STORYTELLING & RESILIENCE:
A NARRATIVE STUDY OF YOUTH IN CARE

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ABSTRACT

Resilience research forms the basis of this study examining first person accounts of youth in and alumni youth from care. Resilience opportunities are strengthened when the various systems supporting children and youth work in interconnected and cross-buttressed ways to promote positive coping and healthy development post adversity. It can be challenging to cull meaningful child welfare interventions from the literature's complexity that are not overly simplified or reductionist. This study is predicated on the idea that making adjustments to an existing practice of compiling life books for children and youth in care could be a forum for translating the complexities of resilience research into a therapeutic storytelling intervention. A narrative approach is taken to examine, explore, listen to and learn from a collection of resilience themed stories produced by Youth in Care Canada. Analysis includes an examination of the personal and political implications of identity formation; the empowerment and emotional healing potential in storytelling; and the power of the stories to alter social discourses. The study finds that a storytelling process has the potential to palliate healing in identities that transform from victims of adversity to persons of agency in recovery. Resilience research's main message that sustained supports strengthen opportunities for resilience is upheld. Resilient youth reconfigure the neo liberal ethos of individuality and self reliance into a stance of self determination dependent on the ongoing support of others. The stories are persuasive in widening discourses with the ideas that youth in and from care can meet the criteria for mainstream membership; and, further, youth do not have to overcome their harm to function well – harm and healing can co-exist. The study ultimately supports the recommendation that a storytelling process be implemented in the child welfare system to foster increased opportunities for resilience.

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INTRODUCTION

As a children`s service worker engaged with the child and youth in-care population, I became intrigued by child resilience research. "Resilience" is an attractive concept due to its lens of assessing a child/youth in terms of their strengths and positive adaptations post adversity as opposed to the more typical identification of deficiencies. The premise is appealing and the literature can be compelling to read. There is something encouraging and even comforting in understanding that researchers are studying the concept intently and can articulate the complexities of the various environmental systems that need to work in interconnected ways to promote possibilities for positive coping and healthy development post adversity. A theme threading throughout much of the literature is that the child is not inherently resilient, but that the systems that support the child directly and indirectly need to function in supportive and connective ways (for eg. Masten, 2006). The literature, at first glance, is reassuring in that if there is such a comprehensive knowledge base regarding all the mechanisms needed to promote resilience, the principles must then break down into sensible units of intervention that should be effective in priming the various systems. This tinkering of systems would then hold much potential for the prevention, reduction and amelioration of harm. The positivity is somewhat deflated when realizing that a lot of the literature does not specify practice interventions. How then to translate an overhaul of the complex inter-relatedness of various systems in the child's life into suggestions for adjustments?

I wanted to integrate research findings into my practice but found it too difficult to cull concretely do-able interventions from the literature`s complexity. Taking an education leave to complete my M.S.W. afforded me the opportunity to immerse myself in the literature, and, also, to grapple with the challenges of how the research could be translated into practice. I

experienced a sense of crisis after an extensive research review as the literature continued to appear limited to theoretical possibilities that were too abstract and ideal for implementation strategies. My focus shifted to youth's experience of care; youth voice; the stigma of care; and the emotional healing potential in storytelling. I questioned whether these trajectories veered away from the focus that had inspired me to return for further education. Contemplating the tenets of social justice helped to merge the research tangents with resilience theory. Somewhat paradoxically, reflecting on the abstractions of social justice allowed me to simplify grander ideals into possible ways that social justice and resilience could be grounded into practice. Research focuses started to coalesce around an already existing practice of compiling life books for children and youth in care. Distilled from the lofty ideals of social justice came a simple idea of modifying the purpose and meaning attached to the life book. Stories that are actively produced by the child over the collecting of data to be presented to the child, privilege and value the youth voice. Further, the potential benefits of empowerment and emotional healing could be affected with some adjustments to an existing practice.

Youth in Care Canada (YICC) (formerly National Youth in Care Network) is a national network of current and alumni youth from care. Their mandate is to:

- Increase the awareness of the needs of youth in and from government care by researching the issues and presenting the results to youth professionals and the general public through publications and speaking engagements;

- Provide emotional support to youth in and from state care and to guide the development of Youth in Care Networks (www.youthincare.ca).

I understood from the YICC website that their resources included a printed anthology collection and a two-volume DVD set of digital stories that were first person accounts of experiences of

being raised in state care with a resilience theme. I further understood that the YICC identified

storytelling as intrinsic for emotional healing and political advocacy (ibid). I became enticed by

the idea of having the stories form the basis of a narrative research project. A narrative approach

can be likened to deep listening; repeated readings that centre on different story strands privilege

me with an opportunity to be a captive audience. I hoped a narrative framework would be a

respectful approach to listening and learning from the stories. I wanted to be mindful that beyond

the research impetus I was also bearing witness to personal experiences of adversity as well as

recovery. I aimed to find the "right" balance of respectful witnessing and, also, a standing back

to analyse and articulate political implications beyond the personal meanings. Delving into the

politics also matched the YICC stated purpose of the stories being political advocacy as well as

windows into the process of emotional healing. Basically, I could not think of a better way to

learn about supporting opportunities for resilience through a storytelling process than by

listening intently to the first person narratives of youth in and from care.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Child Resilience

Bernard (1991) describes resilience as "a set of qualities, or protective mechanisms that give rise to successful adaptation despite the presence of high risk factors during the course of development" (in Howard et al, 1999, p. 310). There is a logical consensus that the greater the number of protective factors, the greater the chances are that resilience will be present. Protective mechanisms can be individual or environmental factors (ibid). The resilient child is often described as having some combination from a list of "internal assets" such as: social competence; problem solving skill; autonomy; sense of purpose; sense of the future (ibid, p. 311); an easy going temperament; higher intelligence; qualities that elicit positive responses from others; coping strategies; high self esteem; realistic sense of hope; personal control and self efficacy (Walsh, 1998). Environmental factors are identified in an ecological systems perspective as the family, school and community (Howard et al, 1999). Some researchers also consider the indirect impact on the child at the system levels of social policy and culture (Barber, 2006). Resilience considerations can be more complicated than they first appear as the concept tends to be largely focused on the child. From an interventionist point of view, there may be a positivist assumption that the child can somehow be fed fortifying bites to strengthen their inner core to overcome or at least cope well with adversity (Walsh, 1998). Howard et al (1999) point out that resiliency is not a fixed personal attribute nor is it biologically inherent. Further, it can change over the course of personal development and/or throughout the life cycle. The likelihood of resilience being developed and maintained to a level that becomes protective is dependent on the dynamic interplay between the child and the systems supporting the child (ibid). As a

practitioner, the idea of making adjustments beyond the individual system of the child is daunting.

Barber (2006) acknowledges that resilience research has been overly focused on individual processes. There is growing recognition that while resilience mechanisms are "manifest" in individuals, persons do not "possess" resilience (ibid, p. 422). Current research tends to focus more on the various systems that support or impact the child's life. Fernandez (2006) states that based on outcomes from a study of resilience of children followed in foster care over a five year period, that resilience is best understood as "complex interchanges across spheres over the life cycle" (p. 133). She points out that a major theme is the importance of relationships, not just the biological or foster family, but other mentoring relationships such as a teacher or coach. Howard et al (1999) discuss the quandary of applying the theme to practice with the caution that emphasis not be placed only on identifying protective factors, but, also, on the factors' "developmental" and "situational" mechanisms (p. 311). Gilligan's (2006) case example illustrates this point. He relates the story of a young boy who enters foster care as a "loner" type child. The foster father introduces him to his interest in tropical fish. The boy takes up the interest and is inspired to start a tropical fish club at school where he experiences friendships for his first time. The child also becomes a pen pal to others internationally who share his interest. His expertise helps him to get a job at a local pet shop. Eventually the placement breaks down but the boy leaves with a strengthened sense of resilience due to positive relationship experiences across the systems of foster family, school friends, work place and the broader community of pen pals (ibid). The problem: as a worker, how do I set up relationships that are meaningful when the dynamism of the relationship is dependent on factors outside of a worker's control?

Ungar (2003) advocates for qualitative methods of research to help counter the arbitrariness of quantifiable measurements when identifying risk factors and defining positive outcomes. Qualitative methods explore the socio-economic and political context of the often marginalized environments in which stories and experiences of resilience unfold (ibid). Ungar (2003) further explains that identifying risk factors in isolation removes the complicating context of interactional factors. Identifying key risk factors is akin to locating the keystone in a stone archway; the keystone is embedded in an interdependent structure (ibid). The author supports the more recent research emphasis regarding resilience being a dynamic that changes across time. The across-time factor is complicated by a range of implications. Levels of coping mechanisms vary at different life points due to fluctuating risk and mediating factors (ibid). Also, risk factors can be multi-dimensional and make an impact in different ways across time (ibid). Ungar (2003) provides an example: an infant may experience parental alcoholism as a risk for disrupting attachment. The same infant as an adolescent may experience continued parental alcoholism as negative role modelling; the young adult may be inducted into an intergenerational pattern of substance abuse (ibid).

Regardless of the shifting trend in research from an individual to a systems' perspective, there continues to be literature and practice that overly centres on the individual child (Walsh, 1998). This more limited lens carries the risk of viewing the child through earlier research descriptions of the resilient child as an "invulnerable" (Silva-Wayne, 1995, p. 310). The term resonates with images of a "super" child (Walsh, 1998, p. 5) who is "impervious to the cruellest treatment and immune to the countless blows of misfortune" (Silva-Wayne, 1995, 310). It is important to note that the resilient child still suffers the short and long term impact of negative life experiences but is somewhat cushioned through a synergy of internal coping mechanisms

and external supports (ibid). Walsh (1998) makes a link between the "faulty notion" of invulnerability and the ethos of the rugged, self-reliant individual (p. 5). A risk associated with this view is that the child can be blamed for not "bucking up" and coping more admirably with adversity (ibid). A further risk with the mindset is that it underpins a neo-liberal attribute of individualism which could lessen commitment to resources for social policy derived from resilience research (ibid). Howard et al (1999) discuss a suspicion about why research shifted from a deficit to a strengths perspective in the first place. Is it possible that the change is simply a semantic gloss over? The happier spin on a disheartening topic may have a positivist impetus which could led to attempts to boil down the complexity of the literature into a "few key global composites" to be remedied into formulas for resilience (ibid, p. 311). An example of this kind of reductionist thinking is found in a survey of school children which led to a listing of "developmental assets" (ibid, p. 313). There is a prescriptive feel to many of the assets, such as: a one hour of homework per evening; or, three or more hours of reading for pleasure per week (ibid). The list gives the impression that if one works hard enough and acquires the tipping balance number of assets, one can become resilient. This formulaic perspective compromises the integrity of the major body of research by simplifying the complexity into "gimmicky" "quick fix" programs (ibid, p. 311). Frustration stems from understanding that simplified remedies that are not especially effective align with a worker's realistic scope of power. The literature heightens a sense of angst in wanting to do more, having a sense of what is needed to do more, but, not having the power to effect massive system changes.

A frustration with the literature as a whole is linked with the idea that while a social worker appreciates that individuals are negatively impacted by social structures, the worker is largely limited to making individual level interventions. Millar (2006) comments on the

disconnection between social work's overarching philosophy to make social change and its primary practice of carrying out individual level interventions. He points out that this is necessary due to the pressing nature of individuals' immediate needs. The author raises another challenge when he wonders how social work could be carried out in thoughtful, creative and reflective ways when it is dominated by compliances to bureaucracy. This description relates to my experience as a child welfare worker. Combing through resilience literature in search of fresh intervention ideas is typically done in a hurried fashion at the end of an already too long day. Role confusion is an apt label to apply to that gnawing sense that there is very little contained in the literature that can be imagined as meaningful intervention at the individual level. There is a yearning to reconfigure social systems to better support the child, yet my role is largely limited to minor micro adjustments. Interventions such as participation in sports, dance or hobbies are statistically, although weakly, associated with positive psycho-educational outcomes (Barber, 2006). Recreation is often cited as a means for increasing opportunities for resilience. From the density of conceptual frameworks such simple strategies stand out as accomplishable and cost effective. But, are they not simply common sense? Cutler (2001) queries the sense in spending money to evaluate the effectiveness of children's recreational programming when it is obvious that regardless of any measurement of positive outcomes, the recreation is likely enjoyable and it "can't hurt" (p. 1). Beyond the sense that simple strategies miss the mark of matching the literature's more complex intent, is the suspicion that lesser interventions and costs align well with neo liberal social policy.

Neo-Liberal Considerations

The roots of resiliency research can be traced back to the early 1960's where a small number of researchers started to wonder why some children living in high risk situations coped

well with adversity (Masten, 2006). The shift from a deficiency to resilience focus did not gain a

lot of momentum until the 1980's when it became the primary research lens (Howard et al,

1999). Masten (2006) explains that at the "heart of the transformation is a shift to include more

positive approaches in the mission, model, measure and methods of practice" (p. 9). She further

notes that this repositioning is attractive to stakeholders as the language promotes goals of

successful civic engagement. Is it possible that the popularity of resilience research is due to its

malleability to fit a neo-liberal discourse? The timing of its surge in popularity fits with the neo-

liberal agenda of welfare reduction. The idea of building up an individual's capacity for civic

engagement over managing the expense of a high risk population through government programs

and welfare dependence has a cost savings potential. Beresford and Evans (1999) explain that

the position of research generally has changed over recent years with a "radical reappraisal and

redefinition of public welfare and social policies" due to neo conservative ideologies (p. 671).

They further point out that the political prioritizing of the market and individual responsibility

results in a goal to redirect public expenditures away from social welfare. Moreover, as stated

earlier, Walsh's (1998) observation that resilience research has a "faulty notion" of some

individuals being "invulnerable" has an unsettling resonance with the self-reliance mentality of a

right wing political agenda (p. 5). It is possible that the positivity of the research makeover is a

gloss over of a more deceptive goal to attract private over public stakeholders to reduce and

redirect welfare spending (Howard et al, 1999). The feel good spin could also have the

unintended but potentially harmful consequence of holding children responsible for their ability

to cope well with adversity (Walsh, 1998).

