's gone. Honestly, that's the only way I cope. You just go on with your life and that's it. To be perfectly frank I love him, he's been the love of my life, but I'm thinking about getting a divorce. In the past couple of months I've started thinking that. It's just because I don't see any end in sight. And because I'm quite upset at him that he kind of hasn't made any plans. He keeps saying, "We're just going to do this for now."*

As we continued our conversation I asked, "When this all began were you thinking that it would just be for a few months?" Patti responded, "*For sure, till he came up with plan C kind of thing you know. Plan A didn't work. A sucked, B really sucks, and C is yet to be discovered. All these years later C hasn't come about.*" I was interested in learning where Jeff was working at the moment and asked about this. With a sigh, Patti replied,

*I don't know. He doesn't have cell contact where he is and that is something that is very trying. I don't actually know where he is. He said he thought it was about 4 hours outside of Edmonton, in what direction I don't know and he's now been gone since the end of January.*

I inquired, "Do you know how long he'll be away or when he will be home again?"

Patti's eyes looked down as she quietly responded, "*No. I'm always the last to know.*"

In the re-telling of this story, Patti articulated how difficult it was not to know where her husband was working and how long he would be gone. As she shared this insight with me, her sadness and frustrations were palpable. Listening to Patti, I thought of how this ambiguity must be challenging for a relationship over time. I could only imagine the additional strain that exists for wives such as a Patti who are left behind and living with constant uncertainty about where their husbands were working, how long they had employment, and when they would be able to return to their families again. I also thought about their lack of communication. Without access to cellular telephone service and internet, Patti and the children had no way of communicating with Jeff on a regular basis. Patti explained:

*Most places right now have improved technology with cell phone reception or internet. When he first started working away that wasn't the case. Most times I wouldn't know where he was. I might get a staticy phone call once or twice a week and that would be it. That's all it was. Now, I always have a contact number and if there is a true emergency, the company can satellite phone him and can always get a message to him.*

I was interested in learning more about how Patti and Jeff communicated when something was happening at home or with the children and asked, "In day-to-day activities, if you've got an issue with the children or something is happening at home, how do you communicate this with Jeff?" Patti replied,

*Normally we would have talked about it, but now I don't consult with him at all. You see, parenting issues usually need to be dealt with fairly quickly and so talking with him doesn't really work. I always need to think about what shift he is working, where is he at, is he sleeping, is he travelling, is there cell phone contact; can I get a hold of him? It's all of these logistics too.*

Patti felt that communication was important to family growth, development, and functioning. She believed that when Jeff was away for employment, the whole family fell apart and was in chaos. She identified that Jeff was her best friend and when he was at home and they were together, they communicated well and wanted to be together all of the time. However,

when he was gone Patti felt lonely and had many worries. She worried about Jeff's safety and that she would receive a call one day from his employer telling her that he had been seriously injured or was dead. She also worried that she would have to call Jeff and tell him over the phone that something terrible had happened to a family member while he was away working. This worry actually became a lived reality for Patti a few years ago when Jeff's father unexpectedly died while he was working off shore with a drilling company. Due to the location of his employment, Patti had difficulties contacting him and letting him know that his father had passed away. She shared with me how traumatic it was for her to have to call and share this news with Jeff:

*When Jeff's dad died he was away working. I had to call him in the middle of the night and get him home. That was awful. His dad died in his sleep. He was a very healthy man and only 64. It took Jeff two days to get home and it was just an awful experience; it was all very sad and traumatic.*

For Patti, having lived the experience of telling Jeff that his father had died and waiting two days for him to return home had affected her deeply. She reflected on this experience as she thought about her son who had been admitted to hospital for minor surgery. While this was a routine surgery, it was still challenging for Patti to be the lone parent on PEI while her son was in the hospital. This weighed heavily on her mind as she shared, *"Even if you needed your husband, you know it would take him a day to get here; like my son, if something happened, god forbid, during his operation. Right now I couldn't even reach him if I needed to talk to him."*

### **Perceptions of Marriage – Dreams versus Realities**

As Patti reflected on her life with Jeff, it became apparent that there existed a disconnection between her vision and dreams of marriage and family and her lived reality. Patti questioned much about what she wanted as a wife and mother and disclosed to me, during our

initial interview, that for the first time in her life she was contemplating divorce. As she reflected on the past 25 years of marriage, Patti realized that during half of her married life she had been alone caring for their children and home while Jeff was employed out of province. Patti felt that she was coming to a crossroad in her life. She needed to make some life decisions and questioned whether she could continue trying to foster a relationship with Jeff if, for the unforeseeable future, she would always be left behind. As I listened to Patti speak about her marriage and the challenges experienced while Jeff had been coming and going for employment, I questioned if they had ever discussed moving to Alberta as a family. Reflecting on this, Patti recalled a story that spoke to a time in her family's life when they were preparing a permanent move there. She began:

*We've got three children who are in high school now. When they were all in elementary school I decided, that this is crazy; we are living our lives apart! We decided that we would sell our house and move out west and so we did. We sold the house. I had everything packed up in boxes and had sold all our major appliances. Then Jeff came home and said, "I don't want to move. I can't bring us out there to live, without any family around and with the amount of drugs that are out there. I don't want to bring the children up in that environment." So we ended up buying the house back. You see we actually built this house. We went to the woods and cut down the wood for this house and we built it. We started the day after our son was born.*

Inviting further discussion, I asked: "How long had Jeff been working away before you came to the decision to move?"

Patti replied:

*That was probably four or five years after he had started doing it. You see he grew up in this community, so this really is his home. I could have moved and would have been very happy out west. I thought that it would be good for us to make a whole new life together out there but he didn't want to leave his roots here. He has always told me about the excessive amount of drugs available out there, but I'm like, "They're everywhere." He just felt that without the roots of his family around, our children might be more prone to getting into the wrong crowd or getting into drugs and that kind of thing. I couldn't*

*really fault him. He did have the best interests of the family at heart. How can you argue with that? But I was mad at him.*

I commented, “There are a lot of memories that go into a house.” Thoughtfully, Patti shares, “*Yeah, but in the end it’s just a house. It’s the home, the family that’s important, not the house specifically.*” Listening to her response, I inquired, “How did you feel about not making a move after all?” Patti replied, “*Oh I was mad as hell. That decision set us back even more financially. We had to pay the real estate agent commission; we had to replace appliances.*”

In listening to Patti share this story, I could visualize what this experience must have been like. I could see the ‘for sale’ sign on the front lawn, as well as boxes piled high awaiting movers to come and take the family possessions to their new home in Alberta. The images of this resonated with me, as only a few years ago, my husband had decided that he wanted to move from Calgary and begin a new life on PEI. I was both reluctant and highly resistant to this decision. As I packed our family possessions from our Calgary home into boxes, I repeatedly hoped that he would change his mind and that we would not have to move back to PEI. While I had grown up and attended university there, it was now a place to vacation; a place where my daughter and I visited with family for one month a year in the summer. I could not imagine leaving the life and career I had established in Calgary for a life of uncertainties on PEI. Years ago it had been considered home to me but now PEI was becoming a place that I was moving to where I had no house, no job and with the exception of my family no people that I knew very well.

As Patti and I explored this time of her life together, it became apparent that her and Jeff’s perceptions regarding home were in contradiction. We spoke about her perceptions regarding house, home, and family. Patti felt that home and family involved having everyone

together, living together, and working towards the same goals as a family unit. While this was her belief, she also acknowledged that this was not her current reality. She shared, “*You can never grow as a family if one of your core members is never present.*” Although she and Jeff built their home together, she did not feel that it was the physical building that made a home. For Patti, it is family cohesion, coming together and staying together that makes a home. I recalled how surprised I was at this insight and thought that perhaps Patti would have felt more attachment to the house, considering that she and Jeff had built it together shortly after the birth of their first child. I reflected on this and wondered how people construct meaning to the concepts of house and home. How are these shaped over time as lives are lived?

Recalling the three dimensional narrative inquiry of interaction (personal and social), continuity (past, present, and future), and situation (place) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I wondered if Jeff’s coming and going over the past 12 years had changed Patti’s perceptions of home. Patti now felt that their house was just a building, it was not a home; it was a place that she could leave at any time. I questioned if she felt this way years ago when she and Jeff were first married. What were her ideas about home as she and Jeff worked together cutting down trees which would become lumber for their home? wondered if the many years Jeff had been away had shaped her current perceptions regarding home.

### **Challenges to Maintaining Marital Relationships**

I was curious about how Patti and Jeff’s relationship had been prior to when he began coming and going for employment and asked, “Can you back track a bit with me to when you and your husband met at college? Before 2001 were there times when you were apart?” Patti considered this for a moment and replied:



*Before 2001, we had never been apart. Times are so different now with husbands going away for work. My grandparents were married for 60 some years and they had never spent a night apart in all of their married life. And now, it's really coming up to half of our time being married that we've been apart. So that's certainly becoming a very prevalent issue, I'm considering some long term consequences and I am feeling quite emotional about it right now. We have our 25th anniversary coming up and I think in any kind of big milestone in your life, you pause and reflect a little bit. That's where I'm at right now.*

I commented: "Jeff is the man you've always known, you literally grew up with him, this must be quite difficult for you."

She responded:

*Yes, it is. When we're together its good and when we're not, it's not. My belief is that with a little more effort and planning or taking charge on his part he could be here. This is a cop out; this is always the backup plan. It's always, "If this doesn't work, I'm going to have to go away for work" but since it started, it's been constant. Last year he was home and he had a consulting contract. This was something he could do from a home office. I'm angry at him that he didn't try hard enough to find more work, so that he could have stayed home with us. You know, we will be married 25 years this year and last year was the first full year that he didn't go out west, but now he's back out again this year.*

In response to this, I offered: "As you think about your marriage and the almost 25 years that you've been married, I'm sensing that right now there is probably a lot of soul searching and reflecting that you are doing."

Patti revealed:

*He doesn't realize that I'm considering such drastic measures as divorce; he doesn't want to think about that even as a possibility. Even when we have argued in the past we would never go to the extreme of saying, "This is it; we are going to get a divorce." We've always stopped short of that but now this is something that I'm definitely considering. When we're together we get along great, we have a great relationship, we do love each other, and we've always been faithful to each other. But then he goes again and it's such a change. It's the change that is the hardest thing to adapt to. I had always envisioned that when we were married we wouldn't be apart. We as a couple are leading an inadequate life. This is not what we had imagined for ourselves and our family.*

"Would you say it's this life of him always coming and going for work that is causing you to feel this way?" I inquired

*Absolutely, this is the only trigger. Jeff doesn't go until we're backed up financially and then he goes; we get caught up on bills, he comes home and then the whole cycle starts all over again. Because he doesn't want to be away, he only goes so that we can get things paid off and caught up but then he comes home and the income stops again. We're in this vicious cycle. I'm sure other people do it and are able to get ahead but we've never seemed to be able to manage to do that. I have a friend whose husband is an alcoholic, and she tells me that it's just always wondering if he's going to start drinking again. This is kind of the same feeling I have all the time. I have a knot in the pit of my stomach all the time worrying about whether this can this last, is he going to be here, when is he going to go again? That's the way I feel.*

Since Jeff began working out of province 12 years ago, there has only been a year that he has stayed at home continuously with the family. This occurred when Jeff had received two contracts which enabled him to work from home. I was interested in learning more about this and asked Patti, "What was it like for you the year when Jeff was at home and with the family full time?" She shared, *"I remember thinking how great it was, of course, and how much I really liked him."* I continued, "And now that Jeff has left again, does there feel like there is an end point coming to his going away for work?" Patti paused for a few moments and then shared:

*No, and that's the crux of the whole issue. I never envisioned married life like this. I envisioned that we'd be together. Since he has left again, this time, it has been bad because this past year made me realize just how much I do love him and how well we do get along when we are together. It's almost bizarre really to be thinking about such severe steps as divorce. I just keep thinking that to continue on, living like this, is going to be irreparable to our marriage. He doesn't see that this is doing more harm than good for us. Did you know that 60-70% of the men that Jeff works with are divorced? It'd be easy to have an affair for both parties; being away, feeling disconnected, not having anything in common anymore. Then it also becomes a fast-paced lifestyle; often there are drugs and alcohol involved, and that's a terrible thing. Men spend every cent on toys and not developing a family life because they don't get a chance to meet somebody or can commit to a relationship because of their work schedule. Life becomes very compartmentalized.*

*I think there are a lot of issues that come up that a couple have to deal with that you wouldn't normally consider in situations where the husband doesn't go away for work. I think there's probably a reason why so many of the men working out west are divorced. I know that the women left behind, they often slide into affairs and the men do too. You're just so lonely. The expression I heard one time in a song - you harden your heart. I don't want to be like that but it kind of feels like you need to harden your heart in order to protect yourself so that you're tough enough to get through this.*

As Patti discussed the challenges that existed for couples when a husband participates in interprovincial labor migration, I was reminded of the past conversations that I have had with family physicians and nurse practitioners on PEI regarding the sexual health of men returning to their wives after a work term in the oil and gas industry in Northern Alberta. Specifically, these practitioners spoke about married men who are sexually active with other people while working away. These men often make appointments with their family physician or nurse practitioner to be tested for sexually transmitted infections such as syphilis or gonorrhea, before going home to their wives. Recalling these conversations and listening to Patti share how easy it would be to have extra marital affairs, I could not help but question how devastating it would be for a woman who eagerly waits for her husband to return home following a work term, only to discover after he has left, that he has exposed her to a sexually transmitted infection. Not only would her physical health be impacted through this exposure, but I questioned the toll that this would take on her mental and emotional health. While her husband is away again working, she would be left alone caring for children, and dealing with the realization that her husband has been unfaithful to her while away on a work term. While this has not happened to Patti, she frequently worried about infidelity and the high prevalence of divorce that appeared common among men who came and went for work in the oil and gas industry.

Reflecting on this I am reminded of the work by Goldberg, Shoveller, Ostry, and Koehoorn (2008), who write about the increased prevalence of sexually transmitted infections among oil and gas workers in Northern Alberta and British Columbia. Re-reading this work, many of the points raised by these authors were also ones that had been identified by the physicians and nurse practitioners that I had spoken with on PEI. Due to sporadic work schedules, many men who may be exposed to a sexually transmitted infection do not access

health care services while away for work. The hours that clinics are open do not correspond with the hours that the men are off work. As a result, men exposed to a sexually transmitted infection do not seek care and treatment while away. Rather they wait until they return to their home communities following the end of a work term or do not seek treatment at all and infect future sexual partners.

### **The Impact of Coming and Going on Families Left Behind**

During our conversational interviews, it became apparent that Jeff's coming and going over the past 12 years had been difficult for Patti. Intertwined within Patti's stories regarding marriage were also those that spoke to how Jeff's coming and going over the years had impacted their family and her dreams for it. As we explored this topic together, Patti felt that the phenomenon of men leaving their families behind for employment outside of the province was destroying families. Patti shared many stories about the evolution of her family from the beginning when she and Jeff made the decision to have children to the present day. Patti recalled:

*It was never my life long vision to be a wife and mother. I had never considered marriage until I met Jeff. It had never been my burning desire to be a wife and a mom. When we were married we didn't have children for 8 years; we were just too busy and never really thought of it. Then I turned 28 and said, "If we're going to have children I think we should get cracking." So we did.*

Patti and Jeff had three children in three years. She recalled how busy this time was in her life as they tried to maintain a struggling family farm, build their house, and transition to their new roles as parents. Jeff began leaving the family for employment outside of the province when the children were preschoolers. As we discussed family life over the years while Jeff had been away, Patti repeatedly shared that their children had always been their priority; reiterating that the reason they stayed behind while Jeff went away for work was to provide a stable home

for the children. After deciding that they would not sell the home, their goal as a couple was for the children to grow up in the house they had built for them in rural Prince Edward Island. As we discussed this goal in greater depth, Patti verbalized her disappointment and feelings of resentment that had built up over the years that Jeff has been away. Speaking about what Jeff has missed out on with the family, Patti revealed:

*He doesn't want to be away but we just don't seem to be able to get out of this situation. I probably blame him, and I know that I feel resentful towards him. He's missed Christmas, birthdays, and all kinds of significant things. When he's around he wants to be involved in everything. I've been here with the children having surgeries, broken bones, hurricanes by myself. When my husband first left, we were still farming a little bit. We had a herd of 40 goats. And so I was also looking after them too while he was gone, which was a bit of a nightmare because they were giving birth in the middle of the winter. It was rough with the children too. They were all really little then. We had the goats for two years and that was when he first left. We got out of it because there wasn't any money in that either.*

Confirming, I offered: "While Jeff was away working and you were at home managing three children and 40 goats."

Patti replied:

*Yes. And when he first went away, I also had a job outside the house. Now, the children are grown but they all have activities. They all play hockey which is a full time job running in the evenings and weekends. And there's more; they also have horses and ride. They work two evenings a week and try and ride their horses at least five days a week. My son also works part time at a rink and at a farm. So their extracurricular activities are fairly intensive. I have found that when the children are busy it's better. When we are constantly on the run you don't think about Jeff being away as much, you're just focused on the day-to-day. We have a big schedule on the fridge, and that is our pulse of the house. If it's not on the schedule, they don't get to participate in their activities. I'm always looking at the schedule. I like to be organized. I have no choice. The children have to be responsible and put their activities down on the schedule; where we need to be and when. I always said my only goal in hockey was to have the right kid at the right rink at the right time. Some times that didn't happen but overall it's been a pretty good average.*

Upon hearing these experiences, I was intellectually struck by the magnitude of roles and responsibilities Patti has carried since the initial time Jeff left the home for employment in

another province. I was curious to learn more about role perceptions and co-parenting responsibilities during periods of time when Jeff was away working and also when he returned home following a work term. I continued exploring this topic and asked Patti,

Do you think Jeff feels that, 'If I can provide financially for the family then I'm a good husband and good father. As long as I can financially take care of my wife and kids and the home then that means I'm doing my job as a man'?

Affirming this, she replied,

*That's him to a T and I do everything else. I've wanted him for some time to take more of a leadership role in our family. I feel like I'm the backbone of this family and he just abdicates his role when he leaves.*

Patti paused momentarily before elaborating:

*I guess I expected that my husband would provide for us financially, and I thought that I didn't necessarily need to earn an income and that he was going to look after us. It would have been very difficult to find a traditional job while he was away working because of the children's needs, their schedules. Unless you had some type of amazingly flexible job, I don't see how the children could have had the adolescence that they have had if I was working a traditional nine to five job without any other family support to be able to run them where they needed to be and also be here for them when they got home from school each day.*

*It sucks for Jeff too. I know that he's out there thinking about us and hoping we're doing ok and he sends home every cent that he makes. He's a good man, it's just our situation. I probably need to accept some of the responsibility too, for the financial situation that we're in because I haven't been contributing financially to our household but how could I with all of the needs of the kids?*

Through re-telling these family stories of experience, new insights were illuminated.

Patti questioned the impact Jeff's coming and going was having on their children. She shared with me how she felt her children's perceptions of family had been shaped by living their lives with a father who was absent much of their childhood and adolescence. Patti explained:

*When Jeff's around he wants to be involved in everything with the children. For the kids they don't understand why he can't be here like most of their other friends' fathers. Their dads are around. It sucks for them and most of their life they've been in this pattern. They don't understand why we don't have any money if he's out there working and why we can't do this, why we can't do that, why he can't be home.*

Continuing our conversational interviews, Patti identified that she has noticed a gender difference in how she and her children were processing their experiences of growing up with a predominantly absent father. She revealed:

*My girls are more understanding because they're very close and they have each other. My son has had some anger issues lately. I know that's partly because of his dad being away but then he starts arguing with me. I feel sympathy towards him, and I understand what the issue is, but at the same time he can't have a bad attitude towards me. That's just disrespectful. My son will say to me, "Maybe I should just go out west to work too." And I'm like, "Don't say that, don't say it." But then I think about how we have exposed our children to this lifestyle. I don't want them thinking that this is OK for their own marriages and families in the future. When you grow up you learn most of your values through osmosis. I think now about role playing in a marriage and a family with children, what they see is what they will carry forward. I worry about what we have role modeled for them.*

As our conversational perceptions of family were concluding, I asked Patti; "How do you think the coming and going of a loved one impacts the family?" She paused and reflected on this question before answering,

*I don't think it's a good thing. I think you feel the weight of the burden of looking after the family without any help. I've always said it's easier for them to leave and go away for work than to be the one who stays behind, the woman with the family and the responsibilities of everything. I know they're working hard but we work hard too.*

In response to this, I inquired, "Why do you think it is harder to be left behind?" Patti explained:

*I don't feel like we're as much as a family now and I'm not happy where things are at. In regards to this whole issue, I think it's probably a lot tougher on the strength of the family or the cohesiveness of the family than what people would expect. I said to Jeff last year, "I don't want to do this anymore. I've had it. I'm tired. I'm really tired of it; this was supposed to be a short term measure. This is just weird. It feels weird, it feels unnatural." A stable family life is what Jeff and I were both fortunate to grow up in; with a mom and a dad and a house where we never moved and that kind of thing. Without ever giving it any conscious thought I guess, that's what I wanted for our children and for our family too. Being able to do things together as a family, spending time together and everybody encouraging the children to do their best and try to make them into good people. That's it, that's all I wanted for our family.*

As I listened to Patti share her perceptions regarding family and her beliefs about what she had envisioned for her family, I felt saddened. Patti expressed deep concerns that Jeff's coming and going for employment for the past 12 years had been detrimental to their family's growth and development. She was worried about not only the impact that this was having on the children now, but also how this experience could possibly impact them in the future as they transitioned from adolescents into adults. It became apparent to both of us that what Patti had wished for her family when her children were born was not the reality of how her family life had evolved over time.

### **Perceptions from Others in the Community**

On multiple occasions Patti and I discussed her perceptions regarding how others in the community viewed her and her family as a result of Jeff's coming and going for employment in another province. As we explored these experiences together, Patti began our conversation by offering her ideas regarding what it meant to her to be part of a community. While she had lived in the same home in rural Prince Edward Island for many years, Patti acknowledged that she did not feel a sense of community or connection there. She spoke about this in the context of growing up in another province and shared,

*I don't know if it is nostalgia or even accurate but my home community, where I grew up in, was a tighter knit community. I think that if I was still living there, it would be different than it is living here.*

Affirming, I replied, "I as well have been thinking a lot about community and what it means to feel a community connection; it seems to be missing more so these days than in the past." Patti responded:

*I think you're right; everyone now has become more remote from one another. It's like everyone connects online but nobody connects face-to-face. We're connecting virtually with people but does it really mean anything? I think the more remote you are, the closer*



*knit the community, just because you've got to get along and there's not a lot of people to pick and choose from. But I've never felt a sense of community living here, never. My husband of course, this is his community, so he feels like this is home. Where I grew up we had a community hall, we had the school. It wasn't a town, it was a pinpoint on the map, but all the activities were centered at locations that the community would come and gather at; where you would see your friends and your neighbors at. Here there's no community hall or anything; the church that we had here, the one that we used to belong to, has been bulldozed down. There's no binding structure here anymore.*

As Patti and I continued speaking about community and community support, it became evident that her social network was lacking. Patti had few female friends. The majority of her friends were men who were also friends of Jeff. Her other friendship circle was primarily couples. Living in a rural community, Patti worried about how she would be perceived by others, should she engage in activities with male friends while Jeff was working away. Patti explained:

*I have a couple of close female friends but they are busy with their own life too. I am really close with some of Jeff's guy friends and I have even hummed and hawed as to whether to invite them over for a coffee when he goes away. When Jeff is home we do a lot of things with them and are together a lot but when he leaves I am really lonely. I have often thought how nice it would be to get together and have them over for a coffee and talk but I don't because I think, what would people think, what would he think, me inviting him over and the kids are at school and Jeff is away working and here she is alone and inviting me over for a coffee. So I don't, I stay here and I put my head down, and work, work, work and consume myself with what the kids have going on so that I can cope and just try and keep going. Even when I do go out I'm always minding what I am wearing, I watch whether I put make-up on or not because I don't want people to think that I am on the prowl. In terms of couple friends, it's been really hard to maintain any friendship with couples because he's away so much of the time we can't make plans to do anything because you never know if he's home. And then if I'm home by myself I don't accept invitations anywhere because I feel like I'm a third wheel. So my social wellbeing is very much lacking and that's been consistent from the beginning.*

Through intimate sharing and exploration regarding community supports available, Patti revealed that she thought women who were living with a partner who came and went for employment deliberately isolate themselves from others as a coping mechanism. She would not want to be perceived by others in the community as someone who was out and searching to have

an extramarital affair. She found it to be self-protecting to isolate herself from others but this, in turn, had contributed to her feelings of loneliness.

Similar to what I had heard in the conversations with Laura, Patti had felt that she had been judged negatively by others in the community because Jeff was employed out of province. Patti identified that she had feelings of shame and embarrassment. These had been perpetuated over the years, as people in the community had realized that the reason Jeff left the family behind for employment was due to the amount of personal debt her family was carrying. They could not afford to purchase much in terms of material possessions. They had not purchased anything in the 12 years that Jeff had been away that could be perceived by others in the community as frivolous or as showing off the family's improved financial situation. Patti expressed embarrassment and shame over this and felt that everyone in the community knew that it was only because of their precarious financial situation that Jeff had to leave her and the children behind for work. She also felt that because they did not have anything materialistic to show for Jeff being away, as a family they were not talked about as much by members of the community; in comparison to other wives whose husbands left the province for work and had chosen to purchase new material possessions for their families. Patti elaborated:

*I think that there are some families who want more of a lifestyle than what a wage here could give them, but in our case, anything extra that we have goes towards the children. They have activities that are not cheap. We don't live extravagantly. We have this house. We've got older vehicles. We've been on one family vacation the whole time we've been married, and we don't have any other extravagances or expenses. We don't take trips. We don't buy expensive cars, and we don't have expensive hobbies. So it's not that he's going to feed that type of expense. I think people understand that he's going just for work. People will say, "You've got to do what you've got to do." I think if we had a more extravagant life and if I wasn't driving an old rickety vehicle, people would be talking about us more.*

She continued:

*All of this makes me feel stupid, just absolutely stupid that we can't keep things together enough so he can stay here, and we can make a go of it financially. We seem to be missing some genetic code or something. Some snippet of DNA that's gone sideways. I hate it when people say, "Oh Jeff's away again, when's he coming home?" Then I have to say, "I don't know." They then ask, "Where is he?" And I have to say again, "I don't know." Then I just pull back. I avoid social situations. It's awkward. It's embarrassing and it just plain makes me feel dumb. Living this life you become one person instead of a couple, and I don't want to be pitied.*

As Patti opened up to me regarding her feelings of embarrassment and stupidity, she also expressed her feelings of inadequacy as a wife, mother, and woman. She believed that if she could have worked harder outside the home and contributed more financially for the family, Jeff would not have had to leave them behind for work outside of the province. Patti wished that others in the community were aware of how Jeff's going away for work made her feel and would consider this before engaging in dialogue with her about Jeff and his work out of province. Patti wished that people in the community knew families were not doing it because they wanted to. Rather, many families are doing this out of necessity; they are at a tipping point and husbands need to leave in order to provide financially for their families. Patti believed that no family would choose this type of life, whereby one partner goes away all the time and leaves the other behind to raise their children, if it wasn't out of necessity. Patti articulately shared:

*Nobody would choose this. Nobody would choose to be away from their families; to miss out on their children growing up, being with their wife, being part of the regular day-to-day routines of being part of a family. People would not choose this life unless it was out of necessity. We have tried it here. We can't make a go of it, and things have not worked for us. Jeff has to go just so we can get caught up on the bills not even to get ahead. This is probably the life of most families who are living this life on PEI. It's not like you choose to go because you want to make all this money and get wealthy. The reality is that you need to go and get yourself out of the situation that you have gotten into or else you are going to lose the house, the kids are going to lose their home, the lights are going to get turned off. It's those kinds of things."*

### **Considering the Economy of Rural PEI**

The timing of our conversational interviews occurred three months after Jeff had left once again for work in Alberta. Prior to leaving, Jeff had been awarded a contract for business development and was able to work from home for a year. This was a time for family reunification, and also one in which they were able to meet the financial needs of the family. Having Jeff home during this year reaffirmed how important family cohesion was to Patti and what their family had been missing for the previous 12 years. Patti reiterated how much she loved and appreciated having Jeff at home last year.

Unfortunately, this contract was not renewed and Jeff was unable to find employment on PEI that could provide enough financially for his family. As a result, he left again for Alberta in January. We discussed how this decision was made. I asked, “When did Jeff come to the decision that he was going to go away again for work? When did this start being discussed?” Patti replied, “*Oh that was last fall. There was a definitive end date to the contract and he said, ‘Well that’s it. I’m going to have to go back out west’.*” I asked, “Had Jeff been looking for work on PEI while he was here?” Patti responded, “*Oh yes, in construction but the pay for that is bad; \$15 an hour. We can’t survive on \$15 an hour.*”

I learned from Patti a great deal about the economy of PEI and the challenges facing small businesses. Her firsthand knowledge and experience as a small business owner enhanced my understanding of government policies regarding economic development. As we discussed these in depth, Patti’s frustration with government policies specific to business development was palpable. She felt that many of these policies created barriers for local residents who wished to pursue small business opportunities. She also felt that these policies are also stifling economic growth in the province. Patti offered many suggestions specific to how government could

support local business development. She stated that if these policies were strengthened and aligned to what was happening in the rest of the Maritime region, that the economy of the island would improve and fewer men would have to leave their families. Patti explained:

*I started my own business about 4 years ago, that I run from home. I really like it but I'm not making enough money. The goal is for the business to finally start making enough money that my husband can be at home and both of us can be working at it. Prince Edward Island is lagging behind in terms of the other two Maritime Provinces in economic development for sure. It is business that drives the economy; business development, business growth and capital projects. The problem here is all of the politics involved. The government here doesn't seem to have any plan for economic development; they jump from hot sector to hot sector and sometimes it pans out and sometimes it doesn't. I think the government has been focusing on trying to bring companies to PEI when it should be focusing more on organic growth from within. Islanders are very loyal and if they got a chance to start and grow a business here, they would. The government does not seem to be supporting the growth of Island-based companies. I know of a couple of companies that are expanding and can't get government support. They are being lured by New Brunswick and Nova Scotia and they're going to move and take their jobs there.*

Listening to Patti talk about business development on Prince Edward Island, I commented, "I don't know a lot about business development but it seems to me, that if we could grow our own business here, and create successful businesses, then we would be creating success for the entire province." Patti replied:

*Yes, and then it would become a hot bed that would encourage others to want to develop businesses here. New Brunswick and Nova Scotia both have yearly innovation contests, sponsored by the government. There are a lot of accolades and there's a lot of attention to research and innovation and there's prizes like money and mentoring. There's nothing like that here. The government has missed such an opportunity for agriculture. With a strong government policy, PEI could have marketed itself as an organic province. With financial support they could have had all farmers on board. They won't spend the money on agriculture that they do on tourism, but you know the hog industry would still be a stable industry if it had been marketed as an organic product. The agriculture community has really gone downhill and that was because of government policy as well. We couldn't compete with Iowa and out west for potatoes. This is all short sightedness because this type of initiative would have helped with the tourism industry; eco-tourism could have been a drawing card for us.*

As Patti shared these suggestions, it reaffirmed to me that the phenomenon of men leaving their families behind for employment in another province was multi-faceted. While government entices call centers and fish processors from other provinces and countries to relocate their companies to rural PEI through tax incentives, these jobs pay little more than minimum wage. Such jobs are not being applied for by local residents who recognize that these wages cannot provide sustainable incomes for families. These businesses then look to temporary foreign workers to supply them with the labor required. Often these businesses end up failing or relocating after receiving millions in benefits as promised by the provincial government. While these initiatives look like they are promoting job creation and economic development, they are actually doing nothing to curb the current trends of labor migration away from Prince Edward Island. As we spoke about these challenges related to economic development and employment sustainability, Patti revealed:

*We have the lowest per capita income of any province in Canada; the highest unemployment rate and most density per capita, than any other province. I guess it's just because nobody here really wants to leave, so if employers can find enough people to work at the low wages they offer, then I think they will just keep paying them that. But as there becomes a shortage of workers on PEI, employers will have to pay a higher wage to recruit people. That's what happens in Alberta. The conditions there are such that they require more people than what they can find locally and so they have to pay premium wages to get people to leave their own location and go to work there. If you look at the unemployment rate between PEI and Alberta, Alberta is half of what it is here. I think it's something like a 4% unemployment rate there and I believe it's 11% here. The high unemployment here is because so much of our economy is seasonally based on agriculture, and tourism, another seasonal industry.*

*This farm up the road has men from Mexico working there. Even some women around here are leaving; nurses in particular. They're leaving their husbands and kids behind for work. A mom from one of my children's hockey teams a couple of years ago said that the wages here were 25 or 30 percent lower than what she was making in Ontario. She got this job flying up north and loved it. She said it was like being on a vacation when she went away for work. And that's what I think it's like for the men who go away for work too.*

Hearing Patti speak about unemployment rates and low rates of pay, I offered my own perceptions regarding the cost of living on PEI and wages paid to employees in various industries. Often PEI is purported by politicians and employers to have a low cost of living and this justifies employers paying lower wages to their employees. Rather, the cost of living is quite high with PEI having the highest provincial sales tax in the country at 10% and highest personal income tax in the Atlantic Region. In April 2013, the province adopted a 14% Harmonized Sales Tax on all goods and services with the exception of children's clothing and footwear, textbooks, and home heating oil. This tax rate has resulted in the province having the second highest sales tax in the country (Canada Revenue Agency, 30 December, 2011; Canada Revenue Agency, 18 December, 2012; Province of Prince Edward Island, Department of Finance, Energy and Municipal Affairs, 2012).

As we discussed the cost of living on PEI further, I stated,

I think there is also a false assumption that the cost of living is so much cheaper on PEI and that's why we get paid lower wages, but the reality is, it's not. It doesn't matter if you live in rural PEI or in the city, the prices of property, groceries, fuel; everything is so expensive here, especially when the wages are not high.

Patti added, *"That's absolutely right. Even if Jeff worked the same number of hours here on PEI, the wage that he earns out there is double at least, if not triple what he would get paid for the same work here."* Continuing along this vein of conversation I commented,

Many times I have looked at the classifieds in community newspapers and there is at least one full page of help wanted ads for positions in Alberta. In contrast there might be one ad for a job available in the local community and this is offering minimum wage.

Patti replied:

*It's striking isn't it? I think another interesting aspect to the study you're doing would be to look at all the young people without families who are also leaving. They just don't see the opportunity to stay here on PEI and have a family here. They immediately go out west because that's where the work is. Just as you're saying about openings in the*

*newspaper; if you're looking for a job, there's one job here and 50 out west. There's little opportunity here.*

### **A Snapshot of Life - Designing a Home Away from Home**

Patti stepped away momentarily and returned with a business magazine. “Look at this,” she said as she invited me to look at an article describing a proposed work camp presently being constructed in northern Saskatchewan by an oil and gas company. The design of this camp will emphasize luxury, comforts, and amenities to address the needs of men who are leaving their homes and families behind for employment in the oil and gas industry. As we reviewed this article together, Patti commented,

*They're talking about men who are coming to live in the camp and leaving their families. This is a mini town that they're building to house four to seven thousand people. For every seven workers, there will be one staff person at the camp taking care of this community of men.*

Looking at the photographs and floor plans for the camp that were included in this article, I noticed that there were not only dorm rooms and a dining room but also a hockey rink, a movie theatre, and a fitness center. Patti noticed this as well and commented, “*Well you see they're trying to keep the men there once they get there, because they have such high turnover rates. Eighty percent of their staff is men.*” Patti then offered a quote taken from this article, “*Amenities matter a great deal in order to keep employees occupied and curb substance abuse. Once completed, the complex will house laborers, supervisors and skilled tradespeople who will leave homes to work here, potentially for years*” (Canadian Business, 2 April, 2012). As she read this quote I was intellectually stuck by the open acknowledgement that these work camps are being purposely designed to encourage men to leave their homes for years at a time to work for this company. I commented,



I have never seen an article like this before, where a company is actually building and designing a work camp intended to encourage men to leave their homes and families behind for years at a time. They are designing this so that the men will be happy to live here.

