A Photovoice Exploration of the Lived Experiences of a Small Group of Aboriginal Adolescent Girls Living Away from their Home Communities

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Abstract

This paper discusses how a small group of Aboriginal/Indigenous adolescent girls, living away from their home communities and/or families, understood their lived experiences. These experiences were explored with photovoice, a participatory action research method using photography to capture and analyze participants' experiences and viewpoints, and educate/change the broader community. The participants identified both adversity and strength/resilience in their lived experiences. Despite feeling challenged by stereotypes; the experience of intergenerational trauma and loss; the suicide of friends and family members; peer pressure to smoke, drink, and use drugs; and the unfamiliar challenge of living away from their home communities, the participants conveyed a realistic and positive view of their life and development. They expected to make mistakes along the way as part of a life-long learning process. They expressed an interest in engaging with cultural traditions and practices; were willing to leave their home communities to access education; appreciated and accepted their families, seeking out support when required; found solace in nature; and supported and encouraged their friends and peers. The findings challenge negative stereotypes and essentialized notions about Aboriginal adolescent girls, peoples, and communities, and are consistent with an emphasis on strengths and resilience.

Keywords: Aboriginal, adolescence, lived experience, resilience, photovoice.

Adolescence is a time when young people work on developing an identity. They prepare for future roles and careers, develop their abstract and critical thinking skills, and sometimes engage in intimate relationships (Meschke et al., 2012). Researchers have long examined adolescence and its relationship to specific issues and risk factors such as suicide (Caldwell, 2008; MacNeil, 2008); substance use (Saewye et al., 2006); pregnancy (Shercliffe et al., 2007; Banister and Begoray, 2006); and educational involvement (van der Woerd and Cox, 2003; Knesting, 2008).

Aboriginal/Indigenous youth often experience greater risk factors during adolescence (Shercliffe et al., 2007; Banister and Begoray, 2006). Canadian Aboriginal youth have the highest rate of suicide of any identified cultural group in the world (MacNeil, 2008), and significantly lower graduation rates than those of the general population. The 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples found that only 37% of Aboriginal youth graduated from high school, and 9% of these graduates entered university with only a 3% completion rate (Bazylak, 2002). In 2001, the British Columbia Ministry of Education noted that the primary reason for elevated female Aboriginal dropout rates was pregnancy (van der Woerd and Cox, 2003). Furthermore, across Canada, Aboriginal youth are disproportionately represented

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in the criminal justice system, in the child welfare system, and are considered at higher risk for early exposure to problematic alcohol/drug use (Public Safety Canada, 2008).

The history of the oppression of Aboriginal peoples in Canada has been well documented and marked by discrimination in the form of European colonialism and imposed residential schooling and genocide (Kirmayer et al., 2000). It is beyond the scope and intent of this paper to examine these matters in any depth but we will note that colonial policies related to residential schools, reserve communities, loss of traditional lands, and erosion of language and cultural traditions have created a loss of cohesion and identity in many Aboriginal communities, which have affected family health behaviours (MacNeil, 2008). This intergenerational trauma (Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski, 2004), coupled with ongoing oppressions and discriminations, can affect the ability of Aboriginal adolescents to resolve the challenges of adolescence in healthy ways. Indeed, Aboriginal adolescents are often referred to as at-risk of developing poor health, suffering abuse, leaving school, and committing suicide (Banister and Begoray, 2006; Jaffe and Hughes, 2008; van der Woerd and Cox, 2003).

However, increasingly, researchers are exploring various protective factors that can help youth develop resilient trajectories or positive adjustments to the adversities they face. It is important to identify areas of resilience and resistance to domination so that we do not overemphasize aspects of victimization (Hankivsky et al., 2010), which is certainly convergent with the current emphases on strengths-based perspectives within helping/health professions (Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000). Positive adaptational outcomes can arise from positive cultural engagement, strong support systems both at the personal and community level, and a well-developed sense of self (Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000; Garmezy et al., 1984; Luthar and Zigler, 1991). Especially relevant to our study, culture is one of the layers of experience that can contribute to adolescents' resilient trajectories (Dei et al., 1977).

