

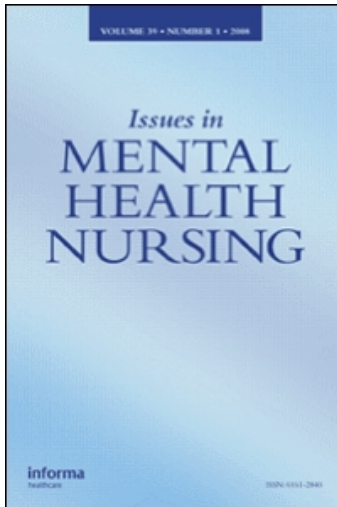
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### Uprooted and Displaced: A Critical Narrative Study of Homeless, Aboriginal, and Newcomer Girls in Canada

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# Uprooted and Displaced: A Critical Narrative Study of Homeless, Aboriginal, and Newcomer Girls in Canada

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Uprooting and displacement are a common part of everyday life for millions of girls and young women throughout the world. While much of the discourse has centered on movement from one country to another, uprooting and displacement are also a reality for many within Canada. Notably, a growing population of homeless girls and Aboriginal girls also have experienced uprooting and dislocation from home, community, and in some cases, family. For many of these girls, multiple forms of individual and systemic violence are central features of their lives. The primary purpose of this critical narrative study is to examine how uprooting and displacement have shaped mental health among three groups: (1) newcomers to Canada (immigrant and refugee girls); (2) homeless girls; and (3) Aboriginal girls. In-depth narrative interviews were conducted with 19 girls in Southwestern Ontario. Narrative themes revealed that although there is much diversity within and between these groups, uprooting and displacement create social boundaries and

profound experiences of disconnections in relationships. Barriers to re/establishing connections generate dangerous spaces within interlocking systems of oppression. However, in negotiating new spaces, there is the potential for the forming and re-forming of alliances where sources of support hold the promise of hope. It is within these spaces of hope and pathways of engagement where connections offer a renewed sense of belonging and well-being. The findings highlight the relevance of the construct of uprootedness in girls' lives, provide beginning directions for the design of gender-specific and culturally meaningful interventions, and comprise a substantial contribution to the growing body of research related to girls and young women.

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Uprooting and displacement are a common part of everyday life for millions of girls throughout the world. Typically such experiences are understood by Canadians as occurring "elsewhere," in nations where war, human rights abuses, and civil unrest prevail. As a result, little attention has been paid to uprooting and displacement among those who reside within Canada. In recent years, researchers have examined the importance of community, belonging, and citizenship in the lives of girls and young women in Canada (Berman & Jiwani, 2002; Downe, 2006; Gonnick, 2003; Haldenby, Berman, & Forchuk, 2007; Khanlou et al., 2002; Lee, 2006). However, this body of work remains sparse, and little scholarly inquiry has been undertaken to explore the

meaning of uprooting and displacement in girls' lives, including how the experience of these events and the meanings attached to them influence girls' sense of well-being. The purpose of this paper is to examine uprooting and displacement among three groups of girls and young women in Canada who have been displaced from their homes, families, countries, and/or communities: (1) immigrant and refugee girls; (2) homeless girls; and (3) Aboriginal girls. Findings from a recent study are presented, with particular attention to the intersections of race, space, gender, and class. Strategies used by girls and young women to overcome, resist, and challenge the sense of relational disconnection from peers, family members, school, and community that typically accompanies uprooting are examined. Lastly, the way in which experiences of uprootedness are commonly shaped by violence in the lives of girls and young women is considered.

### BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Apfelbaum (2000, p. 1008) has stated that we live in an "era of uprooting." During the last decade, global conflict, religious, ethnic and racial persecution, tyranny, war, and economic uncertainty have all combined to leave no continent without immigrants and refugees. Although numbers vary, and depend upon the source and one's definition, it is clear that large portions of humanity are on the move. To put this phenomenon into perspective, when the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) was first established in 1951, there were 1.5 million refugees; today it is estimated that there are close to 32 million refugees, displaced persons, and asylum seekers worldwide (UNHCR, 2007). Current Canadian policy is to admit approximately 220,000 newcomers each year. About 24% of these are under the age of 16 and approximately one in ten girls admitted is under 15 years of age (Berman & Jiwani, 2008).

Much of the discourse concerning uprooting and displacement has centered on movement from one country to another. However, uprooting from homes or communities is also a reality for many within Canada's borders, particularly among homeless girls and Aboriginal girls. Although the experiences of these groups differ in many respects, all have endured the loss of what they have known as "home." For some, this loss is accompanied by shattered or culturally eradicated communities. While it would seem plausible that dislocation has adverse consequences for girls, little research has been conducted to either confirm or refute this assertion. Moreover, little is understood about the intersecting influences of emotional well-being, uprooting, and other forms of oppression, including poverty, violence, and racism in girls' lives.

### CONCEPTUALIZING UPROOTEDNESS

In one of the most insightful writings related to uprooting and displacement, Malkki (1995) examined the issue of displacement and exile among Hutu refugees who fled selective genocide in Burundi in 1972. In this ethnography of displacement, Malkki challenged the a priori assumption that the refugee experience is, by necessity, accompanied by loss of culture, iden-

tity, and habits. Because common notions of culture are biased "toward rooting rather than travel" (Clifford, 1988, p. 338), it is generally assumed that violated, broken roots are tantamount to a fractured cultural identity, a damaged nationality, and are incongruous with the health of individuals, families, and communities. The "territorializing, grounding metaphors of identity—roots, soil, trees, seeds—are replaced, or 'washed away,' in tides, streams, rivers, waves, and so forth" (Malkki, p. 15). These fluid names for the uprooted convey and reinforce widespread understandings about home and homeland, identity, and nationality. Uprootedness, from this perspective, may be understood as one of the most profound of human tragedies. Malkki, however, insists that we look beyond the notion of displacement solely as a human tragedy to gain insight into the lived meanings that displacement and uprooting have for particular groups. With respect to the refugees from Burundi who were the focus of Malkki's research, the experience of exile did not erode the collective identity shared by the refugees. Rather, the refugees located their identities *within* their very displacement. Malkki cautions, however, that this was not the case for all refugees and that for others, relationships between roots and identity were differently constituted.