Patti found this point interesting as well and shared, *“They plan to leave the camp standing until 2022 and then the mine should be completed. After that, the facility will be disassembled and they can move it somewhere else. I thought that was pretty interesting.”*

While the article was explicit in identifying that the intention of this camp was to target a male workforce who would be migrating from across the country for employment within their company, nothing was mentioned regarding those who were left behind managing children and homes so that their company could maintain an active and productive workforce. Patti also noticed this and commented,

*I know the focus of your study is women and looking at this issue from the point of view of women. You are asking what we could do for women. Why can't we move women into something like that; a camp where we have our own entertainment system, our own school, and can just sit around? Let us give up looking after the house and kids and go to camp for a while.*

As I drove home following this interview with Patti, I reflected on many of the stories we had shared during our time together. Recalling our discussions specific to the work camp that was being designed for men by a large oil and gas company, I thought deeply about women who were left behind. I thought about the invisibility of women who were left at home to care for children and homes and who may also be working outside of the home. They were at home while their husbands were employed out of province for weeks at a time. Until I reviewed this article with Patti, I was not aware of the ways in which this industry tried to entice men away from their families using recruitment strategies, such as the redesign of a work camp to promote comfort and relaxation for men at the end of their work day. I thought about husbands who were

away and may be playing hockey, going to the gym or movies at the end of a work day. I also thought about their wives who would be left behind with children who may have little support or time to relax. While oil and gas industries are making hundreds of millions of dollars in profits per year as a result of men leaving their families for employment, marriages are being affected and children grow up with an absentee father. As I reflected on all that was coming to mind, I thought about the lack of awareness regarding the needs of women who were left behind. While the article repeatedly mentioned that men would be going to work from across the country, and that they needed to do what was needed to retain this workforce for years to come, not once did it acknowledge who those men would be leaving and the impact their absence would have on families.

### **Coming, Going and Women's Health**

During our conversational interviews, I repeatedly heard Patti speak about her feelings of embarrassment, stupidity, and inadequacy as Jeff left the family for employment. I could not help but question how these feelings, in addition to the multiple roles and responsibilities that she was managing, might impact her health. As I listened to Patti's stories of experience regarding her perceptions of marriage, family, community, and the economic realities of life on Prince Edward Island, I heard her speak about stress. I wanted to better understand the stress and challenges faced by women who are left behind while their husbands are working out of province. I asked Patti if she thought people recognized the stress and challenges women experienced when their husbands went away for work.

Patti replied:

*No, I don't think so, but I don't think it's something that I would willingly bring up either. Scientific studies have shown that stress affects your health and your wellbeing. Most women whose husbands are away would agree that it's more stressful than when they're*

*home. I think this heightens the level of stress in your life. I don't have much of a support system here, basically it's none; so it's me all the time. Tonight I'll be going to out of province for work. If my husband is home I get to stay over with a relative or a friend. If he's not home, I will have to drive home tonight because I need to be here for the children in the morning but then I won't get home until one in the morning. It's those types of things that cause extra stress.*

*I think you get physically and mentally worn down by it all after a while. Of course it depends on how long the man has been away too. I think if you're on a regular system where he's gone X weeks and home X weeks, it's probably easier because you know that you've got this date when he'll be home. You know you will be able to take a deep breath when he comes home and maybe get a day to yourself.*

As we explored Patti's views regarding stress, I was interested to learn more about the coping strategies she used to manage life stress. Recognizing that with the exception of her children, Patti was alone most of the time and had little in terms of a support network. I asked Patti how she dealt with stress and if there were any activities that she particularly liked.

Patti shared:

*I do yoga; I started it just this last time my husband went away. I have made a very conscious effort to keep a very strict schedule in terms of exercise. I do yoga every morning, and then I have to go for a walk at some time in the day too. That's what I do for me. I focus and do not think about anything else. This links to my mental health too. I think it's helped me stay calmer, especially with all the mental anguish that I seem to be going through since Jeff left this time. I needed something like yoga as an outlet.*

I commented, "You have so many things on your plate, I am wondering if carving out times each day for yoga and a walk could be a challenge." Patti affirmed, "*It is. I'm up at 5:30 to do yoga and then I have to find time somewhere else in the day to go for a walk.*"

Recognizing the positive health benefits of these activities, I replied, "Those are good things; being in nature, getting out, getting fresh air." I also questioned if there were other activities Patti liked to participate in if she had the time. After pausing for a moment, she responded,

*I don't know anymore. Honestly. I'm thinking now about a career change and I've been doing some reading on it and it asks, "What do you like to do? What are you good at?" And I'm like, "I've got no idea at all anymore.*

As we explored these notions together, from Patti's perceptions about health and the experiences of women left behind, a new story emerged. In speaking about health, stress, and coping, Patti shared with me a past history of living with postpartum depression. She recalled how difficult that time had been and the care, support, and love that Jeff had shown to her. Patti invited me into this intimate space as she remembered many of the challenging points in her life as she battled depression. She recalled the following story.

*I want to tell you about my experience with depression. I didn't realize I actually had postpartum depression. Over 3 years I was pregnant and nursing two of the three children. We also built the house and were putting up barns wanting to expand the place. After the farm fiasco I had postpartum depression and ended up having to go into the hospital for four months. That was all just before Jeff left, so it was quite a trying time for us. But he had to go, there was no other choice, if we wanted to try and keep the house.*

*I remember going to my family doctor and saying, "I can't seem to stop crying." He says, "Well you're under a lot of stress. Maybe you should go talk to a counselor" and I'm like, "Who would I talk to?" And he said, "Well, I can't really recommend anybody, that's something I can't do." So I came home and looked in the yellow pages and I found somebody. I had no idea about her qualifications. I was too stunned and overwhelmed to even look into that. I went to her office every week, paid something like a \$100, and cried the whole time. She patted me on the back and said see you next week. This went on for about 6 months. And then I got into serious trouble, I became suicidal and had to go into the hospital. Neither my doctor nor the counselor picked up how bad things were.*

*For a while after I had depression I saw a psychiatrist and I found that kind of stressful too because he was always thinking that it was basically pure will and that I could just get over my depression if I wanted to. My husband was working away then. I saw him for a couple of years once a month or so. He recognized my stress and it was quite an intimate relationship. I think much more than what you would have with a family doctor, and probably more than you would even have seeing a nurse on a regular basis.*

*I think until I had depression I didn't know that there were amenities available to people with mental health issues. In the past couple of years there's been a great deal of public awareness about mental health and depression. I think that's something that a person maybe might feel more comfortable discussing with a public health nurse specializing in mental health rather than with your family doctor. The doctors here are so busy, it's just, "What's your problem and here's your prescription." Knowing that there's somebody that you can talk to like a nurse or counselor that would be helpful, in regards to accessing mental health services. Thinking back, we could barely afford it at the time but it was something I had to do. There's a lot of stigma attached to mental*

*health. Letting people know about what's available to help women who are living through this; that is important. Even now, it's something that I don't share readily that I ever had depression. It was especially awful for my husband too. I know I've shared with you that I've been feeling like I'm ready to give up on the marriage, but he stood by me through that and I always swore that I'd always stand by him through whatever. When I was sick, we were farming full time. He looked after me and our children. It was awful, it was really awful.*

Hearing Patti recall this time in her life and her challenges in trying to access mental health services, I questioned why her family doctor was not more supportive during this time. Being part of the health care system, he would have had greater knowledge of mental health services available in the province that could support Patti during her time of need. I thought about how difficult it must have been for Patti to even go to her family doctor and share how she was feeling, and then to be told there was nothing he could do for her; there was no one he could recommend to help her.

As Patti recalled how devastating this time was for her and her family, I considered how lost she must have felt as she left her doctor's office, knowing that she needed help but not knowing where or how to access it. Attempting to find what she needed on her own must have been terrible. I can only imagine what this experience would have been like as she scoured the yellow pages, trying to find a counselor who could support her as she lived with postpartum depression. Patti's frustration with the services she received during this time was palpable, especially when she recalled the period in her life when she became suicidal and needed to be hospitalized. She could not understand how those she entrusted with her health did not recognize the signs that she was experiencing a mental health crisis. As I listened to Patti share this story with me, I was reminded once again of the research conducted by Glynn et al. (2009), who reported an association between role overload and negative mental health for women.

During our time together, Patti shared multiple stories reflective of her experiences juggling various roles such as mother, wife, small business owner, and manager of the home. I thought about Patti and her past struggles with depression, and wondered how many other women left behind may also be experiencing negative mental health consequences as a result of the multiple, continuous roles they must engage in while their husbands are working out of province. I recalled Patti telling me how difficult it was for women who are left behind who must do everything and be everything for their families. I also thought about her statement that it was easier for men to leave their families, and to abdicate their roles and responsibilities as husbands and fathers when they work in another province. As I thought about this, I was curious to learn what Patti thought would be helpful to support women who were left behind. I inquired, “If we could change things, what could be some resources or things that might be created that could help women whose husbands are working away?” Pausing to consider this question, Patti replied:

*First of all, how could you even identify which women and families are living this. That would be tricky though; people don't really want to come out and tell you this. I guess you might find women through newspaper ads, notices at rinks, community halls, play groups, that kind of thing. It might also be helpful to consider a social support group where women who have been living the same type of experiences can pull together, where they can come together in a safe place, without judgement and have some open and honest conversation. They would have that instant identifier and could bond. This could be very, very valuable. It would kind of be like a support group for women in similar circumstances. And then if you could have counselors available and just being able to talk issues over with them. I think sometimes your thinking gets skewed a little bit when you're here alone and handling everything by yourself.*

Continuing, I inquired:

In terms of the support network you were speaking about, would you envision it being offered in a community center, being offered as a public health outreach program, or something located in a family resource center?

Patti replied:

*Maybe you could use public health nursing and their offices as an avenue to let people know that there are services available. I think a big need would be counseling services and matching women to other women who are going through this experience. We have the family resource center already available. You could use that location and that concept of a drop in center for children and target it towards young mothers. It could be an extra play time for the kids and a break for women who have a husband who is away. That for sure, would be helpful.*

*You know, it would be great to have a women's support group and a wonderful women's clinic where everyone could come together in a one stop shop. The reality though that support for women living this is not likely to happen here on PEI; with government budget cuts, and the way the province is slashing everything. The real way to help women and families is to create jobs; to create full time, year round work where families can afford to live here and we don't have to have these issues of family separation. Economic insecurity is the whole root of this matter and until government starts creating and supporting small business, where year round employment can come as a result, this issue is not going to be solved.*

I found it ironic to hear Patti speak about how important social support is for women who are left behind and caring for children; yet she also repeatedly mentioned how intensely lonely she felt and that she needed to isolate herself from others when Jeff was away as a coping mechanism. It saddened her to think about what Jeff has missed out on while away for work; he had been absent for half of their marriage and three quarters of their children's lives. She recalled how lonely it was to live this way and found that being busy with her children and work helped to take her mind off how she felt as a result of being left behind. As we continued our conversations, Patti also noticed an irony in what she was saying versus what she was living. As Patti reflected on this, she noticed how she spoke about the importance of developing support groups for women left behind when she often isolated herself from others so that she did not have to talk. She stated, "I know as I speak, this sounds crazy but you have to know the whole thing is ridiculous living like this!"

## **Taking a Break**

During our time together, Patti repeatedly mentioned that she was feeling frustrated, stressed, worried, and lonely as a result of Jeff being away for work. She shared that these feelings were more intense recently than they had been in the previous 11 years that Jeff had been away. As Patti shared her stories of experience, I sensed that our time together during conversational interviews was leading her to deep personal reflections regarding her life, marriage and family. As we co-participated in this inquiry and together shared life experiences, I recalled Patti saying that being left behind had a negative impact on her health. She shared,

*This whole issue affects your feelings of self-worth and self-confidence. I think all of it certainly takes a toll on a woman's health because she has to be the strong one for the whole family. This wears you down; you are always feeling like you're responsible for absolutely everything.*

As an ethical researcher attentive to the research relationship, I was continually negotiating with Patti throughout the inquiry; I was attentive to how she was feeling during our time together. While receptive to having each conversational interview unfold in the direction Patti wanted, I was also mindful of Patti's wellbeing as she re-told and re-lived life narratives reflective of her experiences of being left behind. As I walked into the midst of Patti's storied life, I became aware that many of the stories she was sharing with me were ones that had not been previously disclosed. As I listened attentively to Patti sharing personal and intimate stories of experience, comments such as, "I have never really shared this with anyone before" and, "No one knows how awful that experience was," and "I can't talk about this with anyone else, they wouldn't understand," were noted.

At the beginning of our fourth conversational interview, Patti shared that the experience of participating in this research had been invaluable for her and prompted deep reflection, new



understanding, and personal insights regarding her life and the experience of being left behind. She felt that she needed some time away from the study for further reflection and to explore what she wanted for her life and marriage. Through the re-telling of life narratives new understandings were emerging and Patti felt that she needed to take a break away from the research to explore these further. I asked if she would like to be referred to someone to speak about how she was feeling. Patti declined the offer and stressed that participating in this inquiry was the best thing she had done for herself in a long time. She valued our time together and found it helpful to have an opportunity to have someone genuinely interested in listening to her and understanding what her life has been like. Patti also shared that participating in this inquiry brought new clarity for her in terms of coming to decisions about what she wanted for her life.

As we re-visited stories that had been shared during our previous conversations, I reminded Patti that we were co-participants in this inquiry and asked if there was anything that she had shared to date that she did not want to have included in the inquiry. Patti stressed that there was nothing that she had shared during our time together that she did not want me to include, as I came to decisions regarding the composition of the research texts and future dissemination of the inquiry.

### **Experiencing the Experience of Being a Narrative Inquirer**

Leaving Patti's house, I could not help but question if I had done something wrong or presented myself in a manner that was off putting, resulting in Patti needing a break from the inquiry. I reviewed each research reflection field note that had been composed immediately following each interview with Patti. In these reflective field notes, I commented about the personal challenges Patti had experienced over the years that Jeff had been away. I reflected on our research relationship and the level of intimacy that had grown between us. I noted this

particularly after our conversational interview where Patti had shared her struggles with post-partum depression. I thought deeply about this and wondered if Patti may have felt that she had disclosed too much and now needed to step away? I recalled Patti sharing that she found herself pulling away from others when she felt that they were trying to find out too much about her life. I wondered if this was how she was feeling about me.

That afternoon I called my supervisor to discuss what had happened with Patti and her need to take a break from the inquiry. She reminded me that narrative inquiry was hard work and that the elicitation of life narratives can also be an emotional experience as participants re-live and re-tell their stories of experience. She suggested that I give Patti a month and then call her again to see if she would still be interested in participating in the inquiry. As I lived and re-lived this narrative tension over the next month, I reflected on my approach to each conversational interview. I felt that I had co-participated with Patti in a way that was respectful, non-judgmental, and receptive to hearing what she wanted to share during our time together. I was thoughtful in questions raised and comments offered as I listened to Patti share her life narrative.

As I continued puzzling over why Patti needed to take a break from the inquiry, I read Josselson's (2007) work on ethical considerations in narrative research. She wrote that what distinguishes narrative inquiry is the inquirer's ability to elicit life narratives that are meaningful and significant to the participant. These narratives become illuminated through the nurturance of a research relationship that is genuine, empathetic, and respectful. Josselson (2007) further offered that the depth of sharing that occurs between participant and inquirer is highly dependent on the trust and rapport that is built between the two. The greater the rapport and trust, the

greater the degree of self-disclosure and accounting of personal memories that will be shared, which can become a catalyst for “growth-promoting personal reflection” (p. 543).

### **The transformational power of narrative inquiry.**

Following the advice of my supervisor, I contacted Patti a month later. She was pleased to hear from me and receptive to talking. The moment she said hello I knew that something significant had happened to Patti over the month that we had been apart. Her voice sounded happy and cheerful. She had an energy and positivity that I had not witnessed during our previous four conversational interviews. As we connected again, I could not have imagined the life transformation that had happened to Patti since we last spoke. Patti shared with me that co-participating in this inquiry had empowered her in a way that she had never experienced before. Through sharing life narratives with me, Patti came to recognize her inner strength and for the first time in 12 years clearly knew what she wanted from her marriage and family.

During the time we were apart, Patti had a conversation with Jeff and told him that she could not live like this any longer. This was the first time in the 12 years that she had actually had an open and honest conversation with Jeff regarding what her life had been like being left behind while he came and went for employment. During this in-depth conversation, Patti revealed her intense feelings of loneliness and how embarrassed and inadequate she felt as a wife, mother, and family member because they were not able to provide for themselves financially without Jeff leaving for employment in another province. She verbalized that she would not continue living in a marriage where Jeff was away for most of the year and she was on PEI alone, raising their children. She told him, “I am done. I can’t do this anymore,” and threatened a divorce. Jeff was taken aback when he heard Patti say that she could not live like this and was contemplating divorce after 25 years of marriage. He did not realize how

negatively his coming and going for employment had been affecting his wife. Through this conversation they came to realize as a couple that immediate actions and decisions needed to be made in order to save their marriage and family.

Patti beamed as she told me that as a result of their conversation, Jeff had left his position in Northern Alberta and was at home again with the family and actively looking for employment on PEI. They did not know if Jeff would be able to find work there and, if so, were keenly aware that the wages he would earn would not be comparable to those that he earned in Alberta. Even with this uncertainty, Patti felt that this was the best thing for their family. She believed that the family was becoming stronger and more cohesive since Jeff had returned; and hoped that Jeff's coming and going for employment out of province had finally come to an end.

As we concluded our final conversational interview, I was surprised to learn how deeply co-participating in this inquiry had impacted Patti. Our conversations opened the door to deep reflection as Patti lived, told, and re-told life narratives. In the sharing of her storied life, Patti gained new insights and clarity. While acknowledging that our mutual sharing and the deep personal reflection that followed was at times difficult, it was this authentic dialogue that helped Patti realize what she wanted in life and to have the capacity to articulate it to her husband. She expressed deep appreciation to me for allowing her to co-participate in this inquiry. As a result, Patti had an opportunity to explore her experiences, perceptions, and feelings with me. Patti felt that for the first time she could now articulate these feelings to her husband. She disclosed that many of the things shared with me were feelings that she had felt for years but had never verbalized to another person. Josselson (2007) reminds us that:

If we are good interviewers and the interview is intensive and extensive, people will often articulate the most sensitive areas of their lives; the matters about which they are doubtful

or ashamed. It is not uncommon for people to tell us things they have never told anyone else. (p. 546)

In attending to our closure of the conversational process together, Patti thanked me for providing her with the opportunity to participate in this research experience. I had created a space for her to speak with someone who was non-judgemental and genuinely interested in hearing about her experiences. Patti felt supported as we came together during each of our conversational interviews and felt safe sharing what it was that had contributed to her feelings. She expressed that she could finally share intimate details about her life experiences with another person. She stated,

*There really needs to be some awareness about this issue by others so that maybe there can be some action and things can change. You are doing good work taking on this research to raise awareness of this for women living this life. This is impacting a lot of women on PEI and yet very few people are genuinely interested in learning what this experience is like to those who are left behind.*

### **Final Reflections**

Josselson (2007) acknowledges the importance of narrative inquirers being empathetic, listening attentively, and being non-judgemental when conducting interviews with participants. Patti expressed a deep appreciation to me for taking on this research and felt privileged to have had an opportunity to co-participate with me in this inquiry. She also expressed pride in herself for continuing to participate in the study and for sharing her life narratives with someone who was a virtual stranger. She acknowledged that,

*To be able to share your inner most thoughts about yourself and your family, your husband, and your perceptions of yourself as a wife and mother when your husband was gone was a valuable experience and it was tough work.*

Coming together once again and saying our final goodbyes, I understood that Patti's request to take a break from our conversational interviews had nothing to do with me. I had not

offended her. Rather my support of Patti throughout our time together led to new understandings about her past and present experiences. As these were being illuminated and verbalized for the first time, Patti recognized that she needed some time away to reflect on all that we had been sharing together. As I walked into the midst of Patti's storied life I was conscientious of our relationship and attuned to my responsibilities as an inquirer. I recognized that the research relationship was one that constantly needed to be negotiated and realized that taking the break when we did strengthened our research relationship. I knew that this inquiry and our time together had been a meaningful experience for Patti. I understood this as we said goodbye and Patti shared,

*Christina, there is nobody who could have done this work better than you. You have allowed me to open my heart, share what is in it and how this whole experience has affected me; for that, I will forever be grateful.*

Walking away from these conversational interviews with Patti, I thought deeply about the transformational power of narrative inquiry research and how new insights can be gleaned when participant and inquirer come together in a spirit of collaboration to share deeply their life narratives. My work with Patti taught me a great deal about being a narrative inquirer and the importance of nurturing the participant and inquirer relationship.

While Patti felt a great appreciation to me for inviting her to co-participate in the inquiry, I felt gratitude to her for having had the courage to share so intimately with me during our conversational interviews. For her to share personally emotional stories reflective of her experiences of being left behind and her perceptions of marriage, family, and community was not easy. Through our coming together and her disclosing stories of experience lived, told, and re-told, I also learned a great deal about Patti's perceptions of women's health and economic

development. In the re-telling of stories, further insights were gleaned and, together, new meaning and significance were uncovered.

In our final conversational interview, I was curious about the main ideas Patti wanted me to understand about her experience of being left behind, caring for children, managing the home and building a business while Jeff was away for employment in Alberta. Patti and I had shared so much through our conversational interviews. I wanted to ensure that what was important to her would be reflected in the research texts. Similar to Laura, I asked Patti to reflect on the top three things that she wanted to ensure I took away and shared with others.

Pausing to reflect on this momentarily, she responded that primarily, it was economic insecurity that was at the root of the whole phenomenon. She felt that if government did a better job with economic development, supporting small business, and creating year-round employment that offered a wage that could sustain a family, the whole issue of men leaving their families behind for employment in another province could be eliminated. Secondly, Patti felt it was important for others to understand the extreme loneliness she experienced while Jeff was employed out of province and she was left behind. Along this vein emerged the third point Patti wanted to share. She felt it was important that others understood that she felt inadequate and embarrassed, as a result of Jeff leaving her and their children behind for work. She felt that she was inadequate as a wife and mother because she could not contribute enough financially to the family so that Jeff could stay at home. She also felt embarrassed when others in the community posed questions to her about Jeff and his employment status. As these questions emerged, Patti sensed that others knew about the family's precarious financial situation and that this was the reason behind Jeff continually having to come and go for work in another province. She felt that others in the community knew that even with Jeff's coming and going, the family was not getting

ahead financially. Unlike other families who engaged in interprovincial labor migration, Patti and Jeff did not have new material possessions such as cars and pools to show others how lucrative Jeff's working out of province had been over the past 12 years. Patti shared that it was these perceptions by others that contributed to her feelings of embarrassment and her desire to isolate herself away from others living in the community.

As Patti gained greater clarity through our conversations and personal reflections, she was awakened to how these past experiences of being left behind had affected her and for the first time articulated this to Jeff. Listening to Patti discuss her marriage and family, it was obvious that she loved her husband deeply; he was indeed her best friend. As they approached their 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, she struggled with the realization that for half of their married life Jeff had been coming and going for employment in another province. While they had a committed relationship, Patti had found that their separation over the years had been damaging to their marriage and had affected her mental, emotional, and physical health.

Patti wanted a family life where she, Jeff, and their children could be together to experience the day-to-day routines and activities that encompass family life. Jeff moved home with her and the children and she was pleased that through our work together, she finally had the courage to express this to Jeff. As a result of their open and honest conversations, Jeff left his work in Alberta. Working with Patti further enhanced my understanding of contemporary economic development and the challenges this presents in rural Prince Edward Island. Patti is committed to developing her small business so that it generates enough income; and that Jeff does not have to leave their family behind again for employment out of the province. I understand in new ways, how the lack of employment opportunities available on PEI influence men having to leave their families behind for work. It is my sincere wish that Patti's hopes and



dreams will come to fruition; and that with Jeff's return home they continued moving forward and growing together as a family.

## **Chapter 6 - Entering into the Research Relationship with Helen**

Helen was the third person I co-participated with in the inquiry. We met early in my doctoral program when, by chance, we struck up a conversation about my research interest. During this initial meeting, Helen shared with me that she had a husband employed outside of PEI and that she had remained behind to be the primary caregiver of their children. She expressed interest in being part of this narrative inquiry research and asked me to reconnect with her once I was ready to recruit participants. After receiving ethical approval for the study, I followed up with Helen and provided her with more information regarding the research process. She was still receptive to participating with me and met all of the recruitment criteria. In determining the date, time, and location for our first conversational interview, Helen expressed a desire to come to my home rather than me travelling to hers. Helen was not comfortable with me coming her way. She felt her neighbors were too inquisitive and would question any unfamiliar vehicles parked in her driveway. She indicated that if I came to her home for the interviews, she might not be able to relax. She was also worried that her home might appear untidy to me and that I may judge her because of this. Thus Helen travelled over 80 kilometers in each direction to meet me at my house and engage in our conversational interviews, the first one having been scheduled for late April.

My research relationship with Helen unfolded easily. There was an unexplained comfort and ease with one another that began with our initial meeting. As Helen entered my home, she favourably commented on the expanse of the grassed yard, the peaceful water view in the distance, and enveloping rural landscape that surrounded us. Helen noticed various personal photographs and artifacts within my home which prompted us to converse about our multiple roles and responsibilities as parents, and partners. Helen is the mother of three daughters. Two

of her daughters are adolescents and still living at home. The oldest daughter is a young adult and lives independently. Helen revealed that she had been the primary caregiver to the children over the past nine years while her husband, Paul, came and went for employment outside of PEI. Helen estimates that her husband had spent only an average of 30 to 50 days per year at home with the family during this length of time.

Helen and I engaged in five conversational interviews, with each lasting between 1 and 2½ hours. The following chapter provides an overview of the stories co-constructed during our time together. Helen's stories of her experience are represented through our voices coming together in conversation; stories interwoven where applicable with my own stories of experience, research reflections, and alignment with current scholarly literature. Also incorporated in this chapter is a reflection on personal photographs shared by Helen during our conversational interviews. Entitled *Snapshots of a Life*, these photographic descriptions have been integrated throughout the chapter to enhance a deeper understanding of Helen's life narratives and stories of experience.

### **Deciding to Live Apart**

During our initial conversation, Helen shared a great deal about her life with Paul including their courtship, marriage, family, and his employment. They had met through mutual friends shortly after she graduated from university and were married a year later. Helen shared that she felt an immediate sense of connection, comfort, and belonging when she was with him; and was proud to have been married for over 30 years. Over the past 20 years, there were numerous times when Paul had left the family for employment in another province or country, due to a lack of employment opportunities and economic stability in PEI. On two occasions Helen and the children moved away from PEI so that the family unit could remain intact. These

episodes, however, proved to be difficult family transitions and resulted in Helen deciding nine years ago to take the children and to remain in their PEI home, and that Paul would come and go as needed for employment. She explained:

*All three of the children were born on PEI and then we lived in a city in the United States. Paul lost his job after a year and we came back to PEI, and we were all living together here for three years. Then Paul got a job and would leave us behind on PEI for weeks at a time. Then he got a big promotion and we decided as a family to move with him to a city where he was making huge, mega dollars. And I was like, "Wow, I like this lifestyle. I like that I can go to a restaurant at any time. I like that I can go shopping and get anything I want. I like that I can go to the gym and the kids can go to private school. I like having all the material things" but then I went, "Where is Paul?" He was working every day until 11 or 12 at night. I took the children and made the move to be with him, but we never got to see him because he was off working and providing for us. I felt like he had dropped me off in this strange city with the kids, while he went out and climbed the corporate ladder. He was getting many accolades and financial rewards, but I was the one who uprooted our family and moved away from PEI to be with him.*

*I really thought this was going to be our chance to spend more time with Paul. I thought it would be a time where we as a family would regroup, when in fact it wasn't. I was very discouraged when I found out that he was still going to be travelling and working away; gone for a week or 2 and then back. I thought that we were going to live together in the city and that he would go to his office and then come home for supper. So what I thought I was getting and what I actually got were two totally different things. There was no sense of togetherness as a family and I was discouraged. I remember thinking, "This isn't what I had in mind. I thought that we would have Sunday suppers together. I thought we would nurture our children together with all of this money." Money turned out to be just another reward for him not being there for our family.*

*The first year I was there with him I was really homesick, and then the second year was ok, and then the third year I felt like it was not so bad. But then the war broke out with Afghanistan and 9/11 happened and I began to live in fear. I was by myself in a foreign city with the kids. I remember I would get overwhelmed with anxiety and my heart would race and I would think that a terrorist was going to attack, that someone would come out of Wal-Mart and kill me. I never once felt like this on PEI. I just always felt happy and peaceful there. I had given up my sense of identity, my sense of safety, and nothing had changed. He wasn't home with us and we didn't regroup as a family. So I said to Paul, "That's it! I'm not living like this anymore. I am taking the kids and moving back to PEI where at least my landscape and my environment nurtures me and I'll obviously see you just as much as I do now." I decided that we would live here and he would come back and forth to see us. We have been doing this now for the past nine years.*

Helen decided that she needed to raise her children on PEI in a community where she felt that they would be happy, safe, and nurtured. While she was not leaving the marriage, Helen acknowledged that this decision caused Paul a great deal of emotional pain. He felt rejected and hurt that she had decided to move with the children back to PEI. Unfortunately, resentments built up and over time contributed to significant and lasting damage to their relationship and marriage. Paul entered into an extra martial relationship with another woman. Helen spoke about the negative impact his extra marital relationship had on their marriage. Each time we met during our conversational interviews she offered a bit more about how this had affected her and how it influenced her perceptions of marriage and family.

Helen explained:

*I didn't know it but Paul was having a relationship with someone else for many years. Here I was living on PEI with the kids and I didn't know anything about this. I just happened to notice a phone call. I never knew at that time he was living another life. I could see how that could happen to me, to anyone who is living this life. At that point there was so much hurt between us. When you do find out that an affair has happened it makes it really hard to plug in and you get really angry. You come to realize that I needed to say to him, "You are just missing watching your children grow up. OK come home for your 4 days. I'll play nice and just bite my tongue." It's one of those things where, "I love you but I hate you." Our marriage has suffered. It is getting better now, but it will never be the same because I will always have suspicions.*

*I think for a lot of women you forgive, but you never forget and you are always on guard. You love this person but there is a degree of respect that is gone. You understand that this was a situational thing and that this could have happened to anyone, but it happened to me. People are in pain. Men are not fulfilled. They are empty because the partner that they love is not available to them. Marriages become cloudy and then the extra marital affairs can begin for both women and men. You are looking to someone for attention, for love, for fun and laughter because your partner is not there for companionship. I think it is probably odder if you don't have an affair.*

"Could Paul have come home more?" I inquired.

Helen replied:

*Of course he could have come home more but he didn't think he could, because he had this beautiful blond in the city. You justify things like, "Oh it's a long drive and he only*

*has a few days.” Even after I knew about the relationship it took them two years to stop it. But he was working away and it wasn’t in my face. I didn’t have to live with it. It wasn’t like she was here and it was happening right here in the community. I could pretend that it was over even though I knew it wasn’t. I had a nice home. I had the girls. I really don’t think I could have survived this if I had been still living with him in the city. On PEI, I was nurtured by nature, by friends, and I could pretend it wasn’t happening because it wasn’t in my face. I didn’t see it. I didn’t see any of it. So I was able to kind of tuck it out of my mind. When I found out about the relationship, a new job opportunity came up and I took that because I needed a distraction. My children were not enough to keep my mind settled. I needed something that would challenge me, challenge my mind, and take up a lot of my time. In the new job you could put in 10, 20, 40, or 100 hours a week. The work is never ending and so I decided to put in 100 hours per week to ease the pain that I was feeling. My work became my opium and I kind of abused it.*

### **Perceptions of Home - Life in Rural Communities**

During our initial conversational interview, Helen shared intimate details about her childhood which had shaped her beliefs regarding home, place, and community. As these stories of experience were shared, I learned a great deal about Helen’s personal perceptions regarding marriage, family, and role identity and how these have evolved over the years. Helen is an only child; her grandparents and cousins played significant roles in her early life. She always wished to be surrounded by these extended family members who lived in rural Nova Scotia. As I listened to Helen recall stories about her childhood home and family life, I noticed that she repeatedly identified home as being her extended family’s home in rural Nova Scotia. Although Helen was born in this community, she moved with her parents to Halifax when she was six years old and moved again to Ontario when she entered Grade 11.

As I listened to Helen speak about these multiple moves while still referring to her home as being where her extended family lived in rural Nova Scotia, I became inquisitive. I wanted to understand more about her early life and sought clarification about where she perceived home to be. I asked, “You grew up in rural Nova Scotia?” Helen replied, “Yes, I grew up in rural Nova Scotia then I was off to Halifax when I was six years old, and came home every summer.” I

continued, “Where was home?” Helen responded, “*Rural Nova Scotia. I came home to be with my family there every weekend from Halifax until I was ten years old.*” I asked, “So you did not feel like Halifax was home?” Helen shared:

*No, rural Nova Scotia was always home. I was born in this community and then I moved to Halifax until I was in Grade 11. We migrated just like salmon migrating up stream. We would always go back to rural Nova Scotia. This community is where my grandparents, all of my aunts, uncles, and cousins lived. I would spend my summers in here without my parents. They would literally drop me off with my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins and then go back to Halifax for the summer without a kid, and pick me up in time for school in September. I had a really nice childhood. I am an only child, so if I was not with my family here, I would have been home alone in Halifax while my parents were working. That’s why it’s really hard for me to give up the intimacy that you get when you live in a small town like PEI. I never had the intimacy that you get with brothers and sisters when I was growing up. I was alone a lot. It was just me alone at the table with my parents, me alone reading, or me alone and being sent off to be with my grandparents and cousins in the summers.*

*My father took a job in Ontario when I was in high school and it was tough. We were there for a couple of years but it wasn’t the same. I missed the feeling of a small town and I said, “I want to move back with Grammy for my last year of school” and my parents weren’t very comfortable with this but let me go. They knew that I would be safe in rural Nova Scotia and so I went with my Grammy and did really well in high school there. I finished Grade 12 and loved it. I had that immediate connection there; it’s a slower pace, you are accepted and it’s a lot like PEI. You can be a big fish in a little pond.*

From childhood onwards, Helen had always yearned for a feeling of belonging which she associated with living in a rural community. She described a feeling of security, support, and nurturance that was experienced when living in rural PEI, where others in the community took an interest in her and her family. As we probed deeper into Helen’s perceptions regarding community and family, I found it interesting how she could clearly articulate feelings of where she belonged and did not belong. Helen indicated that she never felt fully content when she lived with her parents in Halifax and Ontario due to a lack of connection and belonging to these places during childhood. Nor did she feel like she belonged on the two occasions when she left PEI and moved with the children to live in the cities where Paul was based for employment.

As I listened to Helen recall these life events, I was intellectually struck by how these experiences were paramount to her sense of belonging in the world, and the significance she associated with the notion of home. Helen's rich descriptions of home, family, and belonging stimulated me to question the complexity of how people make sense of these concepts. Reflecting on this, I began to question the ways in which people attached meaning to place and wondered if it was actually the physical place or the memories of experience and relationship that developed in a specific location. Or is it a combination of both that contributes to our feelings of belonging and contentment? Such strong emotions seem to well up in us from that sense of "being at home in a place;" thus extending to feelings of stability in our experience with ourselves.