At the same time, processes such as identity formation can be especially complicated for ethnic and racial minority groups. As Beal-Spencer and Markstrom-Adams (1990) stated, identity formation is complex when an individual must also navigate colour, physical differences, language differences, differing cultural traditions, and social stereotypes. Groome (1995) pointed out that Aboriginal youth are influenced by five major "worlds" impinging on their lives: the family, the Aboriginal community, the wider society, peers, and the school. Each of these factors brings a variety of expectations regarding values, beliefs, behaviours, and differing patterns of control, relationships, and communication. Aboriginal youth often face a barrage of messages that are contradictory and antagonistic to them and their communities, and as a result, they may develop a "failure identity" and experience personal confusion and difficulty finding a comfortable and safe nesting spot. In social work, this ecological perspective focuses on the person-in-environment and the dynamics of power inherent in interrelational transactions between a variety of systems (Ungar, 2002); it can help us understand Aboriginal youths' relationships with their "worlds." For example, Aboriginal youth, who become interested in exploring their cultural background and anticipate guidance and support from family and community members, may be disappointed if family and community members, especially those who experienced residential schools, have internalized oppressive beliefs that cultural traditions and rituals are symbolic of "devil worship." As Hart (2002, p. 34) explained, "After years, if not decades of hearing the oppressors' way, Aboriginal people come to hold the message dearly."

We were interested in exploring how Aboriginal adolescent girls, living in a small northern Ontario city and away from their home communities, understood and navigated some of the tasks associated with adolescence, especially identity formation. We wondered what their ideas were about resilience particularly as this related to their Aboriginal identity and culture. Due to (1) the lack of research in this area with Aboriginal girls, (2) the need to work collaboratively with an Indigenous group of girls and the local Aboriginal community and, (3) our desire to understand their experiences in an in-depth

manner, we chose to utilize a creative participatory action research method known as Photovoice.

Method

Participants

The local community in which this project took place is a small city of 45,000 people, located approximately 800 kilometers north of the major city of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. According to Census Canada, the Aboriginal population in this city is growing significantly as a result of both birth rates and migration from remote communities along the Ontario coast of James and Hudson Bay (Statistics Canada, 2008).

Before we describe the participants and how they were recruited, it is important to note that the research ethics guidelines developed by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research in collaboration with its Institute of Aboriginal Peoples' Health (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2007) were followed. These guidelines state that it is essential to establish community support for any type of research conducted with Aboriginal peoples. Accordingly, support for, and cooperation with, the project was initially sought and gained with two local Aboriginal community-based organizations that provided support, culturally relevant activities, and health/helping services to the local Aboriginal community. Kelly met with the Executive Directors of these agencies and each organization's ethical protocols were discussed and adhered to for the project. This included keeping the Executive Directors regularly updated on the progress of the research project. Also, ethical approval from the authors' university's Research Ethics Board was gained for all of the procedures.

Additionally, Kelly established an advisory panel that supported the research, and provided guidance and cultural knowledge. Three well-respected community members and acknowledged role models for Aboriginal youth agreed to be members of the advisory panel. One member was a traditional health promoter, the second was an Aboriginal youth counsellor, and the third was a youth representative on a local Aboriginal organization's board of governors. One of these female members also agreed to be a co-facilitator for the group meetings that were held as part of the research process. She provided leadership and guidance to the participants and Kelly. The establishment of these collaborative relationships helped to engender trust amongst all of the stakeholders, and transparency and reciprocity in the process between Kelly, the participants, and other members of the local Aboriginal community (Martin-Hill and Soucy, 2005).

There were six participants in the study; two other Aboriginal girls indicated an interest in participating but never took part in the process. All six participants were from the Cree Nation. They ranged in age from 14–18 years old (two 14 year olds, one 15 year old, one 16 year old, and two 18 year olds). Five of these young women had status and were registered with the federal government as "Indians" according to the terms of the *Indian Act* (Statistics Canada, 2008). The participants grew up on four different remote federal reserves accessible only by air. Four of the participants moved to the local northern Ontario city in order to attend high school. The other two participants relocated with their families during elementary school so that their parent(s) could attend college and secure gainful employment.