A similar perspective was articulated by Naficy (1993) who examined the situation of Iranian immigrants and refugees after they fled to the United States. Naficy discussed "liminality," a concept that has received considerable attention in the field of medical anthropology and that refers to a "betwixt-and-between" stage. According to Naficy (1993, p. 86), uprootedness is often accompanied by feelings of pain and paralysis, especially when the migration is a result of tragedy or political circumstances beyond one's control. At the same time, however, Naficy observed that "liminality . . . also positions the exiles to reterritorialize, or build, themselves anew" (p. 86). Thus, liminality is not only characterized by a sense of transition, but also a presiding *communitas* that develops among those who find themselves sharing a temporary liminal space (Turner, 1969).

According to Malkki (1995) and Naficy (1993), uprooting and displacement can hold different meanings to individuals and groups depending upon the social, cultural, and political contexts in which uprooting is experienced. Similarly, the ways in which mental health is shaped by uprootedness and displacement are likely to be highly variable. Thus, our research was an attempt to examine the lived experiences of displacement, highlighting not only those structural forces that marginalize and subordinate girls who are homeless, Aboriginal, or new to Canada, but also their sense of agency. Looking at their lives in the context of displacement directs attention to the effects of isolation and the disruption of social ties, and to an examination of how girls actively engage in strategies to create a sense of self and belonging.

### CURRENT KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDINGS

A number of researchers have documented a range of mental health problems associated with individuals who have been

uprooted and/or displaced and have recognized the specific vulnerabilities of particular subgroups within the larger population. However, the vast majority of this literature concerns adults, and to a lesser extent, children and youth. Few Canadian studies have focused exclusively on the uprooting of girls and the impact of uprooting on their mental health. Perhaps the most extensive research focused on girls in Canada has been undertaken by the Alliance of Canadian Researchers on Violence (Berman & Jiwani, 2002). This national consortium of community and academic researchers used a range of innovative methodologies to explore how violence becomes normalized in the lives of a diverse group of girls and young women, including Aboriginal and newcomer girls.

### Immigrant and Refugee Girls

Between 2001 and 2006, approximately 128,000 immigrant and refugee children and youth under the age of 15 were admitted to Canada. Of these, about one-half were female (Statistics Canada, 2008). A review of the literature reveals few Canadian studies examining the realities and experiences of racialized girls from immigrant and refugee families. During the past decade, however, this trend has begun to shift (Berman & Jiwani, 2008; Bourne, McCoy, & SMith, 1998; Handa, 1997; Jiwani, 2006; Lee, 2006; Matthews, 1997).

Jiwani (2006) spoke about the “intersecting vulnerabilities” experienced by racialized immigrant and refugee girls of colour. According to Jiwani, through processes of socialization, racialized girls who are marked as different by virtue of their skin colour or religious/cultural differences, are Othered and in essence, devalued. Lee (2006) has similarly examined the situation of girls of colour in Victoria, British Columbia, demonstrating how “ideologies of whiteness” (p. 106) effectively silence girls’ expressions of identity, reinforcing their exclusion and marginalization.

Several researchers have revealed that girls from racialized immigrant cultures experience dissatisfaction with, and strain from, the normative values imposed by their own cultures (B. D. Miller, 1995; Rosenthal, Ranieri, & Klimidis, 1996). The contextual factors influencing and shaping this dissatisfaction tend not to be examined in structural terms, that is, as arising from the subordinate position of the cultural group in relation to the dominant society, and/or the construction of racialized communities as deviant others (Handa, 1997; Razack, 1998). Exceptions to this trend are found in American studies that focus on the differential rates of violence against Afro-American girls and women (Kenny, Reinholtz, & Angelini, 1997; Wyatt & Riederle, 1994), and studies examining girls at risk who come from a variety of different cultural backgrounds (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Razack 1998).

### Homeless Girls

Due to the lack of data on homelessness, both globally and nationally (Haldenby, Berman & Forchuk, 2007), and lack of

an agreed-upon definition of homelessness (Kelly & Caputo, 2001), it is impossible to determine the precise number of girls who are homeless. However, there is evidence that the number of those who are without safe and adequate housing in Canada has increased during the past two decades (Novac, Serge, Eberle, & Brown, 2002; Hulchanski, 2004; Shapcott, 2004).

Several studies conducted in the United States and Canada have documented the intense stress and uncertainty in the lives of homeless children and the adverse effects of homelessness on their health, development, academic success, and behaviour (Boivin, Roy, Haley & du Fort, 2005; Ensign & Bell, 2004; Haldenby, Berman & Forchuk, 2007; Herth, 1998; Miller, Donahue, Este & Hofer, 2004). Reports suggest that homeless children have twice the rates of acute and chronic physical disorders as compared to the general population and other children living in poverty, and that these children experience psychological, emotional, and developmental problems as well as learning problems (DiBiase & Waddell, 1995; Rohde, Noell, Ochs & Seeley, 2001; Rotheram-Borus et al., 2003; Shields et al., 2004). Several researchers have reported that many homeless youth have either directly experienced or witnessed violence in their homes and communities (Kipke, et al., 1997; Novac et al., 2002; Reid et al., 2003; Trocme & Wolfe, 2001; Tyler, Hoyt & Whitbeck, 2000). For many adolescents who are homeless either by choice or necessity (a distinction that is often impossible to make), life on the streets may be a means to escape what they consider to be intolerable conditions at home (Hyde, 2005; Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, & Fitzgerald, 2001).