Neo-Liberal Considerations – *The Hurried Child*

Resilience research is compromised if the main tenants of the discourse picked up on

align with reductionist micro interventions and a neo-liberal agenda. An example of this

alignment is the popular book, *The Hurried Child* (Elkind, 1981). The timing of the publication

fits well with the emergence of a neo-liberal goal to dismantle the welfare state. The author

argues that contemporary parents unwittingly hurry their child to maturity as child rearing is

stressful and parents do not cope well with competing personal, family and professional

demands. If children hurry up and grow up, stress for parents is reduced (ibid). Elkind (1981)

states this hypothesis is substantiated in multiple ways, including: head start academic programs

to increase early academic success; specialized programs to promote excellence in music and

competitive sports; children's clothing that is the miniature version of adult fashion; the

sexualisation of children in the media; the proliferation of stress related illnesses in children and

adolescents; the normalization of early sexual experiences; younger ages for criminal activities;

and higher rates of teen suicides. The author further explains that due to a plethora of stresses

dominated by income insecurity linked with the advent of globalization, parents are self absorbed

to the point of being egocentric. Egocentrism makes parents place their own needs before their

child's needs. Further, egocentrism and stress impairs parents' ability to understand their child

as a complex being so the child is reduced to a symbol. The symbolic reduction of the child to

the "student" or "dancer" is easier for parents to manage (ibid, p. 28). The antidote to this

multifaceted dilemma is play. "Pure play" is unstructured and uninterrupted by parents or

teachers for teachable moments; it is a more old fashioned kind of play (ibid, p. 197). Summer

camps should not be expensive, specialized camps but more a mix of typical sports and nature

type activities (ibid). The author (1981) concludes that "play is nature's way of dealing with stress for children as well as adults" (p. 197).

Elkind (1981) presents a theory for a complex social phenomenon in a multiple system context of the individual, family, work, community, politics and culture with global inter-connections and reduces it to the simple solution of play. Play is also a "one size fits all" kind of solution as it reduces stress for both children and adults. If stress is eliminated, it appears to follow that most of the negative sequelae linked with stress will disappear as well. The reduction of a multiple systems' complexity to a simple micro solution resonates with a tenet of a frustration with resiliency literature. As with resilience research, on the one hand, one is left to feel overwhelmed when wondering how to untangle such a complex interplay across various systems that are complicated by psychology and the formidable challenges of the dominant discourses of the media, family and global politics. On the other hand, one is left to ask, how can the key to a multiple system problem be such a simple solution? Also, why is play or recreation for children such a recurring theme in theories examining issues of resiliency? Resilience literature demonstrates recreation can led to positive outcomes if it fosters feelings of self esteem or leads to supportive relationships with peers or adults (for eg. Masten, 2006). There is however something dissatisfying with this kind of directive. Firstly, is research really needed to state something as obvious as play or recreation is a positive activity for children (Cutler, 2001)? Secondly, simply signing a child up for an activity is not enough. For the activity to have resilience strengthening benefits, the dynamics of relationships and internal workings must be initiated (Howard et al, 1999). The priming of such systems to facilitate the dynamic process is complicated and appears to be somewhat contingent on chance happenings. For example, the presence of an available and supportive adult; a peer dynamic that clicks for the

child; and the child experiencing and internalizing success in the activity (ibid). Elkind's (1981)

theory also vexes in its conformity to neo-liberal ideals of social cost savings and keeping the

responsibility for childrearing within the family. The author does not suggest the development

of social programs that could alleviate some of the stresses experienced by the contemporary

family. The low cost solution of play is squarely the responsibility of parents. Further, the low

cost micro level focus on play avoids the need to address the structural impact of social

inequalities that place children and families at risk, such as: poverty, racism, sexism, domestic

violence, addictions and mental health challenges. Further still, the focus on the parent's

responsibility for play veers away from mobilizing around the need for government sponsored

quality daycare.

Neo-Liberal Considerations – *Your's Mine and Ours: Ontario's Children and Youth Report*

In the above-noted governmental committee report, Offord and Knox (1994) set out the

complexities of what is needed for healthy development. The authors ground the report in a

resiliency framework with the advisement, "(p)romoting healthy development may seem to be

more indirect than the traditional risk-based approach, but the Committee believes it has a better

chance of succeeding than many other strategies which have been tried in the past (p.43). The

report confirms the complexity of determining interventions or pathways for healthy human

development. Like resilience, healthy development is shaped by the quality of sustaining

relationships across the environments of home, school and community (ibid). The report breaks

down a person's life into life stage transitions with key recommendations for each category.

While some of the recommendations are too abstract to implement, there are suggestions that are

thoughtful and concrete. For example, the report outlines the benefits of the existing school

system being better integrated with families and the community. It recommends a coordinated

effort between the school, parents, community agencies, community advocates, the provincial

and the municipal government. Suggested community school based programming includes

before and after school care programs; removing barriers for licensing daycares in the school;

volunteer and mentoring opportunities for students in the community; and life skills

programming. Overall, the report does a better job than a lot of the resilience research articles in

suggesting some concrete interventions that acknowledge the complexity of the goal of

promoting healthy development.

The report (1994) is, however, compromised by its obvious alignment with a neo liberal

agenda. Recurring neo liberal themes throughout of (1) lesser government spending with a shift

to "community" over government accountability for social programming and (2) children

constructed as future beings who are self reliant and contributors to the province's economic well

being are captured here:

> the healthy development of children and youth is in everybody's interest. It
> will strengthen the social fabric and improve the economic well being for the
> whole society (p. 23).

Healthy children being "everybody's" concern is framed throughout the report in various ways.

Examples include: parenting is a difficult and important task that requires the support of "caring

communities" (p. 23); the government's role should be limited to public leadership for the

parents and communities; parents, communities, children and youth are accountable for

achieving outcomes with parents holding the community accountable for the quality of support

services; the community has a "moral imperative" to be a "caring community" and take up the

challenge of achieving outcomes as the government has legitimate reasons to lessen public

spending largely linked with a changed global economy (p. 16); and private sector employers

should provide families relief through flex work hours, sick time off to care for children and

elderly relatives and extended paternal leaves – all cost to be borne by employers with the government sector showing leadership by extending the same policies its employees. The foregoing is a short list of examples as the entire report is framed in rhetoric of lesser public social spending and accountability with a shift to community and private sector responsibility.

The other prevalent theme that compromises the integrity of the report is the repeated assertions that the community should care about children as they are the economic vehicles of the future. Children must not only grow up not to be drains on public monies, but, also, to be contributors to public funding. More meaningful goals of self sufficiency linked with outcomes of resilience such as better emotional functioning and life satisfaction, are eroded with a consistent economic underpinning. For example, previous generations could tolerate some children dropping off the economic grid and living off the avails of public funding due to past high standards of living for the majority of citizens who could afford to support the "drop outs" (ibid, p. 19). However, society can no longer afford to lose any children along the way due to changed economic times; all children must become productive and contributing citizens or the way of life that many have worked hard to achieve will be disappear (ibid). This kind of message is made blatant here:

> Children need to grow up to be ready for a highly skilled work force. If children are not raised in ways that promote good learning and coping skills, they will not be able to generate the wealth needed to maintain current standards of living (ibid, p. 19).

> All children and youth must have a fair chance to develop their potential as productive, responsible and contributing members of society (ibid, p. 24).

Underlying both neo liberal themes of a social shift from government to the community and self reliance is the major objective of lesser government spending. The authors (1994) state that "(w)e have learned over the years that simply putting money into problems is usually not

effective" (p. 45). They go on to point out that such expectations of the government simply

would not be reasonable or even responsible so the public will necessarily understand that

government cutbacks are not only inevitable but fiscally responsible. The report is ultimately

disappointing as it twists comprehensive and socially beneficial child resilience research into a

political platform that upholds a harmful neo-liberal agenda of lesser social spending and

accountability.

Value Judgements: Abstract Influences and Operationalizing Definitions

Masten (2006) points out that resilience is "inferred" from judgments made about how

well an individual is coping which is typically judged by the measuring of psychosocial

achievements such academic achievement (p. 4). Quite differently, judgments can be inferred

from a person's self report of their sense of wellbeing (ibid). To read research outcomes in

critical ways, it is important to understand how "success" is defined and operationalized as well

as who is doing the defining – the researcher or the researched (ibid). Ungar (2003) argues that

qualitative methods are needed to expand the too narrow focus of what constitutes a positive

outcome in quantitative research. Quantifiably defined outcomes may not adequately explore

social and cultural contexts and may be limited by biased constructions (ibid, p. 87). Richman

and Fraser (2001) remark:

> [R]esilience requires exposure to significant risk, overcoming risk or adversity,
> and success that is beyond predicted expectations. Of course, problems arise
> when researchers and practitioners attempt to agree on what constitutes
> *significant* risk and *successful* outcomes that are *beyond predicted* expectations.
> For adaptations and outcomes that are at the level of *social competence* and
> *functionality*? (Richman and Fraser, 2001: 6, emphasis in original) (ibid).

As stated elsewhere, a literature review confirms that the dynamics of resilience are

complex; yet, sometimes the complexity is distilled into overly simple dichotomies. Someone is

successful or not successful; they are on the economic grid or have dropped off the grid (Offord

and Knox, 1994). Dichotomous determinations of outcomes resonate with the "faulty notion" of

the resilient child being an "invulnerable" (Walsh, 1998, p. 5). Walsh (1998) describes the

danger of the child being viewed as either "Teflon coated" or "wallowing in suffering" (p. 5).

Determinants of success more narrowly defined as success in school or in economic self

sufficiency in adulthood run the risk of aligning with the "faulty notions" (ibid, p. 5) of resiliency

instead of expressing more complex and nuanced outcomes that better uphold the integrity of

much of the research. Howard et al (1999) caution researchers to be sensitive to the value

judgments embedded in the social context of research. They point out that research may be

constructed with an adherence to dominant culture ideals that are not as relevant to some social

groups. For example, post secondary education may be an indicator of success for the dominant

culture but may not be for a social group that has not had any members go further than secondary

education (ibid). Success for a social group may be better inferred from someone joining their

family business after the completion of high school. In this example, value judgments influence

in both abstract and concrete ways with an underpinning assumption of middle class values as

well as the definition for "success" being, in part, operationalized with the indicator of a post

secondary education (ibid).

Stigma and Voice in System's Care

Howard et al (1999) discuss the concern that existing research does not often consider the

viewpoint of the child:

> There is a considerable body of literature in developmental psychology
> that illustrates that children do indeed interpret their worlds differently
> than adults; they have distinctly different perspectives, values and
> understandings about all sorts of things from death to politics (p. 318).

If children's perspectives are not considered there is a risk that the meanings, interventions,

programmes and policies that are developed for children may be based on an adult perspective

which could lessen the chances that the applications will meet the children's needs (ibid).

Fernandez (2006) points out that there is very little research that includes the children's voice in

studies regarding resilience and the child welfare system. The author further explains that if the

child's voice is not heard, there is a risk that a children's perspective will be viewed generically

without factoring in the complexities of the diversities present in the child population. Silva-

Wayne (1995) conducted a qualitative study including the voice of "resilient" youth graduated

from the foster care system. The author (1995) discusses the stigma associated with the concept

of "double devaluation" (p. 313). She explains, the "pervasive devaluation perceived by

participants because they had been in out-of-home care is the strongest and most surprising

finding" (Silva-Wayne, 1995, p. 313). "Double devaluation" is described as the devaluing

connected to the adverse experiences that brought the child into care and the devaluing linked

with living in care (ibid, p. 313). The doubling is further aligned with the child's/youth's self

assessment of lower value as well as the negative social value judgment ascribed to foster

children (ibid). Without the inclusion of the youth voice, stigma would not have been identified

as a harm that most participants rated as strongly and negatively as the adversity they

experienced that brought them into care (ibid).

YICC confirm that stigma is a central theme for children in care:

> The stigma attached to being a youth in care is an overriding concern for
> youth in care. They have already faced the challenge of being forced to
> leave their home because their home lives are disruptive and unhealthy for a
> multitude of reasons. Unfortunately, for children in care, the next challenge
> they face is trying to fit back into a society that asks them, "What did you
> do?" They are continually forced to the periphery of society due to further
> victimization, marginalization and criminalization (NYICN, 2005, series #3).

YICC further state that youth in care feel that their voices are not being heard. Moreover, that

the concepts of having a voice and of being heard are crucial to the development and

empowerment of young people (ibid). Regarding the experience of marginalized people, Ungar (2003) argues that qualitative research is the most credible when it is produced by the members of the community being researched. Further, listening to the subverted voice provides an opportunity for unique perspectives to emerge that thicken and enhance research findings (ibid).

Life Books – Produced in Therapy Context (Trauma Narratives and Life Narratives)

Cohen et al (2006) explain that the process of producing "trauma narratives" is an effective way of helping children and youth to work through traumatic events (p. 16). The "trauma narrative" is described as a "gradual exposure" therapy that can work to uncouple thoughts or reminders of a traumatic event from any overwhelming sequelae the child/youth may be experiencing such as terror, horror, extreme helplessness, shame or rage (ibid). However, the effectiveness is limited to children or youth who have experienced a single episode of trauma as the process is a gradual re-visiting of a specific event. The authors explain that a different kind of narrative is more helpful for children and youth who have experienced more pervasive forms of maltreatment such as the experiences that typically result in being raised in out of home care; trauma that cannot be isolated to a single or even cluster of events. For children and youth in care, the "trauma narrative" is altered to a "life narrative" which is similar to a time line of events starting with birth and moving through the sequence of any placements subsequent to child welfare involvement (ibid, p. 119). Each placement is likened to a chapter in a book with the child/youth being encouraged to remember the circumstances leading up to the placement; memories of the placement; any feelings linked with this life stage; and events and feelings regarding the transition from the placement (ibid).