The participants were recruited with the help of a youth coordinator at a local Aboriginal community-based organization, the Aboriginal youth counsellor for the local English public school board, and a guidance counsellor at a local high school. Each of these people distributed an introductory letter to possible participants explaining the project, which was described as a photovoice research project to explore the lived experiences and personal stories of Aboriginal adolescent girls. In this introductory letter, potential participants were invited to an information meeting at the local Aboriginal health centre. Only two potential participants came to the initial information meeting held in early November 2010. As a result, and with the help of the guidance counsellor and the advisory panel members, more flyers were distributed and two additional information meetings were scheduled for late November 2010. A total of 21 potential participants attended these two information meetings. The photovoice project was described and the level of commitment required by participants was discussed. Interested participants

were provided with consent and confidentiality forms to be signed by a parent or legal guardian. To provide time to obtain parental consent, Kelly and the co-facilitator (one of the advisory panel members) scheduled the first official photovoice project meeting in December 2010. At this meeting, six participants attended with signed consent and confidentiality forms thus establishing the group of participants for the project.

Research Design

Photovoice was a relevant participant action research method to use with Aboriginal girls because it gave the participants meaningful involvement in the research process and the creation of their own narratives through photography. Photovoice was originally developed by Wang and Burris (1994) in the field of health promotion and education as a method of creating personal and community change. Wang (1999) identified several key concepts in Photovoice: images teach and can influence policy; people ought to participate in shaping public policy; and individual and community action is emphasized. Community members are a vital source of expertise and what researchers consider important may not be what the community considers important (Wang, 2007). Photographs taken by participants create a foundation for critical discussion of issues, and they allow a participatory group process to assemble personal and community knowledge and develop an understanding of their shared experiences, issues, and concerns (Castleden and Garvin, 2008).

Typically, a Photovoice project begins with a group discussion to establish a theme or research goal that the participants would like to explore and share with their communities. They are then provided with cameras and take pictures related to the research goal. In most cases the participants take the photographs over a two-week period, returning to the group to analyze the pictures and discuss their meaning. This process creates knowledge grounded in their lived experiences. The group then decides how best to share this knowledge to inform and educate others (Wang and Burris, 1994).

The use of photography is convergent with other creative and arts-based methods that can be highly relevant for Indigenous peoples. Archibald and Dewar (2010) state that there is compelling evidence that creative arts, culture, and healing are connected, and when community helping/health programs have a choice, they include creative arts methods. Others argue that creative arts are interconnected with Aboriginal value systems and perspectives (Herring, 1997); and that art and other creative methods are important for Aboriginal peoples (Dufrene, 1990; Struthers, 2003). Moreover, a photovoice method is well suited for exploring and analyzing a variety of systems, connections, and "worlds," which resonates with Indigenous social work approaches emphasizing "the inter-connectedness of individuals to their families, communities, other adults, Mother Earth, all creation, the Creator and the spirit world" (Baskin, 2009, p. 137). Similar to an ecological model, individuals are both affected by, and have an impact on, everything and everyone around them (Baskin, 2009).

Procedures

At the first group meeting, all participants signed confidentiality forms outlining their responsibility to maintain confidentiality and to respect each group member's opinions, perspectives, and decisions. At the beginning of every subsequent meeting, the matter of confidentiality was reviewed to encourage respect for the shared materials. Participants were also taught about the ethical use of photographs and photovoice techniques such as not taking photographs of individual people or photographs that could potentially harm or misrepresent them, other people, and/or their communities. During the first meeting, the participants also chose pseudonyms for themselves and the process of establishing a theme and research goal began. By using the technique of brainstorming, the participants were encouraged to contemplate and share with the group the issues they felt were important to them and what they might like others to know about their lived experiences as Aboriginal adolescent girls. The group also discussed Kelly's interest in resilience and identity formation. The participants eventually agreed that they would like to educate their communities and the local community about

"what it is like to be a young Aboriginal girl growing up in today's society." The theme agreed on was "What You Need to Know About Me."