The dominant discourse on homelessness is one that continues to characterize this population as poor, lazy, mentally deficient, middle-aged, and male (Reid, Berman, & Forchuk, 2003). Alternatively, homelessness has been brought to the public imagination as the “street child” who resides in so-called “underdeveloped” nations in other parts of the world (Boyden, 1997; Panter-Brick, 2002; Stephens, 1995). One result of this persistent mythology is that little research has been conducted with homeless adolescent girls and their unique needs and challenges have been largely overlooked.

### Aboriginal Girls

While considerable research has been conducted with Aboriginal peoples in general, very few studies have focused specifically on Aboriginal youth, and even fewer have concerned the lives of Aboriginal girls and young women (Downe, 2006). Thus, there remain significant gaps in our current understanding of how Aboriginal girls fare within the larger context of uprooting and displacement. Where girls are included in research, they are rarely portrayed as agents of knowledge. More commonly, they are included as objects of study in analyses of on- and off-reserve violence (Long, 1995), residential school abuse (J. R. Miller, 1997), community displacement (Fournier & Crey, 1997), young offenders (Aboriginal Corrections Policy Unit, 2002; Cabrera, 1995; Moyer, 2000), motherhood and

mothering (Fiske, 1993; Lavell-Harvard, 2006), and cultural identities (Anderson, 2000; Carter, 1997). A number of clinically-based studies in the US, and to a lesser extent Canada, have explored various health-related conditions among Aboriginal youth: psychiatric disorders and social role adaptation (Ackerson, 1990; Beals et al., 1997; Beiser et al., 1993; Gotowiec & Beiser, 1994; Zvolensky, McNeil, Porter, & Stewart, 2001); alcohol and drug addiction and abuse (Beauvais et al. 2002; Herman-Stahl & Chong, 2002; Novins, Beals, & Mitchell, 2001); nutrition and eating disorders (Croll et al., 2002; Story et al., 2001); as well as HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (Craib et al., 2003; Heath et al., 1999; Mill, 2000; Tyndall et al., 2003). Fetal alcohol syndrome has received particular attention (Golden, 1999; Kessler, 1999; May & Hymbaugh, 1989; Williams & Gloster, 1999), as has suicide (Garrouette et al., 2003; Gartrell, Jarvis, & Derkson, 1993; Johnson & Tomren, 1999; Wissow et al., 2001).

Aboriginal girls are seven times more likely than non-Aboriginal girls in Canada to commit suicide (Statistics Canada, 2000) just as they are more likely to witness and experience violence in their homes. In Canada as well as in the United States, Aboriginal children are more likely than African-American, African-Canadian, or white students to experience race-based violence in schools (Public Agenda On-Line, 2003). Among Aboriginal adult women, there is evidence that those who report greater vulnerability to violence similarly report more mental health problems, including depression and addiction (Waldram, Herring & Young, 1997).

### THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the current research are derived from critical social theory (CST), intersectionality theory, and narrative inquiry. From a critical perspective, knowledge is grounded in politics with the insistence that social phenomena be related to the historical whole, and to the structural context in which they are situated (Lather, 1991). Closely linked to, and compatible with, CST is intersectionality theory. Although the term was first articulated by Crenshaw in the 1990s, black feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins (1991) had previously written about the interlocking “matrices of domination” to describe the multiple and intersecting inequalities, derived from race, gender, class, and ability, that shape the lives of women (Crenshaw, 2000, p. 8). An intersectional analysis directs attention away from an exclusive focus on individual stories and experiences, to consideration of larger systemic and structural inequalities. By locating the issue of uprooting and displacement within a political and social context, critical theory can provide a practical and relevant framework for understanding the lived experiences of girls while simultaneously seeking strategies to challenge oppressive circumstances in their lives.

Although narrative inquiry embraces many theoretical approaches, several assumptions are shared. One of these is a

consensus as to the pervasive nature of stories and storytelling. Humans are storytelling beings who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. While narratives may take many forms, they generally consist of stories that include a chronological ordering of events and an effort to bring coherence to those events. Van Maanen (1988) spoke about “critical tales,” or the use of narrative approaches within a critical framework. The interest in such tales is to shed light on larger social, political, symbolic, or economic issues. Thus, in telling stories about their experiences and the ways in which these experiences, in turn, shape their sense of well-being, girls may communicate not only their perceptions about what happened to them, but also the social, economic, and political meanings of those events.

### RESEARCH METHODS

This study was conducted in a Southwestern Ontario community where the researchers have well-established relationships with leaders from each of the study populations. Based upon community and academic partnerships, each stage of the research was designed and carried out in collaboration with those who work most closely with the study population. The sample consisted of 19 participants and included 6 Aboriginal girls, 6 homeless girls, and 7 newcomer girls, aged 14–19. During face-to-face dialogic interviews, we examined the various discursive means and strategies whereby uprooting and displacement are defined, experienced, and reproduced over time in different social contexts, and we examined how, in turn, these experiences affect girls and young women. Consistent with the theoretical assumptions, one research goal is the development of knowledge in ways that have potential for emancipation and empowerment. A central aspect of the study design was, therefore, the use of dialogic and reflective techniques in which respondents became actively involved in the construction and validation of meaning (Maguire, 1987). An interview guide was used flexibly, with probes to encourage dialogue, critical reflection, and elaboration of responses. Narrative interviewing requires an open-ended structure that allows the participants to direct the flow and focus of the conversation. While the research team established the context for the interview, offering overall direction and providing affirming feedback, the participants took the lead, making associations among concepts as they understood these.

Information about the study was provided to potential participants by counselors within the partner agencies. Girls who expressed interest contacted the researchers either by phone or e-mail at which time the study was described in more detail. Because not all girls who have experienced uprooting and displacement have been associated with community organizations, we also advertised the study in places girls frequent, such as shopping malls and community centers.