I thought deeply on Helen's *identity* as a narrative construction; a story which she lived her life by (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As we co-constructed life stories reflective of her experiences, I repeatedly noted how her identity and sense of being in the world had been shaped by her feelings of being connected to place. Raymond, Brown, and Weber (2010) examined the personal, community, and cultural factors that contribute to a person feeling an attachment to place. They identify that conceptualization of place is often grounded in personal experiences with others and the community. Embedded within these experiences are personal histories and memories which shape one's feelings of connection and belonging within a specific place (Raymond et al., 2010). Manzo (2005) further offered that a person's relationship to a place grows and transforms over time and is continually being shaped by past experiences and relationships which evolved in these settings. He further acknowledges that places of importance in people's lives are ones where they feel nurtured and a sense of connection (Manzo, 2005).



Helen repeatedly stated how nurtured she felt living in her rural community. She felt blessed to live in a place where safety, security, and belonging were paramount. Kamalipour et al. (2012) and Morgan (2009) reported that comfort, safety, and belonging are hallmarks of place attachment and that one's affinity to place develops over time. As people develop an attachment to place, physical settings and landmarks become central to identity construction (Kamalipour, Yeganeh, & Alalhesabi, 2012); Morgan, 2009). For Helen her identity constructions were grounded in being able to live in rural communities. Helen shared that during her entire life there were only two places that she knew she belonged and felt at home; rural Nova Scotia with her extended family and rural PEI with her children. Helen first came to PEI for a visit with Paul when they were dating in 1979. Prior to meeting Paul, Helen had never been to the Island and yet upon her initial visit felt like this was home and that she was born to belong there. Recalling this memory Helen explained:

*The first time I was ever on PEI was when I came to visit Paul's family. When I walked into his family home, which became our family home, it was that same feeling I would get when I went to rural Nova Scotia. It was this feeling of, "Oh, I belong here." PEI was all about family. People were very connected, very nurturing. I felt this sense of home on PEI from the beginning. It is more than I can even explain. On PEI if you are sending your children to kindergarten, you know all the other kids and their parents, because not only do you see them at school, you see them at the mall, you see them at the grocery store, you see them at craft fairs. There is this sense of community where you know one another and are always looking out for one another. I find the Island very intimate that way. People care and are invested in one another. Paul loves the anonymity of living away. I feel naked without it. I think it goes back to me being an only child; being here I feel like I'm surrounded by friends all of the time. Sometimes I am driving and I have to pull over; the beauty here is incredible and I think, "God, I am so lucky to live on this little island where life is pretty simple and where I have had a lot of positive experiences happen."*

Listening to Helen share her feelings about living on PEI made me think about her perceptions of community and the differences she noted when she moved away from PEI to be with Paul. As we explored this in greater depth, I inquired, "Did you ever feel a sense of

community or belonging when you were living in those other cities with Paul and the children?"

Helen responded, *"Never, ever, in those cities was there a sense of intimacy. There wasn't that sense of community of people coming together and being together. The people I would meet there were all superficial. Here on PEI you know everything, the good and the bad."*

Continuing, I probed; "Do you think that is why people choose to raise their children in rural communities, because of that feeling of connection? Could this be the reason why wives and children decide to stay behind while their husbands leave the province for work?" Helen pondered for a moment and then replied:

*That's exactly why I needed to come back to PEI with the kids and why Paul and I decided to live apart. I didn't have the safety nets, friendships, or connections in the city where I was living with Paul. I lived in a beautiful, thriving, rich community but I was there by myself; everywhere I went I was by myself and I struggled. I felt like it was all plastic, it was artificial. It was not who you were inside but how you portrayed yourself to others. I felt artificial living there and couldn't buy into it.*

*I'll give you an example. When we moved there we did well financially but did not have as much money as our neighbors. All around us were signs of wealth. The first thing women would say to me when I met them was, "What school do your children go to?" But what that question was really implying was, "When you tell me what school your children go to, I too will know exactly how much your husband makes. I will know exactly how to judge you, what your status is and where I'm going to peg you based on your wealth."*

*The children picked up on this as well and would say, "Look mom, they've got three cars, we've only got one car. Those kids all wear American Eagle clothes and we don't." I was unfamiliar with those signs of status. I was picking up on those cues and thinking, "I don't know if I belong here. I don't know if I like it here because they are so artificial." It was just buy, buy, buy, consume, consume, consume all of the time. I knew Paul was only going to be working here for a certain period of time and I didn't feel like I could put my roots down there. I loved Prince Edward Island and I couldn't get over the fact that I missed the simple and the plain. I just wanted to get home to PEI. I wanted the kids to grow up on the Island where it doesn't matter what you wear or how rich your family is; you're just accepted for the good person you are.*

### **A Snapshot of a Life - Three Men in a Truck**

Since childhood Helen had yearned for a sense of belonging and for life in a community where she felt nurtured and safe. She had left her rural PEI community to be with Paul and yet

he was still continuing to travel back and forth in relation to his employment, leaving her and the children behind in cities where she felt intense loneliness and social disconnection. Helen felt that a lack of authenticity persisted in relationships with others in these densely populated urban centers, finding it difficult to sustain a friendship based on wide personal differences related to extreme materialism and continuous consumerism. As Helen and I continued to discuss authenticity within relationships, she shared with me a photograph of three men in a truck. This image represented many of her perceptions regarding how friendships between men and women differ. Helen explained:

*As I think about this picture of three men in a truck I see true friendship, loyalty, togetherness, frivolity, playfulness, laughter, and being carefree; where you can be yourself and receive unconditional love and acceptance. These are working men who are just content to be together heading home from a hard day of work in jobs that are physically demanding. Men have genuineness about them; they have friendships that last forever and there's never any drama. When I see the three men, all I can think of is a pure friendship that is healthy; they're laughing and they're all on the same page. To me it's just this wonderful friendship; there's no pretense, there's very little judgment, what you see is what you get.*

*Women are not like this, it's completely different; with women you get judging and pettiness. Women are jealous and catty; there's always a kind of formality and you don't see them just being themselves. There was one time I had a tent in the house and was doing it just to be playful with the girls and we were having sleepovers in it; and a busy body showed up. She had her son with her and her eyes were rolling when she looked at my house because it wasn't the tidiest. Her son asked what the tent was doing in the living room and I said, "Wouldn't you like to know?" By the way she was looking at me I could tell that she was judging me and she thought that I was odd for having a tent in the living room. Women judge a lot. There is always an underlying sense of, "Oh, he's away and you make so much money." I think back now and those are probably the reasons behind why I don't like having people over to my house. I'm not opening myself up to the judgement of other women. I would be so stressed having others over and into the house. My focus is on my girls. I have learned over time that some things I just have to let go of, and for me a lot of what I have let go of is the house. I no longer make beds; the house is clean but may never be tidy. Some women have the perfect, immaculate house but that's not me.*

## Changing Family Dynamics

Helen felt that in the past nine years that Paul has been away climbing the corporate ladder he had forgotten what it meant to be a husband and father. During this time he has seen his family, on average, 30 to 50 days per year. Helen shared that in Paul's position, he had many men employed under his leadership. She has supported him over the past 30 years as he developed in his career and became a successful businessman. While he had reaped much professional success and great financial rewards, Helen openly acknowledged that Paul sacrificed his family in order to achieve this success. She indicated that the longer he was away from the family for work, the more she noticed him detaching from his roles as father and husband, losing touch with the day-to-day functioning of his family. Helen felt that Paul lived two different lives: one as a powerful and wealthy businessman working in a large city and the other as a distant husband and father of three daughters living in rural PEI. She noticed the challenges Paul had in juggling these two lives and wanted me to understand more about this dichotomy and how it had affected their family's development over the years. Helen revealed:

*It was hard for him to juggle his two lives of home and work. So he decided that he would live his life climbing the corporate ladder and that he would come back and visit us. Think of his side Christina, he lives an orderly and predictable life when he is away. He's a catered man when he is at work; he's in a hotel where everything is perfect. He goes to a restaurant and he's served; he is constantly waited on. He has lived a life where he is very much in control and has what he wants. When he comes home there's you may have to walk over 10 pairs of shoes just to get into the kitchen. When you do get into the kitchen the sinks are probably filled with dishes. There could be an empty jar of peanut butter and a knife still in it from the morning's breakfast. All the cupboard doors are open. The laundry is piled up; there's stuff all over the place, and he has no control. There is no control or order to anything here and he doesn't know how to relate to it anymore. And then he will look at me and ask, "Is this the way everyone lives?" And I am like, "Yeah, it is" but he's traveled and stayed in hotels and is living in penthouses with amazing views. So coming back is hard for him, too, and I've come to realize that he just needs 24 hours to come into our home again and recondition himself to us.*

Clarifying, I asked: “To recondition to the fact that he is not in a hotel anymore where all of his needs are taken care of I understand, but isn’t this his home?”

Helen replied:

*Right! (Helen is laughing) He is staying in hotels where he has the best of things and chandeliers over his bed. When he is away working his every whim is taken care of and people are waiting in the hall to put shampoo in his room. So it’s really different from our life at home. I’m like, “I’m sorry that this is not a hotel that you are coming home to.” And I am thinking, “Here I am a married-single mother, working and doing it all by myself with the kids. I’m not really a single mother, but really he’s gone most of the time and I am alone with three children, a dog, a cat, a car, and a job. When he’s at work, he doesn’t have anyone around him with children. He’s hanging out with all of the guys who have left their wives and never see kids. On Friday nights they are having wings and beer, hanging out at the bar. Their lives become just so different; it’s hard for him to transition back to being at home and it’s hard for me to have him to come into my place as well.*

Confirming in a supportive way I commented,

It seems as if there is a disconnect between what the ‘it’ is like day in and day out for you and the children living here versus what Paul’s life has become while he is away for work. It seems as though he has lost touch with what happens on a day-to-day basis in his own home.

Affirming with the nod of her head, Helen replies, *“That’s exactly it! And that is why he has such a hard time transitioning when he comes back home.”* Continuing our conversation I asked Helen, “How does Paul locate himself in your home? If he’s not really at home a lot, how does he place himself in the home?” Helen paused momentarily and took a deep breath, then offered,

*That is such a good question. Paul has his closet and a beautiful office. All of his personal things are in this closet. These rooms are strictly his and he’s happy with that. He needs to have a space that’s all his and so, yes, he does have a presence in our home.*

Exploring the dichotomies of Paul’s life home and away, it opened the door to a conversation regarding role development and role identity. I was curious to learn more about how Helen viewed husband and father roles and how these evolved over time. As Helen and I

explored this together, she recalled past life experiences and observations specific to parenting and partnering, and how these had influenced her perceptions regarding the husband and wife relationship they had together. Entering into the conversation I asked: “How do you think men come to understand what their roles are within families?” Helen paused momentarily before sharing:

*I think if you were to interview men they would give you a list of three things: being a provider, being a good partner, being a good daddy. I would think the majority of men would identify that their role is to provide financially for their families. I think that it has been indoctrinated into their brain to provide. My children know that Paul brings home the money. He's gone away to work to bring home money. I've accepted it and they've accepted it. For roles I really don't know how they evolve. Many men can balance their family life while they are working away. My best girlfriend has a husband who also works away. He understood his role as a husband and father and always knew how to balance it. My friend was able to express her needs and her anger but I could never do that. From me Paul would hear, “Boo hoo, you really aren't going to be able to come home to see us?” And my friend would just tell her husband, “Get your f..... ass home!” She would lay it on the line and give him an agenda of what was happening at home. She could clearly articulate that this is what I want, this is what I expect, this is what we have planned and you need to be home. She actually tells her husband what his role is and what she expects from him. And now as I look back on it in hindsight, I know that I should have been more like this too. I am an only child. I don't know how to fight or stand up for what I want. I never had to give anyone direction and I never witnessed my mother being direct with my father. She never once told him what to do. She was a lot like me, if she wanted him to do something and he didn't want to do it she would whine. There were never any fights or arguments but she would pout. When you think about roles and how you develop in these over time, it's sometimes what you didn't see and wished for in your family that makes you want to do things differently when you are an adult.*

In the sharing of these experiences Helen arrived at new insights regarding her unmet needs and expectations. She recalled how her friend was able to clearly articulate her needs and expectations for her marriage regardless of the distance between them. Helen felt that this had been the catalyst behind her friend and her husband being able to continue developing and growing together in their marriage over the years, in spite of the fact that he, like Paul, was often employed outside of the province. As I listened to Helen share that she could not articulate what

she wanted and expected from her marriage, I also thought about Paul's perceptions regarding what he viewed to be the roles of a partner within a family. Was it as simple as Helen described? Paul did not understand what the role of a father was within a family and equated fathering to being a financial provider to his wife and children. Did he view Helen's role to be the nurturer of their children? Did he actually understand it as going away to work and building a successful career that paid extremely well, and she staying behind to care for the children and home?

Through our conversational interviews I learned a great deal from Helen about the challenges of family reunification which occurred when Paul came home to visit the family. At the time when our conversational interviews occurred, Paul was only home and with the family about four days every eight weeks. While at home Helen revealed that he no longer recognized what his role was within the family; and because he was home so infrequently, when he did come home he wanted to be noticed. So he tried to impose various rules for how the family should be functioning. While rules and order may have been necessary in his business life, in the four days that he was home with his family, Helen felt enforcing these rules negatively influenced family functioning and the children's perceptions of their father.

Exploring this in greater depth with Helen I commented,

I find it really interesting that you are here with the children day after day and Paul is home about 30 to 50 days per year, but when he comes home he wants to enforce various rules. How does this work for him when he hasn't been here to work with you to figure out what rules should be in place for the family?

Helen shared:

*It's like you're always on a teeter totter looking for balance. I find when Paul is home I'm a different person. I'm trying to keep him content. Paul is an incredible businessman who's got a lot of power and a lot of authority in his position. In his job, he gives grown men orders all day and they listen to him. When he comes home he wants to be completely in charge of us and the home. He thinks being part of our family is like running another business. He doesn't understand that a family is not a business. He*

*doesn't know how to integrate into our home and into our family. And now he has been away from our family for so long that he has lost touch with us. Paul doesn't know how to be a playful daddy. The children don't have fun around him because he has so many rules. And that is partly my fault because I have very few rules, and Paul has 100 rules that he wants them to follow; and so it's the difference between day and night. Paul knows he's not really part of our family anymore and so he is doing these things to try to get noticed. When he comes home it's very difficult for us to be able to transition to his likings. He knows business. He's spent most of his life away from us developing in business.*

*There's a complete change in our family when he comes home. When Paul comes home we try and have a meal together and usually we have this huge amount of Chinese food and we'll sit down and we'll eat and talk. But the girls are uncomfortable with that because it's unfamiliar. We talk about things but a lot of the times the children will listen to Paul and say, "Yeah, ok dad" and do it for the few days that he's home. Paul really struggles to find a voice, but how can it be heard when he's only there for 30-50 days a year? Every now and then I'll go, "Come on girls, this is your dad, let's try." No one really wants to listen to him but we do want to keep the peace, because we know that it won't be long before he's gone again.*

I found it difficult to understand why Paul wanted to exert such control over the family by enforcing rules when he was home for such a limited time. Exploring the challenges of role clarity and family reunification further, Helen further elaborated:

*You see Christina, Paul has been gone so long that he doesn't recognize his role in the family anymore, and so he tries to jockey for position by being strict and controlling which only creates additional challenges when he returns home. The children love Paul but because he's been gone, he doesn't know what his role is and so, he makes it up as he goes along. It is actually quite awkward and incredibly stressful when he comes home. I am here all the time with the children and he does not understand how things function, what we do and how we work. Having an absentee partner there is never really family unity. There's a Team Me alone doing it all, a Team Us which is me and the kids, and a Team Him. Team Me doesn't know how to fit with Team Him, but then Team Us sometimes doesn't let him fit in with us either. When we know he is getting ready to come home we are all very much on guard; it's like a black cloud looming over our house when he comes back. When he walks through the door he has a very hard time transitioning back to us and the transition is hell!*

Considering these challenges related to family reunification, I was reminded of a retrospective study conducted by Parrenas (2005) which explored the experiences of children who had grown up in transnational families. Participants in the study reflected on their early and



adolescent childhood experiences of being left behind in the Philippines, while one or both parents left home for employment in another country. Participants shared, in detail, difficulties they had encountered with parental reunification and establishing relationships with others throughout their lives. They reflected on how challenging it was as adults to try and re-establish relationships with their parents who were retired and permanently living at home after working out of country for most of their formative years. Participants identified difficulties they had experienced in developing, engaging in, and fostering relationships as adult children with their parents. They identified that while they respected their parents, in many ways they felt as though their parents were strangers to them as they were working away and had been absent for most of their lives. Also reported were the difficulties these adult children later experienced as they tried to engage in social and romantic relationships with others; they found it challenging to connect and feel secure in these relationships (Parrenas, 2005).

### **Presents in Lieu of Presence**

Over the years that Paul had been away working, Helen noticed that he had become increasingly focused on materialism. She revealed that from his initial return following his first work term through to the present day, there was never a time when Paul had come home without gifts for the family. Helen struggled with this gesture and recalled how artificial their life felt years ago when she and the children lived with Paul in an affluent community, surrounded by people focused on material wealth. This created tension and internal conflict for Helen as Paul's pattern of returning home with elaborate gifts became a new family norm. Helen felt that these gifts were a tangible way in which Paul could demonstrate his love and commitment to the family, as well as showcase his predominant role as a financial provider. Through our conversational interviews new insights were illuminated for Helen regarding these gifts and how

they came to be perceived by Helen as a substitute for Paul's presence in the family. Pausing momentarily, Helen recalled:

*To this day Paul never comes home empty handed. I think because he is absent so much he tries to make up for this with the material gifts. All of their lives the children have been quite proud to tell their friends where their father works. They really liked to be able to flaunt this, because for many people on PEI their dad's job is seen as the pinnacle of success. The kids don't know him and never have. As they got older they could justify what he did and why he was away. To them it's always been dad is going off to work, providing for them and having a prestigious job. The kids bought into that for a long time but then they started questioning, "Dad brings us home stuff but he's never home with us." Then they'd catch themselves and say, "Well, he's got a very important job. He has to be away from us working." And I'd say, "It would be nice to have him home more and for us to have time together but he does have a busy job." Now they are getting older, they are beginning to see that he didn't need to be away from us so much for work and that a lot of it really came down to the choices he made.*

Listening to her elaborate on this insight, I commented, "So it was presents in lieu of being present?"

Helen revealed:

*That's exactly what it was; it was material presents in lieu of presence and Paul being here with our family. He rewarded the children with material presents. He knew that I could look after the family and do a good job of raising our girls and he would provide us with material things. I could see that, but it made the girls happy at the time; but now I am beginning to wonder if this is the same for others whose fathers go to Ft. McMurray for work. Is there a difference in terms of what they think about their fathers going back and forth for work or is it just plain and simple? Dad's home, dad's gone. He makes money and brings home presents.*

*Perceptions are big on PEI and all Paul wanted was to be the material man; to be the provider. He would always want to go on these big trips as a family and I was like, "I don't want to go on a huge trip. The kids don't want to go on a huge trip. All they really want to do is go with you for an ice cream. That's it! It's simple. Just spend an hour with them." But it couldn't just be like that. He had all this money and he always thought that he should do something elaborate with it and spend it on them. A few years ago he decided that we needed an international family vacation. It was this big affair. I kept saying "Paul, let's just go camping with the girls for the week and be together. We could go to the beach and have weenie roasts." But he would have none of it, for him it's always got to be bigger and better. He's never just content to just be and have the simplicity of family time together here on PEI.*

As I listened to Helen reflect on presents in lieu of presence, I was immediately taken back to a similar experience I had while living in Calgary with my preschool daughter and husband. Working from morning to night to build a successful company, there were weeks when my husband would see our daughter a total of seven hours. While he came home every night, he was rarely there during her waking hours. I worked outside of the home and was also the primary caregiver to our daughter with no family support available. I recall how angry I would become when I would go out for errands only to come home and see that he had taken our daughter to Toys R Us for a shopping spree. They would return with bags of toys that she did not need. I remember the many times I would say, “Take her to the pool, take her to the park, or just play with her at home.”

I noticed that this was becoming a pattern and was not happy about it. I did not want our daughter to grow up thinking that this is what her father did; worked all of her waking hours and then bought her things during the few times per week that they saw each other. I recall my husband telling me that he felt so guilty about being away from our daughter that he wanted to take her shopping and buy her the things that she wanted as a way to diminish his guilt. He also shared that spending some of the money he was making on her made him feel like a better provider and father. I was confused by this viewpoint, and while I tried to understand it, I could not see how material possessions could be used as a justification for being absent from our family. Until I listened to Helen recall her own experience and question whether this was what other fathers who work out of province do for their children, I had not reflected on my own experience of my husband substituting presents for his physical presence in our family. While my experience was different than Helen’s, as my husband worked in the same city and came home late each evening, I was intellectually struck by the similarities of our experiences.

Continuing this conversation together, I was interested in learning more about Paul's pattern of coming and going for employment and whether there have been any prolonged periods of time where he has been able to be home with the family over the past nine years. I asked, "Have there ever been periods of time, for example 6 or 8 months in a row, where Paul has been consistently home?" Helen replied, "*No, this is it. This is all the children have ever known.*" Probing further I asked, "What about Christmases, birthdays, and graduations, would Paul come home for these?" Pausing momentarily, Helen responded:

*He would always be home for Christmas but sometimes as soon as we were done eating dinner he would be gone. I remember 2 years in a row he would go back to work right after he ate his Christmas dinner with us. We would be eating our turkey dinner and the car would be in the driveway, warming up to take him to the airport. And I was like, "You've got to go back? Do you really have to go back right now?" But of course he was with the other woman at the time and so he felt he had to go back. Then there were times at Christmas when he would stay for 2 days in a row. He would come home with so many gifts and that would be how he would justify going again, because he would leave us with all of these Christmas presents.*

Clarifying, I inquired, "So even things like a Christmas concert, Sunday school, a dance recital, would Paul have had a chance to be home and see the girls' activities over the years that he has been away?"

Helen revealed:

*No, never. Their graduations, their proms, he was never there. I have always tried to be playful and create a spirit of fun with the girls. I wanted them to have fun memories of us all being together. I remember going through our photo albums one day and thinking, "Paul's not here, Paul's not there. Paul is not in anything. He's simply not there." There's the odd photograph that he was here for, but for the most part he just wasn't there.*

As I watched Helen's face as she thoughtfully re-told and re-lived this experience, I observed the profound emotional impact Paul's coming and going over the years had on their family. While Helen shared how obvious Paul's absence had been in their family photographs

over the years, I could sense her feelings of loss and a yearning for what could have been for their family had Paul been at home more frequently. I thought about the ache of sadness that she must feel as she looks back at photographs of the children during significant life events such as graduations and birthdays. In looking at the family photo albums with me, it became apparent that her description of Paul as an absentee parent and partner had become more literal, more real; with the turn of each page of their photo albums, his absence from their family for Helen was clearly painful, with her emotions slicing through years of rationalization.

### **Children's Perceptions of Relationships**

As Helen spoke about Paul's absence in the family photo album, she began to reflect on the impact his coming and going for employment had on their daughters, especially their perceptions of the relationships and roles within the family. While Helen had been at home year after year nurturing her relationship with the children and watching them in the achievement of developmental milestones, Paul's relationship with the children has been stagnant. Helen began to question how her adolescent and young adult daughters were making sense of what it meant to be a father, mother, husband, and wife based on what they had witnessed and experienced in their own family life. She wondered aloud how the children had interpreted her relationship with Paul over the years that he had been coming and going for employment. Reflecting on this in greater depth, Helen recalled:

*My kids grew up with one parent who was nurturing and one parent who provided materially. They grew up without their father. They know, "My dad was not here for me, he just wasn't around." I have a sense because of what they have witnessed from Paul and me, that something will come up in the future for them around all of this; maybe in their marriages, maybe in who they choose as their partners. I'm beginning to think now about what my daughters actually think about relationships? All they have ever seen is a person drop in; they have seen no arguing, no negotiating, just an absentee father and husband.*

*I think it's a very strong message that you are sending your children when you are able to perform and nurture and do all of those things, but I wonder if I am setting them up to do the same. Maybe I should have stuck it out and stayed in the city with Paul. But that was a disaster; his career was very important to him and we just got in the way of it when we were there. But now I wonder if I am teaching the girls that you don't need a man, rather than it's nice to have a man in your life that you love. I hope I haven't done any damage. I hope my children will still seek out a loving mate, because it must be confusing for them to have always seen one person doing it all but, maybe it won't impact the children. After all, this is a generation of kids that have so many parents living and working all over the world. When you think about it, years ago there was a mother and a father living together all of the time at home; there was stability, order, predictability and roles were defined more. I think that roles are very vague now.*

Exploring this further I probed, "How do you think the girls are starting to understand what the roles of a wife, a woman, and a mother are?" Helen shared, *"I think they learn about roles by watching and observing me and other families. I don't make a whole bunch of comments. They see me doing it all; wifely roles and also doing roles men often do."*

Continuing I questioned, "With Paul's coming and going, how do you think the children understand the roles of a man, husband, and partner?" Helen replied:

*Paul's role has just sort of been the financial part. What are men's roles? They provide, they nurture but my children are not seeing a man nurture me. I think that would be very confusing, not to see the nurturing and the sexuality of male-female roles. They have little glimpses of it now and then, and they'll say, "Oh daddy kissed mommy" and I'm comfortable with that. I feel sorry for them because I would have liked to have been able to teach them to embrace your partner, and that it's wonderful to have a loving relationship.*

*I don't know how they are learning about these roles other than watching mothers and fathers who are together when they go away on sleepovers and hockey tournaments. One of my daughters told me, "All the boys think of me as their best friend, not as a girlfriend." And I question if that is because she has seen my relationship with Paul as only a friendship? My oldest daughter had a very strong relationship with a young man for 2½ years. He was like my son and it was one of those perfect matches. But she got to the point where she wanted to leave PEI. She said, "I'm being smothered, you can't keep me here. I want to explore the world." So she left him; just like her father left us. She actually role modeled Paul's behavior and left.*

Repeatedly during our conversational interviews, Helen used the term “married single mother” to describe her role within the family. I was curious about the meaning she associated with this term. She explained,

*You know, I'm really a single mother but the beauty of all of this is you don't have to say you're a single parent, because there's a negativity associated with that. I mean, I'm a single parent but a married single parent; it's not quite as low on the totem pole. It's down there but it is one notch above single and not being married.*

Alone and caring for children the majority of time while Paul was away working, Helen questioned how her self-professed role as a married single mother was being interpreted by her daughters. She also questioned how witnessing a marriage where one partner was consistently absent may have negatively influenced their understanding of what it meant to be a parent and partner. Helen worried about what the children would choose in their futures as they entered into partnerships and familial relationships with others. I recalled Helen telling me earlier in a conversational interview that it was sometimes what you did not see growing up in the family that made you want to do things differently as you matured and developed your own familial relationships. Each of Helen's daughters was at an age where they were beginning to consider entering or had experienced a relationship with the opposite sex. While they had lived the experience of their parents being mostly apart and witnessed their friends' parents being mostly together, Helen and I questioned how their experiences would shape their expectations of future partners as they navigated and negotiated the details of those relationships.

### **A Snapshot of a Life - Heavenly Rainbow**

As I listened to Helen speak about her children, it was evident that she loved them and had their best interests at heart. Like any other mother, she had hopes for her children and had done her best to provide the nurturance and guidance they need in transitioning from childhood

to adulthood. Her dreams for her children were clearly articulated as she shared with me a photograph she had taken, which she found to be representative of her love for them. The image was of a double rainbow that she had seen one evening when she was driving home following one of our conversational interviews. The meaning this photograph elicited in Helen is described below, a careful selection of words that captured a snapshot of her life. She shared:

*Guess what Christina; I saw a heavenly rainbow on my way home the last time we were together. It was a double rainbow and when you see something like this you just have to make a wish. I wanted to share that picture with you because it symbolizes to me what I wish for my children. I want my children to be productive. I want them to be strong willed. I want them to be self-sufficient. I want them to be healthy. I want my children to be happy.*

As we ended our conversations about the children, Helen recognized that while she had clear dreams for them, the dreams that she had for herself as a woman and partner had not materialized. Having an absentee partner over the past nine years, Helen felt that she had not been able to pursue many of her personal goals due to the multiple family and household responsibilities she had attended to while Paul was employed and living elsewhere. Helen talked about the impact Paul's coming and going had on her own personal development and the choices she made over the years while he was away. Through our conversational interviews Helen reflected deeply about the significance of this. She vividly recalled examples that highlighted how she was unable to develop in her role as a wife and partner because Paul was not available to nurture her within the marital relationship. Helen explained:

*I guess my thoughts are that your partner's job in the relationship is to help foster you, to help you evolve and for the two of you to grow together. Women are not stagnant; we are always evolving and it is nice to hear from others that you are a good mother. It's nice to hear that you've done a good job or that you are pretty or that you look nice today; those positive things that let you know that you are valued; hearing those auditory things where you know you're attractive. You miss that. You just don't get it when he's away working. So that is something that I think as women we are falling short on.*



*In my marriage I didn't have the chance to be a partner and so I put all of my energy into motherhood. I didn't have the option to put that energy into my life with my husband; he just wasn't there. It wasn't an option, so where 50% should go to him and 50 percent should go to the children, 100% of my energy went to my children. You know, Christina, I don't really know what it's like to be a two parent couple raising children together. My role of a wife was naked. I just didn't have that opportunity.*

As I listened to Helen describe how Paul's coming and going had impacted her personal development, she raised points that I had not considered before. While I had heard other women share details about the multiple roles they engaged in while their husbands were away and how they remained at home as primary caregivers to their children, Helen was the first woman to articulate how being left behind has impacted her self-identity as a woman. Until she shared these examples with me, I had not considered how having an absentee partner could impact a woman's self-concept. As I listened to Helen share her stories of experience with me, I could understand more deeply the profound impact Paul's coming and going had on her personal development and evolution as a woman. She was aware of this and it seemed to me as if she was grieving a relationship that she knew she didn't have. Nevertheless, Helen was gaining new insights regarding her role as a partner in her marriage. Although she and Paul had been married for over 30 years, it was interesting to hear Helen describe her role as a wife as one that had been naked. While she acknowledged that she was a married woman, she shared that she did not know what it was to actually be in a partnership where two people lived together, raised children together, and grew together as a couple.

### **A Snapshot of a Life - Peaceful Gardens, Potato Rills, and Salmon Sunsets**

My final conversational interview with Helen occurred at my home on a warm sunny day in June. The grass was a beautiful shade of green and bright, multi-colored flowers were in bloom. The view of the water in the distance from the front yard was captivating. Prior to

beginning our interview, Helen asked to go for a walk together around the yard so that she could take in the water view, flowers, trees, and shrubbery. She expressed delight when she noticed our hammock in the backyard. She asked to lie in it for a few minutes in silence, so that she could just be present in the moment and listen to the sounds of the birds chirping. After she rose from the hammock, she indicated that this experience in my yard was reflective of a photograph she had previously taken and one of several she wanted to share with me. The photograph depicted a garden in late spring—flowers were coming into bloom, dew was on the plants, and bugs were crawling about. Helen titled it “Peaceful Gardens.” As we were exploring the images together, I was reminded of research by Thurston and Meadows (2003) who identified that, “Rural living is quiet, laid back, peaceful and relaxing” (p. 5). Being together with Helen on that June afternoon I felt that we were living the epitome of rural living; the views were stunning and the quiet and calm of the early summer day were both peaceful and relaxing. As we began talking again, I inquired about what came to mind when she looked at the photograph. Helen said that these images brought to mind thoughts of inner peace, quietness, stillness, and an ability to sit calmly and be present. I observed the calmness in Helen’s face as she looked at the photograph. She identified what this image represented to her which was a direct contrast to her actual life wherein she was busy from morning to night each day, trying to accomplish all of the responsibilities associated with her roles as a married single mother.

As we discussed this photograph Helen shared her worries about not being able to balance her time and thus potentially being unavailable to meet the needs of her children. She identified that she could not always be present for her daughters’ activities, especially when they were scheduled on the same date and time and overlapped or conflicted with her work schedule. Helen acknowledged that while other working mothers may also experience this challenge, it

was an additional burden when a husband was working out of province and rarely came home.

She explained,

*In a household where you are a couple and live together, you might have a list of 100 things you need to do, but at the end of the day this may be split 50/50, 75/25 or even 90/10; it's not consistently one person doing 100% of the things all the time when the marriage is actually comprised of two people.*

The next photograph Helen described was a picture of a field she had passed while driving to meet me for a previous conversational interview. In this photograph there was a long, rectangular piece of land that led to the ocean. The land was patterned with uniformed rows of recently sowed potato seed. Helen described a sense of peace that she experienced as she looked at the land and ocean in this picture. She shared that this photograph was representative of the stillness and beauty of rural PEI and the seasonal changes that occur with the passage of time. Helen acknowledged that she felt a comfort in knowing that at this time each year, the land continued to awaken as seeds were sown into the rich, red tilled soil of the island. I could not help but notice the depth of comfort in Helen's facial expression as she reveled in the reassurance of a farming practice that seemed emotionally grounding and ageless.

The third photograph Helen shared was of a salmon colored sunset. She described to me the prisms of color covering the evening sky as the sun began to set over a marsh. Cold air from the water was colliding with the warm air which resulted in a row of steam caught between the marsh and beautiful sunset. Looking at this image, Helen spoke about how change leads to newness and within this newness there can be unexpected beauty. She felt that the photograph reminded her to be open and to experience life and all it had to offer. As she reflected on the image of the marsh and salmon sunset, Helen spoke again about the many challenges she had experienced over the years Paul's had been coming and going for employment out of province.

In re-telling these stories of experience, Helen realized that along with living through these challenges there also came great opportunities. The first was the opportunity of becoming the mother she had always dreamed of being to her daughters. The second was coming to recognize her inner strength and capacity to deal with adversity. In sharing this photograph, I could sense Helen's feelings of empowerment as she expressed how she recognized that there was no life challenge that she could not get through. As she poignantly explained:

*A lot of women on PEI have resources and families around that they can call on for support. I had no one here—no parents, grandparents, sisters—no one at all to help me with the kids. I didn't have someone around asking, "What can I do for you? Can I help you in anyway?" I remember over the years I would say to my mother, "Mom, can you come over and help me?" and she would say, "No." I never told her anything about Paul and all that happened there. I don't think it would have mattered, she didn't live on PEI and she had her own life. I only had a babysitter that I had to pay to be with the children.*

*Women don't want to burden their friends with this because most of their friends will take sides, so it's nice to have a completely impartial third party who can listen. I think that is a huge part of healing. We say it for other issues, for mental health issues, or for alcoholics or for women living with postpartum depression, but for a woman whose partner is gone and they're left behind holding the fort, this is a big thing. My resources were always very limited, but all of that has made me a stronger person, knowing that I am able to cope with anything.*

"I am thinking about what you are saying about women who are left behind and becoming strong. Where does that strength come from?" I asked.

Helen paused to consider this question and then shared:

*That's a very good question. How does this happen? I remember when Paul told me he was taking this job, I cried. Initially I remember thinking, "How am I going to do this? How am I going to be home with my kids all by myself?" But then it happens and you don't even realize it, you just do it. You do it for your children and what would you be showing them if you couldn't. Unless you know someone who is also going through the same thing, it's not likely that you'll ever talk about how you are feeling. It's hard to explain all of this with someone who is not living it; someone who has their husband living at home and always had their brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews and cousins around. I've never had this. I just knew never to complain about being alone while he is working away, because people would look at you as if you had two heads or something. You just lived with it.*

As we came to the end of our discussions regarding Helen's photographs of nature, I asked her to reflect on any additional thoughts that came to mind as she looked at the pictures.