Usually, in Photovoice methods, there is only one photo-taking block or "photo-mission." However, it quickly became evident that this was not what the participants wanted to do. First, all of them were well versed with technology including being familiar with a variety of applications and programs that could enhance and alter photographs, and they all had a large personal collection of digital photographs that they wanted to also utilize in the project. All of the participants chose to use a combination of their previously collected and new photographs. Second, the participants wanted more than one photo-taking mission because of travelling back and forth to their home communities, their traditional hunting grounds, or south to bigger cities, and they felt that taking pictures in these settings would be important to represent their lived experiences.

Although an 8–10 week commitment was suggested to the participants based on the existing literature in Photovoice, the actual process from beginning to end took approximately 30 weeks; during this time, a total of thirteen meetings were held (approximately two meetings per month). These meetings lasted 90–120 minutes. Approximately nine meetings were used to analyze the photographs, which included sharing photographs, discussing personal issues in their lives, and discussing the importance of sharing their lived experiences. Four meetings were used to determine the final product and to work on developing these creations. The meetings were spread over 30 weeks to accommodate breaks in the research process for events such as Christmas, the traditional goose hunt, March break, the Easter break, and the ongoing demands of the participants' academic schedules and exams. For most of these holidays and events, the participants travelled back to their home communities. Overall, the participants guided the photovoice process in determining the time, place, and date of the sessions and the form of the final products. All of the meetings were held at the "Aboriginal Lodge," a converted classroom in a local high school dedicated for the use of Aboriginal students.

As the participants took photographs, they emailed them to Kelly who had them printed for group discussion in a subsequent meeting. The participants were prolific in the production of photographs. Digital technology allowed them to take many pictures and although they screened them for printing, they nevertheless chose many pictures upon which to reflect. Some participants contributed as many as 40 photographs to be printed whereas other participants contributed 10–15 photographs. When it came time for the analysis, the group agreed that each participant would choose 8–10 photographs to discuss and analyze with the group.

The photographs that were chosen by the participants were analyzed using the "SHOWED" guideline developed by Wang and Burris (1994). The participants were asked to contemplate, about each photograph: What do you See here?; What's really Happening here?; How does this relate to Our lives?; Why does this problem/condition/situation/strength exist?; Who could the image Educate?; and, What can we Do about it? The SHOWED guideline enabled the participants to share and analyze their photos in a structured and respectful manner with the entire group. The process dictated that the person presenting the photo was the first to comment and reflect on it. It provided a foundation from which deeper discussions about each photograph developed as the participants asked questions and provided input. A reflexive process within the group enabled the photographer and the group to reflect on the interpretation of the photograph and its message. During these discussions, Kelly wrote the main points on chart paper. The participants were also encouraged to record their many thoughts and ideas on paper, which was helpful for working on the written narratives that eventually accompanied each of the photographs.

Through this process of group discussion/analysis, the participants identified emerging themes. The facilitation of these group discussions was focused and aided by Kelly who used chart paper to record a "word web" (a conceptual map) of their ideas. The participants were able to expand on various themes and identify the focus of their work. The group was assisted to assign conceptual labels to the emerging

themes/categories. As the discussion progressed, relationships between the categories were identified and categories were combined to form themes that were more abstract than the concepts they represented (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). The process of having the participants label the emerging categories

> avoids the distortion of fitting data into a predetermined paradigm: it enables us to hear and understand how people make meaning themselves or construct what matters to them. (Wang and Burris, 1997, p. 382)