The authors (2006) advise that almost without exception children and youth can be safely guided through this process as long as there is trust in the therapeutic relationship and the

therapist is sensitively attuned to the pace and content of the sessions. Being attuned includes assessing the participant's emotional and developmental capacity. Similar to the "trauma narrative", the "life narrative" works through the repeated processing of memories to decrease anxious reactions to memories; it is a process of gradual desensitization (ibid). Further, the process aims to correct dysfunctional thinking or an emerging belief system that may be predicated on faulty cognitive thoughts. The process attempts to root out thinking that may be burdening the child or youth, including thoughts that may be difficult to share such as secret thinking linked with shame, guilt or fantasies of revenge (ibid). When the child or youth writes down or has their thoughts transcribed, the concrete words help to normalize the event and can help to detach the story from overwhelming feelings that may be negatively impacting functioning (ibid). Further, the events are placed in a context of time passing which opens up possibilities for discussions that can include a sense of moving on from the trauma with future thinking uncoupled from the impact of trauma. Further still, sequencing life events helps to bring order and sense making to experiences of chaos (ibid). Cohen et al (2006) also point out that the "life narrative" is an opportunity for the therapist to "bear witness" to accounts of maltreatment by framing the child/youth as strong and brave for surviving such adversity (p. 123). Moreover, any admissions of shame, guilt or longings for revenge can be sensitively addressed with messages that such reactions are normal and understandable (ibid).

Life Books – Produced in Child Welfare Context

When pondering the emotional healing potential in writing down or otherwise expressing experiences of being parented within the child welfare system, the already existing practice of producing life books stands out as a forum for incorporating principles of the "life narrative" (Cohen et al, 2006). In my experience, life books are typically the responsibility of foster

parents. Sometimes a foster parent is attuned to the medium as a record for the child's/youth's journey; sometimes it is a hastily updated record augmented by a couple of photos on the day of a replacement; sometimes it is a forgotten activity. Life books come to the forefront more often when a child is the subject of an adoption feasibility study. At this point it is not unusual to discover that the child does not have a life book and the adoption worker will gather information and photos pertinent to the biological family and any foster placements. Sometimes an adoption worker will ask the child about "likes" and "dislikes" and encourage the child to draw pictures that may represent their self, biological family or foster family. The end product of the life book project can be sentimentally touching. It can also be an accurate record of placements; however, the voice of the child is either cursory or absent. The benefits inherent in storytelling for empowerment and emotional healing could lead to a different version of life books. Life books could be more "live" with the child's or youth's voice narrating their own journey. Instead of a gift of a record that is handed to them, the book could be an interactive medium more firmly rooted in their own narration.

Lichenstein & Baruch (1996) explore the significance of life books for children and youth in care. Life histories can be complicated to compile as they deal with traumatic events. There may be an impulse on the part of workers, foster parents or adoptive parents to smooth over the grief inherent in the separation from the biological parent and to focus more intently on happier attachments (ibid). The tendency to emphasis the positives become more complicated for older children who retain definite memories of parents, siblings and maltreatment. An older child's life history can be further complicated by multiple placements that can generate repeated experiences of grief and loss (ibid). Gergen & Gergen (1993) set out the concept of "nested narratives" where life stories contain divergent themes such as the tragic birth story linked with

loss and the adoption story aligned with attachment (in Lichenstein & Baruch, 1996, p. 92).

Self-narratives aim to make sense of the diverging themes and contradictions. The story process

is a quest for coherence; there is a search for an identity that makes sense of the fractures and

offers an end point of wholeness (ibid). The authors point out that while stories are typically

pieced together retroactively, the reconstruction should not edit out the negative life events but

reposition them in a way that makes sense to the life as a whole. Further, the privileging and

reconceptualising of the negative can support a process that honours the pain instead of

camouflaging the mourning of separations (ibid).

Finding language to construct a life story is not an unconscious or ongoing dialogue that

a person simply needs to become aware of to record their history (Herman, 1992 in Lichenstein

& Baruch, 1996). Herman (1992) explains that traumatic memories are "fixed and frozen in

wordless sensations" (ibid, p. 96). Further, the "translations of these sensations into language

allows the memories to become a part of the self narrative that can be explained and understood"

(ibid). This is not a task to be handed to a child or youth with the simple directive to "write" or

"tell" their story (ibid). While the child or youth needs to be the narrator, others should partner

with the child or youth as someone to help, encourage, question, make suggestions, record and

generally support the process (ibid). Lichenstein & Baruch (1996) explain that the process

should consider the age and development of the child as well as a variety of mediums. Very

young children will act out their stories through play and as a child develops, pictures and words

can express memories and meanings (ibid). Older children may express their story through a

combination of text (journaling, poetry, plays, stories), music, lyrics and/or various visual art

modalities (ibid). The YICC invites youth in and from care to attend digital storytelling

workshops so that they can produce their own digital story. The website states:

> Digital stories as taught through our workshop, supports youth and alumni from the Canadian child welfare system to delve deeply into their individual experience, in the context of a group production environment. In partnership with Canadian post secondary institutions and the Berkley based Center for Digital Storytelling (www.storycenter.org), we provide an intensive curriculum that supports participants to craft and record their personal story. We teach participants how to integrate creative writing, narration, and facilitative digital media manipulation of still images, video clips and music (www.youthincare.ca)

The youth are guided through this process; there is a partnering with others to produce a personal story. The workshop involves 24-30 hours of instruction with creative writing exercises and tutorial help to develop a script prior to production. Participants share their stories in a circle format and receive feedback from instructors and other participants regarding an analysis of the script's strengths, emotional impact, pacing and overall effect. The production phase includes educational presentations, hands-on technical support and mentor/peer emotional support (ibid). The traditional life book produced in the context of child welfare is compiled of information gathered from social workers, foster parents and sometimes the biological family. The book is "static" or fixed and further, it has been shaped from someone else's perspective. A self narrative is "alive" with the child's or youth's voice; it makes sense of and lends meaning to histories that are fractured with disruptions and contradictions. The self narrative is also do-able. It is a concrete intervention process that could be implemented with strategies to ensure the child or youth is well supported in the process.

When I met Abbey she was a seven year old girl who had come into care at age five and had been placed in her current foster home for one year. I worked with Abbey and her foster family for the next three years. Abbey had siblings and there had been attempts during the first year of care to place some of the siblings together. However, their relations appeared to trigger trauma experiences and behaviours for the group as a whole were very disruptive. A decision

was made to separate them to determine if they could stabilize and make some gains in areas of developmental delays. Abbey started to thrive quickly. Within one term at school she went from consistently not meeting academic expectations to meeting and sometimes exceeding them. Further, likely for the first time, she was having social successes with peers that she was able to maintain through positive behaviours and an increased sense of well being.

The foster mother was an avid crafts person who belonged to a scrapbooking group. One day she presented me with a beautifully crafted life book with photos of Abbey and the foster family primarily at times of celebration. It was obvious that a lot of time and detail went into the making of this book. The foster mother admitted to some disappointment with Abbey's reaction to the book. She wondered if I could include time in my visit with Abbey to review the book which might help to make it more meaningful to her. It took awhile for Abbey to articulate why the book made her feel sad instead of happy. She then pointed to a photo of Abbey eagerly cutting her birthday cake surrounded by school friends, foster family and party paraphernalia. She told me that when she looked at that photo she saw another image behind it; there was a picture of her mother crying over her birthday cake, alone. With each photo some similarly despondent meaning was linked with each celebratory moment. Abbey hastily sketched a picture of her mother crying over a birthday cake; she drew lines on either side of her mother and scribbled in her siblings on the other sides of the "walls"; the siblings had frowns and tears. Abbey did not draw herself into the picture as she explained in a "sarcastic" sounding tone that she was too busy having fun with her "other" family. I smoothed out the paper that Abbey had crumpled into a ball and pointed out the scrapbook had screws that could be removed so that new pages could be added. I talked to her about doing a similar picture for each photo so that the book represented both "stories" in her life. I suggested that life can be complicated and it was

possible that her life story was both stories; it did not have to be one story or the other. Abbey ripped up the paper, which was more a rejection of its messiness as she had perfectionist tendencies. She told me that she would think about working on such a project with me but appeared ambivalent about it. Later when I was alone with the foster mother, I explained the idea of the project. The foster mother was clearly upset and stated that she would just take the book back if it was not appreciated.

The next day I called the foster mother to see if she was still upset. She was calmer and stated that she understood the idea of the project but that she disagreed with it. The foster mother explained that while she could appreciate that Abbey felt conflicted regarding her fit with the foster family, that the moments in the book were "real" memories that should not be altered. She was further of the view that making separate pages or a separate book to mirror her darker feelings around the moments of celebration was "morbid" and could pull the scabs off of hurts that were healing over. Abbey continued to be indifferent about working on an alternative scrapbook and I let the idea go. In hindsight, it was probably best to abandon the activity but not because it was an idea that could not have benefitted Abbey. The weakness aligned with the plan has more to do with my lack of training on how to engage in such a process in ways that would maximize emotional safety. Also, the foster mother would require training to be aware of how to support Abbey through an emotionally intense undertaking. Further, the foster mother would need to be supportive of the project in general. I have reflected on the foster mother's assertion that Abbey's life book should not be taken apart to add in the "dark" drawings due to the happy memories being "real" and her sense that the drawings would negate the authentic positivity. Reworking the life book would have lessened the prettiness of the package but Abbey experienced her life as both pretty and stark. To be able to tell her story, her own way, seems to

be a simple and basic right for children and youth raised by the state. It takes the abstracts of social justice and resilience and pulls them down into a person's life. It is social justice grounded in an individual's strengthened opportunity to experience resilience in the reclaiming of their story.

Narrative Therapy

It would seem remiss to undertake a narrative project without discussing narrative therapy and its principal tenets. White (1995) provides a general orientation towards what is meant by the term "narrative as life" by explaining that humans are interpretive beings as we are active in the interpretation of our experiences as we live our lives. A framework is needed to interpret our experiences; a framework provides some intelligibility, context and makes the attribution of meaning possible (ibid). He explains that story is the framework. The stories we communicate shape the expression of our lived experience; the stories shape and constitute our lives. Further, White (1995) clarifies that story does not reflect or "mirror" our lives, it does not "represent" our lives but, instead, shapes and constitutes our lived experience (p. 15). He emphasizes that a single story cannot encompass a whole life in any complete sense as life consists of too many contradictions and ambiguities to be contained and interpreted within one story. The process of attempting to resolve our experiences against an interpretative framework includes the need to have alternate stories to handle the "contingencies" when our main or dominant story cannot help in making sense of some of our experiences (ibid, p. 15). White (1995) maintains that our dominant stories are "cultural" stories in that we base the story on how we perceive a person of moral worth and value to be in the society in which we live (p. 16). He makes the claim that the construction of our dominant story of self is "really a prescription of cultural preferences as opposed to human nature" (ibid, p. 15). The stories that conform to the

"prescription" feel "right" and shape our lives (ibid). White (1995) emphasizes that people do not simply "think" of the stories we live by, we "perform" the stories and our performance has a real impact and consequences for ourselves and others (p. 20).

White (1995) advises that "deconstruction talk" is a way to renegotiate the dominant story of our selves (p. 24). Once a person becomes cognizant that they play a role in constructing their life narrative, making reconstructive change becomes a realistic goal. Narrative is a "constitutionalist" perspective in that we construct a constitution of our lives through telling and re-telling stories; making sense, attributing sense and reconstituting meaning; and by reconfiguring our past, present and future through the meanings derived by this often unconscious processing activity (ibid). This activity constitutes our dominant stories in a largely undetected way due to our "taken for granted" relationship with dominant culture structures; it is simply the way life is and these assumptions can be left unexamined (ibid, p. 214). "Deconstructing stories" are a "different take" on understanding our behaviour (ibid). Crisis can occur when stories conflict too vigorously with our interpretative frameworks; lives appear to be failing as equilibrium cannot be maintained. An entry into "re-storying" can begin with contesting the assumption that life should generally be in a state of equilibrium. A new understanding could be that "contestation is the condition of life" (ibid, p. 216). White (1995) explains that this break through awareness allows all the various contestations that get submerged under dominant culture stories to rise to the surface for examination. People can reconceptualise their struggles predicated on social injustices linked with gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, able-ism and sexual orientation from being "aberrations of stability" to being a "product of life contestations of power differentials" (ibid, p. 119).

White (1995) discusses narrative aspects pertinent for people who have experienced abuse as children and adolescents. The self destructive behaviour that can be a condition of abuse survivors' lives is an expression of the abuse experiences and the meanings the person has ascribed to the experiences. The author (1995) refers to a "circulatory" movement whereby painfully embedded notions that the person somehow deserves the abuse lead to a sense of self-loathing that circle back to spur self abusing behaviours (p. 87). If a person's story is that they are worthless and deserving of harm, that person is "recruited into a very negative story about who they are as a person" (ibid, p. 85). Alternate stories and meanings can lead to the "re-authoring" of the negative story based on a reinterpretation of the meanings attached to the abuse (ibid, p. 84). "Deconstructing conversations" help to "externalize" the abuse so that it stands separate from the self; the abuse is no longer an internalized and integrated aspect of their "nature" (ibid, p. 88). Standing separately also permits a more neutral stance of analysis so that the socio-political context of the abuse can come to the forefront (ibid). White (1995) explains that the abuse needs to be specified to examine the:

> dominant knowledges and practices of power in our culture, the familiar operations of which can be traced through history in families and other institutions of our culture, and through the history of dominant knowledges and practices of men's ways of being in relation to women, children, and to other men (p. 89).

This kind of contextualizing can lead to a reframing of abuse that may have been steeped in self blame to ideas of exploitation, tyranny and abuse not linked with personal culpability; this is a process of new identity making (ibid).