She revealed,

*I have thought about the theme of the images I tried to capture in the pictures specific to nature, and these are the words that come to mind. When I look at these pictures I see calmness, order, predictability, serenity, and a sense of permanence; these are the exact opposites of the life I live now.*

I realized as I received Helen's interpretive insight that having her participate in this exercise had been a powerful and transformative experience. By sharing these photographs together, new stories and understanding were illuminated. As we discussed each photograph in detail, Helen also realized that each progressing photograph represented even deeper meaning that she had not reflected on in the past. What she originally had once viewed to be beautiful pictures of nature were now images she associated with peace, calm, order, and permanence. Through our discussions of each picture, Helen recognized that while these photographs represented what she desired, they were also in direct contrast to the life that she had lived. I found this insight to be quite powerful and questioned whether these insights would have been so clearly illuminated had we not begun our conversational interview by taking a walk together in my yard and garden.

### **Coming, Going and Women's Health**

Co-participating with Helen in multiple conversational interviews, I learned a great deal about her perceptions regarding how roles developed and evolved during the periods of time when Paul was away for employment and upon family reunification. Helen repeatedly spoke about the stress and guilt she experienced as she lived through Paul's extra marital relationship, her unmet expectations within the marriage, and the lack of connection she witnessed between

Paul and the children. As I listened to her share her thoughts and feelings specific to these experiences, I questioned Helen's perceptions regarding her health and whether this had been impacted over the years by Paul coming and going for employment. I inquired, "Do you think having a partner who comes and goes for employment impacts women's health?" This question opened the door to an in-depth conversation about women's health and the needs of women who are left behind. Helen explained:

*In terms of health, it impacts it; sure it does. I never realized how physically hard it is to be the one living here taking care of the house, kids, and working. For example, I know my sleep has suffered. I can't tell you the number of hours of sleep I have given up because I have an absentee partner. I only need about 4 to 5 hours of sleep to function now. In terms of mental health, I think it affects that as well, because I have all these wonderful ideas but I can't achieve them because I am alone with no support. So, I start thinking, "Oh, I'm such a loser." I really don't think I'm a loser, but I feel like living this life keeps me from evolving into that powerful, competent or successful person that I want to be.*

*Then there is the other area of making friends and socializing. You can't just go off and be with your girlfriend when they are inviting you on outings or for weekends away. I have my family, my work, my friends and I know everybody, but I choose not to make a whole lot of friends because I can't give anymore of myself. I end up being very choosy about whom I want to be with and I try to avoid the others, because I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. I don't have time for a needy friend, so I'm very particular in making sure that the person that I'm hanging out with isn't going to drain me. I have to pace myself, so I choose not to be as visible. I just need to be reclusive sometimes.*

### **Women Need to be Supported**

As we talked Helen expressed a need for support for women who are the primary caregivers for children while their partners are employed out of province. Repeatedly the idea of a support group targeting women left behind was discussed. However, the more we explored this idea the more apparent it became that labeling it a support group which targeted women left behind as a result of a husband's labor migration may not be valuable; and could actually perpetuate judgments by others in the community about how women left behind are coping with their partners' absences. Helen elaborated:

*My other friends have their husbands living here and are in happy, stable, perfect marriages. If women's husbands and neighbors knew that they went to a support group there would be issues, because going to a support group would mean that I was a failure and that I couldn't cope. I would feel different and I don't want to be seen as different although I know I am. I know this sounds ridiculous, but I don't want to be labeled and I know that everyone on this Island is labeled in some way. But to have a support group means going and admitting to others that my husband chose leaving for work over me and our family; that maybe he thinks I'm not attractive, I'm not desirable. I think it would say a whole lot of negative things about me, because I was left alone to raise our children.*

After much discussion, Helen felt that the best strategy to support women and children left behind would be the creation of a family resource center; where women and children could gather in a supportive environment that emphasizes health and wellbeing through relationship building and play. Helen imagined how beneficial something like this could be for all families, but particularly those who had a loved one who came and went for employment out of province.

She revealed:

*I don't think I would go to a support group, but if you called it a different name, like a book club or a husband bashing club, or something like that I'd go. I'd go to a family centre but I'm not going to go to a support group for the lowly, loser, married single mother. But if you could disguise it in a way that it was open to all women and children, then maybe you could meet up with other women whose husbands also go away. Then you would realize that there are other women who are living the same kind of life that you are and that would be really helpful.*

As I listened to Helen share her thoughts and feelings about this, I was attuned to what she was verbalizing as she envisioned what it might be like to participate in such a formalized support group for women. I also began to further question how Helen viewed herself in her self-identified role as the married single mother. Comments such as not wanting to participate in the “lowly, loser, single-mother club” and her acknowledgement that Paul chose work over her and the children were deeply revealing. Helen acknowledged her fears of being judged by others in the community as a result of Paul being employed out of province. I questioned whether these

fears were based in reality or if these may be reflective of her personal perceptions of judgment that she had internalized over the years about being left behind. By exploring this together, Helen reflected more on the phenomenon of husbands leaving their wives and children behind for employment out of province in the context of many families on PEI in similar situations and which continued to remain a taboo subject. Helen shared that while everyone knew that this phenomenon existed, rarely did people want to speak about it with others living in the community.

Continuing along this vein of discussion, I questioned;

Why do you think that this is such a taboo issue? It is kind of like an elephant in the room. Everybody knows the men who are going away for work and the women who are left behind are responsible for everything. Everyone knows whose husbands are working here and those working at a distance away from PEI.

Helen replied:

*That's right and they also think they know how much money these women's husbands are making. People use to think Paul made \$600,000 per year. Now he makes a third of his previous salary, but everyone still thinks he makes all of this money. Men won't talk about this because they think that they are doing the right thing by providing for their children. And for women there is a financial gain. It's either; do you want the financial gain or do you want to be on welfare? So who's going to complain and say, "Let's try it the other way? Let's go on welfare."*

*Here on PEI we live in a culture of poverty where so many people and families are dependent on EI (employment insurance). It all goes back to the economics of the community. PEI is a great place to raise children but for adults there's nothing here for them; for your husband, for my husband there's not a lot to offer and it's not healthy for them. There is also a jealousy factor that comes into play by those who do not have money towards those that do. This could be the catalyst behind a lot of the judging comments you hear by those who don't leave the province for work. In a larger city, no one knows their neighbors and no one really cares about them. They may think about someone having more than them but wouldn't comment on it.*

As I listened to Helen discuss how people in the community believed they knew Paul's annual salary and, in turn, judged her family based on their economic wellbeing, it became apparent to me that while Helen may have yearned for a life where Paul could be home full time



with the family and working on PEI, she would not want this if they had to make difficult financial sacrifices that could impact their children. While Helen may have viewed that a culture of poverty existed on PEI, she had financial security in knowing that this would not be their family's reality, as long as Paul continued working out of province. Continuing our conversation regarding why the phenomenon of men leaving families behind for employment was such a taboo subject, Helen shared:

*I don't know why this issue is so taboo and not being addressed on PEI. But when you think about it, parenting, nurturing children, women's well-being, and women's health, when it's a woman's issue it's at the bottom of the f..... totem pole. Excuse my language but there's probably been more studies done on Viagra than there have been on women and children left behind when their husbands go away for work. People around here don't even think about the lives of women whose husbands are working away and all that they have on their plates. There is no empathy or understanding at all. I feel like saying, "Get a grip; you don't know how lucky you are to have someone there to make a meal for you. I'd give anything to come home and have a meal waiting for me. I come home and it's a messy house, trying to find something to eat; then out the door for one of the girls' activities."*

*In terms of this whole issue, I think we need to have some public awareness. I don't think people ever consider that there are even problems and issues that are facing women when their partners work away. They just say, "Suck it up, you're a woman, you're a mother, deal with it. I'm home and I've got lots of work too and I've got lots of laundry and I work full time." But it's different for some women whose husband is working away and you are home with the kids alone and also doing everything.*

Recognizing that there is a need to enhance understanding and awareness regarding the experiences of women and families left behind, Helen felt that there was a significant need for women to be able to speak about these experiences. She stressed the importance of having an informal setting, such as a family resource center, where women could come together with their children to share their thoughts and feelings with other women in a manner that was free of judgment or commitment. As I probed further into this I inquired, "What do you think would be most helpful to support women who are left behind and caring for children while their husbands are working out of province?" Considering this question thoughtfully, Helen confided:

*Most women don't need a counselor; they just need to have a non-judgmental person to vent to. I think it's so important to have somebody to talk with and unleash to, but not during a formal appointment or support group. I think counselors think that they have to solve your problems and nobody is going to solve my problem. I solve my problem by venting, by expressing, dialoguing and sharing. I would love to find another woman who I could talk to who is also living a similar experience. You want to have this wonderful connection with a woman where you can come together, share and unload about how things are really going. Then if you see each other in a few weeks and want to connect again, great, but if she wants to start talking all the time and being together all the time, well she's just ruined it because I can't take on anymore.*

*I think that it would be wonderful to have a place like a family resource center where women could connect and compare and heal; and children could have fun playing and it would not be a group that you needed to commit to. You would only go there when you wanted to. If you said it was a scheduled meeting or group for moms, then I wouldn't go. I know I would just let somebody down if I had to commit to be there every week.*

### **Reflecting on the Past**

As Helen and I were nearing the end of our conversational interviews, I was curious to learn more about her family and hopes for their future. In previous interviews Helen had mentioned that within the next three years, Paul would no longer be employed in a job that required him to work out of province. I learned a great deal about what she and the family had sacrificed over the years while Paul worked and lived at a distance. During our final conversational interview, we spoke about life, the passage of time, and regrets that wives may experience as they reflect on the years that have passed while their husband has been away. Helen reflected deeply on what she felt had been lost and what had been gained by all members of the family, especially over the past nine years that Paul had been coming and going for employment.

Exploring this further I inquired,

When work ends and it is time for families to come together again, I wonder what men will reflect on as they look back on their lives and their absence from their families over the years. Do you think they will realize that their wife was the one there, day after day, raised his children and watched them grow up? He provided a cheque and provided well, but he missed out on the day-to-day life of his family.

Helen paused for a moment before replying then shared:

*That's what's happening now. Paul is reflecting on this all of the time now. He has missed his girls growing up and is now saying, "Oh my god, where is the time gone? I missed the girls growing up, didn't I? I want them to be little girls again." He is coming home now to visit and asking, "Where are my kids? I want to see the kids?" And I'm saying, "You know that they are getting older now, they don't want to be home. They want to be out with their friends." The reality is that Paul had 20 years to be a father, and now the girls are at the point in their life where they don't care where their father is. Paul is feeling this now and I am thinking, "How could you not anticipate this?" For years, he didn't want to nurture them, he just wanted to provide. The economic benefits were huge but the price Paul has paid for this lifestyle is massive and coming back to bite him in the ass now. It's also biting me in the ass too because I feel guilty.*

*I have this amazing relationship with my girls because I was able to stay home with them. They're happy, they are healthy, and they're kind and respectful girls, but I feel guilty and sad over Paul's lack of relationship with the kids. I tried to get him to be part of their lives but now I feel guilty; did I do enough to push him? I look back now and remember saying, "Don't bring the girls home clothes, take them to a show when you are home." I feel like I should have been more on him about this but I wasn't. I thought "You're an adult, you figure it out." The ugly part of this is now when I hear Paul say, "I don't have a relationship with the girls." I kind of think, "That's your loss sweetie." I guess this is what happens in men's lives when they go off and make money to look after their families.*

*Paul's career was very important to him and we got in the way of it when we moved to be with him. We wanted him to be home for supper and he didn't want to be home for supper with us. He worked away a lot of the time and that was a personal choice for him. Who am I to say that was a wrong choice? This was the right choice for him. He would not have been happy just being here working on PEI and being with us day after day. And so I thought, "That's fine, I can do this." I loved parenting, I loved being a mommy and he made enough money to provide. I was very happy to just nurture and play with my children. I didn't want anything else for myself. Paul has probably paid more of a price, because the children have grown up without their daddy. I think he still made an impact on them. The girls love their daddy, but he doesn't have a whole bunch of credibility with them.*

As we shared together what was lost and what was gained over the years related to the extent Paul participated in his family, I was intellectually stuck by the profound insights Helen gleaned from our conversations. Listening to her describe the price that Paul had paid to pursue his career and economic security for their family, I was reminded of our previous conversation specific to her descriptions of their family photo albums. As Helen reflected on these, she felt

saddened by the tangible proof of Paul's absence in the family over the years. When she described his absence in the most significant life events of their children I, too, felt sadness. I wondered if Paul had ever looked through these family photo albums. As he continued to reflect on his lack of relationship with his daughters and impending retirement, these photographs would become a permanent reminder of all that he missed out on during his family's life.

While Paul was beginning to recognize the impact his absence from the family had on them over the years, Helen also questioned whether she could have done more to encourage the development of relationships between Paul and their daughters. She worries that if she had been more adamant about this, perhaps the children would know their father better and see him more than just a financial provider for their family.

### **Hopes for the Future**

As Helen reflected on Paul's regrets regarding his lack of relationship with the children, we also had a further conversation about their marriage. Particularly, we explored together how Helen envisioned their relationship evolving over the next few years as Paul transitioned from being employed out of province to retiring and returning to live with Helen again on a permanent basis. This would be a significant life transition and one that must be considered in light of the fact that Helen and Paul had grown accustomed to living apart for many years. Helen openly acknowledged that she had never fully engaged in the role of a wife or partner as a result of Paul's absence from the life of their family over the years. She felt that his limited time at home with the family, coupled with his extra marital affair with another woman, had contributed to a lack of connection and trust within their marriage.

While she respected Paul, Helen, like the children, found it stressful when he returned home to visit the family; on average four days every eight weeks. If challenges to reunification

existed in those brief periods of time when they were together as a couple, I questioned how their relationship would evolve over the next few years when Paul retired and permanently returned home. By this time, their youngest daughter would have graduated from public school and would possibly be attending a post-secondary institution, perhaps living away from home. Helen and I explored what it might look like for her and Paul to finally reunite as a couple. I commented:

It must be challenging to think about how you will come back together again as a couple after being apart for so long. It reminds me of an accordion where you have expanded and now are contracting and coming together again.

Helen replied:

*That's exactly right. We're still trying to figure out when and how we are going to come together again. I don't know what I will do if he decides to take another job that's not on PEI, and I come to the point where I don't have the commitments of parenting here because the girls will be in university. I don't think there was ever a time where I thought Paul wasn't going to be in my life, even during our marital crisis. Sometimes I wanted him not to be, but I always knew that at some point in life we would regroup. He was on hold for me, because I was too busy raising kids and he was too busy being a career man. I knew we would regroup when the time was right. I also knew he couldn't come back and live here with us and still build his career, and that was ok. Now as he is beginning to reflect on life and not making the money that he used to make, I am starting to like him more. All of a sudden he's noticing what is real, and before he was only noticing what was affluent and the material things that came with the money he was making and his life away from us.*

As Helen and I concluded our discussions regarding life transitions and family reunification, I remarked, "I can't help but think again about the metaphor of the accordion we used to describe your marriage, when Paul retires, do you hope to reunite and come back together and live again as a couple?" Without hesitation Helen replied, *"I hope that will resume the life we had before he left. I anticipate that, but that may not happen. I will be very sad if it doesn't, but that is what I anticipate."*

## **Final Reflections**

Through our conversational interviews it was clear that Helen and Paul's roles had become quite distinct over the years. She had evolved into a self-described married single mother responsible for the nurturance of their children and care of their home, while also working outside of the home. Paul provided well financially for the family while living two distinct lives; one as the corporate, powerful, successful business man; the other as an absentee partner who came home to visit his family, on average, 30 to 50 days per year. While this had come at a cost to all members of the family, Helen recognized that she was able to be the mother she always dreamed of, but admitted she had never really had an opportunity to engage in the roles of a wife and partner. She understood that she did not know what it was like to live in a family where two people were together day-in and day-out, nurturing the growth and development of a family.

Over the nine years of Paul working away, Helen reflected on and revealed much about what had been lost in their marriage and family as a result of Paul's decision to pursue a career that required him to work outside of the province. She shared with me a great deal about her unfulfilled roles and unmet expectations. As Helen expressed these poignant stories of experience to me, she came to new insights about how her marriage and relationship with Paul had evolved over time. Listening to Helen share her life narratives, I recognized that despite the years that had passed and the hurt that had been experienced, Helen still loved Paul. As they embark on their next stage of life together, they will have to navigate through new life transitions. Paul will be retiring and returning home to live with Helen; however their children may no longer be living at home with them.

This may not be such a difficult adjustment for Paul, as he was often absent in the lives of their children; however readjusting to Paul coming home while her daughters are living independently may prove to be difficult for Helen. As I listened to Helen share her hopes for the future, I began to question if it would even be possible to pick up and begin again as a family when a loved one finally returns home after being away for so long. How can things be the same when so many years have passed and life experiences have been missed? Can they, as a couple, ever resume the life they had before Paul left, if when he returns their children are grown adults living independently outside of their family home? Or will they need to try and create a new life together as a couple upon his retirement and return home?

Helen began to question the impact Paul's coming and going for employment had on their children. Throughout many of their formative years, Paul was absent. This resulted in many missed opportunities for connection and relationship building between him and their children. Exploring this together, Helen realized that Paul was filled with regret over what he had missed in his daughters' lives over the years due to his employment outside of the province. She believed that he would atone for this in the future, should he ever have an opportunity to become a grandfather as he would "*not be climbing the corporate ladder and will be in a different frame of mind.*"

By co-participating with Helen in this narrative inquiry, I learned a great deal about the impact coming and going has on women's personal development and their perceptions regarding the multiple roles they engage in. While other women I have co-participated with have hypothesized about the reasons why families do not move away from PEI to be with their husbands who work at a distance, Helen moved with their children so that the family could remain together. Unfortunately, Paul continued to travel for employment, resulting in him being

away from the family for weeks at a time, but with Helen living in a different city and still left behind as the lone caregiver to their children.

Helen's sense of identity was influenced throughout her life by both place and relationship. Unlike previous co-participants, Helen's feelings of connection to rural PEI were profound. She had an inner peace that was nurtured through her community and the rural landscape that surrounded her. This was evident throughout our conversational interviews and the photographs she shared with me. Helen yearned for authenticity within relationships and could immediately recognize where she belonged and where she did not. When living with Paul in foreign cities and being surrounded by people whose identity was shaped by material possessions and wealth, she felt that this was in direct contrast to her personal values and desire for authentic relationships; she needed to be nurtured within a community that she perceived to be safe and supportive.

As I listened to Helen share how beneficial our conversational interviews had been for her, I reflected more on the transformational power of narrative inquiry as a research methodology. I recognize more profoundly now the therapeutic value that may occur as women share, tell, and re-tell their stories of being left behind. Through these conversations Helen was able to articulate life narratives in a safe, non-judgmental environment. She viewed me to be impartial and genuinely interested in learning more about her experiences. With each talk our intimacy grew, which contributed to a research relationship that evolved based on mutual respect, caring, and sharing. As we concluded our final interview together, Helen confided:

*Women need someone like you to talk with; somebody who is non-judgmental. It is a healthy process to just be able to do that. When I think about how we came together for these interviews, it wasn't as if I was coming for therapy or a formal appointment. It was just a chat with another woman who did not judge, did not blame, and didn't take any sides. You just sat and listened and poured me a cup of tea and nurtured me while I*



*vented. You, who are a very talented and gifted nurse, who can help people, but most people aren't like you. I've never really discussed my experiences with another woman, especially another woman who hasn't lived this. I felt comfortable and knew that you wouldn't be evaluating me or thinking badly of me for what I was saying. Being able to sit and talk with you, I actually processed more through our conversations than I ever did before, when I was holding it all in and not having anybody to vent to. I was able to reflect on so many experiences that were in my mind and then speak about it all with you. So that was kind of neat.*

As Helen and I explored her storied life together, significant and meaningful experiences were shared, out of which new understandings about these experiences emerged. The insights she gained through our co-participation were profound and awakened Helen to how her life experiences had impacted her perceptions regarding roles of partners and parents. Helen also shared her perceptions regarding how being left behind over time impacted women's health. She particularly emphasized the importance of providing support for women left behind as a way to mitigate feelings of stress which can build as a result of multiple roles and responsibilities that women must engage in when faced with these types of situations.

Through our conversational interviews and the sharing of photographs, Helen presented many personal life narratives during our time together. As I reviewed and reflected on field texts and constructed them into interim and then final research texts, I connected once again with Helen to discuss if there had been anything shared during our time together that she did not want to have included in this dissertation. Helen expressed that there was nothing shared that she did not want included. She was pleased that someone was researching this issue and wanted to share her experiences so that others could gain a deeper understanding and appreciation about the phenomenon of women left behind while their husbands worked out of province. It is my hope that by illuminating Helen's stories of experience, a deeper understanding of this subject will

lead to greater public awareness and support for women living in such complex and challenging relational and familial situations.

## **Chapter 7 - Entering into a Research Relationship with Amber**

Amber was the fourth and final co-participant in this narrative inquiry. I was referred to Amber through Stephanie, a woman I met early in my doctoral program. Stephanie shared my contact information with Amber who contacted me and requested an information letter. I asked Amber to call me if she had further questions and/or was interested in participating. Within a month of connecting, Amber called me and expressed her desire to participate in the inquiry. In this conversation, we determined that Amber met all of the criteria required for participation. Prior to ending our call, a date, time, and location for our first conversational interview were determined. Amber suggested that we schedule our first interview at the local coffee shop. Although I had proposed in my information letter and consent form that I would meet participants in a location of their choosing, I did not feel that we should conduct our conversational interviews at a coffee shop. I reminded Amber that our interviews would be digitally recorded and that being in a public location may not be the best venue for sharing personal stories of her experiences. I suggested that we meet at my parents' home which was vacant during the months of May through October. Amber was receptive to this suggestion. We met there on five occasions during June and July. Our conversational interviews were scheduled over her lunch hour and lasted between 1 and 1½ hours. Amber's employer was supportive of her participation in this inquiry and permitted her time away from work, with pay, to co-participate and share her stories of experience.

Amber was a mother of two adolescent children. Her husband Eddie had been coming and going for employment for the past 12 years. She was in her late 30s and had been married to Eddie for 15 years. While busy with the day-to-day management of the household, she also was employed full-time outside of the home. The following chapter presents an overview of stories

co-constructed during our time together. Amber's stories of experience are reflected through our voices coming together in conversation and through the sharing of personal photographs. These stories are interwoven where applicable with my own stories of experience and research reflections, and are aligned with current scholarly literature. As I thought deeply about these stories lived, told, and re-told, new meanings and questions emerged which will also be explored throughout this chapter.

### **Making the Decision to Leave for Employment**

During our initial conversational interview, Amber and I discussed, at length, the circumstances that led to Eddie's decision to leave for employment out of province. For the first years, Eddie was seasonally employed out of province, working away from early December until late March and then returning home to be with his family for the rest of the year. Two years ago Eddie was offered a full-time position with an employer out of province. Together, Amber and Eddie decided that he would accept this position. This led to a new pattern of coming and going where he was home exclusively December to mid-January and the remaining time came and went for employment. Eddie's patterns of coming and going were unpredictable and dependent entirely upon the location of the project he was assigned to. While working on a project within Atlantic Canada he could see his family on a weekly basis whereas when assigned to a project in Western Canada he returned home, on average, 1 week following every 6 weeks of employment. During the timing of our conversational interviews, Eddie was employed in Western Canada. While the location of employment could vary, depending on the project he was assigned to, Eddie and Amber decided that there would never be a time when they were apart for more than 2 months at a time and Eddie would always be home with the family from mid-December to mid-January. During our first conversational interview, Amber recalled Eddie's initial year away:

*One of his friends went out to Alberta the year before Eddie went and he came home with all of this money. My husband was on EI because he farmed, and we were finding it hard with the two kids. We talked about this for a good year. If things didn't pick up we were going to have to do something, and really that was the only option. There's nothing on the Island in the winter, especially when most of the guys don't have their high school education. My job wasn't paying big bucks so Eddie said I'll try it for 1 year. The first year he left in December and came down with an illness and returned home in January. He said he was never going back but then the next December came and he went out again and got along well and came home in March so he went back again the year after that. For us it all began with just trying it to see how it goes, but then the money started to get tight and Eddie started to think maybe I can do it again, the other guys are going, and I should be able to do it too.*

*The third year he was gone, I went out to Alberta to visit him for a couple of weeks. I wanted to see what he did and where he was living. I found that where he was at was a lot like home. You'd walk into a restaurant and it was, "Hey Eddie, how're you doing?" They all knew each other, he was one of them and honestly, half of the restaurant would be filled with people from our community. Companies in Alberta are looking for workers and will ask Eddie to round up some of his buddies from here. He will call around and see if anyone is interested in some work out there and the next thing you know, the men are gone. That's how it goes; it's not like the companies are here putting ads in the papers, a lot of this is just word of mouth. And then it seemed like all of a sudden everybody from our community is doing this. Companies there love Island workers because they are there for the money and they're there to work. They're not there to party; the guys from here are there to make money and want to work as many hours as they can get.*

As we continued discussing Eddie's coming and going for employment, I was interested in learning more about Eddie's transition from a seasonal employee to one who worked out of province on a full-time basis. I was curious about the factors that led to their decision 2 years ago which, in essence, had resulted in Eddie living and working out of province the majority of the year. I inquired, "For the first 10 years, Eddie was working away for a couple of months every year. How did you come to the decision 2 years ago that he would accept a full-time position away?"

Amber replied:

*He was farming here for the summers and then going to Alberta logging in the winters. He and the farmer that he worked for here had different opinions on a lot of things. He would come home every night complaining. And I said, "If you don't like your job that*

*much it's time to start looking for something else." He would say, "Well what else can I do?" He didn't graduate high school; he went to Grade 11 and had no interest in doing a GED. A company came to PEI and they were looking for laborers at a construction project that they were starting here. He applied and 2 weeks later he was working for them. The first week of September the company asked him to go to Western Canada to work on a project and all of this just started from there. He loves what he does and is so good at it; I could never ask him to not do it. In a year, he's become a superintendent for this company.*

### **To Move or Not to Move: That is the Question**

I was interested in learning more about Eddie's coming and going and how this had been experienced by the family. As we entered into this discussion together, I asked whether they, as a couple, had ever discussed the option of Amber and the children moving away from PEI so that they could be together. Considering this, Amber recalled:

*We talked about this for probably 2 years. The kids were in elementary school then but we didn't move. Then you say, "We'll wait a few years and then maybe we will move when the kids are in junior high school." But by then our daughter was saying, "No, I do not want to move." At that time, Eddie was saying that there were a lot of drugs, and a lot of suicides happening there. This made my decision easy; I didn't want the kids exposed to that. So I started thinking, "What the heck would the kids do out there? Would they resent me if I uproot them and took them away from all of their friends and family? Here all of their friends are only 10 minutes away." I also started thinking about what if something ever happened with my mom and dad. If I lived out there I couldn't just run home to be with them.*

Probing further I inquired:

How do you think families come to the decision of "we are either going to stay here and live with you [the husband] coming back and forth to see us or we are going to make a permanent move so we can all be together?"

Amber replied:

*For us, I think if the kids had been three or four we probably would have moved because we wouldn't have been taking them out of school, taking them away from friends, breaking up their whole little world and then trying to get them to fit in and find new friends out there. You also have to think about your family living here too. For some people the change in lifestyle would be too much. To go out there with the hustle and bustle of it all, some people just don't want to change their life like that and so it would be better for them to just stay behind and let him go away and work.*

Amber shared her perceptions regarding why so many men in rural PEI were engaging in interprovincial labor migration. She spoke at length about the high wages and abundance of employment opportunities available in Northern Alberta. Amber shared her thoughts regarding why men chose to engage, year after year, in employment out of province while their wives remained behind caring for their children and home. She explained in detail the contrast between the current economy of Prince Edward Island and that of Alberta. She also offered her perceptions regarding the differences she had noticed in terms of how employees were treated by employers on PEI as compared to the employers that Eddie had worked for out of province. As we began speaking about the many factors that contributed to men coming and going for employment out of province, I wondered aloud if the catalyst behind this phenomenon was always money. Without hesitation, Amber shared:

*Oh definitely! It's always for the work and the money. Men seem to really enjoy working, enjoy their jobs, and being busy out there. It's all about the money at first because it's the money that gets them to leave home for the work. But once they get there, if they really enjoy what they are doing, they just can't turn back. To come back here and work their guts out for \$10 an hour, it just doesn't appeal to them anymore. I could never just ask Eddie to quit his job now because he loves it. It's not even about the money anymore. He would do this even if it was a minimum wage just because he loves it.*

I commented:

And Eddie is now working in a place where he works really hard but is also making really good money and has opportunities to keep advancing with the company.

Amber responded:

*Exactly. And he is valued for the job that he does. He is appreciated and they (his employers) let him know that. Working in farming here, I find people here do not have a lot of respect for their employees. The guys here are basically just there doing a job to get paid. Here employers will make you work 16 hours per day and not even say thank you at the end of the day; maybe not even give you a bottle of water. I notice even when Eddie and I are talking on the phone and he talks with one of his workers, he will put the phone down but I can still hear him talking. I can hear the pleases and thank you's and*

*just the way he talks to them like, “Would you mind doing this when you have a chance or this has to be done between now and dinner time so anytime you have a chance to get this done I’d appreciate it.” Things are so different there and I hear the enjoyment in his job. Out there, Eddie puts in a ton of hours but he knows at the end of the day they are going to say, “Take tomorrow off, you’ve worked a lot of hours, or if you want to take the afternoon off, take the afternoon off and come back in the evening.” This started because of money but it turned into a job that he really likes.*

“And with options and opportunities,” I continued.

Amber affirmed:

*Yes, lots of opportunities which just aren’t around here. Here on the Island, we don’t have anything. We don’t have resources, we don’t have oilfields. People don’t want windmills and we don’t have much room to put them up anyway. Our things are fishing, farming, and tourism and it’s all seasonal. And honestly, what can you do on PEI in the winter? The opportunities are just not here. And that’s THE issue – you want him to be making the money and doing the job that he is doing there, you want to be together, you want him to be here with you and the kids, but it just can’t happen here. There’s really nothing here that the Island can offer people.*

As we explored the multiple factors which had influenced their family’s decision to engage in temporary interprovincial labor migration, I was curious to learn more about Amber’s community and current trends she had noticed regarding men who were coming and going for employment. From my review of literature to support this inquiry, I was aware of the demographic trends specific to outmigration, specifically from the Western Region. Coming to this region to meet Amber during the summer months, the seasonal nature of the rural economy was highly evident; potato fields in bloom, fishing harbors with lobster boats lined row after row and numerous beaches alive with people playing in the sand and swimming in the ocean.

Conducting conversational interviews with Amber in the Western Region, I was interested to learn more about temporary labor migration within her community and asked if she had any idea of the number of men who were coming and going for employment. Amber replied, *“Just in my community, I would say at least 30% of the men are gone at some point*



*through the year, for more than a month at a time.*” I shared with her a statistic from a study that had been commissioned by the local economic development agency reporting that between 2005 and 2010, 54% of men aged 18 to 55, living in the Western Region had left the province at least once for employment (Atlantic Evaluation Group). Hearing this statistic Amber responded:

*That number does not surprise me in the least. Now when you hear, “So and so is going out west for work” it’s not that big of a deal but when Eddie first started going, it was such a big deal; it was like the world had ended. Then within 2 or 3 years everything had changed and it was like everyone was going and then it just seemed to become the norm around here.*

### **Impact of Coming and Going on Children**

As Amber and I explored the impact of outmigration on rural communities, our conversational interviews led to discussions regarding how Eddie’s coming and going over the years had affected their family and, in particular, their children. Being ages two and four when Eddie initially began leaving the province temporarily for employment, Amber shared about the passage of time and the evolution of their family over the years Eddie had been working away.

Amber recalled:

*At first the children were too young and time meant nothing. Whenever he left for work, they thought he wasn’t coming back. Our daughter didn’t really understand what was going on and it’d be, “Where’s Dad, where’s Dad?” When she talked to him on the phone it was always, “When are you coming home?” And then that turned to her crying. So you limit their time talking to him on the phone to once a week which was hard, but it’s harder being here and seeing them cry every night after they get off the phone with him. And with the kids, you are always trying to explain that it’s only 4 more weeks before Dad is home again. We always had the calendar and the date circled when Dad’s coming home. Each night when the kids went to bed, we would x off the days until we could go and get him at the airport. We did that every year.*

*The first year Eddie left for work the children came to the airport with me to say good-bye. The second year she would have been 5. She clung to his leg and just howled when he had to leave. He was trying to go through security to catch his plane and trying to get her off his leg. To this day she will not go to the airport to say good bye to him. She’ll say goodbye at home but she can’t come to the airport. So when it’s time to drop off Eddie, it is either just me, or just me and Evan. I ask, but I always know what the answer is before I ask. I don’t blame her, it’s hard to say goodbye to your dad. Our son*

*comes with me to the airport but he covers up a lot. You can see that it's hurting him too but he acts strong like, "I'm a man, and I'm not gonna cry." You can see it in his eyes that this hurts him too when dad leaves but he turns away. After we drop Eddie off at the airport we go shopping, to a movie, or go out to eat. We always do something together.*

As I listened to Amber share early memories of Eddie leaving and the impact this had on their children, I realized that I had not yet considered how profound the experience of having a father come and go for employment would be for young children left behind. Unlike other women who co-participated with me in this narrative inquiry, Amber's children were preschoolers when Eddie began leaving the home for employment. I thought deeply about how a mother would explain this to a young child. Her vivid memories painted a picture of what this experience was like for their children. I can only imagine how difficult it would have been for Amber to be left behind, trying to console her children as they cried for their father and were fearful that he would not come back to them. I thought about how challenging this would be to explain to children who were at a developmental stage where they could not comprehend the meaning of time. I thought how difficult it must have been for Amber to witness her daughter screaming and clinging to her father's leg as he tried to clear security at the airport to catch his plane for Alberta.

I reflected deeply about Amber's experience of being left behind during this time. Becoming the lone parent of two preschoolers, she needed to continually comfort and support the children as they processed their feelings of having their father leave for work in another province. She also needed to discover ways to convey to the children that their father would, in time, be coming home again. I thought about their daughter and how Amber repeatedly shared with me how her daughter hated going to the airport. As I reflect on this sentiment now, I

question whether this may have something to do with her experience as a young child going to the airport and watching her father leave.

As Amber shared these life narratives with me, I began to think more about the roles of men and women and how these evolve from early childhood. Amber spoke at length about how trying it was for the children to say goodbye to their father. And although they were older and could comprehend that Eddie would be home again in 4 to 6 weeks, the experience of having to say goodbye to their father was still difficult. I noted how differently Amber described each child's response to their father leaving for employment out of province. While their daughter cried and said goodbye to her father at home, their son often accompanied his mother to the airport. Amber noticed the hurt in his eyes but shared that he did not cry but rather turned away when it was time for his father to leave. I wondered if this had always been the way he had responded. As a small boy would he cry at the airport or had it been engrained into him from early childhood that boys must be strong and not cry?

I recalled during one of our conversational interviews that Amber described her son as someone who,

*Often sits back, watches and just takes things in. He's quiet and it takes a lot for him to break out of his shell and tell you if something is bothering him. He thinks of himself as the man of the house. And I find when Eddie comes home he kind of gets taken aback because he does a lot of the man work around the house.*

As I considered Amber's description of her son, I wondered at what point in the evolution of their family did their son associated his role within their family as being "the man of the house." I wondered if this role association was perhaps a reason that he chose to accompany his mother to the airport. Did he view this as a way to show strength and offer support to his mother as she watched her husband leave for employment?

Thinking about the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of continuity and situation (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I recalled one of our conversational interviews where Amber shared, at length, how difficult it was for their family to be without Eddie over the Christmas holidays. The passage of time was apparent as she described how Eddie had been out of province for employment and absent for eight out of 10 Christmases. Being away at this time each year, Eddie missed all of the children's Santa Claus visits. As time passed, Amber and the children developed new family Christmas traditions without Eddie. The passage of time was palpable as Amber shared memories of past Christmases and how their family had evolved over the years that Eddie had been working away.