Also, through the analysis process, the group members eventually identified the photographs that they believed best represented who they were and their lived experiences as Aboriginal adolescent girls. Each participant chose eight photographs to be part of a display (examples of these photographs are presented in the next section). Two 8x10 photographs were mounted on a single piece of 1x4 foot black foam board, accompanied with a written narrative on the foam board in silver marker; the participants were concerned that their photographs might be misinterpreted or taken out of context. The participants also decided to display scrapbooks containing six other photographs accompanied with short written narratives. The group helped one another develop the narratives. The foam boards were displayed on easels and the scrapbooks placed on tables so that someone reviewing them could take the time to read them. The participants agreed that they wanted to display these photographs and scrapbooks at an "Aboriginal Feast-ival" that was held at a local high school in the spring. The event was developed by members of the high school Aboriginal Student Council for the purpose of sharing Aboriginal student art and culture with the local community to increase understanding of Aboriginal peoples living within the community. Attendees at this Feast-ival included students from both elementary and high school as well as the general public.

Results

The data analysis process eventually led to nine major categories, which were: self-esteem; city life; differences; the "Rez"; culture; loss; nature; family; and identity. Each of these categories/themes encompassed both challenges (risk factors) and strengths/resiliencies. We describe each of these categories next.

Self-esteem included various issues such as body image, stereotypes, perseverance, and healthy lifestyles. Figure 1 shows Pea 1's photograph of a brick wall representing the many challenges faced by Aboriginal youth, including

> the stereotypes about Native people being druggies, alcoholics, uneducated, dirty and so on.

Figure 1. Pea 1's Photograph of a Brick Wall with Accompanying Text.

The group understood that these stereotypes affect all Native youth, convincing some youth that they cannot rise above the stereotypes and that this is "all they can ever be." The stereotypes block youth from believing in themselves and setting achievable goals. Pea 1 and the other participants had experienced some of the impact of these stereotypes but they also discussed how one must be determined to overcome the internalization of harmful stereotypes.

City life encompassed issues such as culture shock and feeling out of place but also enjoying both worlds (their home communities and the local city). Figure 2 illustrates a photograph taken by Pea 2 who used a picture, taken at a science centre in the butterfly room, of a solitary tropical butterfly to represent her feelings of being out of place and misunderstood. The butterfly is not indigenous to northern Ontario. She stated,

> Sometimes you feel out of place and alone when you come from your home town to a different town ... misunderstood.

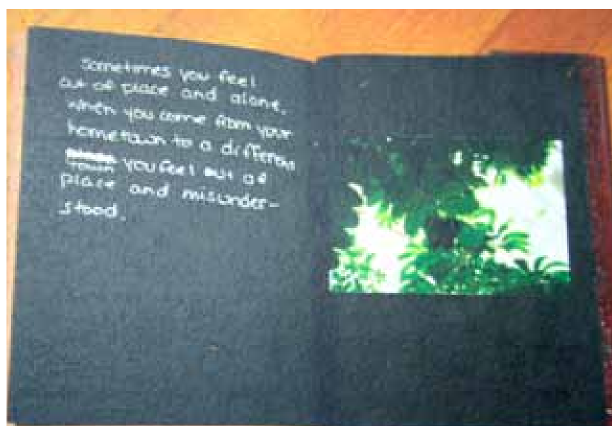

Figure 2. Pea 2's Photograph of a Solitary, Tropical Butterfly with Accompanying Text.

The participants decided to leave the safety and familiarity of their homes to live in a much larger community where they sometimes felt out of place, strange, lonely, and stereotyped. In group discussions, the participants also discussed their experiences with their return visits to their home communities. Fluffy Unicorn stated that

> going home is tough sometimes. Some people call you "towny" or "apple" [red on the outside but white on the inside]. It's a bummer because you don't fit in in the city and then you don't really fit in on the Rez.

Flying Turtle noted the sacrifices she had to make because she chose to pursue her education away from the reserve. However, she stated

> Every morning I look out my window and see something way different than I do back home on the reserve. I see opportunities I get living in the city.... I could see better education and less negative activities. I could see my future, having a great job.

Flying Turtle wished that these opportunities were available to everyone who lived on the reserve.