White (1995) explains that the new identity engenders a different form of emotional expression; the self harming gives way to expressions of "outrage, of passion for justice, of acts to address injustice, of testimony, of searching out contexts in which others might be available to

bear witness to these testimonies" (p. 84). He further explains that this newer political

perspective helps people to seek out others who have had the same experiences; the isolating

experience of abuse during childhood and adolescence often leads to continuing lives of

isolation. The political context helps to dismantle the isolation with the realization that many

others have been impacted in the same way. Moreover, this awakening helps abuse survivors to

rewrite their personal histories as the political context:

> also makes it possible for people to determine the extent to which their own
> parents might have been reproducing the abusive practices that they were subject
> to in their own families of origin, and to determine whether or not their parents
> had done even fractionally better than their grandparents did. Of course, not all
> parents do better than their parents did, and some do worse .... Determinations of
> this sort engage people in a comprehension of the extent to which, in their
> personal work to reclaim their lives from the effects of abuse, they are involved in
> a project that has to do with making it their business to challenge abusive
> practices that have often been carried across generations in their families. And
> determinations of this sort make it possible for these women and men to
> appreciate the ways that they might have done better than their own parents did,
> and provides them with direction in the furthering of this work (p. 96)

White (1995) advises that narrative approaches expand perspectives limited to dominant

culture ideas of well being and success. Survivors of abuse frequently criticize their "dependent

natures" and seek a therapeutic remedy to what they perceive to be a psychological weakness

(ibid, p. 104). A desire for others' support is framed as problematic due to dominant culture's

definition of the what it means to be a "real" person: "independent", "self possessed", "self

contained" (and) "self actualizing" (White, 1995, p. 104). The author explains that the negative

concept of dependence can be reframed as a need for social connection and support. Community

membership can include the idea of a "nurturing team" that provides a "counterweight" to the

"abuse team" or people who counter more positive senses of identity (ibid). Ideas of

membership and a "nurturing team" can include those a person invites to join the team in their

support, but, also, the possibility of being an active member on someone else's "nurturing team"

(ibid). Ideas of success and wellbeing being overly linked with goals of self sufficiency give way to an understanding of enhanced social supports linked with co-operative living in a social world (ibid).

What is Narrative Research?

Riessman and Quinney (2005) first define "narrative" by what it is not: "chronicles, reports, arguments, and question and answer exchanges"; nor, is it a story taken to "speak for itself" without critical interpretation (p. 393). Narrative is concerned with story but beyond the content related by the narrator, attention is paid to the story's construction – how is it made; who it is made for; what is the purpose of the telling; who is the audience; how persuasive is the telling; does it conform to dominant culture ideologies; are there gaps, inconsistencies or unresolved questions that open possibilities for alternative discourses (ibid)? Narrative interrogates language in a personal story and then goes beyond the person's experience to identify the socio-political influences that shape the experience (ibid).

Narrative Methodology and Social Work

Riessman and Quinney (2005) agree that a narrative methodology is a good fit for social work research as (1) the methods are grounded in listening to a client's story (2) it values the diversity of experiences; (3) it gives time and attention to the stories; and (4) when it is done properly, it is an ethical stance. Fraser (2004) also outlines factors to demonstrate the relevance and value of the approach in social work projects: (1) the methodology encourages a plurality of truths to emerge; (2) it is a way to understand interactions that occur among individuals, groups and societies; (3) it pays attention to context which supports that it is an expansionist instead of reductionist method; and (4) expert posturing is reduced so that "ordinary" people's stories are legitimated (p. 184). Further, narrative approaches reflect a social work practice aim in wanting

to move beyond the personal story or problem (ibid). Further still, narrative approaches, like

social work, focus on dialogue to explore possibilities (ibid). Moreover, the opening up of

alternative discourses through an examination of subverted voices is compatible with social

work's guiding principles of self determination and social justice advocacy (ibid).

Storytelling – Personal and Political Implications

Plummer (1995) describes the impact of storytelling on community building and social

mobilization:

> 'stories gather people around them', dialectically connecting people and
> social movements. The identity stories of members of historically 'defiled'
> groups (rape victims, gays and lesbians) reveal shifts in language over time,
> which shaped (and were shaped by) the mobilization of these actors in
> collective movements, such as "Take Back the Night" and gay rights
> groups. 'For narratives to flourish there must be a community to hear, ... ,
> for communities to hear, there must be stories which weave together their
> history, their identity, their politics (in Riessman, 2000, p. 4).

Riessman (2000) discusses objectivity and "truth" in a personal story (p. 19). She suggests that

fact verifying activities are extraneous to the narrative project; it is irrelevant whether the events

actually occurred. The relevant task is to interpret the changing meanings contingent to the

events and then, further, how the meanings are located in history and culture. The "reality" of

the story is steeped in the narrator's interpretation of past events: the "truths" hinge on the

meanings the teller affords the events in the shifting of time from past to present. Shifting

meanings resist the concretization of accuracy (ibid).

Beyond generalizations of paying attention to the socio-political context, Riessman

(2000) discusses specific ways of looking at stories. She explains that most stories are narrated

in the Western tradition of time passing with a beginning and ending that unfolds with time

passing. Telling the story in present time provides the vantage point of reflection; there is clarity

to the cause and effect of events that was not likely apparent at the time the events unfolded.

Placing events in a time ordered sequence helps the narrator to make sense of happenings that may have been chaotic (ibid). The author suggests paying attention to the narrator's selecting process as events are chosen to build up a specific plot and provide evidence for the meanings the storyteller wants to communicate.

Dampier (2008) agrees that first person stories are typically structured with traditional storytelling conventions. She cautions that it would be a mistake to assess that stories have a formulaic form due only to having similar structures. The author encourages a critical set of probing strategies to detect the "gaps", "inconsistencies", "differences", "contest" and "disjuncture" which may open up new explanations that lie outside of dominant discourses (ibid, p. 3). Fraser (2004) adds to the discussion by commenting on the relationship between personal stories and human culture. She points out that dominant culture contains accepted living and storytelling conventions; culture also comprises but subsumes individuals who do not follow accepted conventions. The author suggests that stories be analysed for their adherence or contestation of dominant discourse.

Storytelling – Performance/Audience/Identity/Turning Points/Context of Production

Stories have an intended audience in mind; they are "co-authored" as the narrator's choice of words depends on the target audience and anticipated response to the narration (Riessman & Quinney, 2005, p.399). Riessman (2000) suggests stories be assessed for the narrator's "performance of identity" (p. 10). The author describes the "story" and the "storyteller" as a "performance" and "performer" (ibid, p. 11). "Performance" is linked with the narrator's chosen preference of identity and the decision made on how the identity is represented. Story segments can be analysed for performance by paying attention to the language chosen – are there direct appeals to the audience; or, are words repeated or spoken with a marked

emphasis (ibid)? Performance also links with how the storyteller is "positioned" – is the narrator a "victim" or a being of agency and action; is there a shifting in different "scenes" from more passive to more active participation; does the narrator make things happen or do things just happen (ibid, p. 12)? It is important to look for the telling transformations within the time line of the story told (ibid). To understand constructions of identity, Riessman (2000) suggests stories be examined for "turning points" (p. 20). Turning points map identity as they mark times of change; a person is somehow altered and perceives their self and their social world differently; they are not the "same" after pivotal points in the narrative (ibid).

Dampier (2008) discusses the methodology of "re-reading" where individual stories in a collection are read "against" each other to determine whether they are formulaic for the purposes of conveying a particular political message (p. 367). The methodology helps answer the question: what does this collective mode of production mean in terms of delineating what is personal and what is political; or, how much do the stories capture individual voices versus a pervasive political voice (ibid)? Dampier (2008) explains that re-reading uncovers "rehearsed" narratives where individuals tell and retell specific incidents in a generalized and largely formulaic way (p. 368). There can be a "set form" to the accounts that are "imitative" and develop interactively in the dynamics between the teller and the intended audience; there are "set cues" that invoke a "horizon of expectation" in the audience response (Tonkin, 1992 in Dampier, 2008, p. 368).

METHODS – THESIS PROJECT

I entered into the project with a resolution to get comfortable with the discomfort of not having a "road map" or definite ideas of how I was going to analyse the stories. I planned to go into the research "softly" in not wanting to "interrogate" the stories; I wanted to honour the harm and the healing without too much poking or provoking. I became anxious when the delivery of the YICC stories was long delayed as I wanted to review the stories before I started into the methodology research. When the stories finally arrived – and the discs were "faulty" and needed replacing, I dug into the resources that lay in waiting. I am now grateful that the stories were so long overdue. Delving into the methodologies more firmly framed the project in a narrative approach. The literature helped to form queries to expand ideas beyond combing the narratives for insights into personal experiences related to resilience. I understood from synopsises that the youth had already identified the themes that were the most relevant to them: the impact of placement breakdowns; the stigma of being raised in state care; storytelling related to "voice" for emotional healing; difficulties with transitions to "independence"; and changes needed to reform the system. What other themes did I hope would emerge? What was the point to a project where the youth themselves had already determined and developed the themes – and, further, made recommendations for changes aligned with social justice? The delay of materials helped to better ground me in developing a purposeful but flexible analytical framework instead of a "let's see what happens" approach. I needed to get comfortable with the idea of respectfully "interrogating" the stories.

Analysis Framework

My framework for analysing the stories relies heavily on Herndl's (2006) *Our Breasts, Our Selves: Identity, Community and Ethics in Cancer Autobiographies* (pp. 221-45). Using

the article as a guide feels appropriate due to some similarities between the cancer

autobiographies and the YICC narratives. Similarities include the link of trauma; community

identity ("sisterhood" of breast cancer survivors and YICC "family"); marginalized social

positioning; and autobiographical narrative form. Themes pulled out after multiple readings of

the printed anthology stories and digital story transcripts are explored under main section

headings of story shape; neo-liberal considerations; and ideas for success. Fundamental narrative

tenets such as "performance", "audience", "turning points" and "context of production" are also

more fully considered. The research is further layered with a metaphor analysis to potentially

lend some insight into how dominant ideologies may influence and/or shape personal

experiences of harm and resilience. Sufficient sets of photocopies of the stories were made so

that each thematic segment had a "clean copy" for coding and note making. In the analysis

section, stories from the printed anthology are cited with page numbers. The digital stories are

cited with their placement on the DVD volumes (1 or 2). Storytellers are identified by their first

name and the first initial of their surname. I sometimes employ the term "youth" to abbreviate a

fuller identification of children and youth in care and children and youth formerly from care.

Similarly, sometimes "system" is used as short form for the child welfare system.

Study Sample

The two storytelling sources employed in the project are (1) a printed anthology of first

person stories compiled by YICC (formerly National Youth in Care Network) entitled, *primer*

anthology: sharing our stories and making a difference: a compilation of stories and research

(2006) and a two-volume DVD collection, *Digital Stories Vol. 1* and *Digital Stories Vol. 2*

(2008).

Anthology

The anthology stories (2006) are a compilation of narratives gathered from an earlier

project (primer anthology, 2003) and newer stories written by youth currently in care (primer

anthology, 2006). The anthology (2006) is available as a resource for purchase on the YICC

website. The original YICC project (2003) involved a Canada wide consultation with youth in

and from care regarding their experiences of the child welfare system. The stories forming the

original publication (2003) and the updated version (2006) are employed as sensitivity training

tools for professionals working in the child welfare field such as social workers and foster

parents as well as students training to work in the system. Of the 19 storytellers in the

collection, there are likely 12 or 13 females and 6 or 7 males. Of the females, 10 have their

gender confirmed through unambiguous names and story content with 2 anonymous writers

having story content that infers their gender as female. Of the male storytellers, 3 are confirmed

through unambiguous names and story content with 3 anonymous writers having story content

that infers their gender as male. There is also one anonymous storyteller whose story content is

somewhat gender neutral.

Youth "in care" are ages 14 to 18 and youth "from care" are ages 18 to 24. YICC

membership is currently 18 years plus with no upper age limit (www.youthincare.ca). This is a

recent revision to their guidelines as previously membership has been limited to age 18 to 24

with 25 being a mandatory retirement age (from the roots up, 2001). There has been some

fluctuation with the upper age limit through the network's development. By-laws have

sometimes insisted on a "youth only" management with a retirement age of 25 but there have

also been amendments to include "alumni youth" as consultants to age 30 at some junctures.

(ibid). Of the 19 stories, 3 storytellers identify their age (20, 24 and 29). From story content, I

infer that 7 of the storytellers are "younger" youth (14-20) or youth who are still in care, approaching their transition from care or just recently transitioned from care. Of the 7 "younger youth", 6 are anonymous. The anonymity may be linked with their younger age and probable "in care" status as children and youth in care require Society permission regarding published materials that identify children and youth in care. The remaining 12 storytellers have story content that infers "older youth" or "former youth" (21 years plus) from content such as post secondary education, careers, family and home ownership.

Digital Stories

The digital stories are produced by the youth and former youth through multi-media storytelling workshops sponsored by the YICC. The stories incorporate elements such as spoken story, music, photographs and other images. My narrative analysis is limited to the transcripts of the stories' spoken word or text only. The two disc set is available as a resource for purchase on the YICC website. The collection compiles stories from 17 storytellers [Vol. 1 (10); Vol. 2 (7)]. Of the 17 storytellers, 12 are female and 5 are male. There are no anonymous contributors. Gender is confirmed through unambiguous names and story content. All 17 storytellers appear to be "older youth" or "former youth" as stories contain content such as post secondary education or make reference to there being a passing of time from when they transitioned from care. It is perhaps not surprising that the digital stories are produced by older or former youth as the theme of the digital story collection is resilience. Older youth or young adults may have more opportunity to experience, assimilate and reflect upon their experiences of harm and healing.

Methodological Considerations and Transcription

After receiving the digital stories, I called "Debbie," someone I have known for a few years who does transcription work. I remembered Fraser's (2004) suggestion that it benefits the research process for the researcher to do their own transcribing (p. 188). However, due to a protracted delay in receiving the materials, I wanted to expedite this part of the process. I also recalled Fraser's (2004) caution that if transcription was hired out, the researcher should bear in mind the possible emotional reaction to difficult stories; the time should be taken to point out the sensitive nature of the material as well as time for debriefing if needed (ibid). I did not anticipate Debbie would have difficulty; she is a practical person whose transcription work includes sensitive matters. However, I was also aware from prior conversations that her childhood had been disruptive. I cautioned Debbie that some of the stories may be upsetting. I described the YICC's purpose for producing the collection and identified some of the stories' themes. Debbie placed her hand on my forearm to keeping me from talking further. She reminded me that she dealt with "traumatic stuff" all the time; with a wry smile she stated emphatically that she could "handle it."