All participants were given the choice of being interviewed alone or in a small group consisting of two to four girls. The rationale for this option was the potential power of group interviews to provide a context in which individuals are able to

analyze the struggles they have encountered and challenges they have faced, to simultaneously begin to collectivize their experiences, and develop a sense of empowerment as they began to see the possibilities for change. It was then the task of the researchers to analyze these references systematically within an “overall narrative frame” (Borland, 1991, p. 63).

### Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using techniques appropriate to the analysis of narrative data. This process involves several strategies, and was facilitated by the use of Atlas-Ti, a qualitative software program. While content and semantic analyses were drawn on to some extent (Becker, Beyene & Ken, 2000; Greenlagh, 2001), the main analytical technique was narrative analysis. This process involves breaking the narrative down into idea units, or clauses, in the interview transcript, which are numerically coded. Common themes were then determined from these units and collated. The product of the analysis is a “core narrative” (Garro, 2003) and accompanying themes. Initially, data from Aboriginal, homeless, and newcomer girls were analyzed separately. A comparison of themes across and within the three groups of participants was then conducted, revealing areas of convergence and divergence as well as an overall mapping of how girls and young women relate their experiences of displacement and uprooting to overall well-being.

Diversity within groups was anticipated and factored into the research. Because the experiences of newcomer groups vary by class, conditions of migration, size of community in Canada, and accessibility in terms of language skills and accreditation, and other less tangible factors, we sought to recruit individuals from different backgrounds and who represented communities that are both well-established and recent in the Canadian landscape. Similarly, there is no single, homogenous homeless population of girls or one distinct Aboriginal community. Rather, there are important dynamics and distinctions that occur across and within the study populations. Attention to the ways in which the participating girls’ narratives reference these dynamics was necessary and enriched our understanding of displacement and uprooting in the context of their lives. Recruitment of Aboriginal participants was therefore not restricted to any one Nation, nor was homelessness defined by those in particular geographic locations or in urban or rural settings. This diversity was viewed as a strength of the study and is reflected in the analysis.

### Ethical Considerations and Challenges

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the university’s Human Subjects Review Board. Although participation in research for youth under the age of 18 typically requires parental consent, we successfully petitioned the Review Board to waive this requirement. Our rationale was twofold. First, from a pragmatic perspective, obtaining parental approval was not feasible for many in the research, particularly for homeless

girls who were estranged from their families. Second, from a philosophical, political, and human rights perspective, the requirement for parental consent would have precluded participation among some of the most vulnerable and marginalized girls, whose voices have historically been silenced and excluded from research. A letter of information was developed for parents, but their consent was not required. Consistent with provincial and professional regulations, the girls were told in advance that if they disclosed violence that was currently occurring, we would be required to report this information to the appropriate agency.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings presented here are a co-constructed account that privileges the voices of participants, but also recognizes the authors’ position and power in selecting, presenting, and interpreting the participants’ experiences. We integrate the voices of Aboriginal, homeless, and newcomer girls throughout the results, not in an effort to suggest more sameness than in fact exists, but in an attempt to convey the essences of uprooting and displacement. Woven throughout the participants’ narratives are philosophical fragments and analyses written by the research team and based on our theoretical sensitivity both in the nascent field of girl studies and in authoring this manuscript. This integration of findings and the discussion is intended as a means of presenting a cohesive depiction of the girls’ stories and experiences. All names are pseudonyms, most chosen by the participants.

#### At the Heart of the Story

Girls who have experienced uprooting and displacement exist as bodies marked by gender, race, and class, moving through liminal spaces, seeking connections and reconnections. It is in these liminal spaces where they occupy the position of Other. However, it is here that they also learn new ways of being, connecting, and belonging. Their lives on the fringes, and in the margins, are thus shaped by prevailing and interlocking structures of domination. Through these structures, they strive to develop a sense of self that is strong and resilient, that fosters a sense of agency, and that can counter the hopelessness, despair, and pessimism that often seem so pervasive.

This core narrative implies that uprooting and displacement are accompanied by multiple tensions and contradictions and that these arise from, and are manifested in, individual, social, cultural, and political domains. Moreover, the core narrative reflects the idea that space is a social construction (Kawash, 1997), that identity and space are intertwined, and that because of uprooting and displacement, girls exist in marginalized spaces where disconnections from important people and places occur. Barriers that arise from interlocking systems of oppression and other forms of social exclusion, including racism, classism, negative stereotyping, and legacies of colonialism, limit the ability of girls to (re)establish connections and, ultimately, generate dangerous spaces. Through processes of resistance and

negotiation of new spaces of hope, girls may find spaces of belonging where sources of support are found and alliances formed. We refer to this process as “pathways of engagement” and throughout the remainder of this section, will elaborate on these ideas.

### Experiences of Uprooting

All of the girls who participated in this research experienced some form of uprooting and displacement from their homes, families, and/or communities. For some, uprooting was a single event, as was the case for most of the newcomer girls, who described uprooting in the context of migration from their countries of origin, namely Saudi Arabia ( $n = 2$ ), Somalia ( $n = 2$ ), Korea ( $n = 1$ ), Iran ( $n = 1$ ), and Iraq ( $n = 1$ ). Six were Muslim, one converted to Christianity from Buddhism. For all of these girls, the move to Canada necessitated leaving behind extended family members, friends, and a country they knew and loved. Although the route to Canada was a somewhat circuitous one for this group, with all except one residing temporarily in at least one other country before arriving in Canada, they experienced relative geographic stability after resettlement.