Differences were discussed by the group as their awareness of how others sometimes view them as different. This category included feelings of invisibility within their schools, experiencing a lack of acceptance and respect, and feeling less valuable than others. Despite these feelings and experiences, the participants were also able to embrace their uniqueness and felt that being different could be "cool." Figure 3 shows a picture taken by Flying Turtle who took a picture of a tree that captured her feelings about being different. For instance, despite feeling different, she also believed that she was beautiful like the tree in the picture. She stated,

> I'm Native and sometimes feel like this tree, which is all alone, everyone looking at it and knowing it's different because it looks a bit odd. I do feel like this tree from time to time, which is not a great feeling to have. But you have to look at yourself beyond that like how it's still beautiful on its own. You should always see yourself like that.

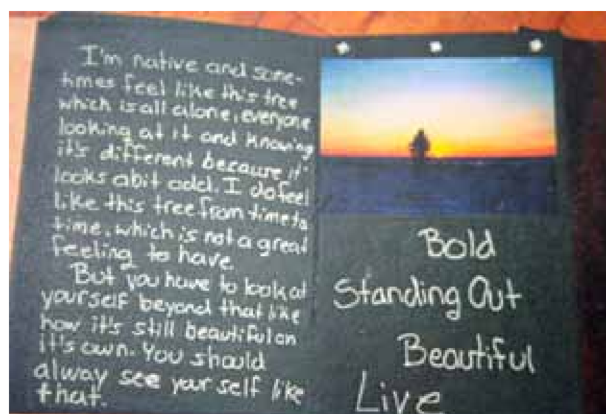

Figure 3. Flying Turtle's Photograph of a Tree with Accompanying Text.

So, while the participants sometimes struggled with their sense of self and confidence, viewing themselves as different and out of place, they also recognized their strengths and used these to cope with these challenges.

In discussions about "the Rez," the participants explained that growing up on a reservation can be very difficult due to peer pressure regarding smoking, drinking and using drugs, and having sex. They also felt that there was a significant lack of opportunities for education, organized sports, and access to modern day amenities when growing up on the Rez. Nevertheless, it was home and all the girls felt a strong connection to their home communities. In Figure 4, it is evident that Flying Turtle took a photograph of a large eraser symbolizing that at times she would like to erase some of her past decisions and actions. She said that growing up on the reserve was difficult in that it was hard to make good decisions and that young people living on the reservation were not always held accountable for their actions, which she believed made it difficult for some youth

to understand right from wrong. She felt fortunate to have been able to recognize that some of her decisions were not good ones and that they had a negative effect on her.

Aboriginal culture was woven into group discus-

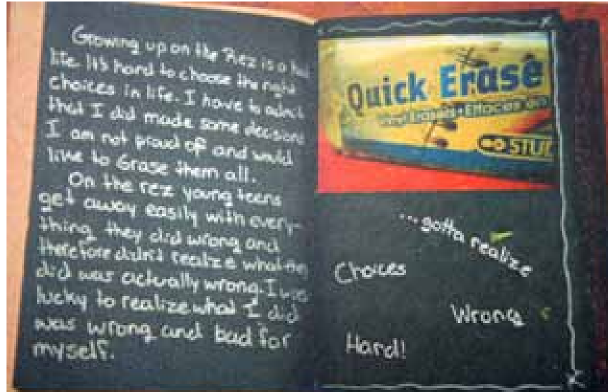

Figure 4. Flying Turtle's Photograph of an Eraser with Accompanying Text.

sions throughout the research project. Some group members participated in cultural activities and traditions, and they all considered the role that their Aboriginal heritage played in their identities. The group discussed how their cultural teachings and traditions offered strength and peace, and encouraged experiencing and being in nature. Some also questioned the belief held by some of their own family members that Aboriginal rituals and ceremonies such as smudging and drumming constituted "witchcraft and devil worship." Figure 5 is a photograph, taken by Pea 2, of sweet grass and sage, two traditional medicines, to share the importance of her culture. She believed that these two traditional medicines brought positive energy and healing.

Figure 5. Pea 2's Photograph of Two Traditional Medicines, Sweet Grass and Sage.