When Debbie brought the transcriptions to my home, I sensed more than a few minutes may be needed. Her face carried an uncharacteristic expression of vulnerability. She talked about being surprised by how moved she felt by some of the stories; she admitted there were times she cried. Debbie stated that she could not really understand the reaction as she assessed that some of the materials she had previously transcribed were more upsetting. I wondered if some of her other work was upsetting in nature but perhaps not as relatable to her childhood. She acknowledged that this was likely the reason. The stories triggered memories of how it felt to be abandoned; also, how it felt to have physical but not emotional needs met. I apologized for not

offering stronger messages of support and stated that I hoped she understood that she could have left the project incomplete. Debbie responded that she was aware that she could have stopped but felt she wanted to "get a bit lost" in feelings and memories she had not accessed for a long time. Debbie further related that her weekend spent remembering childhood happenings and feelings culminated in a cathartic revelation that she had not previously formulated: her parents did the best they could. Also, that she had done much better as a parent than either of her parents; she felt secure in the positivity of her relationships with her adult children. We spent more time talking about her processing of childhood experiences before bringing the conversation back to more "mundane" matters as a way to transition from the emotional talk before she left. Debbie thanked me for having the sensitivity to consider that the stories may be upsetting – even though she admitted it was a notion she readily dismissed. She further thanked me for making her feel welcome to share her own story. I believe the "thanks" are better directed to Fraser (2004); I am not sure if I would have been cognizant of the appropriate duty to consider the impact on others peripherally involved in the project. It may be too easy to forget that practical or seemingly impersonal tasks such a transcribing still turn the typist into an audience; a hearer of stories that can make an impact and unsettle.

ANALYSIS

SHAPE AND FEEL OF STORY

Herndl (2006) points out that stories have different shapes and feel with autobiographies generally having "comedic" shapes which means the master plot ends "happily with some significant recovery" (p. 232). Further, most autobiographical stories are "closed ended" meaning that they end in more definite declarations of "happily ever after"; there is a sense that the recovery is complete and enduring (ibid, p. 232). The author finds that sometimes the cancer narrators tend to an "open ended" ending that acknowledges that their story has not ended and the writer is living with future unpredictability. Herndl (2006) also notes there is a strong trend for the stories to end with an opening up to a collective community of other breast cancer survivors. Merging with a collective has a dual positivity in (1) group membership and (2) a sense of purpose in "giving back" to the community through lessons learned (ibid). This story shape captures the "act of reclaiming one's own story as a way of empowering others" (ibid, p. 234). Open-ended endings that chronicle recovery but acknowledge ongoing vulnerability may be less comforting for readers (ibid). While not as ostensibly cheerful, open endings may more "honest" than closed endings that are punctuated with a definitively resolved ending (ibid).

Looking at the shape and feel of stories is a good introduction into multiple readings to get a sense and a beginning familiarity with the stories. I assessed stories as being either "comedic" (uplifting shape), "non-comedic" (non-uplifting shape), "open ended" or "closed ended." To be "closed ended," the story needed to provide a sense that matters of trauma were basically ended with present and future functioning being essentially free of the impact from trauma. I found that the positivity of a close-ended story could be subtle or quite definite. The difference between being classified as closed or open ended was more aligned with whether there

was an acknowledgement of continuing consequences of harm experienced. Basically some stories read as "things were terrible but all is well now and will continue to be well" (closed ended); or, "I have suffered great harm but am moving forward with a recognition that the trauma continues to be a part of me" (open ended).

Comedic/Close Ended

The majority of the stories are comedic and closed ended, meaning that there is a sense of things being better by the end – sometimes quite subtly and other times more definitely. It is important to keep in the mind that the intended audience for the collection of stories is other youth still in care; other youth from care; and people working in the child welfare system. The stories have been collected for the purpose of reaching these audiences with messages of inspiration and demonstrations of resilience. It is possible that some of the authors that end with more definite affirmations that consequences of maltreatment are fully resolved may be doing so primarily to make an inspirational point to other youth – hang in there; things will be better. It is further conceivable that some of the storytellers would acknowledge an ongoing impact of maltreatment in a narrative serving a different function; or, in the context of a fuller exploratory discussion. White's (1995) observations regarding positivist assumptions that frame our self stories and identities may lend a different lens to more definite statements of recovery. A positivist perspective assumes that life has a linear trajectory: a forward moving momentum which signals progress, goal realization and success. It is therefore reasonable to assume that some of the authors assess that the harm they have experienced has been truly and fully resolved.

Sam P. describes a point of change in her life that aligns with a more linear concept of healing and resolution. At one point on the trajectory there is harm; at a further point, the harm is gone and no longer constrains future planning or concepts of identity:

> Around 23, I almost destroyed the relationship with my foster mother. Because she was the *one* person who <u>never</u> gave up on me, that experience propelled me to change. From that day forward, I began to dream. I realized that there are some good people who die young, but there are some great people who live long lives and <u>I can be great</u>. I began to repair my heart through counselling and sobriety. During my transition, I realized I *am* truly free. I am free from the shackles of fear and I can move on to love. (Vol.2.5).

Some of the stories acknowledge that adverse experiences continue to shape their identity; there is not a moment on a trajectory signalling a changed or new person. However, these stories are still closed ended in their definite message of positivity for the future without acknowledging that the harm could complicate future experiences. For example, Travis S.'s story sets out the adversity he experienced linked a diagnosis of ADHD. He ends his story:

> As I look back on my life, I see that I have experienced a lot of hurt and hard lessons, some of which I brought on myself. I was many things as a kid, behaviour concern, child welfare number, at risk, high risk, at risk to be at risk, delinquent and occasional YDC guest. But now, as an adult, I am a proud father, husband, university graduate and respected child welfare professional. As twisted as it may sound, I wouldn't trade any of my hurts for anything. My experience has shaped who I am today. And I like the person I see in the mirror. And guess what? I still can't sit still (Vol.2.7).

Some the comedic/close-ended stories do not have as definite a message of a positive future free from ongoing consequences of maltreatment. Sometimes the softening of the closed ending is due to the narrator concentrating more on an episode in life rather than a full life trajectory. Other times the uplifting shape is very slight with much more content being focused on the harm than on the happier ending. For example, an anonymous youth limits the experience described in her story to the first time she accepts a hug in foster care (p. 94). The story follows a definite comedic shape in describing an emotionally important moment that has a happy impact on the storyteller. However, the message is more subtle in not being as ambitious as some of the other story messages that are linked with a full life trajectory and "happy ever after" endings. Similarly, Marie C.'s (Vol.1.6) story is focused on an episode where she struggles and then

resolves some feelings of shame connected with leaving university early after receiving some

scholarship monies. There is an uplifting ending to the story but it is not necessarily a

declaration that all life issues are resolved. There is subtleness due to a smaller and more

focused scope of reflection.

Some of the stories have a hopeful or encouraging ending to qualify as having a comedic

shape, yet the positivity is muted by the much more pervasive message of harm experienced. For

example, an anonymous youth details the devastating impact of an adoption breakdown which

entails significant abuse. The writer recounts:

> I remember once on the anniversary of our adoption going to my adoptive
> parents and asking what we would do to celebrate. They told me there was
> nothing to celebrate. I couldn't understand it. My brother and I were still there.
> Weren't we worth celebrating? (p. 40)

After the adoption breaks down, the narrator describes a period of depression. The last

paragraph contains the following two short sentences: "I graduated from high school, and am

currently going to college. I know I can do this" (ibid). While qualifying as a comedic ending,

the brevity of positivity does not accomplish the communication of "uplifting"; it is a very slight

upward turn. Similarly, another anonymous youth devotes most of the content of his story to the

harm he experiences in transitioning between different homes and the consequences of disrupted

relationships. He ends his story,

> When I was sixteen, one group home agreed to take me. I hated this place. I
> hated it so bad. I hated the rules, the people, and sometimes they would call me
> on my actions. I was not used to people doing this. The more they called me on
> my actions the more I would not show it, but I would think about how I was
> acting. Some rules I still disagree with, but they showed me that I can grow and
> be someone other than just another aboriginal youth statistic.
>
> They were there to help me at my lowest times. I am still not perfect, but with
> the time they gave to me, it has helped me grow into more of a mature person
> and I hope there is another group home like that because even though they
> were strict, it was all for my benefit (p. 42).

I had some difficulty classifying the foregoing two stories – are they open or closed ended? I decided they are closed ended in that neither acknowledges that they will continue to struggle with the impact of past experiences. However, they are somewhat "borderline" between having an open or closed ending. These stories along with the other "borderline" stories may share some of the same functions as the open-ended comedic stories. Herndl (2006) observes that open-ended stories may be more "honest" in possibly being more realistic portrayals of struggles with adversities (p. 234). Similarly, the comedic stories that have only a slight uplift and occupy a more in-between open and closed category space may feel more "real" to other youth experiences – perhaps not as inspirational but they may be more relatable for some of the youth audience.

Comedic/Open Ended

The second most prevalent category of story is comedic and open ended. The stories in this category all have an uplifting shape but there is still a sense of the unknown in the future mainly aligned with continued struggles to resolve past harm. These stories tend to have a more circular or layered feel as opposed to the linear trajectory of most of the comedic/close-ended stories. Some of the stories have a linear plot but end with a beginning point of new possibilities for happiness so that the ending statement is more complex than in the close-ended stories. Nichole H. (Vol.1.7) narrates her complicated feelings regarding attempts to establish a connection with her mother and a side of her heritage previously not explored. The story content makes it clear that Nichole H. has been well supported in the child welfare system. Her story also voices the impact of losing her maternal family and heritage. She writes:

> When I look at this photo (baby photo) of my mother and my grandmother and me, there is an awkward resemblance amongst us. A subtle look of fear and pride on the Harris faces, and me looking like a Herbert. Now, as an adult able

to reflect on my own life and who I am, I see a bit of my mother's mother in me. Her seemingly tough and cold exterior is often looking back at me in the mirror. And when I look deeper, my mother's insecurities still cling to the edges of *my* confidence, and sometimes *her* sadness weighs heavily on *my heart* (Vol.1.7).

It is a moving story – the grandmother has died on the streets of East Vancouver and at the time of the narrative being produced, Nichole H. begins her search for her mother who "is dying a slow death on the streets of East Vancouver, giving into everything, and I barely know her." A post script advises that her mother is found dead ten days after recording the story. The story's comedic shape is mainly expressed in this passage:

> Even through great loss and self-doubt, I have always had someone to turn to who didn't expect something in return. This is what gives me the strength to break the cycle, and it's what is giving me the courage to explore my cultural instincts. My mother was deprived of this. She had no one, when she needed someone the most. Remembering this makes it easier for me to forgive my mother, for not having the strength to find her way home (Vol.1.7).

The story has a circular feeling in that it starts with the narrator's distance from her mother and her Native culture; moves to point of exploration and discovery of connection; moves to a desire to find her mother and resolve the harm predicated on their separation; moves to the discovery that her mother has died; and ends with story's dedication: "I dedicate my story to her and promise to bring her home." The delicate telling is uplifting in its resolution of forgiveness, yet, there is a sense that her future includes continuing complications related to her history. Shirley H. (Vol.2.6) similarly tells a non-linear story that layers her positive experiences of being raised in a nurturing foster family with the sadness engendered by the loss of her family connections. She explains:

> Eventually, *they* (siblings) went home. *They* had no choice. That one class *must* have cured the anger management issues, right? But I said no – six weeks does *not* perform miracles so *I* stayed put. I had freedom, responsibilities and a chance for a normal teenage life. But I lost them. That time, those experiences

> and those opportunities with my family – I lost them, and I'm still working on getting them back ...

> Being in foster care saved me. Absolutely saved me. By being in foster care, I lost something too.

> It saved me and it lost me (Vol.2.6).

The shape is comedic in its ultimately uplifting feel but open ended in its uncertainty of whether the conflicting emotions will or can be resolved. There is a sense that the future will continue to be impacted by the loss of family connection and possible complications in attempting to re-establish a kinship bond.

Some of the stories have a more linear trajectory but end at beginning realizations of future possibilities that are more open ended in nature as they are not definite declarations of happy endings. Somewhat ironically, one such story is titled "Happy Endings" by John H. (Vol.1.5). The author details the loneliness of the child welfare system, the difficult years of supporting himself through post secondary education and his resentment due to system experiences. The story has a "happy ending" but the ending is a new beginning with some future uncertainties contingent on the ending being a time of transition:

> It's only in the last couple of years that I'm *starting* to realize the value of having people who will be there for me in good times and bad. I've got a place that I can call home now, and a partner I love and trust. I'm *starting* to realize how much I have to share with others, and how much I can give (emphasis added) (Vol.1.5).

Amanda K.'s (Vol.1.1) story has a linear direction; it is not nuanced with circular or layered experiences. The story details her mistreatment of being medicated to make her more compliant – even when health detriments become obvious. She narrates:

> I graduated high school 80 pounds heavier on my five foot, one inch frame. The drugs kept me quiet, fatigued and complacent. They also caused memory problems, hallucinations, sleep and hormonal disturbances. When I stopped having my period early in high school and started growing facial hair, no one

noticed. No one noticed even though my medication bottles warned about these symptoms in adolescent girls – not the psychiatrist, not the group home manager, not my staff, not a social worker. I am convinced no one cared. I went off the drugs during the summer of 2002, after my freshman year of college.

I was unable to eat or drink due to the swelling in my throat and unexplained lumps in my intestines. I spent my birthday on the I.V. that year. Once the drugs went out of my system, I began having much clearer thoughts. I lost a lot of weight, performed better academically and felt more energetic. My largest frustration now is 5 years later I still have the ovarian disorder, whose symptoms were written on my prescription bottles with clear warning – warnings I never got to see – for orders that were contextual, *not* genetic (Vol.1.1).