In contrast, the Aboriginal girls and homeless girls described uprooting as a pervasive and recurrent feature of their lives. The Aboriginal girls spoke about frequent family moves throughout much of their childhood, with some recalling that they had moved as many as three or four times per year. One of the girls told of living in one location for two years, but this was atypical. In some cases, there was frequent movement between the urban setting and the Reserve; for others, the moves occurred within different parts of the same city or between neighboring communities. More than one-half of this group had extended family and friends living on the Reserve from whom they felt estranged while living in the city. Two Aboriginal girls who were sisters explained that their father had been “adopted out” to a non-Aboriginal family when he was a young child. These girls explained that their family had essentially lost all connections to the Aboriginal community, in general, and to the Reserve, in particular. However, one of the sisters described a great deal of inner tension, ambiguity, and dissonance regarding her Aboriginal roots and identity. This sibling actively sought out Aboriginal peers and engaged in Aboriginal-related activities at her school. In contrast, her older sister did not establish relationships within the Aboriginal community. Most noted that everyday family life included violence, neglect, substance abuse, and chronic poverty.

At the time of the interviews, the girls who were homeless described an assortment of accommodations that included living on the streets, couch surfing, staying in shelters, or temporarily residing with their mothers and/or boyfriends—or some combination of these. All of these girls spoke of difficult childhoods and chaotic homes where interactions were often characterized by physical, sexual, and emotional violence against their mothers and themselves. In addition, they told of sibling abuse, mental

illness of one or both parents, chronic poverty, and substance abuse, including the drug-related deaths of two parents. Like the Aboriginal girls, moves for this group within and between cities were frequent throughout their childhoods.

### Displacement and Disconnection in Dangerous Spaces

Inherent in the narratives shared by girls from all three study populations was a profound sense of disconnection from family, culture, or community. Together, these contributed to a dissonance with respect to space, place, and identity. The girls repeatedly described feelings of “being different,” of not belonging, of being outside and on the fringes. While they weren’t always clear precisely what they were excluded from, there was a strong perception that there was some larger community to which they didn’t belong. They lived their lives on the periphery, in liminal spaces where they felt marginalized and devalued.

All six of the Aboriginal girls who took part in the study spoke of the disruptions and disconnections they had suffered in relationships with school friends and with extended family members that, in their opinion, were compounded by the frequent moves. This brief exchange during an interview with one of the Aboriginal girls who was describing what “home” means to her, illustrates this sense of disconnection.

- Participant: I’m not really sure. Just a place where it’s a roof over your head, I don’t know.
- Interviewer: How do you feel when you talk about the word, home?
- Participant: None really. None.
- Interviewer: Any good feelings, like happy, or any bad feelings like sad when you think of home?
- Participant: Um . . . happy.
- Interviewer: What kinds of things make you happy about home?
- Participant: My bed [Laughs]

In this excerpt, the notion of home is more about having a bed and a place to sleep, rather than a place where relationships are formed, emotional warmth is experienced, or connections with important others are fostered. While this participant stated that home makes her “happy,” the sense of happiness was derived from the knowledge that she would have a place to sleep and that home would ensure a modicum of physical comfort.

For some of the Aboriginal girls, there were ambiguous and contradictory emotions regarding their sense of space and place. Cynthia, 18 years old, was the mother of three young children, all of whom had been placed in protective custody. She had also been in custody, commonly referred to as being “in care,” during much of her own childhood, growing up in a home where everyday life included exposure to drugs, violence, and poverty. Until age 13, Cynthia lived on the Reserve, moving frequently and ultimately attending eight different elementary schools. Throughout her teen years, she moved numerous times from the Reserve to the city and back. At the time of the interview, Cynthia had just moved into a shelter after leaving her common law partner,

a man who had been physically abusive and against whom a restraining order had been issued. Cynthia's ambivalence about her "community" was reflected in her comments about life in the city and on the Reserve. On the one hand, the Reserve represented a space of belonging. In Cynthia's words, "I liked living on the Reserve. I think of home as being on the Reserve with my family." On the other hand, the Reserve simultaneously evoked painful associations and represented a space of danger.

Right now . . . I like my community [Reserve] but there is too much gossip. Like people, they just talk shit on the Reserve, so they never like really help me . . . I think I'd rather be in the city because, um, most of the things I need to do are already up here.

While moving to the city resulted in separation from her family who remained on the Reserve, she added that life on the Reserve meant "moving into drugs and violence." Hopeful that she will be able to create a home for herself and her children, she stated, "I'm just trying to establish my own home for me and my kids, so that's the big thing I think about."

Disconnection and alienation also stemmed from an awareness of themselves as "different", which typically related to how the girls looked, spoke, dressed, or other less tangible markers of difference. The spaces the girls occupied were shaped by deeply entrenched understandings as to where they did and did not belong, understandings that were intricately linked to relations of power, class, and well-established social hierarchies. The inability to move freely across social boundaries and spaces is reflected in the words of another Aboriginal girl who stated, "I don't really associate with friends, like I don't have some friends here because I've learned in the past couple of years not to make friends."

The newcomer girls had a very clear sense of space, and astute perceptions as to which spaces were welcoming and conversely, those where they were not. These girls typically described multiple losses associated with migration—loss of family, friends, cultural familiarity, and belonging. Upon arrival in Canada, disconnection was felt as they resettled, usually in highly demarcated multicultural enclaves within a predominantly white city. These enclaves are symbolic of Canada's commitment to multiculturalism, and are often "celebrated" as evidence of Canada's receptivity to newcomers. While these newcomer communities afford a sense of belonging and may contribute to stronger family bonds, these spaces were often characterized by widespread downward mobility and financial challenges. Moreover, they served as constant reminders to the girls that there is a larger society to which they do not belong, and in which they do not feel welcome. This idea was evident in the words of Chan-sook from Korea:

Without any reason I just don't want to talk to anyone. I think it's because sometimes I feel really lonely and even though I live here with my friends, new friends here, but sometimes I really miss—I don't miss Korea but I sometimes regret coming here, you know what I mean?