### **Lost Christmases**

*I would find come October, the kids would start to get anxious. Eddie would get the phone call from out West and they would hear him talking to his boss who wanted him out there in December and if he didn't leave the second week of December he'd have no job to go to! And that was when we needed the money, so he had to go. Eddie missed 8 out of 10 Christmases and all of the Santa visits. It was always just the kids and I for Christmas. And that is hard, that's crying most of your Christmas day. Eddie would call and out there it would be three in the morning because the kids and I would be up at 6. You could tell he was upset, you could hear in his voice as soon as he said hello and you're here by yourself, trying to describe the kids' Christmas to him. When he first left, we didn't have the money for a video camera, so it was just taking pictures and mailing pictures to him. We didn't even have email then.*

*When we got the video camera it made a big difference. I started taping Christmas. He felt better knowing that there was a tape on the way and that he was going to get to see the kids. I would make them wait when they woke on Christmas morning. I'd be like, "OK, I have to go and get the video camera." Then you could capture the kids and their, "Ah! Look what I got from Santa!" You could see their excitement in the videos and Eddie got to see that too.*

*Every year we do the same thing over the holidays. Eddie's parents always have their big meal on Christmas Eve, we went there on Christmas Eve, and then on Christmas morning we'd go back to Eddie's parents and open gifts and then go to my mom and dad's for dinner. So then when Eddie got the new job 2 years ago and he started coming home again for Christmas I was like, "OK, you can come home for Christmas but this is what we do and don't question. This is our tradition, this is what we do, and you're just along for the ride." And the first year he came home he was like, "Oh my God, this is great."*

*When I think about it now, I feel worse for Eddie than I do for me and the kids. We had all of our family around us except for Eddie, whereas he was out there working and all alone. He didn't get to see all of the children's excitement leading up to Christmas. He didn't see the Santa letter and getting the cookies ready for Santa and the carrots out for the reindeer. I remember our daughter would wake up on Christmas morning and say, "I heard Santa last night." And I would be like, "You did?" It's just all the little things like that. You know, I didn't really dwell on this with him, but whenever I sit down and think about it now, I realize that, wow, he missed a lot.*

Listening to Amber recall this story, I thought about my own children and the magic of Christmas. I thought of the excitement of our 10-year-old over the years as she wrote her letter to Santa and took it to the post office for mailing. I thought of how she beamed when she ran down the driveway after checking the mail and seeing that Santa had written her back. I thought about how my husband and I would take her to pick out the perfect Christmas tree and then come home to watch the Polar Express while we waited for the branches to open so that it could be decorated. I recalled the many get-togethers that occurred over the holidays with family and friends and the baking that we would do in order to have fresh cookies ready for Santa Claus. I looked at the annual photos with Santa and realized once again how quickly the years had passed and how much she had grown. While these traditions are ones that evolved for our family over the past 10 years, I question if these could have unfolded in the same way if my husband had been working away and not with us the majority of these years.

I considered how difficult it would be to remain composed and cheery as Amber watched their children open Christmas presents and eat Christmas dinners with their grandparents while also being lonely for Eddie and realizing how miserable he was alone in Alberta working and what he was missing as each Christmas passed. Being left behind, she was the one who was there for the children and experienced first-hand their joy in the holidays. While Eddie was able to watch this after-the-fact through videos, I question whether the experience of viewing these

alone in Alberta would have ever been as satisfying. By the time Eddie had gained employment out of province that provided him an opportunity to be home each year for Christmas with the family, the children no longer believed in Santa Claus and Eddie needed to go along with the annual holiday traditions that had been established in his absence. As Amber re-told and re-lived these stories of experience, new insights were revealed. As she recalled various Christmas memories over the past 12 years, she came to realize what had been lost with the passage of time and the maturing of their children from toddlers and preschoolers to junior and senior high school students. These stories revealed much regarding the narrative inquiry dimensions of continuity and space and illuminated how Eddie's coming and going for employment had impacted each member of the family and the life narratives that were lived, told, and retold.

### **Being Together yet Living Apart - Family Evolution**

Listening to Amber vividly describe the children's experiences saying goodbye to their father at the airport and Christmases spent apart opened the door to conversation specific to family reunification. I was interested in learning more about their family and what it was like for them during periods of time when Eddie was working away and also during his return to home following a work term. I began this conversation by asking, "What is it like for you as a family during the week that Eddie is home compared to when he is away working?"

Amber explained:

*When Eddie is home he's the great dad, the fun dad, and I'm still left to be the mother who tries to keep everything together. When he's home for the week it's all fun and games and you're trying to pack as much fun family stuff in as you can. You spend every minute together which is why I try and take time off work and save my vacation for when Eddie comes home. We usually do some shopping, go to a show, and go out for meals at restaurants. In the week he is home you try and do as much as you can together but then you turn around and it's gone, it's done, and it's time for him to go again.*

*Our alone time comes when the kids are at school. We'd never go and leave the kids behind. Eddie wants to spend every minute he can with the kids which I totally*

*understand but sometimes I think that I'd really like a date alone with him in the evening. I say that now but once he gets home, I couldn't just leave the kids behind and walk out the door with him because that's very greedy. People say well you need time alone but no, I don't really think that we do. To me it's about the kids right now, they're only young once and I don't have much longer to be at home with them.*

*Eddie comes home and it's, "Mom, Mom, Mom," all of the time like, "You'll never guess what happened Mom." I feel bad for Eddie because he's sitting there listening to us but this is just so natural because it's always just the three of us and the kids don't even think about it. It doesn't even cross their mind to include Dad in the conversation.*

*When Eddie is home you have to squeeze him into your routine and that's when the bickering starts. I thought it was just us who bicker but then you hear the same thing from other women whose husbands work away and you realize, "Oh you guys argue too?" "Well yeah, he comes home and he thinks that we should be doing this but we have our own routine now." I'm like, "Oh thank God, I thought it was just us. I thought we were the only ones who fought a few days after he got home. "Oh God, no, we bicker too." You ask the kids "Are you excited that dad's coming home?" And you can tell that they are, but then there is also some anxiety that things are going to change because we do it one way when it's just Mom and we do it another way when Dad is home.*

*The kids have told me that I change when Eddie's around. I think that I do become a little stricter because I know that he expects me to be strict. He says that I give them too much freedom and that I baby them too much. I kind of try to prove to Eddie that I can be strict but really I'm not at any other time. I didn't realize this until the kids pointed it out to me. They told me, "You know you change whenever Dad comes home." "No I don't." They're like, "Yes you do; you get cranky when Dad comes home." I'm like, "What?" I want Eddie to be happy and I want him to think that I'm following his rules too because he does have a part in raising them; they are our children and I want him to be part of raising them but he's really not. In the 5 weeks that he is home with us in December, Eddie puts on his father hat, but this is something you don't see very often, especially in these past 2 to 3 years. With a week here or a week there, he just hasn't been around enough to do it. Once he's gone and we get back into our routine of just being the three of us it's OK again.*

As we continued engaging in conversation regarding the evolution of their family over the years that Eddie had been coming and going for employment, Amber shared in depth about how their children had grown and matured in Eddie's absence. She acknowledged that "*Eddie doesn't realize they are growing up. He still thinks of them as the little kids.*" While the children were now adolescents, Eddie often viewed them to be still young children who should

not be at a stage in life where they were seeking opportunities to socialize with their friends and gaining greater independence away from their parents.

Amber and Eddie realized that there existed, at times, a dichotomy in terms of their parenting expectations. While Eddie was away working for weeks at a time, Amber became a lone parent. While left behind, she had full knowledge of the day-to-day social activities occurring in the lives of their children; however Eddie was only exposed to this when he returned to the family every 4 to 6 weeks. While at home, he had expectations regarding the frequency of when the children should be permitted to go out and with whom. This sometimes led to tension and conflict in the home and caused Amber to second guess her parenting of the children.

Recalling an example of this, Amber offered:

*When Eddie came home our daughter was on a school break and she wanted to go out with her boyfriend more than usual. Eddie was like, "No, you're not going." She came to me and said, "Mom, Dad won't let me go. If he wasn't here you'd let me go, what are we going to do?" So then it's me who ends up crying. They're fighting and I'm sitting back crying thinking, "What did I do, am I being too lenient with her?" And then I start second guessing my parenting. At the end of it I was like you know what, no, I'm doing a good job. And I told him, "You're here for a short time, you're not disrupting my way of doing stuff." I said to Eddie, "Think back to when you were that age. How often were you home?" Then he thinks about it and says, "I know you're right but it is different now; this is our daughter." And I tell him, "I know, but she's growing up. We have to let her." But Eddie is not seeing the progression. He comes home and he's still seeing them as being 8 and 10. I really think that they are stuck in his head at that age for him. When our daughter now tell him stuff that is going on in her life and then he tells me "I am trying my best not to react because I want her to talk to me but inside there is just this sick feeling of oh my god, she is growing up." I can see his point because he doesn't see all of the stuff that the kids are doing, how they're growing and how they're maturing.*

As Amber and I continued discussing the evolution of her family, she also identified how she had witnessed Eddie and Evan's relationship developing over the years that Eddie had been working away. Just as Eddie acknowledged how Chelsey was changing over the years that he worked away, he also recognized what he was missing in Evan's life as he grew and matured.



Prior to beginning our conversational interviews together, the family had made the decision that Evan would spend his summer vacation working and living in Western Canada with Eddie.

### **The Coming and Going of a Husband and Son**

Embarking on this narrative inquiry research, I anecdotally heard stories from families who had multiple family members coming and going for employment out of province. I heard about fathers and their adult sons who left the province for employment and how this impacted their extended family. However, I had not heard of adolescent children who had left PEI to be with their fathers. I was curious to learn more about this and asked Amber if she knew of other men who had their sons or daughters working out of province over the summer months. She replied,

*No I have never heard of anyone doing this. I mean you get the family trip in the summer like we did last year where the wife and the kids go out to visit and do the tour around and see where they are at but never where the kids are leaving after school ends to be with their dads.*

Amber shared that during Eddie's last Christmas visit with the family, Evan began to talk about going to work and living with his father during the summer months when he was on vacation from school. We spoke at length and on multiple occasions about how this decision was made and what it was like for Amber to now be waiting for both her husband and son to return.

Amber explained:

*Our son doesn't say a whole lot and at Christmas time he said, "You know Dad, it's not that great living here with two women all the time. Is there any way that I can spend the summer with you?" Eddie said, "The only way you can come and spend the summer with me is if you get a job. You're not just going to sit at the house and watch TV. That is not going to happen." So he said, "Get me a job, I don't care what it is, I'll do anything as long as I get to spend the summer with you." He and our son had talked about it first and then Eddie came to me and said, "I talked to him about coming to stay with me for the summer." I kind of laughed it off and was thinking, "You say this and then you will change your mind or something will happen and you won't be able to do it. I wish you hadn't said anything to him because you are going to get his hopes up."*

*When Eddie came home in April, he asked me if I had made up a resume for Evan and I was like "I didn't write up any resume, what would I put on a resume; he's a teenager and has never had a job." Eddie was like "Amber, I need you to do this. I want to take him with me. I want to try my best to get him a job so that he can come and be with me this summer. I am serious about this." So Eddie went and got him a job washing dishes at a restaurant. Yesterday was his first day at work and I was talking with him and said, "Ok I'm going to bed, I love you." And he said, "I love you too," which for our son is a big deal. I know he's a little lonesome but he is with his dad and that's a good thing. I need him to spend time with his dad. He needs to do the boy things.*

I was both intrigued and interested in learning more about Amber's experience of having her husband and son working out of province. As it had only been recently that her son had left, I wanted to hear how this life narrative was being constructed and the storied experiences that were being lived, told, and retold. While all of my co-participants had adolescent and early adult children, this was the first family where a child expressed a desire to leave the home in order to be with their father. Amber was very supportive of this decision and felt that it was important for her son to spend time with his father and learn about the various roles he engaged in while working and away from the family. Discussing this further I asked, "What are some of the things that he can learn from his father by being there with Eddie that he couldn't get learn by staying here and being with his uncle or you?"

Pausing momentarily Amber revealed:

*I want him to learn more from Eddie about how to handle different situations and am hoping that by seeing Eddie at work in his role as a supervisor, he will learn how you are supposed to act and treat people. Mainly I want him to see how Eddie reacts to people. All of the farmers here are the same; they all seemed to freak out at their workers over the simplest little things whereas Eddie can't get away with that in his job. I want Evan to see what it is like when you are not on the Island working in a farming environment. I want Evan to see that you can go away and work at something that you really enjoy. I want him to see how he needs to treat people and people need to treat him. Evan loves it out there and it is good for Eddie. The two of them are having some good male bonding time. He is already saying this is it every summer from here on out anywhere Dad is at I am going to be with him. I knew he would feel this way as soon as this started; this would be the way he would spend his annual summer holidays. After high school he*

*wants to do either welding, mechanics, or heavy equipment or then head to Fort McMurray or work with Eddie's company in another division.*

I commented:

“It's been a while since they have been together for more than just a week here or there, now that Evan is with him day after day, week after week.”

Amber replied:

*Even when Eddie does come home, I'm still here. I'm still the one making meals; I'm still cleaning the house. I am making sure the groceries are bought; I am making sure laundry is done. I am still here but Eddie gets to be here for the fun of it. But now Eddie has to be the responsible parent. He's like, "I don't want to leave him home too much alone because that's not fair to him." Eddie now sees what I have been saying about how lonesome I was when our son first left. He kept saying, "Come on it can't be that bad" but now he's saying "I can't imagine not having him with me come fall when he goes back to school. In a few weeks I can't imagine him not being here with me." They are both coming home together in September and I think Eddie's going to have a harder time saying goodbye this time. It's been a long time since he has needed to be responsible for our children. All of the things that I have to worry about every day with the kids, he is now seeing what I do. I think he is going to be lonesome and it's going to be hard when he goes back alone.*

Listening to Amber reflect on her parenting roles while Eddie was at home with the family and also working away led us both to new insights regarding the multiple responsibilities women must engage in as a result of their husbands' labor migration. Listening to Amber re-tell this storied experience I learned more about what it was like for her to have both her son and husband working out of province over the summer months. I gained a clearer understanding about her roles and responsibilities and how many of these were experienced by Eddie who became the lone parent to their son during their summer months together. As Eddie lived this experience he also gained a deeper appreciation of Amber and the multiple roles and responsibilities that she managed with the children, home, and work during his absence. Listening to Amber share her perceptions, I commented, “I find that really interesting that it was Evan going out there and being with your son over the summer that has given Eddie that new appreciation for you.”

Amber confirmed:

*Exactly, now he understands where I am coming from. He used to think that I was crazy for feeling guilty for working long hours or if I did work all week and someone asked me to go out on the weekend to a movie or something, I'd say no because I worked all week and I wasn't home with the kids. Eddie would be like "You've got to get out and do something for yourself" but now he realizes that you feel guilty leaving whenever you've been gone all week.*

I considered the insights Eddie had gained over the summer months with his son and I wondered how these would present during future visits with his family following a work term. I thought deeply about transitions and what it would be like for both father and son to be apart again after living together for the summer months and what it would be like for Amber who would welcome her son home after living and working in Western Canada. Eddie would be alone again and the primary responsibilities of day-to-day caregiving for the children would once again fall to Amber.

### **Maintaining a United Front**

Throughout our conversational interviews, Amber and I discussed the importance of striving to maintain a unified front with Eddie as they parented their children. While they both acknowledged that Amber was the primary caregiver for their children, she felt that it was of utmost importance to include Eddie whenever possible in family decisions. Although Eddie was working away, they both believed that they must maintain a united front in terms of decisions regarding the children. Communication was of utmost importance for their family and as their family had evolved over the years Eddie had been working away, so too had their patterns of communication. Amber recalled the early years when Eddie was first working out of province and the various ways they tried to promote communication within their family.

Amber explained:

*When Eddie first left, we didn't have money for a video camera, so it was just writing letters, taking pictures, and mailing them. We got to write letters to each other which we never would have done if he was home. Eddie is such a hockey person, and when it was time to put our son into hockey he missed out. He didn't get to see him learn to skate; he didn't see him play a game for years. In 2005 or 2006 I finally got a video camera so I'd take and mail videos of their hockey games. So then he felt better and least he could see what they were doing. And after watching the video he'd call Evan and say next time whenever you're doing this I want you to try that, and he kind of coached him. That's when I noticed their father-son relationship really developed.*

Continuing, I asked:

Is this something that came naturally in your relationship? Did you feel that if Eddie was leaving you still needed to raise your children together? That you were going to be talking with him a lot and that you needed him to still be involved?

Amber replied:

*This was never even a question, it was just automatic. We never really even talked about it. If I was away, I would still want to be involved with the children. If the kids are doing something that's new I'll say, "Well I have to talk to Dad." I never automatically say yes or no. I will make sure I call and ask him what he thinks. If they're going to a friend's place that I've never met before I'll say well I need to ask your dad. I will ask him, "Do you know these parents, and do you think I should let them go?" I've always done that. A few times when he was working away there were days where the kids were just plain bad and bickering and I'd be like, "I'm going to call your father." And there would be times when I'd pick up the phone and tell him, "You've got to talk to these kids. I cannot get them to listen. Here's the phone." He'd growl and they would listen to him and then after they got off the phone they would come to me and say, "Sorry mom," and that'd be it. Eddie has always done the, "Do not make me come home. If your mother can't control you and I have to come home, it's not going to be a good day. I'm not going to leave your mother alone to try and deal with you if you're going to give her a hard time." Since he left he has always said if there ever comes a day where you can't handle it, I'm done here; I'll leave the work and come back home. And I know that; they know that, and they know that they would be in trouble if he had to come home to deal with some stupid thing that they knew better than to have done.*

Throughout this narrative inquiry, I heard a great deal about the struggles to maintain a united front as parents while a father was employed out of province. While Amber recognized trying to parent children together while living in different parts of the country could be

challenging, she and Eddie made a conscious effort to present a united front when it came to their children. Amber shared that Eddie had always wanted to be involved in the lives of their children and was adamant that although he may work away, their family remained his top priority. Repeatedly, Eddie stressed to both Amber and the children that if his working away became too much for her, he would resign and immediately return home.

### **Fostering Communication and Connection**

On more than one occasion, Amber and I discussed how important communication was for families who have a loved one coming and going for employment out of province. This, she felt, was the key to maintaining family unity as years pass and a loved one continued to work away. During one of our conversational interviews, I offered,

It sounds to me like you are deliberate in wanting Eddie to feel the hum of day-to-day life here and that the two of you communicate a lot. Did anybody who's lived this life before tell you that you have to make an effort to keep talking? Was that something that from the time he left, you were like we've got to do this?

Amber shared:

*No, I'm just like that. I always want Eddie to be here with us. I'm forever texting and I do feel like he's here when I'm sending him texts and pictures of what is going on here and he's writing back. It might not be that big of a deal but I know he appreciates it. He wants to feel like he's here with us so I'm forever texting and trying my best to make him feel like he's here. I will take a picture of supper and send it to him. The other day when we were at the beach, I took a picture of the view from my lawn chair. He was like, "Oh my gosh, that looks so nice, the water looks great, you should go in." And then I went in and texted to tell him that I just got back from going into the water. Stuff like makes us feel like we're together all of the time.*

*To me there's never too much communication, I can never text the man enough, and he will do the same. It might be just a quick sentence but it makes you realize that he thinks of me, and I think of him. It's not just like, "That's it, I did my duty, I called her today." We are constantly texting back and forth. I think this is what keeps us together and as close as what we are. He's never once said to me, "You can't text me while I'm working." That would just devastate me. I know that if he doesn't get right back to me he is busy and that's fine. If you think about it Eddie and I talk more than we would if he was home.*

I commented:

With your iPhones and being able to text and send instant pictures and talking more than once every day on the phone, even though you're physically not together, it seems as though this technology has helped to strengthen your marriage and your communication with one another.

Grinning widely Amber replied:

*Absolutely! This phone is my lifeline to him. Since he left, we talk all the time. This (iPhone) gets used all day; if I'm having an issue, or if I have a quick question I will text him right that minute while I think of it. Before he left, there were months where we would fight and bicker and just didn't get along. I think it was mostly the stress over money and having small kids and everything was getting to us and nothing seemed right. We communicate much better now than we ever did when he was working at home. We have never gotten along so well. We are at a point now where we can pick up on if either of us are having a bad day, by reading the text message; you can almost see it in the words. Sometimes when I call, as soon as he says, "Hello," it is like, "You know what? I just had to hear your voice. I'm not having a good day." Now that he is away you make sure you talk. You share whatever is on your mind whenever you can. You just do it; you never take the person for granted. He is still my partner. I know we can't be together but we are together. We're together more now than we've ever been.*

As Amber shared her experiences of communicating with Eddie using their iPhones, I was reminded of a study by Firmin, Firmin, and Mercial (2013). These researchers examined the communication patterns of female college students who were involved in long distance relationships. Participants identified that over time they had acquired an ability to interpret their partner's tone of voice and understand the connotations that their partners were expressing by the way he was communicating with them. I thought about the parallels between Amber and participants in this study and found it interesting that she and Eddie were at a point in their relationship where they could pick up queues from text messages indicative of how they are feeling.

Continuing, I inquired: “Do you think that communicating like this is one of the keys to keeping a marriage strong, when you have a husband who’s coming and going for work in another province?”

Amber responded:

*Yes because when you are communicating like this it’s almost as if he is here. He could be up the street for all I know because with the texting, it’s the same. Even when he comes home now, I am still texting him as if he was out west working. I know we wouldn’t be like this if he lived here because we’d just take it for granted that we’d talk when we got home from work. I think we’d just assume we’d talk whenever we got home. I think the texting is kind of fun. I send him lots of pictures through texting and he loves getting the pictures. If we get a snow storm, I’m like, “Look at how much snow we got. This is what I have to shovel. Look at our son out blowing the snow.” Then he will praise him and say, “Thanks so much for helping mom with the snow, we really appreciate it.”*

Listening to Amber share her perceptions regarding the use of technology as a means to strengthen her relationship with Eddie led me to consider my own experience using iPhones and other technologies to communicate with my family while I was out of province for school or work. I thought of the recent trip I made to Bangkok for a conference and how I frequently used FaceTime to communicate with my family. Using this technology, I saw my husband and daughter on a daily basis. While I may have been half way around the world and in a time zone that was 1 day and 11 hours apart, we, as a family, discussed day-to-day activities as if I was still at home. This technology ensured that we were able to maintain communication and see each other regardless of the distance that existed between us. I thought deeply about what Amber had shared and the benefits of using technologies such as FaceTime, text, and email messaging as strategies to promote communication among family members when a loved one is working out of province.



With multiple technologies currently available to enhance communication, I began to question whether physical distance may actually be a contributing factor to emotional distance among transnational families. While families may be apart for extended periods of time, engaging in video chats such as FaceTime and texting multiple times per day can create a dichotomy whereby families may be living apart and yet feel as though they are still together and highly connected due to their frequent daily communication. Amber had experienced Eddie's coming and going for employment for 12 years and yet felt closer to him now than ever. From day one of Eddie's coming and going for employment, they viewed communication to be an essential component within their relationship. This was evident as I listened to Amber describe the various communication strategies they used over the past 12 years. These strategies evolved from sending letters and videotapes in the mail to using an iPhone and being able to connect instantaneously through telephone conversations, video, email, text messaging, and the sharing of photographs.

As Amber and I shared our experiences using technology as a means to communicate with family while separated, I began to reflect on previous conversational interviews that I had with women co-participating with me in this narrative inquiry. Through these conversational interviews, I did not hear detailed examples that reflected their close connection and intimacy with their husbands, nor did I hear in-depth examples of the multiple ways in which they maintained daily communication with one another. I noted that over the years that their husbands had been coming and going for employment, their patterns of communication appeared to have become infrequent yet brief and task-focused telephone conversations. Previous co-participants shared many examples of how difficult it had been to communicate with their husbands while they were working away. This was often due to time constraints or limited

access to technology that supported communication due to where they were employed. This contributed to additional challenges to communication when the family reunited following a work term. It appeared as though infrequent communication, coupled with physical distance, had contributed to emotional distance within their relationships.

### **Snapshots of Life**

Each time we met, it was evident how much Amber loved her husband and children. This became crystallized, however, during our last conversational interview when we explored Amber's personal photographs. These photographs were shared through her iPhone which, once again, reinforced the importance of technology in the life of her family. In previous interviews we had discussed this exercise and while Amber kept asking me what types of pictures she should share, I reminded her that it was anything that she wanted to share that reflected her experience of being left behind while Eddie was employed out of province. While much had been shared during our conversations about the importance of communication to maintaining family unity and connection, it was during this exercise that this became overwhelmingly obvious. Each photograph Amber shared offered a rich description; a narrative constructed of a family together and yet apart. These pictures reflected the passage of time in the life of their family and revealed much about the day-to-day life Amber and her family experienced in Eddie's absence. All of the photographs Amber shared with me were ones that she had taken and sent to Eddie. The re-telling of these life narratives invited additional conversation reflective of Amber's experience of being left behind. I invited Amber to share her photographs with me and asked, "Would you like to show me some of your pictures?"

Amber replied:

*Oh the pictures! I would love to. Just let me see what I have in here with me (Brings out her iPhone with the pictures on it). All of my pictures on my phone are pictures that I have sent to Eddie. Here is a picture of a bottle of wine I bought myself on Friday night. I sent this picture to Eddie because I wrote to him and said I would like a bottle of wine but I don't know what to get, can you give me any recommendations and he was like "No, just ask them there." So I wanted to show him what I got. In this picture I was sitting on the beach one day (picture is of beach, ocean and only her purple painted toenails) and I sent it to Eddie. He showed it to all of the guys out there and now everybody wants to come to PEI for a visit. And here was Molly our dog before she got her haircut. This is a picture of a campfire that we made one night and we sat out there for the evening. Here is a video I made for Eddie of our son at a race for track. This is a picture of our daughter's birthday party.*

I commented, "Wow look at her! She is so beautiful and grown up." Amber replied, "Here is a picture of her cake, I had picked it up at lunch time and took it to work with me for the afternoon and sent this picture to Eddie." She didn't even know she was having a party. I wanted to have something special for her so I invited all of our family over to the house and everybody showed up. We filled the house with helium balloons and streamers.

Looking at the photographs, Amber recalled a recent experience where she took Eddie to the airport to catch his flight and then encountered an unexpected snowstorm as she was driving home. She explained:

*Here is a picture of our son out with the snow blower blowing the snow after a storm we had in April. That was the morning I drove Eddie to the airport to catch his flight. We left home for the airport at 3:00 in the morning. His flight was to leave at 6:00 am but the weather had turned so nasty that by the time we got to the airport his flight left a half hour later. I waited at the airport until his plane took off. By then, the storm was so bad I couldn't see most of the way home. When I arrived home I took this picture to show Eddie how much snow had come down because when we pulled out of the driveway to leave for the airport that morning there was nothing. We thought spring had come. Look at this picture I took the day before (shows a beautiful picture of sunny day at beach, with ocean, sand and no snow at all) when I had gone out for a walk at the beach. From these you can really see just how quickly the weather can turn.*

As we came to the end of her photographs I noticed a man I had not seen before. “Is that a picture of Eddie?” I inquired:

Amber replied:

*Yep, that’s him. That was taken when he was home for Christmas and we all were together; this is everyone all together and opening presents. This is a picture of Evan and our son at a wedding. Both of them were all dressed up. In this picture he is taller than his father; he loves that picture and always says, “That’s the first picture of me taller than Dad.” And this is another picture of the beach. That was probably last year near the end of October; it was late in the year. I remember sending the picture to Eddie and he was like, “You’re at the beach?” You never have to ask me if I am at the beach. If it’s nice enough I am at the beach.*

Reflecting on all that was shared as we discussed each photograph, I was intellectually struck by how the passage of time became revealed as we explored each image Amber presented. With a swipe of her finger on her iPhone, new images appeared capturing birthday parties, holidays, the children growing and maturing, and seasons changing. As Amber offered rich descriptions of each photograph shared, I realized that these photographs reflected so much more than the day-to-day mundane happenings that occurred in her life and that of their family.

### **Perceptions from Community Members**

As a composite, the photographs that were shared revealed much regarding how important relationships and living in rural PEI were to Amber and Eddie. Repeatedly, Amber’s images included landscapes and pictures of nature observed within her community. As we came to know one another better during each conversational interview, I learned more about her perceptions about her community and family. It was apparent how significant her community was in her personal and familial development over the years that Eddie had been coming and going for employment. Amber spoke about feelings of loneliness and isolation that she had experienced while living in this community. These feelings were fueled by community members

who were known to gossip about families who had loved ones leaving for employment out of province.

Amber elaborated:

*Everybody here knows everybody and everybody's always watching. They know Eddie is away all the time. I remember a man came into our office and I didn't have my wedding ring on and he asked me if Eddie and I were separated. And I was like, "No, why?" And he's said, "Well, you don't have your wedding ring on." I told him that I had gained weight and that it didn't fit me anymore. And he was like, "Oh, that's the reason!" My boss was livid about this. He said, "That is none of his business, why would he ask you that?" I didn't clue in at the time but now wonder if this was a rumor that was going around. So then I was thinking, "Please could you let everyone know that I'm just gaining weight and that my wedding ring doesn't fit anymore?" Then I started to think that maybe I should drop some weight so that I can get my wedding ring back on. But at this time of year, I swell and I can't stand the feeling of a tight ring, so I take it off. I can't believe that a man picked up on that. He actually noticed that I didn't have my wedding ring on. I would never notice if a man was not wearing his wedding ring and I wouldn't notice if a woman didn't have hers on either. I just don't notice these things but I guess he was interested in the thought of Eddie and I being separated. Around here people talk too much. You know, I really can't go out; I do not go anywhere because if you look sideways at a guy then people think you're cheating on Eddie and then it's not even 5 seconds later and he has a text in Timbuktu, telling him, "You'd never guess what Amber's doing or who she's talking to?"*

Taken aback by hearing that someone in her community would actually be watching her and reporting her activities via text messages to her husband, I clarified, "Somebody has text messaged Eddie about you?"

Without hesitation, Amber affirmed:

*Yup, and they are telling him that I'm flirting with some guy because I looked sideways and might have glanced at him. So I do not go anywhere, I do not do anything. Eddie will be like, "Go out, I believe you, those people are crazy, go." When the kids were younger I did go to parties and Eddie's niece would come over to babysit and spend the night. I did that maybe two or three times and then I could see that I was starting to get the, "What are you up to" look from others. So I stopped going, it was just you know, never mind, I'm alright home. Eddie's more like, "Who cares? You know you're not doing anything and I know you're not doing anything." I don't ever put myself in a position where anyone could say, "What were you doing?" or "You were talking to him for an awful long time." I just don't put myself in those positions. I am always worried about what other people think. Oh, the stories you hear around here about people*

*working away; “This one’s doing this, and this one’s doing that both here and there.” And I’m thinking I cannot put myself in that position, I do not want to be the subject of their conversations so I’ll just stay home and people will not be able to say anything about me. I have gone to the occasional senior men’s hockey games, but that was always with the kids; I never went alone. I always made sure it was me and the kids so no one could say that I was trying to get out and socialize. I am always wondering what it is that people are thinking. People have changed. I think people are way more outspoken. Maybe I just didn’t notice it when I was younger, but I find people will say whatever they want to say and they don’t think anything of it. Unless I’m in dire straits I do not ask anybody for help. I don’t want anybody to say she’s dependent on other people or somebody else raised her kids. You hear that around here a lot.*

As I listened to Amber share examples of how men who leave and families who are left behind are negatively talked about by some people in their community, I was saddened by the magnitude of how this had affected her life and her ability to engage in social activities with other adults. Listening to her describe her need to self-isolate and not engage in activities in the community without her children present reminded me of the many stories shared by other co-participants who shared their life narratives with me in this narrative inquiry. All co-participants spoke at length about living in their respective rural communities and their fears of being talked about by others because their husbands worked away and they were left behind. Rather than feeling support from the community, women were filled with worry that someone would begin a rumor that they were being unfaithful to their husbands while he was working away. While women co-participating in this inquiry shared similar experiences, Amber was the first woman who reported that she had people texting her husband when they saw her out. I found this to be quite alarming and as I listened to Amber share this story of experience, I gained further insight about why women left behind chose to self-isolate from social activities occurring within their communities.

Through our conversational interviews, Amber shared examples of comments she had received from some members of the community who questioned their marriage and family in

light of the fact that Eddie was away from the family so frequently. She explained, “*It’s amazing how people automatically think we’re on the verge of divorce. It’s always, ‘I don’t know how you do it? How can you do it? He’s away so why do you even bother staying married?’*” I replied, “Why do you think people have that assumption of ‘Why do you bother being married? Why do you stay together if he’s not here?’”

Pausing momentarily to consider this question Amber explained:

*I think it’s because they don’t understand it. You know it’s mostly the older people. There are these two guys and every time they come into where I work they’re like, “Where’s Eddie at now, when’s he coming home again, I don’t know why you bother staying together, it must be hard on the kids.” That one always bothers me; “must be hard on the kids.” I wish I could just say, “You know what, the kids are fine, you worry about your kids and I’ll worry about mine.” I know that if it wasn’t working out, Eddie wouldn’t be doing it. I have relatives that talk about us to my mother. They pretty much assume that Eddie and I are almost divorced. They will tell her that it can’t be good for the kids to be without a father and that really upsets my mom. I’m at the point where I’m going to have to go and talk to them about it because it’s really not fair; if they want to say something, say it to me directly, don’t involve my mother. My mother gets so upset when they talk about us and she can’t put herself in my shoes because she can’t imagine dad not being here and with her day in and day out.*

Listening to Amber re-live these stories of experience, I came to understand more deeply why women who are left behind often feel that they must do everything on their own and not ask for support. As we shared deeply about how she felt she was perceived by others during periods of time when Eddie was working away and also when he returned to the family, Amber revealed that her feelings of isolation and loneliness had been heightened since both Eddie and Evan were working away from home. Amber had considered purchasing a camper trailer so that she could spend her summers at the campground with her friends and their families. She went to the dealership to look at various camper trailers and while there came to the realization that not only did she feel lonely but on many occasions was actually alone. This insight was illuminated as Amber offered the following story.

*I keep going and I keep busy because you do get lonely. Here I am and I am alone. Everybody else is out having fun; everybody else has their family around them. I kind of got in the dumps this weekend. I was going to buy a camper and go camping and I asked our daughter if she would come camping with me and she was like, "No, I'll come and visit with you but I won't stay with you." So then I start thinking, here I am going to be sitting at the campground with all of my friends and their families around me. I would be sitting there all by myself at the campground and how stupid would I feel. So then I was like, "No I am not going to buy it. I am not putting myself in that position." I really think that this would just bring me down because as much as people try to make you feel like you fit in, you don't fit in. So then I decided that I would just stay at home and go to visit my friends at the campground. Things like this can really bring you down and it can get depressing because you start thinking if Eddie was home we could do that. So then you realize I may as well just be sitting at home with the dog rather than spending money on a camper when I would just be sitting alone at a campground.*

### **Supporting Women Left Behind**

On a daily basis Amber was surrounded by people. She worked outside of the home, cared for her children, and connected with Eddie multiple times per day and yet she experienced feelings of loneliness and chose to self-isolate as a strategy to prevent being talked about by others in the community when Eddie was working away. Delving further into this during our conversational interviews invited an opportunity for sharing specific to women's need for support and the impact coming and going of a partner has on women's health and wellbeing. While Amber did not engage in frequent social activities with others, she felt blessed to have had a strong support network over the years that Eddie was coming and going for employment. Amber lived close to Eddie's parents and perceived them to be a significant source of support to her and their children. From the time the children were born, their grandparents played an active role in their lives. They were always present for their grandchildren and provided childcare to them from the time they were small through to junior high school. Amber reflected on the bond between her children and Eddie's parents and commented that they were like second parents to them. As we discussed women's needs for support, Amber realized that it was the support



received by family and her current employer, in addition to her strong marital relationship with Eddie, that made it possible for her to effectively fulfill her multiple roles as parent, partner, and employee over the 12 years that Eddie had been working out of province. As she came to these insights, she acknowledged the many women who also had partners who came and went for employment who struggle in their husbands' absence because they had a limited or non-existent support network.