Similar to John H.'s (Vol.1.5) story, this story also ends in a new beginning with promise but still some uncertainty for the future. The final sentence is uplifting but not in an "all is resolved, happily ever after" kind of way: "It is unlikely I will ever be able to have children of my own, but I am creating new dreams for myself, and redefining family." Word selections such as "unlikely", "dreams" and "re-defining" have a more abstract sense that lend the ending a more supple, open-ended feeling.

Non-Comedic

It is not surprising that almost all the stories have a comedic shape when considering the audience and the purpose of production. The stories are meant to inspire and provide hope for other youth as well as make repeated messages to people working in the system that children and youth can be resilient; there is a duty to provide the needed support. Two stories do not conform to a comedic shape – there is no uplifting message or even slight movement towards a more hopeful ending. Both stories are found in the anthology collection. Andrew M.'s story starts off with the hint of a more typical comedic shape with the opening sentence: "I feel I am a stronger person because when I lived in the group homes I had to be stronger" (p. 63). However, the

strength is needed to survive years of experiences that are either neglectful or overly intrusive.

He ends:

> Maybe I would have been able to look for an apartment if they had helped me
> through it. I had trouble paying for my first and last month's rent and I had to
> make some sort of special deal with CAS. Those are the types of things that
> really would have helped me out a lot. It would have been nice if they helped, it
> would have made things easier on me. But the CAS workers didn't help (p. 65).

The story does not contain reports of hope inspiring experiences; there is an angry tone

maintained throughout. Sarah M's story has a reverse trajectory as she advises that her former

years in care were better than her current life or future possibilities. She writes:

> The most profound and difficult part of being in care to date has been the lack
> of support I am experiencing now at the age of 24. All of my life I have at least
> had a foster parent or group home staff to speak with or look to for support, I
> knew that if my family failed me, that I would at least have a group home to
> spend Christmas at.
> . . .
> I have been blessed by the people who worked with me over the years. They
> really and truly cared about me. They met my needs, they told me I messed up
> when I messed up and they celebrated by achievements with me. But their time
> was fleeting.
> . . .
> What are my words of advice? Give your kids some roots. Tell them that when
> they are 22, 23, 24 and on that they can come back for Christmas. Tell them
> you want to know when they graduate high school. Tell them you can be their
> soft space to fall, because I don't get to fall. If I can't handle my life, if I get
> sick, there is nobody that can help me the way a family does. (pp. 46-7).

These two non-conforming story shapes are, however, effective if the audience is taken into

consideration. The stories instruct system workers and policy makers on some of the

"mechanics" that are working to support resilience in the system. Both stories have a direct and

didactic tone. The youth are not prepared to place any positive spin on the story they are

presenting. As a child welfare worker, the blunt tone of these stories commands my attention. I

think about some of the foster parents I have worked with who hold open house Christmas

parties for all youth who have stayed at their home – regardless of duration of stay or even

positivity of placement. Some foster homes do a commendable service in keeping the lines of communication open and relaxed for youth who have transitioned to independence; these homes tend to be an exception. The child welfare system needs to listen and respond to the critics who best understand how the system can be more responsive to meet needs in supportive and ongoing ways. The stories may also help other youth who experience the system in similar ways. Youth struggling with angry feelings regarding their experiences may feel validated by these stories more than stories that have uplifting or definitively happy endings.

HEROIC/NEO-LIBERBAL CONSIDERATIONS

Herndl (2006) states that cancer autobiographies are sometimes critiqued for a tendency to create a "composite superwoman" who "appears to survive breast cancer as a result of her own initiative – her decision and ability to take charge of her life" (p. 235). This mindset can lead to claims that effectively "blame" women for their lack of "mind over malignancy" power (ibid). The superwoman composite resonates with a dominant culture pitfall where children who "beat the odds" are placed on pedestals as "super children" or "heroes." Similar to Herndl's (2006) point, this construction places the blame on children who are not strong or motivated enough to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps"; it places the onus of resilience on the children themselves (Walsh, 1998, p. 9).

I re-read the stories to assess whether there is a quality of a heroic or self-reliance ethos to any of the stories. Overwhelmingly, most stories stress that success is dependent on the support and help of others. Many stories list specific people instrumental in making a positive change in a narrator's life. Foster parents, social workers, biological family members and community people are often cited as sources of support. There is a common theme of youth

struggling until they come into contact with the YICC which acts as a turning point or catalyst

for helping the youth achieve success. An anonymous author discourages a self reliance ethos:

> Children and youth in care will always struggle. But the key is not trying to do
> it on your own. People will always judge you based on your circumstances – I
> have had a few friends whose parents wouldn't let me be friends with their kids
> only because I lived in a group home. But there are also people out there who
> are ready and willing and want to help you – you just have to find them (p. 78).

Some of the stories describe a positive transition from a state of self reliance to a more open

relying on others. John H. explains:

> I put myself through university, and the lack of any family support made life
> difficult, but I didn't let it stop me. For 4 years I worked full time, took a full
> course load, volunteered and even had time left over to hang out with friends.
> Afterwards, I was riddled with an overwhelming amount of debt and a bad
> credit rating, but I had my education. For a couple of years, I just focused on
> paying off my university. It was during this time that I became bitter about my
> past, and the way I was treated by others. I decided to hit the road and found
> employment in Russia.
>
> While I was living in Russia, I needed to rely on others around me for support
> and guidance. This wasn't easy. My comfort zone had always been relying on
> myself and not believing in others. It was during this experience that I became
> more aware of myself, my values and beliefs (Vol.1.5).

I tentatively coded Cortney G.'s story as one coming the closest to the heroic/self reliance

ethos. However, on closer examination, I determined that like John H.'s story, her main message

is about the positivity of making a transition from a closed reliance on self to an open sharing

with supportive people. Cortney G. details adverse childhood experiences which she basically

manages on her own. She cares for her siblings due mainly to her mother's diminished mental

health capacity. Her mother leaves and her care transfers to her father who she describes as

abusively controlling. It is Cortney G. who brings the maltreatment to her worker's attention. In

a foster home she comes to realize that abusive dynamics continue to frame her life. With a

packed duffel bag Cortney G. heads out on her own. At age sixteen years, she travels across the

country to start a new life. Cortney G. is in university which has been paid for largely with

scholarships awarded for academic achievements and community services. She works full time

during the day and attends full time school in the evenings – and still finds times to volunteer.

Cortney G. meets the goals that she has set for her success while not telling anyone of her family

or child welfare history. She speaks out for the first time after attending a youth in care event.

Cortney G. feels liberated by the connection to a support network. She no longer feels burdened

by secrecy and shame; she is validated by the awareness there is community of people who have

lived similar experiences. She states:

> The moral to the story? Well, I suppose there's not much of a moral per say
> except that this has changed me. I can feel it when I'm talking to my
> roommates. I hear the change in my voice when I answer the phone, my
> attitude is calm when I sit at my desk at work, classes are lighter and when I'm
> in bed at night there's this warm sensation that everything is going to be okay.
> And I don't just think everything is going to be okay – I know everything is
> going to be okay and I can feel it (p. 23).

Self-Reliance

Somewhat surprisingly, after sorting the stories into piles of "others helped" or "reliance

on self," I found that the candidates in the much smaller "reliance on self" pile are the same

stories coded as "non-comedic" or "borderline comedic" in the earlier analysis. These stories,

however, do not celebrate or champion a reliance on self philosophy. The much smaller

grouping shares an overall theme that one only has their self to rely on due to the failure of

others to support; it is self reliance by default. The stories predominantly have an angry or

accusatory tone. Not only do others not help, they hinder and harm; the only person you can

trust is yourself; no-one else cares. Amanda K. takes herself off the medications that have

harmed her for years. Others should have been looking out for her well being but they did not.

Amanda K. is moving into her future free of others' control; she will rely on herself. The

anonymous youth who describes extensive abuse linked with his adoption breakdown plainly

states: "The only person who was there for me, or who will always be there for me is myself" (p.

40). Self reliance by "default" does not support the celebratory feel of the rugged, self-sufficient

individual. The youth in these stories do not sound "heroic" in ways glorified by dominant

culture. It is possible that the youth may build the dominant culture ethos into their identity as

the trait is much admired in the context of a neo-liberal society. The framing could help to build

an identity of enduring strength that could, in turn, promote opportunities for resilience.

However, most stories overwhelmingly support the idea that resilience is strengthened by the

ongoing support of others.

Self Reliance or Independence Should Not = Being Alone

Several stories contain the message that being self reliant or independent should not mean

being left alone. Whether system experiences are positive, negative or mixed, the abrupt ending

is often experienced as an exile or abandonment which can resonate with earlier experiences of

maltreatment. Jennifer B. writes:

> Is this how it is supposed to end? Didn't we start out being alone and confused
> and having no one, and now it starts all over again?
> . . .
> For youth transitioning out of care, it is like looking into a rear view mirror;
> everything we knew slowly goes out of focus. We walk through the door and
> don't get to say, "hi mom" or "hi dad" and if we have siblings they most likely
> have been separated from us and they are on their own too (p. 48).

Amanda R. similarly selects to build her story around the main point that being independent

should not mean being alone:

> The CAS takes us in as their children; they become our parents. Maybe if
> CAS's provided a sense of love, we'd all flourish. We would all succeed to our
> fullest potential. Maybe we wouldn't think that suicide is an option. If CAS's
> never gave up on their kids, regardless of their age, foster kids would be
> happier. Love shouldn't have an expiry date (Vol.1.2).

Jenn C.'s story illustrates the positive benefits for youth when the concept of independence is

merged with continuing supportive relationships:

> I transitioned to independent living. I left my younger brother behind as I
> moved out due to the constraint on the system. I felt like my world was ending.
> My last day at my foster home saw everyone helping me pack and a contingent
> followed me to my new place to help set up. When I was alone that night I
> grieved for everything that I thought I had lost. Consistency and continuing
> connections had never been a part of my life before, and to me, moving meant
> a forever good-bye. I wanted desperately to go back and visit. I missed my
> brother dearly and the transition from a busy home of eight to a basement
> apartment with me and a roommate who was never there had caused a hopeless
> state of loneliness. Even with an ache deep inside to return, I didn't know how
> and I wasn't sure if I could ... The door was soon opened wide and the smile
> and enthusiastic greeting let me know that I was still welcome ... I continued to
> return each weekend and slowly began to realize that I was always going to
> belong there, that no matter where I went, it would always be my home. Until
> then, I had managed to keep my distance. Even though I had fully participated
> in household activities, and come to deeply respect and care for my foster
> family, I remained emotionally reserved. It was their commitment and
> acceptance of me when it was no longer required of them that gave me the
> assurance that they really cared about me and wanted me around (p. 120).

Kayla B. picks up on the theme of parenting carrying on past being "required." There is tension

between dominant ideologies of family, nurturance and unconditional love and parenting that

includes a fee. As a worker in the system, in my experience, the vast majority of foster parents

foster for reasons other than financial gain. However, the system of fostering is still predicated

on a business model where the terminating of economic transactions effectively ends the foster

child's relationship with the foster family. There are "inventory" turnovers with youth moving

out and new youth moving in. Kayla B. makes the point:

> .... Aging out and being kicked out of the system and pretty much forgotten
> about by our so called "governmental parents." For some individuals, they
> have been able to make a happy home with foster homes and to be told 'you
> have to leave because we will no longer be paying your way anymore' is
> complete nonsense (p. 52).

The Sequelae of Blame

A difficulty associated with the super kid persona is that it places blame on other youth who have not overcome their adversities. I was quite sure that I would not find any stories of youth explicitly blaming other youth for their adversity or struggles to heal from the traumas experienced – and I did not. There are several stories that discuss the stigmatizing experience of youth feeling blamed for their circumstances. Cortney G. explains why she keeps silent regarding her history:

> This is because I have kept my life history up until I turned sixteen a secret. I keep it a secret because I fear judgment and being misunderstood. I also fear that people will blame me for what has happened. I have made a point of leaving my past in the past. My experiences are not contained in the past however and they never will be because they are a part of my everyday life and a part of who I am (p. 22).

Beyond a more localized or personal fear of being blamed, Nicole G. expands the concept to include more generalized dominant culture stereotypes:

> Many people perceive youth in care as a detriment to society. We have done bad things, our behaviours are bad, we don't know how to love, and the world is afraid to see us for who we are. We are labelled delinquents and nobody will trust us (p. 61).

An anonymous youth similarly expresses her understanding that youth are burdened with negative dominant culture perceptions:

> I really wish people wouldn't judge kids in care. The stigma of being in care really hurts. The young person doesn't have to be the person who had done something wrong. It isn't always something that we did that brought us into the system. When people judge me for being in care, it makes me feel sad and unimportant and it doesn't give me hope for a good future, but I know I am a good person and I will accomplish my dreams. I remember once me and the girls made big dream catcher for the site manager of our home and when we gave it to her I told her to please show everyone that comes to our home so that they will know that we are not always bad (p. 124).

Not surprisingly, blame is mostly assigned to child welfare failures to better understand and support children and youth. The stories are produced for a specific audience of other youth, but, also, system workers and policy makers. The stories are a form of advocacy for system changes. For example, Tanya G. places blame on a policy of releasing youth from care after age eighteen if they are not continuing in school:

> If I had left the program when I was 18 – I know that I would not have made it to where I am today. I simply didn't have the skills; most 18 year olds don't. Throughout my time in the program I saw this person or that person kicked out. They were given up on. To see where they are today reflects the fact that nobody gave them another chance. Some of my peers are in jail, in homeless shelters or struggling to get by. I believe that if someone had shown them the same care that I was shown then they would not be there, but we'll never know. Having people care was my life saver (p. 35).