Similar to Lalonde's (2006) findings, the participants' involvement with their Aboriginal culture was associated with their resilience. Four of the participants regularly participated in traditional cultural events and practiced cultural rituals such as smudging. Engagement in their cultural teachings helped to guide them in their pursuit of a positive and healthy lifestyle and successfully maneuver "between the two worlds [as they] decide[d] when to be traditional and when to be non-traditional" (Frideres, 2008, p. 321). Buzz Gun pointed out her pride in being able to go hunting with her family one week, and the following week to visit New York City.

Loss was also discussed by the group and identified as a relevant category/theme. The group discussed the losses of their cultural teachings and traditional ways suffered by their families via forced attendance at residential schools; losses of friends and family members through suicide; and the losses associated with leaving their home communities and friends to attend high school. Buzz Gun captured loss in her photograph of an eagle feather held behind a barbed-wire fence (see Figure 6). She told the group that she and her father considered how to best capture his experience in residential school. They experimented with several photographic ideas and felt that the image of an eagle feather behind a barbed wire fence best illustrated his feelings of being trapped and hurt but still desperately trying to hold on to his culture. Buzz Gun explained that she is coming to realize the importance of her

Figure 6. Buzz Gun's Photograph of her Father Holding an Eagle Feather behind a Barbed-wire Fence with Accompanying Text.

Aboriginal culture and the role it can play in her life. She noted that she feels angry that she does not know her traditional ways and wonders what it would be like today if residential schools had never existed. She wrote:

> The eagle feather; I know it's important to our people. But I have no clue what it is, how important it is or what it stands for.

The importance of nature was often discussed by the participants. All of the girls appreciated what they identified as the comfort, safety, and peacefulness of nature. Nature reminded them of family, home, and "freedom." Figure 7 shows a photograph, taken by Pea 1, of a bright moon reflecting on Hudson Bay. She referred to this as "pure nature." She was very appreciative of the relatively undisturbed natural environment found in her community and accordingly, the "luck" of being an Aboriginal individual.

Figure 7. Pea 1's Photograph of the Moon Reflecting on Hudson Bay with Accompanying Text.

The importance of family was shared by the participants and all of them included photographs that represented their appreciation and love for their families. They talked about how they felt accepted, loved, and respected by members of their families, and how despite the fact that things sometimes "fall apart" they are "fixable"; forgiveness is always possible. Figure 8 demonstrates how Pea 1 captured her feelings towards the women in her life by taking a photograph of a forest with a snow-covered tree in the forefront. She believed women were strong, beautiful, and nurturing. She stated that the mother

> hold[s] everything together. If she falls, everything else will also fall.

Figure 8. Pea 1's Photograph of Snow Covered Trees with Accompanying Text.

The group identified the importance of familial support. Moving away from one's home community can be very difficult especially when one moves from a small, isolated, homogeneous community to a significantly larger, more diverse community. The participants shared a belief that had it not been for the guidance and love of their support systems back home that their adaptation to the challenges associated with moving would have been far more difficult.

The final category was that of identity. The participants discussed their beliefs that they were unique, complex, and funny and not "just" Aboriginal; being an Aboriginal person was one part of their identity and they did not want to be essentialized according to this dimension of their identity. Figure 9 is a picture of Ali G's scrapbook introductory page that stated:

> I don't only want to be known as an Aboriginal. I want people to know me for me. I'm not just a First Nation person, I'm an original person, I'm my own person.