As Amber and I spoke about her extended family, it was apparent that she had a very close relationship with her in-laws and this had been established early in her relationship with Eddie. This was further solidified when their children were born. As we explored the topic of support for women left behind, I commented, "It sounds like you had a really good family support. Was this something that was there before Eddie left or did he talk with his mom and dad and ask them to help you out after he left?"

Amber replied:

*No. Eddie's parents have always been there for us from the day the kids were born, if we wanted to go somewhere it was like, "Give us those kids! We'll take them for the day; we'll take them for the weekend." I never was intimidated about going over and asking them for help. Eddie's mom looked after my kids all of the time. They are just like second parents to the kids. Before the kids went to school it was a lot harder, I remember there would be days where my only conversations would be with a 2- and a 4-year-old. Back then we didn't have the iPhones or computer and there's a 3-hour time difference, so you might get 10 minutes to talk with Eddie. It was a quick, "How are you doing, is everything ok at home? Good, I've got to go, chat later." And that would be it. That would be my adult conversation for the day because there was no one else around. I'd do this for a couple of days and then realize, "I have had no adult conversations, and I only talk to my preschoolers, day in and day out." I did this for years.*

*I look back now and am reminded of a lot going through this research with you. I am reminded of the ways I felt and I don't know if I realized it then just how lucky I was to have the support that I had until I stop and sit down and think about I now. I think about the way it could have been. I see how other women are struggling and no one is helping them; their husbands are gone, their families are not stepping up to help and they are becoming bitter.*

Continuing along this vein of our conversational interview, I inquired, “Why do you think this is so?” Amber responded, “*I don’t know. Some parents say ‘I have raised my kids, I’m not doing it again with the grandkids.’ They kind of have the attitude, ‘These are your kids, you raise them. This is the choice you guys made.’*” Listening to Amber share this sentiment I thought about what it meant to feel supported and how much of a difference this had made in her life over the years that Eddie was coming and going for employment. I began to think deeply about the importance of support and the difference that this can make in the lives of women and families left behind. Revealing these insights I asked Amber,

Do you think that the key for things working out for you was having the support from family and knowing that at any moment if you needed to, you could call Eddie and you knew in your heart that he would quit his job, get the next flight out and come home to you?

Amber took a moment to consider this question before sharing:

*I never felt that I ever needed to call Eddie to come home because I knew that if I was having a bad day I could call his mother and say, “I need a couple of hours, please.” I have never, ever been turned down when I asked family for help. If she was busy Eddie’s sister-in-law took the kids or Eddie’s nieces did. There were so many people I could call on. It is things like this that mean so much. But if you don’t have support I can see how it would be so hard. Like I’ve said, I was just one of the lucky ones; my situations have always seemed to work out. I just can’t imagine what it would have been like otherwise.*

As Amber continued this train of thought, she shared and reflected deeply on the experiences of other women she knew whose husbands also came and went for work. She spoke at length about the numerous challenges women experienced as they juggle multiple role demands during their husband’s absence. Amber recalled numerous examples of how being alone could heighten anxiety, stress, and feelings of being overwhelmed. Repeatedly during our conversational interviews, Amber shared how important it was for women left behind to have a support group. She discussed how important it was for women and their children to have an

opportunity to come together and share their experiences in a confidential and non-judging manner. The more we spoke about the importance of support for women left behind, the more vividly Amber began articulating her vision of a support group; a group that would be specifically developed for and led by women left behind due to their husbands' interprovincial labor migration. This support group would be offered in a location that would be welcoming to women and their children. It would provide an opportunity for women to come together and share their experiences in an informal setting where trust, caring, nurturing, and support towards one another could be fostered. Additionally, the needs of children left behind could also be addressed through a play group that would occur at the same time as the women's support group. This would not only provide childcare for women who wished to participate in this support group but also offer an opportunity for children whose fathers came and went for employment to come together and play. During our fourth conversational interview, Amber described her vision for a women's support group:

*I think it could be something like an AA meeting where you can just come together and vent; I think that's the biggest thing. It's so important to have someone to vent to, because you need to vent and you can't vent to your kids; you have to be the chipper mom all the time because you don't want the kids to get sad. If they see you upset then they're going to get upset, so you almost have to put an act on. You could be having a terrible day where you're lonesome but you can't let anyone know this.*

*To have a group where you could just drop in and talk or maybe even exchange phone numbers with other women who are in the same boat as you and want to talk. Or where there are kids of similar ages who could just play together without hearing, "Oh, your dad goes away for work." It would be nice to have a place where the kids can go and play and the parents could sit back and watch and talk. That's such a big thing, just knowing that there are other people out there who are living the same thing and that you are not alone. There are lots of women living this life and you don't think of them until you hear that their husbands are away working and then you're like, "Oh really I didn't know that their wife and kids were at home." They are here and going through the same thing as you are but you just don't think of it at all. People just don't talk about this. I think it's almost common knowledge that "Amber's husband's gone and it's just part of her life. You know that's what she chose. That's what they chose as a family." It's*

*amazing though when you think of how many people are going to Fort Mac right now and leaving their families behind. There are a lot of people doing this.*

*Women are not looking for handouts. It's just support, a shoulder to lean on when you're having a bad day. Sometimes you just need to walk away for an hour and just breathe and if you knew you could depend on someone to talk to for that hour; gosh it would be so helpful. And this would be nothing formal, just an opportunity to gab and that's it, just to feel like you are not alone. There are days when you are frustrated so if you could just get to be able to let that out, that's usually all you really need! It would be nice to have someone else who is impartial but understands and will listen. To know that, "Oh ok, we're not the only ones going through this." The support would be awesome. It would be good to know that you can start talking about this with others. I think a lot of women feel the stress of being alone and they want to get out for a bit. I could see these mothers really being open to a group because we all know what it's like to be in that position. I could never turn somebody down who needed help like that because I've been there, I've done it, I'm living it and I understand. All this is or would be is a support group, just a get together. It doesn't have to cost a cent. Money is not the problem; these guys are going away for work for the big money. That's why they have left and are working out there.*

As we continued discussing the need to develop a support group for women and children left behind, the logistics regarding what this group would look like began to crystallize. It would be essential for this group to meet in a central location in the community and have members participating who were non-judgmental. Amber spoke about various community programs across PEI that offered support groups for single mothers and questioned why no one had started a group specifically for families who had a loved one coming and going for employment. Amber felt that in the initial development of this support group a coordinator may be required to market the group and facilitate the first few sessions. However, once operational she felt that this group could be led by a woman who had intimate knowledge of what it was like to be a mother left behind and caring for children while their husbands were temporarily employed out of province. As we were concluding our discussions regarding women's need for support, Amber confided:

*When I think about developing the support group, I almost feel like a grandmother to all of the women who are going through this now with younger children. I just want to help them, support them, and let them know that it's all going to be OK. That it's OK to talk*

*about what's going on, it's important to talk about what's going on and how you are feeling. It's hard doing it all on your own but you are not alone, not at all.*

Listening to Amber share her perceptions regarding the need for women to have support, I was intellectually struck by her comment that she felt like a grandmother to younger women with children who were left behind. Being in her late 30s, Amber was the youngest woman who co-participated with me in this narrative inquiry and yet she had been experiencing the coming and going of her husband for the past 12 years. Time and experience over the years that Eddie had been coming and going for employment had given Amber a wealth of knowledge regarding what women and children who are left behind needed to feel supported. It was evident through our conversations regarding this topic that Amber's vision for a support group was one that she had been considering for some time. As she shared this vision with me, many strategies that could be viewed as both helpful and empowering to women left behind emerged. The creation of a support group as described by Amber could not only provide a source of support for women and children, but also help to decrease their feelings of loneliness, reduce isolation, encourage socialization, and encourage reciprocal sharing such as carpooling which could help to lessen the challenges associated with role overload as women left behind juggle family, home, and work responsibilities.

### **Exploring Women's Health**

As we engaged in discussions regarding women's need for support, issues specific to loneliness, isolation, and psychological stress experienced by women left behind and caring for children while their husbands engaged in employment out of province were illuminated.

Dissecting these multi-layered storied experiences revealed additional insights regarding

Amber's perceptions about the impact coming and going could have on the health and well-being of women left behind.

Inviting this discussion, I inquired: "I am curious about what your thoughts are around women's health. You have mentioned the stress and loneliness women left behind often feel. I am wondering if you think being left behind impacts women's health."

Amber paused momentarily before responding:

*Not so much for me, don't get me wrong, I have my days but I know of some women who are really depressed. They did everything with their husbands and then all of a sudden he decides to take a job away. These women take it really hard and get depressed and they feel stuck because they have the kids with them all of the time. Before their husbands left they were used to just coming and going whenever they wanted to. They had someone at home with them to help care for the kids.*

Continuing I asked: "Do you think they feel overwhelmed now that their husbands are working away and they are at home with the children?"

*Oh yeah (louder and with emphasis)! I can go and visit and try and help as much as I can but they just don't seem to want it. Whenever you leave, these women are still feeling the same way they were when you walked in the door; just overwhelmed and down. As far as saying, "Just tell him that you're not doing well," they do that but their husbands aren't listening. They feel that they are at that point now where they aren't coping and need them to come home but they are being ignored; their husbands are ignoring them. These women feel like there is no way out plus I don't think that they have the family support that I have, so this is where I think a support group would come in handy. I was lucky to have my in-laws, if I needed my hour I would just drop off the kids but I know of a lot of women who don't have that. I am lucky because Eddie and I have always had an understanding.*

*You know, maybe that's why I feel OK because I always know that if I ever get to that point Eddie will come home. And I'm thinking even if their husbands would just say, "Give it another month. If things are still bad then I will come home," I think that that would totally change their attitude. These women feel alone and don't feel comfortable asking for help from his family. But if he could just call his parents and say, "Mom could you just run in and take the kids for an afternoon?" If her mother-in-law would offer the help, she would say yes. But again, it's having to ask others for help and women left behind don't want to do that.*

I inquired: “Do you think that women who are not doing well talk with their doctors and nurses about how they are feeling?”

Amber replied:

*I think when it gets to a certain point, yes. I think it has to get to the point where they physically feel sick; where they are not eating and they are not sleeping and they know there is something wrong. They know it's more than just being lonesome and it's just going on and it's not getting better. I know one lady, she gets better when her husband gets home and then when he leaves and she gets sick again. She starts to feel like she is going to be sick to her stomach and gets headaches. It's all just really sad.*

*I can't imagine not working and being home all day while the kids are at school and Eddie's away. That would be hard. At least when I'm at work, your mind is on something else for 8 hours. Then you can go back to home and the reality of, “Oh yeah, I'm alone.” There are days when you walk into the house, and the first thing you realize is that I'm alone again. But it's OK really; I walk on the beach, I go to the gym, I visit people. You just have to keep yourself going. You need to just go, go, go, and for goodness sakes keep busy, don't dare sit.*

“What does sitting do?” I asked. Amber replied, “*When you sit, you think too much and then you start to feel sorry for yourself.*” As Amber offered this insight, I thought about what was being revealed in this statement. Rich descriptions of her storied life were intimately shared as we came together during each conversational interview. I reflected deeply on how frequently Amber spoke about support and how important it was to have had that support from Eddie and their extended family over the years that he was coming and going for employment. I recalled how many times she described herself as lucky when she compared her life in relation to other women whose husbands were also employed out of province but did not have a strong social support network. Amber's empathy for women left behind and also caring for children ran deep as she shared her vision of a support group and her experiences visiting those who were not coping well. As we continued speaking about how some women left behind were feeling stressed and overwhelmed, we discussed how health care providers could intervene to support women left behind. Amber shared her perceptions about the current practices of doctors and

nurses and together we brainstormed various interventions that could be implemented to enhance women's health.

Exploring this together, I asked:

Do you think doctors are attentive to the needs of women who are left behind? When a woman is coming in and talking about feeling stressed or overwhelmed do you think that they ask questions like, "Where is your husband working? Or what is going on with your children?"

Amber shared:

*Most doctors are men and they don't think of things in terms of women's needs. I know a couple of people who have gone to their doctor and they've actually ended up on medication. He said "I'll give you a prescription; this should help you to feel better." I think that's crazy! They were in and out in 10 minutes with a new prescription. Doctors just give you medication to help you become numb and cover up what you are really feeling; they are not there to really help. Most doctors don't have the time or don't take the time to spend with their patients and just talk. Think about it, if I made an appointment to go to a doctor's office, I must be feeling pretty darn bad. To go there and tell a doctor that you are feeling completely overwhelmed because your husband is out west working, most people won't go to a doctor for something like this unless it's a last resort. Sometimes you go to the doctor and have to wait for 5 hours waiting to see him so that would be another stressor. Can you imagine feeling so bad that you make an appointment to see a doctor and then having to sit and wait for 5 hours? I think that this just speaks to the fact that women's health needs are not being met at all in terms of this issue. To me maybe seeing a psychiatrist, a psychologist, someone along those lines might help but I think that the support group we have been talking about would probably do a lot more than medication would.*

Probing further, I inquired: "Instead of getting a 5- or 10-minute appointment for a prescription, what things from a health promotion stance do you think could be offered that could be helpful for women who are left behind and feeling overwhelmed?"

Amber replied:

*When you think about things from a health promotion stance, number one would be the support group because I really think at the heart of it is talking, just getting it all out and seeing that there are other people who are also living this and feeling the way you are too. You feel alone so much and you might feel shy the first time you go to a group but in the group you could talk about it and also cry about it too. I have never heard of anything to address this but if there is a place out there that is helping women whose*



*husbands are away, whether it is mental health or public health or whoever, we have to let women know who they are and how to get a hold of them. The government has to realize that this is happening and it's happening big time. I'd love to know the numbers of women who have husbands who are out there working because I think it would shock you.*

*Something the government could do to support women would be developing a telephone line where women could call in and talk with someone. They could put ads in the newspapers saying, "We realize that your spouse is away working. If you're feeling overwhelmed and need to talk with someone here's a number you can call." They could make commercials about this and air them on CBC during the supper news. That would be a great idea. It would be something so people would know that you have an option. There is something more that you can do other than just go to your doctor and get medication in a quick 5-minute appointment.*

*I would never ever think to call a public health nurse and share with them what I am going through. To me a public health nurse is just about babies; I saw them when I had a baby and then again when I took the kids in for their needles. That was the only time I have ever seen a public health nurse but now that you think about it, even in those visits they could be doing a lot more. They could play an awesome role in helping women but they don't. With public health, I think it's always just about the baby isn't it unless you as the woman are having trouble? But when you stop and think about it, this whole issue really falls under the umbrella of public health because if you're not healthy, or not doing well and have to go off on stress leave, this can impact the EI (Employment Insurance) system and the medical system. If you are off on stress leave, you are overwhelmed and you can't be the best mom or the mom that you want to be. This can then impact the kids because you can have the kids who are feeling sick and saying that their bellies are sore and you know that they are not really sick, it is just that all of this is bothering them too.*

As I listened to Amber offer suggestions for how government and health care professionals could intervene to address the health of women left behind, it became apparent that she recognized a linkage between social support and health. As she offered multiple examples of the challenges faced by women left behind due to their husband's labor migration, I began to question the role of health care providers in providing support and intervening on behalf of women who were left behind and caring for children. I, too, have heard examples of other women whose husbands come and go for employment out of province who sought help from their family physicians and left, after a brief appointment, with a prescription for anti-anxiety medication. Through our conversational interviews, both Amber and I agreed that developing

support groups for women by women could present an excellent opportunity for women to come together, share their experiences, and create a network of support for one another. Additionally, I thought that her suggestion of a help line could also be valuable for women left behind. Having an opportunity to share, in a confidential manner, how they were feeling with a health care professional with expertise in mental health could provide a forum for women to share when they did not have childcare or did not want to participate in a support group.

### **Strategies to Promote Women's Health**

In the re-telling of her stories of experiences, Amber came to realize how fortunate she had been over the years that Eddie had been working out of province. She acknowledged that the support she received from Eddie and their family was paramount to her being able to continue managing multiple roles and responsibilities while left behind with their children. Amber admitted that on occasion she did feel lonely and overwhelmed, however she recognized how important carving out a bit of time for herself each day could be to enhancing her well-being. Over the years that Eddie was working out of province, Amber adopted three primary self-care strategies which she felt helped to promote her physical and mental health. These included daily walks on the beach, going to the gym, and going outside to blow snow in the winter. Amber acknowledged that she would never have been able to engage in these health-promoting activities it was not for the support received from Eddie's parents when the children were little. Without childcare, she would not have had an opportunity to take time away from her primary role as dual parent in Eddie's absence. I was interested to learn more about Amber's self-care activities in light of her admission that she did not engage in social activities with other adults while Eddie was out of province working. Continuing this conversation I said, "Tell me more about what you do for yourself?"

Amber shared:

*Eddie got me a walk behind snow blower. It is my best friend. Oh my god, I love it. Well not only do I get to get out whenever I want to, but it's exercise; you get outside and you're away from everything. You can get out and just think and just breathe. I also started going to the gym 6 or 8 months ago. I take an hour in the evening and I go to the gym. The gym has become very important; it helps to clear your mind when you can be away from it all. You're not in the house, you are out, and you don't have the kids with you. I have an hour of me time and whenever I go back home I feel so much better than if I had spent that hour sitting at home, on the couch, watching TV and thinking I do nothing for myself all day. At least you can say at the end of the day. "I took an hour, I got out of the house and I feel so much better." After a month you look back and you've lost 5 pounds or you're eating a bit healthier and you're drinking more water or whatever it is. You can look back and say, "I am doing something for me." I used to feel like I had to be at home and with the kids every minute that I could because Eddie wasn't there. A few years ago when they were still young, I went to the gym straight from work. By the time I would pick the kids up they would already have had their supper and we would go home, do homework and spend some time together before bed. And they were fine. Before I did this, I asked my mother-in-law "Are you sure you don't mind?" And she would be like "No not at all. I am not going to tell you not to go to the gym. If it helps you feel better then go and do it. We'll be here if you need us"*

*I'm also a big beach walker. The beach has always been there for me. As a kid, I lived a few minutes away from the beach and any time something wasn't going my way I'd just go to the beach. My friends and I would live at the beach; that's all we did every day, every summer. If it wasn't raining we would just play at the beach and we were allowed to go on our own. At like 9 and 10 years old we would take our bikes and just stay. We would go after dinner and come home before supper and then we'd leave again after supper and have to be home by 9 or before the sun went down. And that was the way it was every single day. I used to go to the beach whenever I was having a bad day, but now I do it just for the sake of doing it. The kids are old enough now to stay home on their own. That's my me time. Going for a walk on the beach for a half an hour, there is nothing like it; just to get away and not to be constantly hearing mom; you get so tired of hearing "Mom" because there is nobody else here. It's just "Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom;" it's coming from everywhere, that's all you hear from morning to night. To just get away from that for a bit is so helpful.*

Recalling my own love for the beach and past experiences walking there in solitude, I

shared:

I always find the beach to be such a great thinking spot. You can be in the worst mood and then you go to the beach and you see nothing but the water and feel the sand below your feet and it's just . . .

Amber interjected:

*It's the air too; you breathe in that fresh air, you can just smell the salt and it's just like ahhh. Being there is more therapeutic than anything I could ever imagine. Yesterday I was thinking, who would ever want to go on a vacation away from here. This is all I need. Any day is a good day to go to beach, even if it's snowing; I will put on my coat, hat, mitts and rubber boots and off I go. As soon as there can be a trail down to the beach I am there. I love my first walk of the year. And every year I try to get out a bit earlier. Everyone makes fun of me; they start in about February saying. "When are you going to the beach for a walk?"*

Do you ever walk with anyone else? I inquired:

*I will ask the kids and sometimes Evan will come. He skips rocks and looks at crabs that are dead and then when I turn to come back we will meet up and walk the rest of the way back together. Sitting here with you, I find myself think about this. Up to about 3 years ago whenever Evan would come with me to the beach and we would walk back together, he would hold my hand. I remember thinking that whenever I was his age I would never do this with my mother or father. He must have been 9 or 10. I can still remember it and thinking about how special that was. This was something that I would always remember him doing with me. He wasn't 2 or 3 but he still wanted to hold my hand. I knew that he wouldn't have held my hand around other people but because we were alone at the beach, he held my hand and talked with me and asked me questions. I remember thinking that I would never have done this with my parents. My mom and dad weren't affectionate people. I was always so cuddly and wanted to be cuddled every chance I got. Evan was such a big cuddler when he was little, not so much now, but at that time he wanted to hold my hand when we were at the beach. He was like that up until he was about 11; every night he would hug me good night, and I know I didn't do this with my mom and dad at that age.*

Listening to Amber recall this story of walking on the beach with her son, I commented, "What a beautiful memory. As you shared this with me I could sense that innocent, pure love of a little boy towards his mother." Amber exclaimed,

*Yes! That is exactly it and this is the stuff you remember. I will never forget that. This will forever be engraved in my memory of him being not a baby but still wanting to hold my hand as we walked together hand-in-hand on the beach.*

The importance of self-care is an issue not unique to women whose husbands come and go for employment in another province, but rings true for many mothers who are faced with managing multiple role demands associated with parenting, working outside of the home, and

having limited social support networks. I believe, however, that this issue becomes more glaring in the lives of women who are left behind and alone for weeks at a time and must try to juggle multiple family, home, and work responsibilities.

All women who co-participated with me in this narrative inquiry shared how a husband's coming and going could negatively impact health. However it was through my conversational interviews with Amber that I realized just how important a social support network can be to promoting women's health. While the linkages to public health and the social determinants of health have been evident to me for years, Amber also came to this realization with little difficulty. She recognized the importance of self-care for women left behind and how engaging in health-promoting behaviors such as walking and going to the gym can have a profound effect on physical and mental health. However, she acknowledged that having an opportunity to get out for a walk or go to a gym without children can be challenging for women with young children who do not have support systems in place to provide childcare so that women feel that they are able to take an hour for themselves.

### **Envisioning the Future**

During our final conversational interview together, Amber and I spent much of our time discussing the future and what she envisioned for her marriage and family. Unlike other co-participants who expected that their future plans would involve their husband's retirement and subsequent transition back to the family on PEI, Amber's plans were in complete contrast. By the time both of her children have graduated from high school, Amber will be in her early 40s. At this age and stage in life, she expects that both she and Eddie will have at least another 20 years left to contribute to the workforce. As we entered into this discussion, I was curious about what she thought her future would look like and comment, "What do you think the next 4 or 5

years are going to look like?” Amber beamed with excitement as she described the plans she and Eddie had already made for their future together.

She explained:

*My life is going to look a whole lot different; in the next few years things are going to change. Once the kids are done of high school I'm moving and going to be with Eddie. The kids already know this. I'm not going to dilly dally here with the kids. I have said to them that, "When I feel you are old enough, I'm outta here, I'm going with dad." And they're like, "Yes, you should be with him. That is what you should do." I've already told my boss at work, "You have me for about 4 or 5 more years and then I'm gone." My mom and dad, everybody here knows our plans. We will still keep our house on PEI and have it to come back home to.*

*I'm not hiding our plans from anyone. Last night when Eddie and I were texting and saying Happy Anniversary he's was like, "In 5 or 6 years we'll be able to go out and celebrate and have a nice anniversary meal together. I wonder where we'll be then." So it's kind of fun to think about the future and being together again. Chelsey told me yesterday, "If you want to go with dad sooner, I can look after Evan." I said, "No, I am quite content to be here with you guys." I think now that Chelsey has a boyfriend she realizes how much you want to be together and that being in a relationship takes work. People say all the time that you need to take time as a couple, but right now I feel like I need to be with the kids, this is their time. In 5 years Evan will be 19 and Chelsey 21 and I will have all the time that I need to go out with Eddie. Right now, I am really trying to hold on to our time together and engrave every minute of being with the kids in my head. I see them getting older and know that our time together is slipping away as they are getting more independent.*

## **Conclusion**

Listening to Amber's stories of experience, I learned so much regarding how the bonds of family can be maintained and even strengthened for families who have a loved one coming and going for employment. While challenges can exist at times regarding reunification and role clarity, the strength of the family unit and the united front they strive to maintain as partners and parents is impressive. There are opportunities to learn from Amber's life narratives about the importance and necessity of frequent communication among families who have a loved one coming and going for employment. Over the 12 years her husband had been working away, Amber embraced various strategies to promote communication within their family. From early

letter writing and the mailing of video tapes through to present day use of technology available through their iPhones, Amber was deliberate in including Eddie in the day-to-day functioning of their family. While apart, Eddie witnessed the evolution of his family through various mediums such as videos and photographs that Amber sent to him. These gave Eddie an opportunity to virtually see significant moments of his children's lives such as Christmas morning and hockey games. Over the years that he worked away, technology evolved exponentially. Amber and Eddie's adoption of iPhones provided a forum where they could talk, text, and see one another on a daily basis. Although people in Amber's community questioned their marriage and the impact coming and going had on their children, Amber felt that her relationship with Eddie was stronger than ever and attributed this to their use of various communication technologies available through their iPhones.

Through our conversational interviews, I learned a great deal from Amber regarding the sacrifices women make as they are left behind and become lone parents while their husbands come and go for employment. These sacrifices can take a significant toll on mental and physical health and while Amber felt blessed to have a strong support network, she knew of other women who struggled as a result of overwhelming role demands and limited support. Developing a group by women left behind specifically for women left behind could present an opportunity for formalized support in a confidential and non-judgmental manner. Coming together to share experiences of being left behind may be viewed as a positive self-care strategy that could help to promote the mental health of women and families left behind.

Co-participating with Amber in this narrative inquiry, I have gained tremendous insights regarding the importance of communication and support for families who have a loved one coming and going for employment out of province. While Amber acknowledged that coming

and going is not ideal for families, she shared in-depth examples of how her family overcame many challenges, in spite of Eddie's absence over the years. I will be forever indebted to Amber for her open sharing of life narratives with me during our conversational interviews and have a clearer understanding of how support and communication can positively impact the health and well-being of women left behind.



## Chapter 8 – Final Synthesis and Discussion

Throughout this narrative inquiry I gained a wealth of knowledge regarding interprovincial labor migration and the experiences of women left behind. In composing final research texts, I was attentive to the purpose of my research and the three broad questions which guided this inquiry and were used to elicit stories reflective of women's experiences of being left behind. Being mindful of these questions, I formulated final research texts in a manner which first, addressed the stories women constructed as they were left behind and experienced their partner's labor migration, and secondly, reflected the stories women constructed regarding how they felt they were being perceived by others as they lived out this phenomenon. Reflecting deeply on the purpose and goals of this inquiry, I made the decision to organize the predominant narrative threads elicited under the headings: Being - The Married Single Mother, Fulfilling Roles and Responsibilities, and Imagining Networks of Support; Becoming – Family Evolution, Family Transition, and Importance of Communication; and Belonging – Unsupportive Community Relations, Faithfulness and Commitment To Marriage, and Self Isolation. The *Circle of Health* (COH), *PEI's Health Promotion Framework* (PEI Department of Health and Social Services, 1996) was selected to further align research texts in consideration of women's health. Embedded within this discussion are nursing practice, policy, education, and research implications. In concluding this chapter, recommendations for future consideration will be offered.

### **Deconstructing Narratives of Being**

Many stories of experience were illuminated during multiple conversational interviews with co-participants. Through our coming together and intimate sharing, new insights were gained regarding to how women have conceptualized being left behind as a result of their

husband's participation in interprovincial labor migration. Central to women's conceptualization of self is an acknowledgement of the roles that they fulfill within their families and how these fluctuate as a result of their husbands coming and going for employment.

**Being – The married single mother.**

All co-participants in this inquiry used the term "*married-single mother*" as a way to describe who they were when left behind and caring for children while their husbands came and went for employment out of province. Women recognized that they were married yet explained that they often felt as though they lived the life of single mothers due to their husbands' frequent absence away from their families. Wray (2012) identified the challenges that exist for women left behind who must continually juggle life between being a one-parent family while their husbands are working in Fort McMurray and then upon his return morphing back into a two-parent family (Wray, 2012). While not explicitly examining labor migration, Trussell and Shaw (2007, 2009) researched the experiences of farm wives living in rural Ontario communities and found that due to their husbands' unrelenting demands associated with farming, wives must become the primary caregiver to their children. Trussell and Shaw (2007) wrote of women often living different yet parallel lives from their husbands. While physically still living at home, the time demands of their farms have resulted in their husbands often being absent from family activities resulting in rural farm wives experiencing "single parenthood within the marital context" (pp. 382–383). Further, Taylor et al. (1985) researched the experiences of women left behind in Great Britain whose husbands came and went for employment in the oil industry. A participant shared that, "being an oil wife was like being a one-parent family without the financial worry" (p. 481).

Further deconstruction of the married single mother narrative highlighted how co-participants in this narrative inquiry had experienced being left behind. The coming and going of their husbands year after year had shaped their role development and contributed to role confusion within their families. Co-participants recognized that their roles and responsibilities within the family were constantly in flux and often changed depending on their husband's location and employment status. They reported that they often associated household duties by gender with men being responsible for such tasks as snow shoveling, garbage removal, and heating maintenance and women being responsible for such tasks as dishes, laundry, and vacuuming. However, when left behind, women were responsible for all household responsibilities and the notion of dividing household duties by gender became a moot point.

While their husbands were employed out of province women felt that the narrative of the married single mother was predominant in their lives. However, this narrative changed upon their husbands' return home following a work term. Co-participants spoke of the challenges that existed in living their predominant life narrative of being a married single mother and then having to adjust to their husbands being at home for brief periods of time and reunited with their families. Women reported that while they were left behind they needed to do everything in their husbands' absence. However each time their husbands returned home, they had to re-negotiate their roles and responsibilities within the family. Co-participants reported how foreign it felt to have to adjust to sharing family and household roles and responsibilities with their husbands who were with them so infrequently.

These findings align with those discovered by Wilkerson et al. (2009) who examined gender roles within families and how these change as women are left behind due to labor migration. They discovered that there is a change in gender role ideology as a result of labor

migration with women's roles within the family needing to adapt as they fulfill roles that their husbands would have attended to if they were still at home and with the family (Wilkerson et al., 2009). McGuire and Martin (2007) identify the "excessive burdens of responsibility" (p. 183) women experience as a result of their husband's labor migration and being left behind. Drummet et al. (2003) also wrote of the experiences of families left behind as a result of frequent military deployments and the challenges experienced by those left behind as they renegotiate roles and responsibilities during times when they must be separated from their loved ones and also upon their return home.

#### **Being – Fulfilling roles and responsibilities.**

All co-participants spoke in depth about how draining it was to be the person left behind and always having to put the priorities of others ahead of their own. Women reported feeling stressed as they attended to multiple responsibilities during their husband's absence. Taylor et al. (1985) discovered that wives of off-shore oil workers experienced increased anxiety and depression as a result of their husbands' frequent coming and going for employment. Co-participants in this narrative inquiry acknowledged that they often felt overwhelmed trying to attend to the needs of their children and employers during periods of time when they were left behind. Often they described this experience as akin to being on a teeter totter, striving for balance while also trying to juggle multiple balls in the air.

Co-participants in this inquiry acknowledged that other working mothers may also experience these feelings yet believed that women who are left behind face additional challenges because they are married and yet rarely have the physical support of their husbands in the day-to-day management of family and household responsibilities. Women shared how they felt being a divorced single mother would differ from the experiences of being a married single mother. For

a divorced woman, custody arrangements often dictate periods of time when their children will be with them and with their fathers. Co-participants believed that while children of divorced parents spend time with their fathers, their mothers would have a reprieve from their childcare duties. Women felt that this was not often the case for them as married single mothers as often upon their husband's return they were still looked upon to fulfill the majority of caregiving duties for their children.

Trussell and Shaw (2007) write of the gendered nature of caregiving roles and how these are socially constructed. They identified that "time stress and fatigue is severe for women who experience societal expectations of being the primary caregiver of children while maintaining the bulk of household and domestic responsibilities" (p. 368). While written from the perspective of rural farm women whose husbands are physically present, I noted similarities between Trussell and Shaw's findings and those illuminated by this inquiry. Co-participants repeatedly shared how exhausting it was to be left behind and how they felt that there were never enough hours in the day to complete all that they wished to do. A noted difference, however, was that women left behind due to their husbands' labor migration reported that in their husbands' absence they became responsible for fulfilling all roles associated with caregiving and household management.

Deconstructing this narrative further, I was reminded of Wood's (2010) article which explored gendered aspects of women's identities and pervasive cultural narratives by which they are defined. She examined the "can-do discourse" which purports that women can and should do it all when it comes to home and employment responsibilities without expecting their male partners to share equally in these responsibilities. Written from the perspective of a heterosexual couple not engaging in labor migration, I can see parallels between Wood's findings and those

illuminated by this narrative inquiry research. I question if my co-participants had adopted the can-do discourse and if this was contributing to their frequent feelings of being overwhelmed as they strived to do everything for everyone in the wake of their husbands' labor migration.

Women identified how stressful it could be to manage their time and meet the multiple roles and responsibilities associated with being a parent, partner, and employee while their husbands were employed out of province. Repeatedly they spoke about the internal struggles they faced while living the narrative of being a married single mother. They confided that they never felt that they were able to fulfill their roles and responsibilities to the best of their abilities. Co-participants in this inquiry felt that this contributed to feelings of anxiety and worry that were disappointing to others. Glynn et al. (2009) have studied role overload and its effects on women's mental health. In their work, they adopt the definition of role overload to be "the extent by which a person feels overwhelmed by her total responsibilities, is strongly associated with mental health" (p. 217). As I listened to women repeatedly share stories reflective of their multiple role demands and use terms such as feeling stressed and overwhelmed to describe how they were managing within these roles, I began to wonder if co-participants were experiencing role overload. For example, co-participants revealed that they often felt additional pressure to be overly present in their children's lives in an attempt to compensate for their husband's frequent absence from the family. They worried that if they did not attend their children's activities, their children would feel that neither of their parents cared enough to be there to support them in their activities.

#### **Being - Imagining networks of support.**

As I listened at length to each co-participant share the challenges experienced as they strove for balance in the wake of their husband's labor migration, I also noted a common

sentiment of not wanting others to know how difficult it was for them to be left behind in the role of lone caregiver for weeks at a time. While living the narrative of the married single mother, women attend to multiple role demands with a public persona that they are managing everything well. In contrast, all co-participants shared, at length, how exhausting and lonely it was for them to be left behind by their husbands and to have to be the lone caregiver to their children day-in and day-out. Probing this further together, we recognized how valuable it would be for women left behind to have someone impartial and non-judgemental to talk with. Through our conversational interviews women realized the importance of having support for women who experience the coming and going of a loved one as a result of labor migration. Together we imagined how we could move forward and develop a support group that would specifically address the needs of women and children who have a loved one coming and going for employment out of province. Co-participants believed that coming together with others could create new opportunities to share and network with others also affected by this phenomenon.

Through coming together and talking with others, women could discover ways in which they could create networks of support with mutual sharing of responsibilities such as childcare or carpooling to and from children's activities. Having a support network available where women would trade off childcare services would provide periods of respite from the day-to-day responsibilities associated with being in the role of lone parent. Periods of uninterrupted, child-free time could also help reduce feelings of stress associated with multiple role demands and present opportunities for women to engage in self-care practices such as socializing with adult friends or participating in physical activities.