Beyond policies, some of the narrators place blame on workers who do not understand the struggles informing challenging behaviours. Tanya G. writes about a painful time that was exacerbated by her worker's failure to support her:

> Life at the shelter was scary. I was not a street-wise kid and I had no idea how to be with those who were. I found them intimidating and lived in fear of them. My social worker had given up on me by this time. She was sick of me going from place to place and refused to find me a place to live. I decided to leave the shelter and moved in with some people I didn't know. They were friends of a friend. For the next month I lived with this young couple. I was 15 and they were 18 and having a baby. It was awful.
>
> I wasn't in school because my social worker wouldn't enrol me. I was living with people who didn't want me in their home and made it very clear. I was all alone, no home and trying to deal with the devastating events that had happened. In a fit of despair, I tried to take my life and swallowed a bunch of prescription pills until I passed out, unconscious. When I look back, my heart breaks to think of it. There I was 15 years old, with no one to support me, no money, no real home and dealing with something far beyond anything I could understand (p. 31).

Embedded Dominant Culture Ideologies of Blame

I reviewed the narratives again to determine if there were any unintended but implied

blame placed on youth not demonstrating the resilience of the YICC storytellers. I was looking

for dominant ideologies presented as taken for granted assumptions. I did find an example. The

author is not directly blaming youth; there is an unintended blame contingent on cultural

assumptions that one must be "strong" to be "successful." The passage points out what can

happen to youth who do not possess strength but, instead of being a compassionate message for

those overwhelmed by adversity, she makes the assumption that all youth are strong. The

framework does not appear to include all youth regardless of the level of strength demonstrated.

Further, the assumption of strength places the impetus of success on the youth directly.

Moreover, ideas of strength and success are bounded by dominant ideologies of success

belonging to the fittest. Cortney G. sets out:

> In sharing bits and pieces of my story in conversations following the
> event, I have had many people tell me how strong I am. Strength,
> however, is something that all children and youth facing adversity at
> home or in the child welfare system need simply to survive. Without
> strength, we cannot maintain healthy relationships. Without strength, we
> crumble into depression. Without strength, we escape into drugs, alcohol
> and crime. Without strength we surrender, we escape into drugs, alcohol
> and crime. Strength is what keeps us alive and we know that if we are not
> strong there is no hope of living a life without those adversities that
> hinder us.
>
> We do not need to hear that we are strong because we already know this
> (p. 23).

Her cohort appears limited to only the survivors or the strong that have made it past the pitfalls

of not having strength. I do not believe this was her intention, especially as the passage carries

on to talk about the importance of community involvement: "What we need to hear are the

voices of people in our communities speaking up for us when we cannot speak for ourselves"

(ibid). The messages appear a bit contradictory and confused perhaps due to its adherence to a

cultural ideology that does not permit ideas of functioning adversely impacted by maltreatment

and strength/success to co-exist. The person who succumbs to addictions or crime does not have

the strength and fails; it is not the child welfare system or society at large that fails. Moreover,

Gilbert (2002) points out that the cultivation of "independence and private responsibility leave

little ground for a life of honourable dependence for those who may be unable to work" (in

MacDonald, 2006, p. 37). Instead of positive affirmations being assigned only to those that are

"strong" and independent, dominant ideologies could expand to affirm concepts of an

"honourable dependence" for those not included in the strength equals success equation.

The story of Richard R. also addresses ideologies of strength/independence/success:

> There is no way of avoiding the societal need to stigmatize members of
> our community. Whether the stigma is positive or negative, it can live on
> through social standards of the time. The result is often the evolution and
> maturity of the stigma within and throughout a person's life.
> . . .
> As a child, I felt stigmatized as being weak, both physically and
> emotionally. The effects of this led me down a destructive path of
> drinking, drugs, life on the streets, institutions and the child welfare
> system. I lost the will to live, but I was too weak to follow through on my
> desire to die.
> . . .
> The evolution of stigma is only as powerful as our social standards allow
> it to be.
>
> I am now 29 years old. I have survived many misfortunes and I have
> achieved many accomplishments. But I realize that as independent as I
> become, I am nothing without the support of my community. The
> contribution that I can make to our society depends on our ability to look
> past the "systems" and look toward the skills and abilities that our young
> people have to offer (pp, 59, 60).

The story recognizes the connection between dominant ideologies and the strength-equals-

success equation. It further tempers dominant ideas of success and independence by stressing

the need of a supportive community. However, the author appears to have left behind that cohort

of youth who have not achieved independence with or without community support. The ending that emphasizes looking to "skills and abilities" appears to be an adherence to the dominant ideologies that the author has been attempting to work somewhat against. The final message does not appear to be that youth would benefit from expanded perceptions of success. The story works in some ways to examine the consequences of a too narrowly defined perception of youth in/from care. However, alternate messages are not consistently carried through the narrative. For example, a possible alternative message could be that instead of success being the responsibility of the youth, success could be measured by society's response to those not demonstrating the "skills and abilities" needed for independent living.

METAPHOR

Metaphor – Personal Implications

Metaphors help to convey sensations linked with pain and distress; our language has a limited number of words to describe physical and emotional trauma (Lupton, 2003, p. 58). Metaphors help the writer to contemplate their experience and liken it to something else that engages a broader linguistic potential (ibid). Lupton (2003) explains:

> Metaphor works by association, by comparing two non-associated entities with each other centring on the ways in which they resemble each other. In doing so, the metaphor shapes perception, identity and experiences going beyond the original association by evoking a host of multiple meanings (p. 59).

Higher Content/More Sustained Use of Metaphor

Some authors appear to more consciously structure their stories with metaphors. These stories tend to have a higher content of mixed metaphors or sustain a particular metaphor for a significant portion of the story. For example, Shirley H. employs the metaphors of "lost/found" and "gardening." She bookends her story with the repeated phrase: "It saved me and it lost me."

The opening paragraph does not contain any actual "gardening" metaphor words or phrases but a "scattering of seeds" is suggested as she points to different towns on a map to explain how her siblings were split up after coming into care. The "gardening" metaphor is more obvious in the second paragraph:

> I got a boyfriend who grew into a husband. And we planted seeds! We grew a house! And a car! And a baby! And another baby! And a university degree! And stability! And love! And peace. Man, those are some good seeds (Vol.2.6).

The following paragraph combines the two categories of metaphoric associations as Shirley H. explains that she while she stayed planted, her siblings returned home. The metaphors express the complexities of her emotions layered with sadness in the loss of family connections while at the same time acknowledging happiness and a sense of thriving:

> But I lost them. That time, those experiences and those opportunities with my family – I lost them, and I'm still working on getting them back. I lost some leaves. I lost some flowers. Some of my fragrance and colour. And sure, they look like weeds, but they were important to my little ecosystem.
>
> Being in foster care saved me. Absolutely saved me. By being in foster care, I lost something too (Vol.2.6).

Tina R. sustains a metaphor that invokes associations of a prisoner of war or concentration camp with repetitions of the word "label" and associated inferences to express her struggles with identity. Her story starts:

> WHO AM I?
> VICTIM, FOSTER KID, DELINQUENT, DEFIANT, FILE#368215
>
> I used to think labels were who I was – not a girl with hopes and aspirations (Vol.1.10).

Her labels are markers of a "systems' kid" but there are associations beyond the system of foster care to the prison or concentration camp system. Tina R. talks about feeling "exposed" in people

knowing all the "intimate details" of her life; "was that pity or disgust in the receptionist's eyes?"

To be labelled is to be objectified, dehumanized and marked by others which could infer "scarlet

letters" or "Stars of David." Being "exposed" invokes images of marked (and possibly naked)

people in a file walking gauntlets, exposed, on view for others to comment on and judge.

Fascist/concentration camp associations are sustained with her comment: "When I turned 19, I

ceased to exist for the system that had ***dictated*** my life for so long" (emphasis added). Tina R.

employs word choices that continue to expand the nuances that convey experiences and feelings

that are difficult to articulate. She likens her termination from system support at time when she

is pregnant to being "set adrift with this little person growing inside of me." Being "set adrift"

hints of ancient methods of placing babies in baskets and sending them down the river to be left

to fate – a possible saving or death. It further links with her earlier descriptor of "exposed"

where an unwanted infant would be "exposed" or left on a rock in the wilderness to similarly be

placed in the hands of fate. The birth of her child and the support of particular people make the

difference in her "journey." The author mixes in the further identity metaphor of "voice" to

explain that the support pushes away the labels to reveal the person. Further, the support "taught

me my voice was valuable." The labels being pushed away transform Tina R. from an unwanted

"victim" of fate to a valuable person of agency who ends her story with this message:

> I choose my own labels now.

> MOTHER, PROFESSIONAL, HOMEOWNER, FRIEND (Vol.1.10).

Nathaniel C. titles his story "Coping with a Mine Shaft: The Unwieldy Ascent" (pp. 82-

93). He structures his story so that it starts in the present time but then the narrative is layered by

time intervals that start at the bottom (his earliest years) and slowly ascend back to the present

day. The layers are suggestive of underground levels or horizontal mine tunnels. "Unwieldy" is

an apt descriptor as the narrative weaves strands of a more complex sense of emotional healing.

The story is not one of linear progress with each upper level of ascent necessarily signifying a

furtherance of recovery. Further, the author speaks of himself only in the third person which

gives the story a somewhat disconnected sense as if he is talking about someone else. I

somewhat expected that when he returned to the present day after his "ascent" that he would shift

to a first person style to signify a connectedness in his identity. The story is perhaps more

interesting for its instance on the third person reporting as his life story is one of extreme abuse

and neglect. A switch to first person narration may be too tidy or based too simply on linear

assumptions of emotional healing being a point of wellness overcoming harm. His story

describes emotional healing in a way that still acknowledges the harm that continues to impact

him.

> Herndl (2006) queries:

> When someone acknowledges that she was terrified, that she cried, but
> talks about getting beyond that point, does that do justice to the power of
> the painful emotions? In a desire to be encouraging, do we play up on
> the courage aspect at the cost of acknowledging the lost soul part" (p.
> 235).

Nathaniel's narrative is a story of resilience following adversity but it also manages to

acknowledge the "lost soul part." He ends his story and ascent with passages that convey the

complexity of his healing process by employing a sustained mining metaphor:

> For nearly a century Nanaimo's chief industry was coal mining.
> Thousands of men, including my ancestors, earned their living by going
> beneath the earth every day and extracting coal in extremely dangerous
> conditions. Far beneath the heart of Nanaimo lie abandoned tunnels and
> shafts, arteries gone cold. The old shafts and air vents are still there but
> are now capped and largely forgotten. Nanaimo has new industries and
> coal mining is a distant memory, but it is an irrevocable foundation on
> which the city uneasily rests.

> Nathaniel's foundation is equally uncomfortable. Years of abuse and neglect were mine shafts and tunnels that pierce his very core. Those precious resources that were extracted from him are gone. They were taken away to prop up the lies and denial of people who still walk this earth. At first glance Nathaniel is an average looking twenty-something man. Tall, slight of build and full of character but the needy glimmer in his brown eyes betray a hole inside his spirit that can no longer be ignored. Although the holes have been patched up they still exist to destabilize his life and relationships (p. 93).

Metaphors – Political Implications

In addition to being an aid to writers for expressing difficult experiences, metaphor is important to explore for its political implications. Lupton (2003) makes the point that metaphors:

> ... are not politically neutral; in fact, metaphors are commonly used in ideological struggles around a contested site of meaning, a linguistic strategy used to persuade the acceptance of one meaning over another meaning (p. 59).

Lupton (2003) further explains that metaphors do not work in isolation but in the political and social context of the times (p. 60). Representations that are relatable to an audience typically uphold the dominant ideology of the time (ibid). Often the adherence between metaphor and current ideology is not obvious as the resonance registers as a taken for granted or common knowledge assumption (ibid). Lupton (2003) states that the dominant metaphorical representation for illness and disease today is linked with DNA which renders our bodies amenable to "technological tinkering" where coding and scientific analysis identifies which "faulty" parts require "correcting" (p. 64). The author points out that this adheres to what we consider as a given – that science and medicine are unquestionably inter-related (ibid). However, Lupton points out that different assumptions have underpinned different times in ways that were as taken for granted as our current belief system. She argues that a scientific/ positivist focus strips away social considerations of poverty, racism or sexism. It is further pointed out that

writers often draw on metaphors that are negative or stigmatizing as the representations can be too embedded in culture to contest.

I re-read the stories to assess dominant or embedded messages regarding resilience – is resilience stated or implied to be the responsibility of the individual? Or was the social context made apparent? Basically all of the narratives are personal stories placed within either an explicit or at least implied social context. Some of the stories emphasize self and relationships; other stories focus more primarily on the socio-political context. Not too surprisingly, the most prevalent social comments link with system issues such as the impact of inadequate policies regarding transitions from care. Not all stories regarding child welfare are negative; several storytellers describe positive experiences of care. Stigma is an often cited social problem that lowers personal self esteem as well as life opportunities due to cultural ideologies that too often marginalize the youth. It took a few re-readings to identify a more embedded ideology that is present in several of the stories. Youth sometimes attribute positive experiences to "luck" or being "lucky" instead of framing the support or opportunity as something that should be assumed in our society generally or as being provided by the structure and policies of the child welfare system as de facto parents. I coded stories as having either an emphasis on self and relationship; or, an emphasis on social context. After noting the theme of "luck", I separated stories with embedded notions of "luck" and re-coded accordingly.

Metaphors – Resilience - Emphasis on Self and Relationships

Ron E.'s (Vol.1.8) story employs oppositional representations of a loss of control/agency; and, failing/success that are aligned with ideologies of mastery and self sufficiency. A sense of being in control of one's self is further connected to positivist assumptions that the ideal state of being is one of equilibrium and balance (White, 1995). The first part of his narrative contains

associations of being acted upon/failing/being unbalanced with words and phrases such as: "the idea of university was being *drilled into my head*"; "dorm life had *consumed me*"; "alcohol began to *take over my life*"; and "*were all against me*" (emphasis added). He then mixes in inferences of someone throwing their self on the mercy of a tribunal, again, emphasizing power imbalances and his lack of agency: "I returned home to "*face the criticism of being a failure*"; "I *pleaded for a second chance*"; "I need to *prove myself*"; and "the only thing that *saved me*" (emphasis added). Ron E. gets his second chance at school, works hard but then does not graduate due to one missed credit. His fledging sense of self and movement towards agency is "*crushed*"; "*devastated*"; and "*ruined.*" After five years, he attends a conference and meets a professor who he met previously at a youth in care event. The professor takes control – she does not "*allow*" Ron E. to leave town before she "**guarantee(s)**" his placement and finances his return to school. Control and agency begin to transfer to Ron E. who by the end of his story is completing a university degree with a goal of becoming a police officer. He acknowledges the help of others for his impending success: "With the support of my future wife, family and friends, and Susan (professor), when I finish school, I will finally consider myself a success." The story ends with a final tribute: "To my unborn child, I will never fail you."