For the homeless girls, uprooting commonly began long before they began to define themselves as "homeless." These girls spoke repeatedly about histories of violence, substance abuse, poverty, and mental illness. Frequent relocations were the norm and notions of community and belonging were elusive. In a somewhat ironic and paradoxical twist, homelessness afforded some the stability and at least some sense of safety that were so markedly absent during their childhoods. As Chelsea stated:

I'm really glad that I'm not living with either of my parents anymore because it means that, yeah, I might move a couple of more times, but at least it's in my control, I know where I'm gonna be, and I don't have to move, you know, I mean who knows how many more times my mom's going to move.

Implicit in Chelsea's comments is the suggestion that stability may have little to do with physical space. Rather, stability is derived from feeling grounded and connected to others.

While homelessness was associated with a sense of freedom from families that were described as oppressive, abusive, and controlling, the girls did not appear to be intentionally severing connections with their families, at least not entirely. Some maintained family contact while living on the streets, but they welcomed the emotional and physical distance that they considered to be a positive aspect of displacement. Amanda attributed leaving home to an ultimatum from a stepmother with whom she did not get along.

I was a really angry child, I guess, like after my mom passed away. I never got like counseling or anything and I just, like, pretty much, I just like hated everyone. . . . I just wanted to die. And then, I don't know, my dad started dating again and the woman who is my stepmother now moved into my house when I was like 15, and we just, like, I just despised her and then we just got into confrontations all the time, so she basically told my dad it was either, like, me or her, and she wanted to be a part of the family and I really didn't. So they just kind of dropped me off at the shelter one day. . . . After my stepmother moved in, like I didn't feel wanted at all, right? Which is what made me want to leave, like, I think you need to feel wanted especially when you're a teenager and depressed, or like angry. You just need to feel like you're wanted somewhere and feel comfortable and I just never felt that, really.

Whether the girls who were homeless had left home by choice or were forced to leave was not always apparent. More often, the "decision" to leave was imposed upon them, as was the case with Amanda. Homelessness for these girls was neither sudden nor unexpected, but seemed like a logical next step in a life fraught with experiences of abuse and feelings of rejection. In essence, the disconnections experienced by this group had begun prior to becoming homeless, and it was during their days, weeks, and months of living on the streets that they began to create a new sense of family and belonging, both of which had been so profoundly lacking throughout much of their lives.

Life on the streets was also fraught with risk and danger. According to the girls, violence was commonplace, theft was routine, and drugs were readily available. All of these placed the homeless girls at considerable risk for physical health problems, including sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy,

and nutritional deficiencies. One of the homeless girls spoke about homelessness as follows:

I hate moving from one place to another never knowing where you're going to be the next day, never knowing that—especially if you're out actually sleeping on the street and you fall asleep, that's like entrusting the people of the city not to come up and harm you. I am petrified of people. I don't like a lot of people, like, I don't like the idea of falling asleep and having someone come up and find me and I have something on me, like I have smokes on me that I need or something, and that I'll have, like, no smokes left because they'll rob me or they'll hurt me or they could take advantage of me. And I'm just little me. I can do some stuff, but I'm just little me.

### Tenuous Connections Amid Spaces of Hope

The ability of newcomer girls to speak at least one of Canada's two official languages, English or French, enhanced the possibilities for movement in and out of marginalized spaces—the communities that are inhabited primarily by other newcomer families. However, the desire to move out of these marginalized spaces was continually weighed against an equally compelling desire to remain in these spaces, where they generally felt accepted, where they were unlikely to encounter subtle or explicit forms of racism, and where they derived some solace in their connections to history, culture, and heritage. From the girls' vantage point, these were welcoming spaces that offered hope, encouragement, and a sense of solidarity with others in similar circumstances.

Like in our neighborhood there's [sic] so many Somalis and they all came from Somalia, they came to my country so I feel like I'm happy to have them here. And other people, well, I don't know, they're mostly friends. I feel like I'm home in here too. . . . sometimes we go together every Friday at night. Sort of like I'm in Africa.

Several newcomer girls who were interviewed together similarly commented about feeling accepted in the community where they and their families have resettled.

I met lots of Arab people over here because I'm from the Middle East. And I feel I'm more connected to them, like, because, you know, they speak the same language I speak so like really that's—talk with our mother language. So it's kind of nice, like, to practice it so we don't forget it. But I feel really more connected to, like, people from our country.

Another participant added,

I feel the same thing, actually, because now even my friends at school notice that I really like to be with Arab people because I feel like I belong—like, we all belong to the same place. . . . So, like, when we talk together, we're, like, get each other like that, so it is, like, easier, I guess. And I have, like, a Korean friend and she is, like, very nice, too, and I feel, like she is new too, so it's, like, I don't know. But I really, like, because I am from—like, you feel that you belong there more, like, than—than the Canadian community.

Even in their schools, where they felt relatively safe and secure, the notion of space was clearly delineated, with several girls describing places where they “hung out” together, sections of the gym or cafeteria, apart from “the others.”

Although the idea that connections were vitally important was heard repeatedly, many simultaneously expressed some concern regarding what they perceived as the tenuousness of these connections. According to Lynette, one of the homeless girls, “. . . and then you always know that once you're on top and everything is going good, everything is just going to crash and turn into shit again. Like that's just life really, so, I don't know. I just felt more comfortable down there—rock bottom—I think.”

Frequently, the connections that were established were described by the homeless girls as being explicitly related to the shared sense of abandonment and betrayal by family. Also evident in their comments was a depiction of themselves as outcasts.

I think a lot of people down here—I mean, I talk about family . . . with my close friends, but it's not something that we talk about openly with everybody down here, you know? Sometimes we do, but we don't really—I think I've noticed down here, like, people don't tend to tell the whole world down here. You tell your closest friends and you talk with your close friends about it and stuff, and sometimes you'll share it with everybody, but everyone down here has had different experiences and everyone's been betrayed in some sort of way. I think there's that understanding of, um, being—kind of being betrayed and abandoned. I think a lot of people down here have had that feeling. So I think that's largely where we connect, our different experiences where we're kind of outcast from the society. And, yeah, things like that. Yeah.