During the time when I was conducting conversational interviews with co-participants, there was no support groups established on PEI specifically for women left behind. As I thought

deeply about what co-participants had shared regarding their need for support, I began to question how support groups could be established in rural communities across PEI. In reviewing literature, I discovered two specific studies which mentioned support groups specifically for women left behind. The first, (Drummet et al., 2003), specifically addressed the needs of military families left behind while their loved ones participated in frequently deployments. Drummet et al. (2003) identified there was a participation rate of 25% in these support groups and the majority of those who attended were the wives of military officers. While the participation rate in these organized support groups was not as high as the military would like, nor was it effective in attracting spouses of non-commissioned officers, there was an acknowledgement that all military spouses must have social support networks available to mediate the stressors that are experienced by loved ones left behind while their spouses are deployed. Further examination of literature specific to exploring social support from the experiences of those left behind while their husbands are employed in the oil and gas industries of Fort McMurray, Wray (2012) writes about women left behind coming together to develop a support group. Known as the “McMurray Widows” (p. 154) this group schedules regular meetings to discuss their mutual experiences and how they can support one another to address their needs while their husbands are employed out of province.

Deconstructing narratives specific to women’s experiences of being left behind illuminated that a new understanding of this phenomenon is experienced by women who have partners participating in interprovincial labor migration. As we co-participated together in this inquiry, new insights were gleaned regarding the impact being left behind had on women’s interpretations of roles and responsibilities within the family during periods of time when they were left behind and also during times when their husbands returned to the family following a



work term. Specifically, the narrative of the married single mother permeated how women conceptualized their experiences of being left behind. Deconstruction of this narrative revealed how gendered norms specific to women's responsibilities for children and the home influenced women's interpretations of their identities as married single mothers. The repeated cycles of coming and going of their husbands for employment out of province resulted in the women adopting a "can-do discourse" (Wood, 2012) while their husbands were working away. This contributed to co-participants feeling overwhelmed as they tried to manage all that was required of them in their husbands' absence. All women felt that it would be helpful to speak with other women also experiencing the labor migration of a loved one. Together we imagined opportunities to develop groups for women left behind to come together, share their experiences with each other, and create networks of support. Further elaboration on the development of support groups to promote the health of women experiencing labor migration will be presented later in this chapter.

### **Deconstructing Narratives of Becoming**

The phenomenon of employment migration is one currently being experienced by families locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. In examining literature on labor migration and the experiences of loved ones left behind, I noted that regardless of gender, place, or type of employment migration, for those who are in a partnership and parents, the rationale for leaving their loved ones behind was always to access improved economic opportunities available elsewhere (Abrego, 2009; Boehm, 2008; Hoang & Yeoh, 2012; Maharjan, Bauer, & Knerr, 2012; McGuire & Martin, 2007; Parrenas, 2001, 2005; Sternberg, 2010; Taylor et al., 1985; Wray, 2012). Wray (2012) has researched temporary labor migration in Cape Breton, NS, focusing on the dual experiences of men who leave for employment in Fort McMurray, Alberta

and women who are left behind. He writes about “economically driven migration” (pp. 150–152) and the push/pull factors that have contributed to outmigration in this region. He presents statistical data highlighting the vast differences in wage parity between Cape Breton and Fort McMurray with those employed in Fort McMurray earning two to three times the salaries that could be earned living in Cape Breton. Participants in his study reported that they had earned more in two 3-month contracts commuting back and forth to Fort McMurray than they would have earned in 2 years in their rural Cape Breton communities. They viewed the sacrifice of leaving their families behind to be worth the improvements that were obtained in their family finances.

#### **Becoming – Family evolution.**

In deconstructing narratives specific to women’s experiences of being left behind, I realized that I had entered into this narrative inquiry research with preconceived assumptions. Prior to embarking on this inquiry I had believed that participation in labor migration was short term and often used as a means to supplement family incomes during periods of time when men were unemployed due to the seasonal nature of their employment. While this may indeed be the situation for other families who have loved ones coming and going for employment, this was not the experience of the women who chose to co-participate in this narrative inquiry research.

On multiple occasions throughout this narrative inquiry, co-participants spoke in detail about the local economies and how seasonal employment, coupled with precarious financial circumstances within their families, had been the catalyst behind their husband’s initial decision to leave them and their children behind for employment out of province. All co-participants initially believed that their husband’s participation in interprovincial labor migration would be temporary and last for only a few months. Leaving their families behind was viewed to be a way

to make large amounts of money in a relatively short period of time. Women discovered that their husbands' labor migration provided their families with high wages and improved economic security but also offered their husbands opportunities for career advancement. Women shared that their husbands felt valued and respected by their out-of-province employers and experienced job satisfaction and enjoyment in their employment that they had not experienced in the past while working on PEI.

All co-participants envisioned that their family's experience with labor migration would be short term and temporary, however this was not the case. Within a few years of their husband's initial participation in temporary labor migration, all had accepted full-time employment out of province. This led to a re-structuring of their families whereby women and children were left behind on PEI and experienced an indefinite pattern of coming and going by their husbands. Co-participants wished that their husbands could be on PEI doing similar work and for similar pay as they would receive in Western Canada; each acknowledged that this was their dream and not likely to ever happen. Being paid three to four times more per hour in Alberta for similar work once done on PEI, these financial incentives cannot compete with the wages offered in seasonal economies within the fishing, farming, or construction sectors. This, coupled with families choosing not to move away from PEI, created a paradox by which nuclear families were left behind year after year and evolved in the absence of husbands and fathers.

The profound impact that the passage of time had on women left behind was revealed during our conversational interviews. Women shared how their children had grown in the absence of their fathers and how many of the dreams they held for their family had not been achieved because they, as a family unit, could not physically be together for extended periods of time. This was apparent as women recalled numerous celebrations that had occurred in the

absence of their husbands. As co-participants reflected on these experiences they came to the realization of all that had been lost over the years that their husbands had been coming and going for employment. All women participating in this inquiry had children who had experienced the majority of their lives with a father who was absent from their home as a result of their labor migration. Women felt that their children loved their fathers, however they worried that the relationships between their children and their fathers had been negatively impacted as a result of his lack of physical presence in their family.

McGuire and Martin (2007), Bojorquez and Casique (2009), Hoang and Yeoh (2012), Parrenas (2001, 2005), and Sternberg (2010) have discovered that the experience of being left behind can negatively impact the relationships children establish with their parents who are participating in labor migration. These researchers identified that children left behind over time develop issues with attachment and grow to become indifferent towards their absentee parent. This sentiment was revealed as each co-participant recalled how their children developed from toddlers and pre-schoolers to adolescents and young adults in the years that their husbands had been participating in labor migration. Over time, they noticed a difference in their children's response to their father's coming and going. In the early years of their husband's labor migration, women reported that their children would frequently cry over their fathers being absent from the home. However, as the years passed and their children grew, their father's absence became normalized and their children became indifferent to their fathers coming and going.

Co-participants also worried about their husbands who were living and working out of province. Women questioned what they would do if they ever received a call from their husband's employer telling them that their husband had been involved in a work accident. Co-

participants spoke at length about how stressful it would be to experience something like this. They also questioned how difficult it would be to have a tragedy happen to a loved one on PEI and not able to reach their husbands and tell them this news in a timely manner due to not knowing where they were working and/or having limited cellular reception. Two of my four co-participants experienced the unexpected death of a loved one while their husband was working out of province. They spoke about the challenges they had experienced in trying to contact their husbands and how difficult it was for them to be left behind on PEI and needing to share this devastating news over the phone. They spoke about how frustrating and draining it was to have been alone when they learned of the death of their loved one and not being able to immediately contact their husbands to share this news. Being left behind, they were the ones who had to attend to initial funeral arrangements while their husbands continued working out of province and were oblivious to the crisis unfolding for their family on PEI.

Reviewing literature, I discovered that military spouses participating in Drummet et al.'s (2003) research also reported how stressful and worrisome the unknown can be for loved ones left behind who have a spouse actively deployed. These spouses revealed that they frequently feared for the safety and security of their loved one. This was a daily worry that they experienced until they could see their loved one again. While co-participants in my narrative inquiry did not have husbands actively engaged in combat, they too worried about the unknown when they were not physically with their husbands. They felt that there was something about the distance and location of their husband's employment that had perpetuated these worries. While they could not specifically identify what had triggered these worries, they reported that these did not exist when their husbands were living and working on PEI.

**Becoming – Family reunification.**

As women shared their storied experiences regarding who they had become over the years that their husband had been coming and going for employment, challenges to family reunification emerged as a predominant narrative thread. Boehm (2008) identified the lives of migrant workers as characterized by frequent movement. This results in families continually striving to maintain, reassert, reconfigure, and transform as they are left behind as a result of their loved ones' labor migration (Boehm, 2008). Co-participants and I spoke at length about the fragility of marriage and family and how trying it can be to create a sense of togetherness and nurture a marital relationship when their husband's coming and going for employment appeared to be never ending. Women co-participating in this narrative inquiry shared how challenging it could be to live a life constantly in transition. They spoke about how challenging it could be to revert to being a married mother who had a partner physical present 1 week, on average, every 4 to 6 weeks.

As we discussed these frequent cycles of "presence and absence" (Wray, 2012), co-participants realized that they functioned differently within their families during periods of time when their husbands were away for work and upon his return. Women confided that they had been awakened to this when their children informed them that they acted one way when their fathers were away for employment and another when he returned home and reunited with the family. Co-participants yearned for family cohesion and unity during their husbands' return following a work term. Drummet et al. (2003) identified this as the "honeymoon effect" (p. 282), whereby a loved one's return to home is something that is highly anticipated and yet can be challenging as couples re-negotiate boundaries and roles within the family. Co-participants in my narrative inquiry realized that their husbands may only be at home and with their families for

a week or two; as such they did not want to do anything that would lead to a disagreement between them and their husbands.

Co-participants wished to have a happy home when their husbands had returned and the family was reunited again. As such, they often acted in a manner which contributed to family unity by encouraging and embracing their husband's participation in household and parental activities which they alone managed in his absence. While they loved their husbands and looked forward to their return following a work term, some co-participants felt as a result of their husband's coming and going for employment for many years and sporadic periods of time spent with their family, their husbands were now like a visitor who came to their homes to visit every 4 to 6 weeks rather than being an integral part of their families.

As women re-told and re-lived their many storied experiences during our conversational interviews, they came to new insights regarding the magnitude to which they had managed adversity and risen to life challenges while being left behind over the years that their husbands had been coming and going for employment. Women recognized that while it was challenging to live the life of a married single mother, this had helped them to develop inner strength and self-reliance. Through our in-depth sharing of their storied lives during our conversational interviews, women realized that as a result of their experiences of being left behind they became "*strong, powerful women,*" "*good mothers to their children,*" and felt that they were capable of "*overcoming anything life may throw at them.*" Through our mutual sharing, co-participants realized that while there were many negative experiences associated with role overload experienced as a result of their husbands' years of coming and going for employment, there were also some positives. As a result of being left behind, the women needed to become independent in managing multiple roles, responsibilities, and adversities within their families. These

experiences led to an inner confidence and strength for women left behind and they wondered if this would have developed in the same manner had their husbands not made the decision to engage in labor migration, leaving them behind to attend to the multiple needs of the family and household.

Literature reviewed specific to women's experiences of being left behind due to a husband's prolonged labor migration revealed similar findings. While women identified multiple challenges that exist as a result of their husbands' absence from their families, Bojorquez and Casique (2009), Maharjan et al. (2012), McGuire and Martin (2007), Taylor et al. (1985), and Wray (2012) discovered that as a result of being left behind women can develop an increased sense of autonomy and independence within their families. As a result of physical distance and sometimes infrequent communication with their husbands who are participating in labor migration, women left behind often become the primary decision makers for their families. While this may be the case when their husbands are working away, upon reunification this position in the family may have to be renegotiated. This can lead to tension within the relationship, especially when women realize that their husbands' return home may only be for a brief period of time.

Whether viewed as positive or negative experience, all women felt that the family needed to adapt and adjust to being together each time they reunited as a family after being separated for weeks at a time. They expressed that they found it difficult for their husband to really fit in with the new routines of their family knowing that he was only going to be at home a brief period of time before he would have to leave them behind again and return to working out of province. Some women found their husband's return home to be a stressful experience whereas others regarded their reunion as exciting and a great opportunity for their family to come together,



reconnect, and engage in various fun family activities such as going to the movies or out for dinners.

### **Becoming – Importance of communication.**

Women shared the dichotomy that existed in being married and yet often living thousands of kilometers away from their husbands the majority of the time. They spoke to the challenges that existed as they strove to nurture intimacy and connection within their relationships. During our conversational interviews, three out of my four co-participants expressed that their communication patterns with their husbands had been negatively affected over the years that they had been coming and going for employment out of province. This was attributed to their husbands working long hours and in remote locations with a lack of availability to telephone or internet reception and 3- to 4-hour time differences.

Deconstructing narratives specific to communication, I noted two contrasting stories regarding co-participants' perceptions about communication and how this had evolved within their families over the years that their husbands had been participating in temporary labor migration. Some women described their communication patterns with their husbands to be brief and task focused. These conversations were focused primarily on such things as paying a household bill or making flight arrangements for their husbands to fly home on a certain date. Three of my four co-participants felt that the geographical location of their husbands' employment had been a contributing factor to an emotional distance they felt within their marital relationships. Some women felt that by not physically being present to experience day-to-day activities occurring in the home their husbands could abdicate their role as an active decision maker within the family and as such the majority of decisions regarding the children and household fell to them. All co-participants recognized that their husbands were also

experiencing life differently as a result of their coming and going for employment. While away, men were often living in work camps where their housing, food, and laundry services were provided for them by their employer. Men living in camps are surrounded by other men who are also there for employment. Families are non-existent in these camps and as such, a man's primary role becomes one of a dedicated and dutiful employee.

In contrast, my fourth co-participant communicated with her husband multiple times per day. They embraced technology and connected via text messaging, FaceTime, phone calls, or sharing personal photographs through text or email messages. This family recognized how valuable communication was to nurturing their relationship as a couple and that of their family. In spite of her husband's absence from the home for extended periods of time, technologies such as FaceTime allowed them to physically see each other regularly. By maintaining frequent communication using these technologies, this co-participant felt that her husband was invested in their family and wanted to be an active co-parent to their children, regardless of whether he was physically present at home with their family or virtually present while employed out of province. As I came to understand the varied ways my co-participants communicated with their husbands, I was intellectually struck by how women's perceptions regarding communication frequency seemed to correlate with their feelings of intimacy and connection towards their partners. Reflecting deeply on this led me to question if frequent communication might be the key to maintaining connection when a loved one comes and goes for employment?

As I considered this question in greater depth, I looked to literature to explore what had been studied regarding the use of technology as a means to facilitate communication in long-distance relationships. The introduction of video chatting through FaceTime and Skype, texting, and social media over the past decade has created a communication world far different from

what it once was where telephone conversations and letter writing were the norm. In recent years, Bergdall, Kraft, Carter, Hatfield-Timajchy, and Hock-Long, (2012); Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, and Grant (2011); Firmin et al. (2013); and Hertlein (2012) have explored the use of technology to support and enhance communication within long-distance relationships. In Bergdall et al.'s (2012) study, participants were young adults in committed long-distance relationships. They reported that the use of cell phone technology such as text messaging enhanced communication and helped to promote intimacy within their relationships. Participants associated text messaging and phone calls to be akin to spending physical time together and the more frequently they were able to communicate with their partners using various technologies, the closer they felt to them and the stronger they viewed their relationships to be (Bergdall et al., 2012).

This sentiment was also echoed by Coyne et al. (2011) who examined how individuals in long-distance romantic relationships used various technologies to connect with their partners. They discovered that married couples, in particular, used multiple technologies such as texting, instant messaging, social networking, blogs, and webcams more frequently than couples who were dating as a means to enhance communication and negotiate decisions that needed to be made pertaining to the family. Coyne et al. (2011) also reported that the most common reason for using technology in the long distance relationship was to express affection and found that couples who communicated frequently using multiple technologies expressed greater satisfaction within their relationships (Coyne et al., 2011).

Hertlein (2012) also conducted research looking at the use of technology to facilitate communication among transnational families and discovered that using various sources of technology can enhance intimacy and feelings of closeness. Hertlein suggests that this may be

due to the fact that one must write a text or email messages and often read these and edit them before sending. This gives people an opportunity to reflect on what they wished to convey in their messages before sending these to their loved one. This may contribute to more meaningful and insightful messages as people may be more comfortable sharing intimate thoughts and feelings through a text or email message than they would be sharing these in a face-to-face conversation (Hertlein, 2012). Hoang and Yeoh (2012), Parennas (2001, 2005), and Sternberg (2010) also stress the importance of fostering communication among families who are left behind as a result of a loved one's transnational labor migration. These researchers discovered that the use of telephones and computers were the most commonly used technologies to support communication among family members left behind. While a telephone call or email message could never substitute for their physical presence at home and with their families, it conveyed their desire for connection and intimacy with their families in spite of the physical distance they experienced while working in another country.

As I deconstructed life narratives specific to women's experiences of becoming I began to reflect deeply about family communication patterns and how these evolve over time. Through listening to multiple stories of experience regarding the evolution of families, I was reminded of how important communication is and how deliberate efforts must be made to support frequent communication among family members when a loved one is coming and going for employment. Listening to co-participants share their perceptions regarding communication, I was awakened to how feelings of loneliness could be perpetuated if a loved one was away for weeks or months at a time and only communicated with their families sporadically and for very brief periods of time. I believe that the evolution of multiple communication technologies over the past decade presents new opportunities for family members to connect with one another when separated due

to labor migration. The adoption of these technologies could be effective strategies to encourage frequent communication which could enhance feelings of connection and intimacy among family members who have a loved one coming and going for employment out of province.

### **Deconstructing Narratives of Belonging**

All co-participants spoke about their connection to rural PEI. They spoke at length about rural Prince Edward Island being a great place for their children to grow and be nurtured. And yet, each woman identified that rural PEI was not a great place for adults to live due to the limited employment opportunities available in their communities. Women felt that the decision to stay behind and raise their children in PEI had been good for their children but not necessarily for them. Through the co-sharing of multiple stories of experience I learned that women often felt stigmatized and ostracized by others in their communities because their husbands worked out of province. These experiences had permeated women's lives and had affected their sense of belonging and feelings of connection to others in their communities.

#### **Belonging – Unsupportive community relations.**

Wray (2012) and Boehm (2008) discovered that those who participate in employment-induced labor migration do so with the belief that sacrificing time away from their families was worth the economic stability and security it would provide for their loved ones left behind. Examining labor migration from the context of families left behind in Mexico, Boehm found that to provide economically for children often required parents to leave them behind for employment opportunities available in the US. Participants in both Wray and Boehm's studies reported that the salaries earned as a result of working away allowed them to afford new opportunities for their families which were previously unattainable.

While this was reported from a sample of participants in Cape Breton, NS, similar findings have been shared in research conducted by Boehm (2008), McGuire and Martin (2007), Wilkerson et al. (2009) in Mexico; Maharjan et al. (2012) in Nepal; and Parrenas (2001, 2005) in the Philippines and speaks to the global experiences of families left behind and experiencing the labor migration of a loved one and a common hope that by working away they were improving the economic status of their families which could lead to better opportunities for their children. For example, participants in Wray's (2012) study viewed their work in Alberta as a means to provide a better future for their children. They wished for their children to have better employment opportunities than they had experienced and as a result one participant had chosen to engage in temporary labor migration as a means to fund their children's university education.

Researchers Boehm (2008), Maharjan et al. (2012), McGuire and Martin (2007), Parrenas (2001, 2005), Wilkerson et al. (2009), and Wray (2012) all write about an irony that exists whereby families left behind can now afford to pay for these things for their children. However, the person responsible for improving the finances of their families is rarely home to witness firsthand how their employment away benefits their families. Similar to these findings, co-participants in this narrative inquiry shared that they would not have been able to afford having their children in activities like hockey and swimming if their husbands had not left for employment out of province. They spoke with sadness as they shared that their husbands' incomes paid for these activities yet they were rarely at home to watch the children participate in these. Often, husbands' experiences of witnessing their children's activities came after the fact via text messages, photographs, or videos. Witnessing a hockey game or swim meet was dependent on his work schedule and that of their children's teams.

Living in a rural community, people often show a keen interest in the lives of others in the community. Co-participants referred to this as being a double-edged sword. On one hand knowing many people contributed to feeling like they were part of a community and knowing that people were interested in the welfare of others and would come together in times of need. However, having this vested interest in others may prompt some community members to feel the need to be aware of the day-to-day happenings of fellow residents. Repeatedly, co-participants mentioned a lack of privacy that came from living in a rural community. While left behind, women shared that they often worried that if they were to ask others for help or support while their husbands were working away, people in the community would perceive them as not being able to manage their children or household. They feared that asking others for help would be viewed as a sign of weakness or that they were not coping well during their husbands' absences. Liepert and George (2008) acknowledged the importance of social support for women living in rural communities and identified this as a detriment that can positively or negatively impact health. They discovered that because of the "socially cohesive nature of the rural community" (p. 216) those who are viewed to be different and not ascribing to the social norms of the community may experience stigmatization, ostracization, and being gossiped about by others. Delving further into Liepert and George's (2008) research, I began to question if people in the community perceived women left behind as different and as a result did not want to offer support.

All women participating in this narrative inquiry research shared that they had been talked about by members of their communities because of the increased income their family had as a result of their husbands coming and going for employment out of province. Co-participants shared that people in the community perceived that they were now living a lavish lifestyle

because of the amount of money their husbands earned by working away. On many occasions women had heard people in the community embellishing their extravagant lifestyles and falsely proclaiming to others that their husbands were earning double or triple what he actually made. In communities where seasonal economies and part-time employment are the norm, this can lead to women feeling that they are being judged negatively by others because of their improved financial situation. These feelings were perpetrated when community members talked about co-participants going out for lunch with friends, getting a haircut, purchasing household goods, or taking a vacation.

Co-participants shared that they believed that some members of their communities may be jealous of them because of the material possessions their family could afford. These perceptions contributed to women feeling ostracised by community members and experiencing unsupportive community relations. Women shared that when they mentioned to others that they were feeling stressed and overwhelmed, their experiences were minimized. They confided that community members told them that because they had an abundance of money from their husbands working away, they should stop complaining and use this money to pay for whatever they need. This negatively impacted the women's sense of belonging within their communities and affected their desire to socialize with others for fear of being questioned about their family's income or material possessions.

### **Belonging – Faithfulness and commitment to marriage.**

Another contributing factor which impacted the women's sense of belonging within their communities was the gossiping that occurred regarding the relationship status of families who had a loved one coming and going for employment out of province. All co-participants worried about what people said regarding to their marriage and the strength of their relationships with



their husbands being out of province the majority of the time. They explicitly described how they chose to self-isolate from others and social activities as they did not want to be perceived by others as being unfaithful to their husbands who were working away. As I deconstructed this narrative thread, I was intellectually struck by how common this experience had been in the lives of each of my co-participants. Listening to women share these intimate experiences, I noted that they all used common terminology in the re-telling and re-living of these narratives. All women shared, at length, about not wanting others to think that they were “on the prowl” during periods of time when their husbands were out of province working.

Three of my four co-participants acknowledged that it would be relatively easy for either of them to be unfaithful in their marriage due to the geographical and emotional distance that had developed over the years that they had been living apart. One co-participant intimately shared how damaging it had been to her self-esteem when she discovered that her husband had entered into a 7-year extramarital affair while working away. Another co-participant revealed how belittling it felt to have another man tell her that she needed to keep her wedding rings on as a way to symbolize to others in the community that her marriage was intact. She spoke about how surreal it was to know that someone had watched her at a coffee shop and texted her husband to share their concerns that she was not being faithful to him while he was working away.

Co-participants shared their concerns regarding marital fidelity and perceptions from others as a result of their partner’s frequent coming and going for employment. As I thought deeply about the pervasive ways in which narratives regarding faithfulness and commitment to marriage were being lived out in the lives of my co-participants, I began to wonder if there was something within the rural PEI culture that was perpetuating these concerns. I recalled a study by Liepert and George (2008) who examined determinants of health and how these were

perceived by women living in rural communities in Ontario. Specifically, I was drawn to their findings regarding the social environments of rural communities where they identified that divorced rural women were often treated as ‘outsiders’ who did not belong in the community. Married women in the community perceived divorced women to be a threat to other married women and went out of their way not to include them in social activities occurring in the community. Considering this finding, I wondered if something similar was occurring in rural PEI. I questioned if, during the periods of time when co-participants were left behind due to a husband’s labor migration, others in the community viewed them to be actively looking for another sexual partner and as a result did not want these women to feel included in social activities. Could this have been the reason the marital status was so frequently talked about by members of the community? Did this influence women’s decisions not to engage or socialize with other adults in the community when their husbands were absent for employment?

As co-participants shared multiple examples of past experiences where they had to repeatedly defend their marital status to others, I thought about how demeaning this must have been. To be left behind with children, managing multiple roles and responsibilities, and then having to defend your relationship to others who are questioning its integrity would be very difficult. However, co-participants felt that it was important to address questions about their marriage as soon as they were asked. Women worried that if they did not respond to these questions immediately they would end up being talked about by others. This perception may or may not be true and could contribute to gossip about their marital relationship that could be spread by others living in the community. I recalled one co-participant sharing that if you did not answer questions as they were asked community members would talk about you anyhow and

therefore it was best to just answer questions as they were asked and be in more control of your own gossip.

### **Belonging – Self isolation.**

As I re-visit these narratives, I can now more clearly understand why women chose not to engage in social situations with other adults in their community. Rather than risking potential gossip from community members or having someone see them out and report their activities to their husbands, co-participants shared that they often chose to stay at home and be alone. While this may perpetuate feelings of loneliness and isolation for women left behind, women viewed it to be self-protective. By not participating in activities with other adults, women were trying to minimize being talked about by others in the community. By staying at home with their children and not engaging in social situations where only adults would be present, women were trying to avoid being the target of gossip regarding what they were doing and with whom which could lead others to question their commitment to their marriage and family in light of their husbands' absence.

Co-participants repeatedly shared how they often heard community members speak negatively about women left behind who looked for support from others during their husband's absence. Particularly, they were sensitive to how community members spoke negatively about women left behind not being able to adequately care for their children. This sentiment was clearly expressed when a co-participant confided; *“Unless I'm in dire straits I do not ask anybody for help. I don't ever want anybody to say she's dependant on other people or somebody else raised her kids. You hear that around here a lot.”* Women shared that while they were reluctant to participate in adult social activities offered within their communities, going to watch their children's extracurricular events presented a great opportunity for them to socialize

with other adults. They realized how valuable it was to get out of the house and interact with others. With their children participating in these activities being the primary focus, co-participants felt that they did not have to worry so much about how they were being perceived by others. While their husbands were working out of province, attending their children's activities became an outing that women enjoyed and looked forward to. Women identified that through attending their children's various activities, they discovered other mothers whose husbands were also coming and going for employment. This common bond contributed to a sense of belonging and presented a springboard for conversations with others about their mutual experiences of being left behind.

As I deconstructed narratives specific to belonging, I continually noted how women's interpretations of how they were being perceived by others in their communities were central to how they had conceptualized their storied lives. In reviewing transcripts of my conversational interviews with co-participants, I realized how women's worries regarding how they were being perceived by others had permeated not only their sense of belonging within their communities but also affected their representation of self. During times when their husbands were working out of province, women wished to self-isolate as a way to avoid being the target of gossip. However, upon their husband's return they attended social events with their husbands that were occurring in the community. I questioned if these public outings may have been viewed as a way to assert to community members their fidelity and commitment to their marriage.

### **The Circle of Health (COH) – An Overview of PEI's Health Promotion Framework**

In deconstructing predominant narrative threads illuminated through this narrative inquiry research, I thought deeply about women's stories of experiences and their perceptions of how having a loved one come and go for employment had impacted their health. In composing

final research texts, I began to conceptualize how women's storied experiences specific to health could be presented. I selected the *COH (COH) PEI's Health Promotion Framework* (Mitchell & Beattie-Huggan, 2006; PEI Department of Health and Community Services, 1996, 2003) as a framework by which women's health narratives could be deconstructed and critically analyzed. I believe that the *COH* is an excellent framework to align women's stories of experience beside and appreciate its wholistic and dynamic view of health. As I align women's stories of experience beside the *COH*, I will critically examine labor migration within the realm of health promotion with particular focus on how this can impact the health of women left behind. As I deconstruct women's narratives regarding health and align these to each ring of the *COH*, I will critically reflect on these in light of nursing practice, policy, research, and education. In doing so I will provide recommendations for future action which address the phenomenon of interprovincial labor migration and the experiences of women left behind.

### **Considering Physical, Emotional, Mental and Spiritual Health**

The innermost ring of the *COH* recognizes the importance of balance among spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional health (Mitchell & Beattie-Huggan, 2006; PEI Department of Health and Social Services, 1996, 2003). The *COH* views the balance of mind, body, emotions, and spirit to be critical to a holistic view of health (Personal communication, T. Mitchell and P. Beattie-Huggan, 12 February, 2014). In developing the *COH* community feedback was solicited. Community members suggested that health should be visually represented using a medicine wheel which recognizes Indigenous views regarding the importance of body, mind, emotion, and spirit. There are many different interpretations of the medicine wheel, but at its core, it symbolizes wholeness, balance, and resilience (Dapice, 2006; Weaver, 2002). While each of these four domains was not specifically defined, the *COH* asserts that a state of health is

achieved when physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health needs are met (PEI Department of Health and Social Services, 1996, 2003; Personal communication, T. Mitchell and P. Beattie-Huggan, 12 February, 2014).

The concept of health was left open to interpretation during my conversational interviews with women left behind. While co-participants and I did not explicitly engage in a discussion articulating our philosophical beliefs regarding the definition of health and what it means to be healthy, when questions were asked specific to their perceptions on health, women readily engaged and offered multiple stories showcasing how they perceived their health to have been negatively affected over the years that their husbands had been coming and going for employment.

As I re-visit co-participants' life narratives, I can clearly see how these align within each of the domains of physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual health. Considering health from a wholistic perspective, I now realize the benefits of having left a definition of health open to interpretation during our conversational interviews. Women shared their perspectives regarding how being left behind had impacted their health without trying to categorize their experiences under one specific health domain. For example, as women spoke about their health they may have initially perceived this to have affected their physical health and yet in the re-telling of this story new insights were gleaned and they could recognize how this experience also had also affected their mental, emotional, and/or spiritual health.

Walking out of the midst of my co-participants' storied lives, I can clearly see the fluidity of health and how difficult it can be to try and categorize health narratives under one domain. For example, as I composed final research texts specific to the narrative thread of belonging, I recalled how women spoke about their fears of being talked about negatively by others in the

community and as a result they did not want to ask others for help. I did not realize the degree to which this fear could impact the health of women left behind. This insight became crystallized as a co-participant recalled a winter where they had experienced significant snowfall. She explained:

*A couple of winters ago we had all that snow, so I'd get up on the roof and shovel snow off from it. There was so much, I'd shovel and shovel and shovel. My son would come up with me and we'd shovel and scoop, gosh the next day it'd snow and there'd be more snow on the roof. My friend, called me and said, "I'm just calling to tell you that some of the guys are coming in to clean off your roof tomorrow morning." I panicked, I'm like, "No, no, no, please no, I'm going to get to it, don't get them to come over." Then I felt embarrassed and thought, "Oh great, so people think that I'm not looking after the house" and then I went into panic mode. She called me at nine that night and I'm outside at ten with my son; thinking is there any way that I can get the roof cleaned off before they have come over. When I realized that I just couldn't do it by myself, I called my husband and I was crying and telling him, "These people think I can't do it myself." It was very embarrassing, I was grateful for the help, but I was so embarrassed. People were driving by and I'm thinking that they're thinking that I can't look after the house and that really bothered me. I went and I bought them all gift cards to the coffee shop and coffee and donuts. I told each of them, "If you ever need anything, let me know, I will do whatever I can for you. You guys do not know how much I appreciate it." But I growled at my friend and told her, "Don't ever do that to me again, it's embarrassing for me." But she doesn't understand because her husband is here and doesn't have to go away for work.*

Deconstructing this narrative through a health lens, I recognize how physically dangerous getting up on the roof to clear snow could have been for this co-participant and her son. In the reliving of this story I could visualize her and her son on the roof of their home, in the dark, trying desperately to clear the snow off. Getting up on roof and falling could have led to dire physical health consequences for her and/or her child. While this example is one that I initially considered to align along the vein of physical health, upon second glance I can clearly see how this example also impacted her emotional and mental health. The fear of how they would be perceived by others in the community was so powerful that this woman may not have even considered her own personal safety before getting on the roof that evening.

Considering health in light of the three predominant narrative threads around being, becoming, and belonging, I thought deeply about how being left behind can impact women's emotional health. Women acknowledged multiple feelings associated with being left behind. These ranged from sadness, loneliness, embarrassment, and feeling overwhelmed due to competing role demands, to worry about being judged by others. Re-reading the story about shoveling snow off of the roof, I was reminded of our conversational interview and the emotion in this co-participant's voice as she spoke to her feelings of embarrassment and the panic she experienced when she came to the realization that she needed help from others. She recalled how much it bothered her to have others come to her home and help her with the clearing of snow. I could visualize her feelings of panic as she spoke with her husband and the subsequent conversations she had with her friend who was oblivious to how this offer of help had actually made her feel.

Repeatedly, women offered their perceptions regarding mental health and how they viewed being left behind to have impacted this. They recalled feelings of loneliness and how being together as a couple and yet physically living apart contributed to feelings of anxiety and worry. Fear of the unknown can be incredibly stressful for women left behind with children while their husbands are coming and going for employment out of province. These experiences, coupled with the day-to-day role demands associated with being a married single mother, have negatively impacted women's mental health. All spoke about the overwhelming stress they felt at times and how they tried to manage this. Each woman acknowledged the importance of engaging in daily exercise as a way to promote their health. While recognizing the positive physical health benefits associated with going for a walk or to the gym, women found that exercise was more so beneficial to their emotional and mental health.



All women shared how beneficial exercise had been in helping them to take some time away from addressing the needs of others and “clear their heads.” However, co-participants also recognized how challenging it could be to carve out time for themselves on a regular basis due to their multiple role demands and time constraints they experienced while being left behind. Childcare could be problematic for women who had young children and did not have support available. Living in a rural setting could also present a challenge for women looking to exercise indoors at structured group fitness classes or gyms as these may not exist in their local communities. This resulted in women needing to drive to other communities to participate in formalized exercise programs. Decreased opportunities to access fitness centers coupled with a lack of childcare created barriers for women left behind to engage in organized, indoor physical activities (Trussell & Shaw, 2007, 2009). During the winter months, rural PEI can be cold and desolate. Frequent storms and frigid temperatures make it difficult for anyone to exercise outdoors. While women left behind may want to get out of the house for a daily walk, it would not be safe to push a stroller or walk with small children on rural Island roads in the winter. As such, women left behind often stay at home and do not engage in health promoting physical activity during the winter months. This can perpetuate feelings of isolation and loneliness which, in turn, can affect mental and emotional health.

Co-participants recognized the importance of exercise to promoting their physical, mental, and emotional health. They also realized how challenging it could be to regularly schedule exercise into their busy lives. While acknowledging that scheduling time for exercise could be challenging for all mothers, participants felt that being left behind presented additional challenges. If they had their husbands working on PEI and home at a certain time each day, women felt that they would have an opportunity to schedule periods of time each week and

commit to a fitness regime without having to worry about childcare. Some women, however, worried about how they would be perceived by others in the community should they seek out childcare so that they could go to the gym on a regular basis. They recalled examples where other women were questioned and talked about by community members who wondered why women would need to get out of the house so regularly to go to the gym.

Participants worried that rumors could start regarding their marital status if they spoke with men at the gym or if they lost weight and made improvements in their physical appearance while their husbands were working out of province. Examining health from a broader perspective, I once again was alerted to how the perceptions from others in the community had permeated the lives of women left behind. Rather than asking for help and participating in health promoting behaviours, women chose to self-isolate and engage in exercises that they could do alone such as walking or doing an exercise video at home.