Taken together, the nine categories described above indicate that this small group of Aboriginal girls have established resilient life trajectories that include positive and realistic attitudes, and a sense of self-esteem and self-awareness. They expressed an interest in engaging with cultural traditions and practices; were willing to leave their home com-

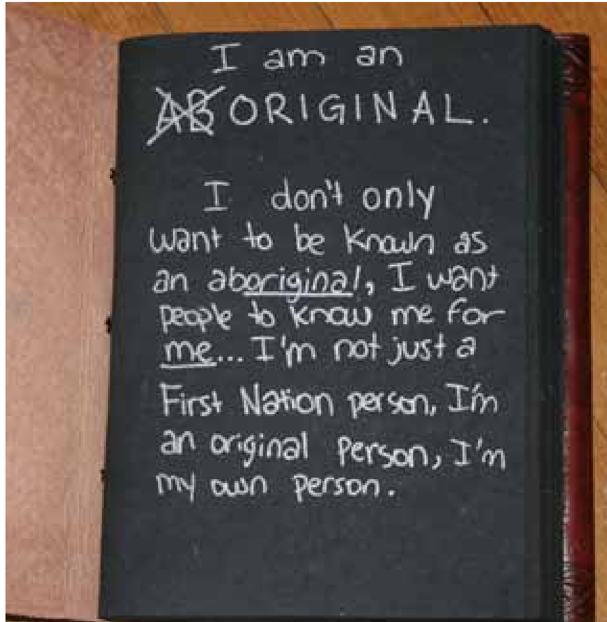

Figure 9. Ali G's Introduction to her Scrapbook.

munities to access education; appreciated and accepted their families, and sought out support when required; found solace in nature; discussed their expectations that they will make mistakes in the future but that positive change is always possible; and supported and encouraged their friends and peers. Importantly, they expressed these attributes despite feeling challenged by Aboriginal stereotypes; by the experience of intergenerational trauma and loss caused in part by parents having been forced to attend residential schools; by the suicide of friends and family members; by peer pressure to smoke, drink, and use drugs; and by the unfamiliarity and challenge of living away from their home communities. The participants displayed a realistic and positive view of their life journey. They conveyed their expectation that they would make mistakes along their journey as part of a life-long learning process.

Discussion

Identities are complex, fluid, messy, and in process (Garry, 2011). Thus, we should be careful not to essentialize Aboriginal girls, as the participants themselves pointed out in their analyses. It bears mentioning again that we also need to identify areas of resilience and resistance to domination so that we do not overemphasize aspects of victimization (Hankivsky et al., 2010). The Aboriginal girls who participated in this project rightly demanded that their uniqueness be honoured, demonstrated various aspects of resilience, and were not bogged down in problem-saturated narratives. Certainly, the participants' narratives expressed hope for the future despite the challenges their families and communities had faced. It goes without saying that we need to challenge stereotypes and essentialized notions about Aboriginal girls and peoples. Along these lines, the recent 8th Fire series of documentary films produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation could be used as an engaging tool with others to promote the diversities and strengths of Aboriginal peoples and cultures in Canada (see http://www.cbc.ca/doczone/8thfire/). We need to broaden our notions about health and healing so that they are more holistic and include many dimensions such as community, culture, nature, and spirituality (Arthur and Collins, 2010). Support for this would include, as one example, supporting Aboriginal youth in their absences from school (and research processes) to attend traditional ceremonies and practices such as the annual goose hunt.

Limitations of this study include the small sample size and the fact that this group of adolescent girls might not be representative of other Aboriginal girls from their home communities. It would be interesting to explore lived experiences, identity formation, and resilience with other Aboriginal girls from other locations and contexts, particularly those who do not make the decision to move away from their home communities to pursue education or employment. We could also consider how youth such as the participants in this study could be engaged in leadership and mentoring roles within their communities. The findings of this study are a small contribution to considering the strengths of Aboriginal peoples, specifically, adolescent girls. These considerations are certainly in line with current emphases on resilience and strengths within child mental health (Coholic et al., 2012).

Finally, while we do not consider the length of time this project took to complete a limitation, it is clear that when working with Aboriginal peoples and communities, researchers must take into account the time it takes to build alliances and rela-

tionships, and be committed to that process. Also, one must be prepared to engage with communities in relevant and meaningful ways, which sometimes means changing established protocols as we did in this project with the number of photography taking missions. As qualitative researchers, we must be open to being challenged and we must be interested in learning and gaining knowledge based on the lived experiences of the participants. Certainly, in our experiences the richness of the overall experience is certainly worth the effort.

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