Several Aboriginal girls explained that efforts to sustain connections with people, particularly those on the Reserve, were often thwarted by lack of money or other material resources. Shauna spoke about the difficulties of keeping up past relationships because, without money—all of which was used for food and rent—she was unable to purchase a phone card. Thus, structural barriers, such as poverty and limited access to resources, were key factors in determining their capacity to establish and maintain meaningful connections.

While most girls viewed community as something positive, and demonstrated the ability to create at least some semblance of a community for themselves, this was not always the case. Linda, an Aboriginal girl, was 15 years old and pregnant at the time she was interviewed. She had moved with her mother many times throughout her life, attending numerous different schools. Her desire to establish connections seemed rather limited, at least based upon her comments and outward demeanor, and she had difficulty articulating what “community” meant to her. Linda did not appear to invest heavily in her physical space, has never had any meaningful say over when or where she would move next, or where home would be. Her relationships with her mother and her boyfriend, and her unborn child were the stability points in her life, although all of these were tenuous and dependent on factors over which she had little control.

Repeated displacements experienced by Linda contributed to a lack of insight about the meaning of community, what it is or could be, for herself and her family. In her words, community is about a “roof over my head, a bed, a place for my things—books

and stuff.” Moreover, community is comprised of “whoever is around where you live,” but generally entails little emotional connection or investment.

### Negotiating Spaces of Belonging

Liminal and marginalized spaces are not readily categorized as positive or negative, good or bad. While liminal spaces may be construed as places of danger, under some conditions, liminality may offer a space of belonging. For many, life in the margins represented a welcoming space. For example, the sense of community and belonging for newcomer girls was derived from being among others of similar ethnocultural backgrounds as themselves. Within the multicultural enclaves—the spaces that they were essentially forced to occupy—isolation and marginalization were reinforced and sustained through raced, gendered, and classed determinations regarding movement in and out of these socially constructed spaces. Individuals within these communities, many of whom are unable to speak either of Canada’s official languages, are literally silenced in the most profound way possible. For girls who are able to speak English or French, there is greater ability to move in and out of these liminal spaces, but racism and other forms of social exclusion pervade all aspects of their lives and serve to limit such movement.

Homelessness represented to this group an end to the oppressive and dangerous circumstances of their homes, an escape from what they considered to be a horrendous situation, and a hope for something better. In essence, homelessness afforded a sense of control that they had not been able to attain when living with their families. As one stated:

I’m kind of establishing who I am right now. Now that I’m out on my own, although I still have some current issues to deal with, like family issues, I’m more—I’m able to deal with the past and to start sorting through all of what happened when I was growing up and that.

The notion of home for those who were homeless was typically understood and experienced as a place of violence and alienation. United in their collective experiences of marginalization and isolation, they achieved a sense of belonging and purpose. This seemingly contradictory idea was heard often in the girls’ voices and stories as they spoke about connections and disconnections, belonging and exclusion, balance and imbalance, cohesion and fragmentation. It was in the liminal spaces where they often felt accepted and gained a greater sense of connection to their history, culture, and heritage. The (re)creation of family was described by Amber, one of the homeless girls.

And I’ve got a street family, like, I’ve got close friends that I would help out or they would help me out. A street family is, you know, there’s people that I’ve helped out. Some stay with us once in a while and we help them out. And they don’t bring drugs or alcohol into our home. And we’re just—you know, they help us out with food or we help them out with whatever. You know, I help people out with cigarettes and just, uh, they help me, you know. We just look out for each other. I just, um—I find that—I mean, I have parents but in many ways I feel like an orphan.

As these comments reveal, the street family replaced traditional understandings about family. It was with this group that the homeless girls derived a sense of comfort, safety, security, and belonging. Although Amber noted that she has parents, she still felt “like an orphan.” Homelessness also afforded some an opportunity to reflect philosophically on their purpose and place in this world, and to gain insights into themselves, evident in the words of Miranda who poignantly stated:

Well, like, it sucks. Like, I would have liked to be able to stay in one place, in a stable environment, but at the same time I also think that if I didn’t go through it, like, I wouldn’t be who I am.

The bonds and new notions of family and community that arose out of shared experiences were reflected in the words of Dakota who was homeless, “couch-surfing” with friends:

We all kind of understand where we’ve been and, you know, if a person wants to talk, then you talk, but if they just want to be left alone, you can tell. And, I don’t know, I think I noticed it more at first, you know? I’ve been here for, you know, probably five or six months and now I don’t—I don’t notice the language as much. But, um, I definitely notice, like, when you first come down here, like there’s a big culture shock when you first get into it. Especially like me, I’ve been—I mean I grew up as a P.K., a pastor’s kid. So, like, going from, you know, P.K. and hanging out with, like, goody-goody two shoes to hanging out with street kids is a pretty big shock. So yeah. It’s just a huge difference. Like, it’s a majorly different culture and that, and people don’t realize that. . . . And everyone’s—everyone’s, like, down here there’s, like, there’s codes and everything, you know. It’s all street codes, you know, like everyone knows. You just know when to leave a person alone, and all this stuff, you know.

Through their collective experiences of uprooting and displacement, the girls described new spaces of hope and encouragement, spaces where they could join with others who understood their experiences, where they could collectivize their struggles, and celebrate their accomplishments. Despite their awareness about potential dangers on the streets, on The Reserves, and in their communities, these “spaces of hope” were where commonplace notions of family were re-evaluated and a sense of community was created, often for the first time.