Considering the four health dimensions, I thought deeply about the spiritual impact the coming and going of a loved one can have on the health of women left behind. I recalled an in-depth conversation with a co-participant who offered multiple examples about how being left behind could affect spiritual health. She shared how women left behind could never reach their full potential in life because their needs could never be a priority. Being left behind and functioning in the role of a lone parent or married single mother, the majority of the time a woman's priority is attending to the needs of their children. In contrast, while employed out of province their husband's primary focus was on their jobs, working long hours, and making money for his family left behind on PEI. Being absent from the home, their husbands were not physically present to attend to the day-to-day needs of children or the home. This fell upon the shoulders of women who were left behind. Being in the role of lone caregiver day after day, year after year,

women may not have an opportunity for self-reflection nor realize if they are achieving what it is that they would like to in life.

### **Aligning the COH – Strategies for Women’s Health Promotion**

Within the *COH*, five strategies were selected as a means to improve population health. These were adopted from The Ottawa Charter of Health Promotion and include building healthy public policy, creating supportive environments, strengthening community action, developing personal skills, and reorienting health services (World Health Organization, Health and Welfare Canada, & The Canadian Public Health Association [WHO], 1986). Embedded within these strategies is recognition that health promotion requires coordinated efforts by multiple sectors and individuals. Through active co-participation during our conversational interviews, participants and I explored multiple ideas that could be implemented and have a positive impact on the health of women and families left behind. These recommendations will be aligned with the five strategies for health promotion (WHO et al., 1986) as conceptualized within the *COH*.

#### **Creating supportive environments.**

Repeatedly, women shared their experiences of being judged by others in the community. Over time, these experiences contributed to women choosing to isolate from social activities occurring within their community if their children could not be present. As I repeatedly heard similar stories of experience radiating from this narrative thread of belonging, I began to recognize commonalities that existed in terms of women’s need for social support. During our conversational interviews, co-participants gained new insights regarding how they had experienced and conceptualized their lives as partners and mothers who were left behind due to a partner’s labor migration. They acknowledged that while they appreciated living in a rural community and having an opportunity to raise their children there, worries about how they were

being perceived by others in their community had contributed to their decision to isolate themselves. Acknowledging that self-isolation was a self-protective mechanism, all co-participants felt that isolating themselves had negatively impacted their mental and emotional health and had perpetuated feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression.

The *COH* (PEI Department of Health and Social Services, 1996) describes creating supportive environments as “taking steps to provide the physical, social, economic, cultural and spiritual health people need to be healthy” (p. 4). In deconstructing narrative threads specific to belonging, it became apparent that co-participants did not feel like their community fostered a supportive environment. While being left behind resulted in greater financial gains for the family, women did not realize how negatively they would be perceived by families who remained on PEI. Rather than offering commendation or showing outward support for families left behind, co-participants felt an overwhelming sense of judgment by members of their communities. They did not feel it was safe to disclose how they were feeling or what was happening in their lives for fear that they would be negatively talked about by others living in the community. As such, they internalized many of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Co-participants shared that until our conversational interviews, they had never spoke about these life narratives before. Having a narrative inquirer solely interested in them and wanting to understand their lived experience of being left behind led to new insights regarding how valuable it was to share these experiences with another person. Through our conversational interviews women realized how profoundly having a loved one coming and going for employment had affected their evolution as women, wives, and mothers. In the re-living and re-telling of these stories of experience women realized that they were not living in a supportive environment. Together we began to imagine what could change to create a more supportive

environment for women who live in rural communities and are left behind as a result of a partner's coming and going for employment.

**Strengthening community action.**

The *COH* describes strengthening community action as “helping communities to find ways to decide what they need to be healthy and how to achieve their personal objectives” (PEI Department of Health and Social Services, 1996, p. 4). As I listened to co-participants share their storied experiences, I was intellectually struck by their common desire for support.

Through co-participating in our conversational interviews, women recognized the importance of talking and sharing their experiences with others in a safe, confidential, non-judgemental, and private manner. As co-participants began to imagine interventions that would positively impact the health of women left behind, each stressed how valuable it would be to develop networks of support where women left behind would have a forum to come together and share their experiences with others. These networks of support could be established through formal or informal support groups developed by women for women. Co-participants felt that having an opportunity to come together with others who were also living this phenomenon would help women to realize that they are not alone. Through these groups new friendships could develop which could enhance women's feelings of belonging within their communities. Women could also establish a network of sharing whereby they could swap childcare or carpooling services with one another. This could present opportunities for women left behind to have time away from their children and engage in healthy self-care practices.

As each co-participant shared how important support is for women left behind, I began to conceptualize what these support groups would look like and how they could become a reality in rural communities across PEI. In composing research texts, I was awakened to how feeling

supported could make a positive difference in the lives of women left behind. In September of 2013 I began to take action. I met with executive directors of all family resource centers on PEI. I shared my narrative inquiry research and spoke about my co-participants' vision for support groups to be established for women left behind. In November 2013 a family resource center in the Western Region of PEI implemented the first *Families of Migrant Workers* support group. Free childcare is provided. Currently, the group meets bi-weekly and has, on average, 20 to 25 women attending. There is currently planning underway for *Families of Migrant Workers* support groups to be implemented in the Queens and Kings Regions of PEI. Through this narrative inquiry research women's storied experiences led to community action which is helping to create supportive environments for other women left behind due to their partner's labor migration.

#### **Developing personal skills.**

The *COH* defines developing personal skills as "helping people to develop the knowledge and skills they need to meet life's challenges and to contribute to society" (PEI Department of Health and Social Services, 1996, p. 4). All co-participants shared at length how alone they felt as a result of being left behind. They shared how comforting it would be to know that they were not alone and build relationships with others also experiencing the coming and going of a loved one. As co-participants imagined these support groups they realized how valuable having an opportunity to talk about their storied lives could be to promoting their mental and emotional health. Having a common bond of being left behind, women could learn about how others in similar situations are coping as they attend to multiple roles and responsibilities in their husband's absence. As women come together in the *Families of Migrant Workers* groups it is hoped that they will support, share, and learn from one another. Through this they may develop

personal skills and have an opportunity to re-tell and re-live their storied experiences and gain new understandings of what it means to be left behind.

**Re-orientating health services.**

Co-participating with women in this narrative inquiry, I came to realize that a significant gap exists regarding addressing the health needs of women left behind. Considering health from a physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual perspective, I thought deeply about the current health services available on PEI for women who are left behind as a result of their husbands' labor migration. While it is often common knowledge that many families on PEI have a loved one coming and going for employment, there appears to be a lack of understanding regarding how this phenomenon may be affecting the health of those left behind.

Co-participants did not view their family physicians to be a positive source of support, nor did they feel that health care professionals acknowledged or even considered the experiences of women and families left behind. Women offered numerous examples regarding how the current health system does not acknowledge their needs. All felt that their family doctors had minimized their experiences and were too quick to write a prescription to “numb the pain of being left behind.” They shared specific examples to illuminate how they felt mocked and belittled by their family doctors when they went to speak with them about their feelings of being overwhelmed as a result of the multiple roles and responsibilities they juggled in their husbands' absence. They shared that their doctors made them feel like they should have nothing to complain about because their husbands were working away and now earning lots of money for their family. While this phenomenon was one being experienced by many rural Island families, co-participants felt that the experiences of those left behind were not on the radar of health care providers working in PEI. Women equated this to be akin to an elephant in a room; everyone

knows it is happening but no one talks about it or wants to do anything about it. To make changes to health care delivery and public policy, awareness and understanding of this phenomenon is paramount.

Re-orientating health services to reflect the needs of women and families left behind would involve thinking about the delivery of services that promote health differently. As we begin to think broadly about the delivery of health services and the needs of women left behind, new opportunities for where and how we deliver services which promote health must be considered. Co-participants spoke at length about how valuable physical exercise had been to promoting not only their physical health but also their mental and emotional health. While physical activity was recognized as valuable, they also acknowledged how difficult it was to participate in physical activity due to lack of childcare available and their reluctance to ask others for help. Listening to women speak about their desires to engage in physical activities I began to think about whether opportunities could exist for local gyms to provide on-site childcare services. This would alleviate the need to have to ask others for help with childcare and offer an opportunity for women to get out of the house and engage in physical activity. Women could go to their local gym to focus on personal self-care activities without having to worry about arranging childcare.

Family resource centers are an excellent forum for service delivery on PEI. They provide a multitude of programs free of charge. The centers are supportive, inviting, attentive, and attuned to the needs of families in the local community. Family Resource Centers could be an ideal setting for health care delivery. Recently, private funding has been secured to develop a health clinic focused on family wellness at a family resource center located in the Central region of PEI. This health clinic will be focused on the needs of families with children under the age of



18 and will be staffed by a full-time Nurse Practitioner who will offer additional outreach services to rural communities. The Nurse Practitioner will work non-traditional hours to promote accessibility. While this health service will be open to all families free of charge, great opportunity exists with this clinic to support the needs of women and children left behind. This Family Resource Center staff is interested in beginning a *Families of Migrant Workers* support group and has committed to providing childcare free of charge for women who wish to attend. With nurse practitioners being on site at this Family Resource Center, I think about the many opportunities for health promotion that could arise for women and children left behind in the re-orientation of health services from a traditional physician's office to a Family Resource Center whose mandate is to support the health and wellbeing of families.

**Building healthy public policy.**

Co-participants felt that small changes to health care delivery could have positive effects on the health of women left behind and managing multiple roles and responsibilities. Central to our discussions was the importance of feeling supported and having an opportunity for women to share their experiences with others in a safe and non-judgemental manner. Co-participants shared that while they often felt that they were talked about because they were left behind, there was little discussion regarding the multiple factors that had contributed to their husbands needing to leave the province for employment in the first place. Recent changes to the Employment Insurance program have had detrimental effects on those employed in seasonal economies on PEI. Each co-participant spoke at length about a lack of will on the part of government to acknowledge the impact that labor migration was having on families on PEI.

Many families were experiencing the coming and going of a loved one and the money being earned out of province being spent in local communities on PEI by family members left

behind. While men may work the majority of the year in Western Canada, their place of residence remains PEI. As such, they will often pay provincial income tax to the province of PEI. This, in my opinion, contributes to a lack of will by government to explore more deeply the social costs and prices being paid by women and families left behind. While awareness and further understanding of the issues faced by women left behind can be gained through research such as this narrative inquiry, co-participants felt pessimistic that this would actually make a difference in broad government policies due to the significant economic benefits received by the province as a result of men leaving their families behind for employment elsewhere.

Recommendations specific to addressing economic policy related to labor migration are beyond the scope of this narrative inquiry. I can, however, see ways in which increased understanding and awareness about the experiences of women left behind could influence health care policy and nursing practice. Throughout my narrative inquiry research, I have heard a multitude of stories from women who felt that health professionals were oblivious to the experiences of women left behind. They did not recognize the stress that these women may have been under as they participated in the roles associated with lone parenting in their partner's absence. While women may be reluctant to bring up the topic of how they are experiencing the coming and going of their loved one, they may be receptive to sharing their experiences with health care providers if they were asked direct questions about their husband's place of employment. Over the past 2 years I have been a frequent recipient of health care services throughout PEI. On numerous occasions I was asked by health care providers my marital status and what my husband did for a living. I was intellectually struck by these questions and wondered why these were asked. I inquired about this with the clinic and hospital nurses and

was offered very little rationale. I was informed that these were just questions on the forms that they needed to ask.

As I reflect deeply on my personal experiences and the understanding I now have regarding labor migration and the experiences of women left behind, I wonder if revising intake assessment forms for health care providers employed in acute and community settings could be one strategy to invite conversations with women about their experiences of being left behind. Revising questions posed on assessment forms to include the location of spousal employment could become an invitation for sharing and further exploration regarding the health needs of women and families left behind. Whether women feel that they would want to share their experiences would be an individual choice. However, having others acknowledge that they are left behind and managing multiple roles and responsibilities in their husband's absence could be beneficial. Asking these questions could help raise awareness and invite discussions which could lead to greater understanding about the experiences and health needs of women and families left behind due to a loved one's labor migration.

I have had preliminary conversations with practicing public health nurses and family physicians that were very receptive to revising intake assessment forms to acknowledge more explicitly marital status and location of employment. These practitioners believed that this could be an effective strategy to ensure that coming and going of a loved one for employment and the experiences of women left behind were acknowledged. This, in turn, could invite further conversations regarding how women were experiencing being left behind and if they required additional support. Health care providers could then refer women to resources such as the *Families of Migrant Workers* groups being offered at local family resource centers.

### **Aligning the COH – Collaborating to Improve Women’s Health**

The *COH* identifies populations as individuals, families, communities, systems, and society (PEI Department of Health and Social Services, 2003). In moving forward and taking action to address the health needs of women left behind, it is paramount that women who live this phenomenon are included. To make changes in policies and practice which will have a positive impact on the health of women left behind, we must work with others within the community. I believe that affecting change must be multifaceted, multi-pronged, and implemented through the collaboration and expertise of multiple sectors working together. While my professional background is public health nursing, I realize that to raise awareness and increase understanding of the needs of women and families left behind I must work with other sectors such as economic development, social work, education, medicine, community development, and spirituality. For example, in the creation of the *Families of Migrant Workers* support groups, co-participants shared with me their vision for the support groups. I met with each of the executive directors of the family resource centers across PEI to share this information. Each director had also expressed concerns regarding how they could support women living in their communities whose partners were working out of province. Through our discussions, the groundwork for the support groups was established. To implement the groups we needed buy-in from each family resource center. The family resource centers offered facilitators for the support groups and early child educators who were available to provide childcare for women while they participated in the support groups. Awareness of the support groups has been raised through media releases, news stories in local papers, and a recent CBC radio program which focused its noon programming on the experiences of women in rural PEI who were left behind due to the labor migration of their husbands and the development of the support

groups. Through this work I have realized that by collaborating with other sectors who also have a desire to support women left behind, strategies can be implemented which can have a positive impact on women left behind.

### **Aligning the COH – Examining the Social Determinants of Health**

Within the *COH*, determinants of health are identified as income and social status, social support networks, education, employment and working conditions, physical environments, genetics, personal health practices and coping skills, healthy child development, health services, gender, and culture (PEI Department of Health and Social Services, 1996, 2003). These determinants are based on evidence that clearly indicates that health is determined by our social and economic environment, physical environment, personal health practices, individual capacity and coping skills, and available health services (Baum et al. 2009; Marmot, 2007; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010; Raphael, 2010; Reutter, & Kushner, 2010). Co-participating with women in this inquiry, I was awakened to how the social determinants of health are intertwined and enmeshed in the lives of co-participants left behind.

I was alerted to how lack of education contributed to decreased employment opportunities and economic opportunities for families living in rural PEI. Through my conversational interviews with women left behind, I also became aware of perceived differences in employment and working conditions between occupations in rural PEI and those in Western Canada. In particular, I was reminded of how important it is to treat employees with respect and convey that they are valuable. While the improved income was the initial catalyst for all families leaving for employment out of province, job satisfaction and feeling like they were valued and respected as employees were also reasons cited by their husbands to have continued coming and going for employment year after year. I have also been awakened to the importance of social

support and, as a result of this inquiry, understand more fully how decreased social support coupled with role overload can negatively impact women's mental health. This finding was also discovered by Glynn et al. (2009) who analyzed the determinants of health in relation to gender and role overload. These researchers discovered that feeling overwhelmed as a result of fulfilling multiple role expectations can affect women's mental health more profoundly than other determinants such as employment and working conditions and income and social status. Beginning this narrative inquiry journey, I was also not as attentive as I am now to issues of gender and early child development and how these determinants were being lived out in the storied lives of women left behind.

### **Gender.**

As my research relationships developed with co-participants, they shared deeply their perceptions regarding the roles of men and women in families and how these are socially constructed. I was awakened to issues of gender and how the coming and going of a loved one for employment is experienced differently by men and women. I learned that women often feel that this phenomenon is one that remains invisible because it is often women who are left behind to manage multiple roles and responsibilities in their husbands' absence. Co-participants spoke about how the roles of men and women were perceived differently in society. Men are often viewed to function in the primary role of financial provider for their families whereas women often ascribe to the roles of caregivers. Men who provide well for their families are perceived to be good fathers and husbands. This perception does not change whether a man is employed in or out of province. Women expressed how societal perceptions of roles and expectations of men and women can be challenging. They shared that as women left behind they manage everything in their husband's absence without question or acknowledgement. Their husbands, who work

away the majority of the time, provide well for their families and as such, are viewed to be good family men by members of the community. In reality, some co-participants expressed concern that their husbands use their work as a way to escape the day-to-day realities that exist for their families left behind, and equate the money that they are making for their families on PEI as fulfilling their roles as a husband and father.

Many co-participants also alluded to the fact that being left behind is a gendered issue which predominantly affects women left behind in rural communities. As such, the women do not feel that it is an issue that is taken seriously and felt that their needs were often ignored. They shared that when they had tried to express to others how they were experiencing being left behind, they were often perceived to be complaining. They spoke of a common sentiment which prevailed among others in their communities which was if they didn't like their situation they had two choices. If they couldn't deal with their multiple roles and responsibilities, they should open their mouths and tell their husbands to come home or put up with their situation and stop complaining. This, in turn, has silenced women from openly speaking to others about their experiences of being left behind. The women wondered aloud how differently things might be perceived on PEI if the tables were turned and it was predominantly men who were left behind to care for children while their wives left the province for employment. In deconstructing this narrative I now recognize the importance of adopting a gendered lens when exploring phenomenon such as labor migration and the experiences of those who are coming, going, and being left behind. Using a gender-based analysis when designing and implementing strategies to support women left behind would ensure that issues specific to gender remain at the forefront.

**Early child development.**

All women co-participating in this inquiry wondered how having a father come and go for employment was impacting their children and how they were conceptualizing what it meant to be married and be part of a family. They spoke about the contrast between the lives of their families and those of their children's friends who had both parents living together and employed on PEI. For many women, their children had spent the majority of their formative childhood years with a father who had been coming and going for employment. He was physically present with the family on average 60 days per year and while at home, time together was often focused on doing fun family activities. Many women spoke to the artificialness of living a life together and yet the majority of time being apart. They spoke about as the years had passed and children had grown and matured, they were coming to realize that their fathers had not been present for the majority of their lives. This was contributing to feelings of resentment among children towards their fathers. As these children became young adults, they began to question the roles of fathers and husbands within relationships.

Reflecting on this, I am reminded of Parrenas's (2005) research exploring the relationships with adult children who had experienced the international labor migration of one or both parents. She writes about the struggles and resentments experienced among adult children as they began to realize all that their parents had missed as a result of leaving them behind for employment. She writes about the challenges adult children had experienced with attachment and trusting others as they tried to establish adult relationships and families of their own. As I listened to co-participants share their stories of experience and speculate how living a life as a child with an absentee father would affect their engagement in future romantic relationships, I too thought to the future and realized that further research specific to this topic is required.



Travelling back and forth from PEI to Edmonton for my doctoral work, I had conversations with many people. On three occasions I conversed with adult men whose fathers had participated in interprovincial labor migration during their childhoods. They shared at length how they had experienced this and how it had affected their perceptions regarding the roles and responsibilities of men within families. They spoke about the challenges they had experienced as they matured and entered into dating relationships with women. As they did not see their mothers and fathers together for more than a week at a time sporadically throughout the year, they did not understand how men and women could be partners in long term relationships that unfold on a day-to-day basis. These men spoke about how they struggled to understand what it meant to be fathers to their children as a result of having a father who was a part of their family and yet not physically present for the majority of their lives. They shared how uncomfortable it was to try and co-parent their children as they had not experienced having a father on a day-to-day basis that could role model what it looked like to be a parent and partner within families. Each man I spoke with was very interested in this narrative inquiry research and encouraged me to conduct future research examining the perspectives of men who had experienced the labor migration of their fathers as children.

### **Aligning the Values of the COH**

The final ring of the *COH* represents core values and includes respect, social justice, sharing, choice, caring, and balance (PEI Department of Health and Social Services, 1996, 2003). These values were considered as I entered into and fostered research relationships with co-participants throughout this inquiry. The intimate sharing of storied lives was thought provoking and insightful and led to new understandings regarding how being left behind over time had impacted women's life trajectories. As I moved away from women's storied lives and

began composing research texts, I was mindful of the voices of my co-participants. I connected with them as I developed each findings chapter to inform them of how the inquiry was unfolding. I strived to convey respect and caring towards my co-participants by ensuring that what was being composed in research texts was reflective of what had been shared during our conversational interviews. I valued our time together and respected women's knowledge and intimate sharing of their experiences. Choices were offered to co-participants during each interview. Women made decisions regarding the location of our conversational interviews, food and drinks that they would like to consume during our time together, and what specifically they wanted to discuss during our time together. While two broad questions were used to guide this inquiry, the ways in which these were answered were open and decided upon by each co-participant. As intimate sharing occurred, I was attentive to what was being revealed in the re-telling and re-living of these stories. During our time together, some women shared experiences that they had never verbalized before. The vivid recollection and articulation of storied experiences illuminated how impactful their experiences had been on the evolution of their life narratives over the years that they had experienced their husbands coming and going for employment.

### **Final Reflections – Revisiting the Past, Considering the Future**

As I pause to reflect on this narrative inquiry research and all that has been uncovered, I realize that I have achieved the intended goals proposed for this inquiry. This research has and will continue to contribute to knowledge development in the future. From the time of initial conceptualization through to present day, I have discussed my ideas and the phenomenon of women living in rural PEI and being left behind as a result of their husband's participation in interprovincial labor migration. In 2008, women living in a rural community in Western PEI

began to talk with me about their experiences of being left behind and caring for children while their husbands were employed in Alberta during the winter months. Our conversations led to me to want to learn more about this phenomenon and how it was impacting women left behind. The more I spoke with women about it, the more they told me that I should go forward and conduct research on this topic. These initial conversations planted the seed for developing a doctoral program and form the foundation for developing a program of research.

To date, this narrative inquiry research has been disseminated locally, regional, and internationally. Knowledge has been transferred during oral presentations at the Bloomberg Emerging Scholars Institute in Toronto, Ontario; the International Qualitative Methods conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia; the International Community Health Nursing Conference in Edmonton, Alberta; and at the International Council on Women's Health Issues 19th Congress in Bangkok, Thailand. During each of these conferences, I was intellectually struck by the response received from audience participants. In Bangkok, participants from Australia, Britain, the Philippines, Mexico, and rural Thailand shared that my research resonated with them and was also being lived out by women they knew living in their countries. These conferences opened the door to networking with other scholars interested in this research and the prospect of conducting future research collaborations focusing on labor migration and the experiences of families left behind.

Locally, I was invited to speak about this narrative inquiry research with the executive directors of each Family Resource Center on PEI. These conversations provided the groundwork to begin moving forward and developing the *Families of Migrant Workers* support groups and led to media coverage from the CBC and local newspapers to raise awareness of women's experiences of being left behind and their need for support. I have also been in conversation

with family physicians, nurse practitioners, public health nurses, and teachers to raise awareness and share my narrative inquiry research. Within the next 3 months, findings from this inquiry will be shared at the Thinking Qualitatively Workshop Series in Edmonton, Alberta and Atlantic Region Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing annual conference, and the University of Prince Edward Island School of Nursing and Health PEI Nursing Research day in Charlottetown, PEI. This will be an excellent forum for knowledge translation with nurses working in both education and practice.

I have also been approached by a minister who is interested in learning more about how she can support women in her congregation who are left behind with children and I was invited by an Atlantic University to offer a presentation to their nursing students and faculty about my research. During my early conversations with women left behind, I could never have foreseen how much I would learn about this phenomenon as a result of this narrative inquiry research, nor could I have imagined how it would resonate with the community at large. As a public health nurse who has specialized in community development I realize that grassroots movements can be very effective in advocating for social change. I also understand that there must be concerted will and multiple sectors working together for momentum to continue.

As I reflect on this research and all that has been shared to date, I am reminded of an email that I received prior to beginning my conversational interviews with Laura. This was from a woman who had learned of my proposed inquiry. She wrote, *“Thank-you for embracing your beautiful mind, and helping tell women’s stories in your research. Knowledge is awareness, awareness leads to possibility.”* Reminded of this email, I now look to the future and offer recommendations regarding how the findings of this narrative inquiry research would influence nursing practice, education, policy, and research implications.

**Recommendations for nursing practice.**

Nurses in clinical practice must become more attuned to the needs of women left behind. There is an opportunity for nurses to be leaders and advocate for women who are experiencing feelings of stress or being overwhelmed as a result of having a loved one coming and going for employment out of province. Nurses are in a prime position to establish therapeutic relationships with women left behind. Working in hospitals, clinics, and community settings, it is often nurses who are the first point of contact for women and children left behind and in need of health care services. Nurses being knowledgeable of families who have a loved one employed out of province could initiate a conversation with women about this. Nurses could assess how women are managing family and household responsibilities in their husbands' absence. By asking direct questions to women reflective of their husbands coming and going, nurses would gain a deeper understanding of how women left behind are feeling. Nurses in practice should have an awareness of resources available within the community to support women left behind such as the *Families of Migrant Workers* support groups. Should women require additional supports not available in the community, nurses could advocate on behalf of women left behind for these to be implemented and accessible.

**Recommendations for education.**

Findings from this inquiry could be shared with faculty teaching in undergraduate and graduate nursing programs. An awareness of the predominant narratives embedded in women's experiences of being left behind could be integrated into undergraduate and graduate nursing curriculum. Content specific to the labor migration and the experiences of women and families left behind could align with the social determinants of health and be integrated into theoretical and clinical courses focusing on individuals, families, community, mental health, women's

health, and school health nursing. In particular, students enrolled at the University of Prince Edward Island School of Nursing would benefit from having an increased understanding of the experiences of women left behind and how these shape their conceptualization of identity and perceptions of health as these students may actually be working with women and their children during their clinical practice experiences. It is also important for nursing educators and students to recognize that this phenomenon is not one unique to PEI but is being experienced by women and children nationally and internationally.

#### **Recommendations for policy.**

Engaging in discussions with co-participants during multiple conversational interviews, I gained a greater awareness regarding gender and how the experiences of men and women living out a similar phenomenon vary significantly. As I listened to women recall past experiences specific to how being left behind has shaped their role identity, I was awakened to how invisible the experiences of women left behind appear to be. This inquiry illuminated many narratives highlighting women's roles and how these are constructed during periods of time while their husbands are employed out of province and change upon their husbands' return. While left behind, women must become the lone caregiver to children while being responsible for day-to-day household management as well as possibly being employed outside of the home. Women frequently mused that because it was women who were left behind, this was an issue that was socially invisible; everyone knows that women are left behind, and yet, no one recognizes the challenges that women may face as they manage multiple roles and responsibilities in their husband's absence.

Currently there is no tracking that offers statistical profiles of the number of families participating in temporary labor migration. While monthly permanent migration and

unemployment statistics are compiled, nothing currently exists which reflects the actual numbers of individuals participating in temporary labor migration and the families left behind as a result. Developing a way to track these statistics on a monthly or quarterly basis would offer quantitative data indicative of the prevalence of temporary labor migration occurring on PEI and reflect the actual numbers of families experiencing this phenomenon. This information could lead to critical questions regarding economic policies to support small business, grow local economies, and retain employees on PEI.

### **Recommendations for research.**

Reflecting on the many stories lived, told, and re-told throughout this narrative inquiry I have come to realize that this narrative inquiry offers a contribution to research and knowledge development in the field of women's health and labor migration. As I deconstructed predominant life narratives illuminated in multiple conversational interviews with my co-participants, I realized that many of these narratives could form the foundation for additional research. Rural health, women's health, and labor migration and the experiences of loved ones left behind are all areas where literature suggests further study is warranted. Future research specific to this phenomenon from a Canadian and international perspective is required.

I am interested in conducting additional research with women living in rural Prince Edward Island and participating in the *Families of Migrant Workers* support groups. Both Caine (2012) and Langley (2012) identify parallels between narrative inquiry and action research. In their respective studies they write how research which combines both of these complimentary methods can help push social agendas and affect change. I am interested in conducting research which aligns narrative inquiry with action research. Particularly, I would like to explore the impact of support for women left behind by examining the sharing of stories lived, told, and re-

told by women coming together in a supportive environment such as the *Families of Migrant Workers* support groups. Illuminating the collective experiences of women left behind could further contribute to an understanding of women's experiences and lead to future action and change.

I am also interested in doing a comparative study exploring the experiences of women coming to PEI for employment as temporary foreign workers. I would like to explore the experiences of women leaving their children behind as compared to women who have been left as a result of their husband's labor migration. I am also interested in learning more about permanent reunification and reintegration and how this is experienced when a husband has retired or is no longer participating in labor migration and returns home. Another area of future research I would be interested in exploring would be a retrospective study, as suggested, regarding the experiences of men who had a father participating in labor migration throughout their childhoods. While these are simply research suggestions at present, I am excited as I look to the future and the contributions that could be made as I continue developing my program of research.

## **Conclusion**

As I conclude this dissertation, I will forever be grateful to each woman who chose to share their life experiences with me. Embarking on this unknown journey of discovery, I could not have imagined how much I would transform as a result of my co-participation in this narrative inquiry research. My personal and professional stories have been shaped by the experiences I have had. The two are intertwined and connected to who I am as a nurse and human being and are reflected in the person I have become. While each co-participant shared with me how valuable the experience had been in coming together with me on this journey of



discovery, I too recognize how much I have changed as a result of my co-participation with them in this narrative inquiry. I now understand what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) meant when they wrote about the relational aspects of narrative inquiry research and how narrative inquirers must “fall in love” (p. 81) with their participants. Not a day goes by that I do not stop and think about my co-participants who shared so intimately with me their storied lives.

As I close this narrative inquiry research and look to the future I realize that lives are always in motion and stories of experience will forever be lived, told, and re-told. I know that co-participating in this inquiry was transformative and made a difference in the lives of each woman who embarked with me on this journey of discovery. I have learned that after our conversational interviews, one woman was able to articulate her feelings of loneliness and that she could not bear to be left behind any longer. Coming together and talking about her experiences with me gave her the confidence and strength to share her true feelings about being left behind with her husband. As a result he stopped working out of province and their family is now reunited and living together on PEI. Another co-participant recently emailed me to share that after our conversational interviews had ended, she came to new insights regarding her family and what she wanted for the future. She informed me that she and her family moved away from PEI and are now living in Alberta with her husband. She decided to go back to school and is currently a student at the University of Alberta. Another woman’s husband will soon be retiring and they are currently trying to come to a mutual decision about whether they will remain on PEI or move away. My fourth co-participant is still committed to moving out of province and beginning a new life with her husband. She is planning to move within the next year and a half when her youngest child graduates from high school.

Reflecting on my journey as a narrative inquirer I have come to many realizations. I leave with a deeper understanding and awareness of labor migration and the experiences of women left behind. I have learned much about roles and the perceptions of roles and how these are constructed within societies. I have learned a great deal about how paralyzing the fear of being gossiped about and perceived negatively by community members can be and its impact on the lives of women left behind. I have become aware of the extent to which having a loved one come and go for employment out of province can affect health. Examining health from a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual perspective has made me more aware of how factors such as limited employment and economic uncertainty can impact the lives of individuals, families, and communities.

Exploring the coming and going of a loved one from the perspective of women and children left behind, I have learned much about family composition and realize that the conceptualization of what it means to live within a nuclear family must be reconfigured in light of interprovincial labor migration and the new norm of families living apart yet being together. Many families living in rural PEI communities are dependent upon seasonal economies. Challenges to economic security as a result of precarious seasonal industries coupled with the restructuring of social programs such as Employment Insurance are resulting in more women living out the narrative of “married single mothers” as their husbands come and go for employment out of province. In looking to the future, a multi-sectored, multipronged approach must be adopted to raise awareness and increase understanding of the needs of women and children left behind as a result of interprovincial labor migration. By illuminating women’s stories of experience it is hoped that there will be a greater appreciation by others regarding the strengths and challenges experienced by women left behind. This, in turn, may lead to new

opportunities for the implementation of interventions specific to policy and practice that will support the health and wellbeing of women left behind and experiencing the coming and going of a loved one as a result of interprovincial labor migration.

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## Appendix A:

### Participant Information Letter and Consent

#### Part 1

#### **Project Title: Being, Becoming, Belonging – A Narrative Inquiry Exploring Women’s Stories of Identity as they Experience a Partner’s Temporary Labor Migration**

Christina Murray, RN, PhD student, Faculty of Nursing.....Tel: (902) 303-0303  
Sylvia Barton, Associate Professor, faculty of Nursing (supervisor).....Tel: (780) 492-6253

This letter tells you about information that you will need to know if you decide to be in this study. I am a doctoral student in Nursing and the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta. I am doing research and would like to ask you to consider being part of it. This study is to learn more about what it is like for women with children, to be left behind while their partner works for periods of time in another province. To be in this study you need to be a woman whose partner works for periods of time in another province. You need to live in Prince Edward Island and still have children living at home. You must also be over the age of 18.

If you agree to be in the study, I will ask you to talk with me 5 or 6 times. Each talk will last between 1-1½ hours. I will record our conversations using a digital recorder. I believe that who we are and who we become are shaped by the stories we tell about ourselves and share with others. As we come together, I will ask you to share stories about what it means to you to be left behind, what it is like when your partner returns home after a work term and how you think others view you when your partner goes away for work. Following our third or fourth talk, I will give you a digital camera and ask that you take pictures that show what it is like for you, when your partner goes away for work and you are left behind. In our next talk, I would like you to share your pictures with me so I can hear more stories about your experiences.

Our talks will be private. Your name will not be used in this study. What is recorded on the digital files will be typed onto paper (transcribed). I will listen to these audio recordings of our talks. In the event that I use a transcriber, your privacy will still be maintained because transcribers are bonded. The information collected and pictures shared in this study will be kept private, except when professional codes of ethics or the law requires reporting. The audio files will be destroyed after they have been transcribed and the typed information and pictures will be locked in a filing cabinet in my office for five years. After this time they will be shredded. Your name and any other identifying information will not be attached to the information that you shared during our time together. To protect your privacy, your name will not be included in any public talks or articles that come from the study results.

I am a nurse who has worked in the community with individuals and families who have had to leave their homes for work in Alberta. Moving back to PEI from Alberta, I have already talked with a lot of women who have partners who go away for work in the winter. It is these women who suggested that I do research with women in this area. Participating in this study will

allow others to learn about your experience and what it is like for women who stay behind and care for their families while their partner go away for work in another province. Having an opportunity to share your stories may help you to see your own personal strengths. A copy of the final study will be given to you upon request.

It is not expected that there will be any risks to you if you take part in this study. You will never be pushed to share anything that causes you to feel uneasy. If you do become troubled about some of the things we talk about, we can talk further. If necessary, I will help you get counseling. You will not receive any additional benefits at the end of the study. The talks only require your time. You are always welcome to ask me any questions at any time about this study. If you decide you want to be in this study then change your mind, you can withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

If you would like to take part in this study, please read and respond to the questions below. Then please sign your name. Your signature will be proof that you have decided to be in the study and that you are aware of what the study is asking of you. If you have concerns about this study, you may contact Jay Babiak. He is the Director of Research in Nursing Program at the University of Alberta and can be reached at (780) 492-8557 or [jay.babiak@ualberta.ca](mailto:jay.babiak@ualberta.ca)

Do you have any questions?

Initials \_\_\_\_\_

## Participant Consent

**Part 2**Do you understand that you have been asked to be a research study? **YES NO**Have you read and received a copy of the attached information sheet? **YES NO**Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this study? **YES NO**Have you had a chance to ask questions and discuss this study? **YES NO**Do you understand that you are free to refuse to take part in or to withdraw from this study at any time? You do not have to give a reason. If you choose to withdraw from the study, do you understand that there will be no penalty? **YES NO**Has the issue of privacy been explained to you? **YES NO**

This study was explained to me by: \_\_\_\_\_

If you agree to take part in this study, please sign your name below.

***I agree to take part in this study.***

\_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Research Participant

The consent has been obtained by the researcher below. I believe that the person giving consent understands what is involved in the study and voluntarily agrees to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_

Date