Among the Aboriginal girls, three of the five explicitly stated that uprooting did not have an impact on their lives. Interestingly, the two sisters who commented that uprooting did affect them came from relatively stable families, from whom they received emotional support and at least some degree of economic security. One of these sisters identified strongly with her Native background, even though many aspects of her heritage were unknown due to her father’s “adoption out.” This individual had an extensive social network, was active in extracurricular activities, and had high educational aspirations that included attending university and the desire to become a neurologist, influenced by her own negative experiences with the health care system as a result of epilepsy.

In contrast, another one of the Aboriginal girls told of very different experiences and perspectives with respect to uprooting, disconnection, and her sense of space/identity. This girl was

pregnant at the time of the interview and gave birth during the course of the research. She had run away when she was 13, and described few examples of engagement or connection outside of her relationships with her mother and her mother's boyfriend. Although she stated that uprooting had little effect on her, this young woman was unable to describe any type of emotional connectedness, did not engage in school, and maintained that she had no meaningful or satisfying social life. Pregnancy evoked a new sense of attachment and importance, unlike anything she had experienced previously.

The negotiation of spaces of belonging for newcomer girls typically entailed creating conditions that would allow them to fulfill hopes and dreams in Canada. Often linked to ideals about peace and social justice, these girls talked about the need to overcome barriers such as language, racism, achieving academic success, and "adaptation" to the new spaces they inhabit. While disconnections were a prevalent theme imbedded in the girls' stories, they simultaneously spoke about connections and the creation of spaces of belonging. Thus, the ideas of connection and disconnection cannot be understood in a linear manner, but exist in a dialectical relationship to one another.

## CONCLUSION

The girls who participated in this study openly shared their thoughts and feelings, the challenges they faced, and the barriers they encountered with respect to uprooting and displacement. In the process, they revealed much about strength, courage, and hope. The capacity of these girls and young women to reconnect in spaces where they felt a sense of belonging was influenced, in part, by the social, economic, and emotional resources that were available to them.

Girls who have been uprooted from their homes, families and communities are forced to reside in "liminal spaces," referred to by Razack (2002) as "the border between civilized and primitive space" (p. 13). These spaces are not neutral places, but are defined by, and sustained through, unequal, deeply hierarchical power relations that are based upon history, economics, politics, and culture. Whether these spaces are the urban slums of inner cities, the multicultural enclaves situated within predominantly white settler communities, or the "Indian" Reserves, movement in and out of these spaces is highly regulated and controlled. Further, movement is influenced by social locations and identities and is, at once, raced, gendered, and classed. Frequently, life in liminal spaces is accompanied by danger and necessitates the negotiation of dangerous terrain.

Upon resettlement in Canada, the newcomer girls in this research all lived in a publicly subsidized housing community with a large newcomer population. The idea of resettling newcomers in communities with other newcomers is largely heralded as an example of Canada's tolerance and acceptance, as a means of preserving cultural practices, and as an example of the benefits of multiculturalism. Interestingly, there is little mention of race within this discourse. Instead, culture becomes the proxy for

race. As Jiwani (2006) has observed, racial differences become encoded as cultural differences, and race itself is culturalized.

Regulatory practices such as admission criteria, legislation concerning crime and deviance, social practices, and stereotypical judgements about peoples of colour and the homeless are some of the ways in which particular groups are constructed and that social spaces are defined and restricted within the Canadian landscape. Through these processes, girls derive a sense of identity, of who they are in this world, and where they do and don't belong. And through these processes, they also learn about privilege and place, about who is valued and who is not. At times, we were struck by seemingly contradictory comments regarding disconnections and the idea of finding connections in liminal spaces. These seemingly contradictory comments reflect the ambiguity and inner tension that many girls who have been uprooted and displaced experience. In this context, the notion of "nested identities" discussed by the Aboriginal scholar, Gerald Alfred (1995) has a great deal of relevance. Developed in relation to Mohawk identity, the idea of nested identities implies that identities are not clearly delineated; rather, they are nested in social, historical, and political contexts.

This research contributes theoretically and methodologically to the burgeoning literature on the gendered effects of structural violence and displacement. Because the girls' narratives are grounded in "institutional landscapes" (Saris, 1995, p. 67), they reveal processes of power, vulnerability, and violation. The narrative themes imbedded in the girls' stories reveal insights into marginalized spaces where disconnections occur in relations with self/other, friends, family, school, and community.

As a result of downward mobility and poverty, language barriers, racism, and discrimination, newcomer communities often become marginalized spaces where the inhabitants are largely excluded from the privileges commonly afforded to those from the dominant culture (Anisef, Kilbride, & Khattar, 2003). Similar patterns of exclusion were experienced by homeless and Aboriginal girls. While experiences of displacement and uprooting may be characterized by personal violations of security, opportunity, home and identity, these experiences also reflect the vulnerable and subordinated social positions and locations of the uprooted.

The findings of this research have important implications for mental health nurses who work with girls and young women. Most importantly, girls need safe spaces where they can talk openly and honestly about their experiences, where they can contemplate the ways in which uprootedness has affected their sense of belonging and overall well-being. Aside from the literature dealing with health and poverty, few studies have addressed dislocation or uprooting as a form of systemic, institutional, or structural violence. In her classic study of child death in an impoverished barrio in Brazil, Scheper-Hughes (1992) examined how the structural violence of racism and poverty, the presiding fear of state-sanctioned slaughter of squatter settlers, and sexism undermined women's health and maternal practice. The narratives of the women in Scheper-Hughes' study repeatedly

revealed links among structural violence, individual assault, child mortality, and ill-health. With respect to Aboriginal, newcomer, and homeless girls, forced migration, displacement, and uprooting constitute specific forms of violence that jeopardize, in fundamental ways, their sense of self, belonging, and space. That so many showed a capacity to negotiate new spaces of hope and belonging, despite dwelling within what Sibley (1995) refers to as a “landscape of exclusion,” is a testament to their strength, resilience, and sense of agency.

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