Herndl (2006) advises that a common trope in cancer narratives is that the writer regains a sense of control after the diagnosis of disease engenders a personal loss of control (p. 28). The author points out that the ordering of a life story from a loss of control to a regaining of control is a deeply personal act of reclaiming a sense of self which is needed for emotional healing and recovery. However, the "personal" and the "political" blend in the sense that being in control of one's life is aligned with the dominant ideology of the self-sufficient individual (ibid). Seale (2001) observes that women living with breast cancer and involved in sporting activities have an

ingrained sense of community which lends a different shape to more typical

masculinised/individualized/sporting hero associations. He calls the effect an "awards

ceremony" and/or "roll of honour" where heroic/ individual's accomplishments are reworked

into the context of a team effort with athletes often specifically mentioning who has helped them

in their success (pp. 320-21). This kind of blending of heroic effort dependent on a team effort

best captures the main point of most of the YICC stories – it took great effort to achieve success

but it could not have happened without the help of others. Several of the stories end with an

acknowledgement similar to Delia T.'s:

> I owe my success to so many.
>
> My husband, foster parents, my sister, my Network family, "my people",
> a very special teacher, and most importantly, myself (Vol.2.3).

Metaphors – Resilience - Emphasis on Social Context

Amanda C.'s story employs a systems analysis metaphor of "good" and "faulty" system

parts. Her main point is that the "good" parts are valuable, they are "gold" to her but there are

far fewer "good parts" and they "*rarely* happened for (her)." Her story is personal but

emphasizes the context of a malfunctioning system. She lists the "good parts" as:

> Like when someone *truly* listened to what I had to say, and forgot all the
> labels. That doesn't happen often for kids in care. Like getting a care
> package of all my favourite things from the staff at Avenue 15 Youth
> Shelter. But that *rarely* happened for me (Vol.2.1).

Amanda C. identifies her time on the "psych ward" as a positive experience. She acknowledges

that many would not but states her own perspective:

> A month before my 18th birthday, I found myself on the psych ward of
> the hospital. It wasn't an unfamiliar place to me – I'd been in and out of
> the hospital since I was 12. And *not* because I was crazy. The hospital
> was the one place where I felt safe and secure, so I kept ending up there.
> *You* might not think the view from 5 North, the "Crazy Floor", was all
> that great – but it was *my* world, *my* space (Vol.2.1).

The "faulty" or bad parts of the system have a greater impact on her life. Amanda C. finds out

when she in the hospital that she is being terminated from the protection of child welfare. She is

advised via telephone by a worker she has met only once. Amanda recalls:

> He told me, "You're losing your child welfare status because you're not
> cooperating. You're not getting a job; not getting into college; and you
> keep ending up in the hospital." Not cooperating? I'm homeless! In the
> psych ward! You don't want to deal with my complicated case, so you're
> just kicking me out (Vol.2.1)?

Amanda C. is forced to leave the youth shelter due to the decision of a "faceless bureaucrat" and

is driven to an adult shelter. She feels overwhelmed by the size of the shelter; assesses no-one

will notice if she dies; stops eating and almost dies, but an ambulance is called. She is thankful

she is alive; she survives by "finding hope in little things."

Amanda C. employs a dominant culture metaphor of a systems analysis but manages to

critique not only the child welfare system's inadequate support for vulnerable youth, but, also,

the cultural ideology that dictates that "cooperation" or sufficient social engagement includes

youth either attending post secondary school or earning an income. Both options are

underpinned by the economic imperative of self sufficiency and being a contributing tax payer.

A systems analysis helps to express her experience of being rejected from a system that could not

incorporate her "data"; her "data" did not compute with what the system and society generally

would code as "sufficient" or "good" functioning. There is an obvious disconnection between a

"system purpose" of supporting marginalized youth and a "system criteria" that mandates

dominant culture compliances. The story is effective in the sense that the youth from the "Crazy

Floor" demonstrates a wisdom that appears lost on the "faceless bureaucrat(s)." In drawing

attention to an evidently faulty notion, the story has the feel of another story – "The Emperor's

New Clothes" – with Amanda C. being the girl who points her finger and states the obvious.

Metaphor – Resilience - Embedded Dominant Ideologies - Luck

Embedded ideologies are more challenging to pick up as typically the writer is not

focusing on the cultural marker but stating it in a socially assumed way. The reader similarly

misses the nuance as it more than likely registers as a taken for granted or common sense

statement. Amanda R. begins her story:

> They told me I'm lucky – because I was never placed in a group home –
> because I *never* acted out due to the abuse before care – because I
> graduated high school and received scholarships for my post secondary –
> because I achieved more than what the statistics said I was capable of.
> But all that I achieved was only good for the Children's Aid Societies,
> because *they* felt that they didn't have to worry about me. I was "low
> risk", so they paid me off and they left me alone. I didn't feel lucky at *all*
> (Vol.1.2).

Luck has inferences of life being subject to the vagrancies of chance or a roll of the dice. An

alternative view is that life is ordered by design and the predeterminations of fate; things happen

for a reason. Yet another way of thinking is aligned with the phrase "carpe diem" or "seize the

day" with associations that we make our own destiny; individuals determine the course of their

life. Luck has further associations of chance happenings/win some lose some/no cause and

effect/accidental happenings/no merit based successes/no system or social accountability /no

safety net assurances and it further hints of chaos. Amanda R. is not buying into the notion that

she is "lucky." She understands that the system has responsibilities – there are supposed to be

structures and supports to enhance her opportunities for resiliency. Further, she knows that her

successes are based on her own effort. Also, "luck" should not enter into an outcome of "never

act(ing) out" as emotional support should be a prescribed aspect of the system's support.

Moreover, luck should not enter into experiencing a stable placement without multiple

replacements. A designed system with policies, practices and workers acting in the best

interests of youth should strive to ensure such happenings are a right. Amanda R. does not feel

"lucky." She feels bereft of love; she experiences loneliness and depression which leads to a

suicide attempt. Amanda R. observes:

> Maybe if CAS's provided a sense of love, we'd all flourish. We would all
> succeed to our fullest potential. Maybe we wouldn't think that suicide is
> an option (Vol.1.2).

Amanda R. makes the final point that "(l)uck does not determine my success – I do." She is

cognizant that her success is her own doing; it relies on her merit – not on the whims of chance

or accident but on her determination. She further realizes that the responsibility for her success

defaults to her; the system failed to support.

Tanya G. refers to positive supports she experiences in care as "luck." When first

entering care, she is "lucky" to have a stable placement for two years prior to the more than

twelve placements she experiences by the time she transitions from care (p. 27). Tanya G. again

states that she is "lucky" to have access to a piano at one home as music is a meaningful aspect

of her emotional healing (p. 37). An anonymous youth identifies herself as a "lucky, lucky girl"

who is "lucky" to build a trusting relationship with a foster parent (p. 94). Yolanda LT.

describes herself as "luckier than most" due her social worker being "brand new and out to do

everything she could for me" (p. 104). Jen C. is "lucky" to have foster parents who understand

her hurt and confusion when first entering care (p. 121). In addition to the problematic aspect

raised in Amanda R.'s story of luck being attributed to something that should be a given in a

system of design, there are further troubling cultural assumptions. There is a sense that the youth

do not feel "deserving" of the positive supports or opportunities. Supportive care and access to a

piano are not factors that would necessarily be considered a boon for mainstream children and

youth. Such factors being fortunate happenings in foster care are entrenched in dominant

ideologies; "system kids" are "lucky" to be provided the essentials of living without

experiencing abuse. This kind of minimal maintenance expectation appears to be internalized within the youth who feel "lucky" to have experiences that exceed this low level of entitlement. Further, there appears to be a dominant society acceptance or expectation of abuses and failings within the system. The acceptance can be likened to a social culpability in a public complacency of assuming that that some children experience abuse within the child welfare system so that any who do not are "lucky."

SUCCESS

In re-reading the stories, I wondered how "success" would be defined: would success adapt to dominant culture markers such as the completion of post secondary education and the status of being self sufficient "citizens" or "tax payers"? Could success encompass ideas of a self defined well being that could include ongoing dependency on the state? Could the "rugged individual" be softened to provide alternative views of success? Would messages of success aligned with mainstream ideologies somehow subvert the stories of people who have not experienced positive recovery and healing? If dominant ideas of success are showcased, does that perhaps burden instead of inspire youth struggling in or after their transition from care? Would this re-enforce a dominant culture sense that resilience is only possible for the "worthiest" as the strongest and fittest? In a basic sense, would the stories conform to dominant discourse or help to soften, expand or disturb?

Some of the stories specifically state the word "success" and provide a listing of achievements; or, provide a descriptive paragraph of functioning that includes the word "success." Other stories suggest more a sense of success or well-being without employing the term "success." Most often concepts of "success" are contained in the ending or close to final paragraph of the story which makes sense as most of the stories have a comic shape where the

ending is "happier." Out of thirty-six stories, at least nineteen authors completed post secondary education. Typically, counting has not entered into my analysis; however, I was curious due to frequent mentions of post secondary education. The number is likely even higher as some of the authors describe employment that likely requires education past high school but do not specifically refer to their education. Also, sometimes the post secondary education is mentioned within the story but not in the context of what it means to be successful. The high rate for post secondary achievement is perhaps not surprising in that a main aim of the collection is to demonstrate resilience after adversity. Therefore, the collection's cohort is likely a "higher functioning" contingent within the youth in and from care population.

Dominant Culture Ideologies of Success - Post Secondary Education

Many stories identify attaining a post secondary education as a marker of success. This is often accompanied with other "middle class" markers such as having a good job and home ownership. These stories appear to replicate and re-enforce dominant ideologies of what it means to be successful in being self sufficient and a contributing member of society. At first glance, in conforming to dominant discourse, this view does not necessarily expand or disturb mainstream assumptions. However, it may in the sense that it provides proof that the youth are able to achieve membership in society's ruling "club." Taken this way, it does expand dominant culture's criteria for who is eligible to join the dominant class. It can also be argued that while the stories succeed in moving the youth from the margins to the mainstream, it does not alter or expand concepts of what it means to be successful or resilient in our society. Ron E.'s (Vol.1.8) definition of success appears to be solely attached to his graduation from university. He has struggled with adversities and is now in a supportive and loving relationship; fatherhood is imminent. However, for Ron E., success is still pending and dependent on graduation. He

states: "When I finish school, I will finally consider myself a success." Similarly, Shauna P-D

appears to place a lot of weight on post secondary completion. She has survived a childhood of

emotional deprivation to achieve a number of impressive accomplishments. Yet, her strongest

sense of success is tied to completing her university degree. She explains: "In a sense, finishing

my BSW will be like closing the child welfare chapter in my life. I am always looking forward

to moving on and to the future" (p. 18).

For Nathaniel C. university completion is a leading factor in an amalgam of meanings

inferring success. However, his relationship with the marker is complicated; graduation does not

signal a "chapter closing" or a clearing of the way for the future. Graduation offers the coveted

membership card but Nathaniel C. is aware that the childhood harm that continues to impact his

functioning also impinges his secure sense of legitimate middle class standing. He describes his

graduation day:

> There's an air of jubilation in Nathaniel's house and surroundings as it is
> his graduation day. In the morning he dons his regal graduation outfit and
> proceeds up to campus on the city bus as though he were some long lost
> prince en route to Camelot. There is an aura of inner peace about him and
> everyone he passes casts a respectful glance in his direction. In two
> hours he will shake hands with Dr. Roberta Bondar, Chancellor of Trent
> University and join the ranks of the educated. At long last he has
> achieved a goal and honour that could never be taken away or disposed
> of (p. 90).
> - and –
> The boy who failed grade one and survived a life of torment has risen up
> out of the ashes of abuse and neglect to achieve an honour jealously
> guarded by the middle class (p. 90).

However, the story contains some contradiction as not long after framing his graduation as an

honour that could "never be taken away or disposed of", he describes his reaction to hearing his

partner discount the import of the day. He states:

> As Nathaniel types away Eric phones his family, the phone is pulled into
> the kitchen so that his parents will not overhear the clatter of Nathaniel
> typing – it might arouse their suspicion that Eric is living with him.
>
> "Hey mom, how are you?" says Eric, "Oh, nothing much happened
> today, how about your day?" A tear wells up in Nathaniel's eye as he
> looks up at his new degree, a devalued piece of paper which he stashes
> away into a mountain of poor report cards and behavioural reports (p.
> 92).

The euphoric sense of well being and mainstream membership quickly deflates. His graduation

does not "overcome" his past; his past is measured as a "mountain" against a single sheet of

paper. The story stresses the importance of success being aligned with a middle class marker of

success yet it does not re-enforce dominant ideologies. Nathaniel C.'s story works to disturb the

standard; good functioning and harm can co-exist. Graduating from university is not a cure all or

a threshold crossing into the ranks of dominant culture. Nathaniel C. is cognizant of the co-

existence. He understands that while his outer physical image and education status lend him the

appearance of dominant membership, his inner harm complicates how he will experience his

future. This story expands categories of functioning by highlighting the tension and ongoing

interface between internal and external functioning; and, functioning from the margins (ongoing

impact of childhood harm) and dominant ideals (university degree, good job, love relationship).

His story ends in a homecoming:

> As he steps out of the ferry terminal and navigates Nanaimo's narrow
> windy streets he discards the internal trappings of an acquired life. Much
> like many of his relationships his life at university was a pale imitation of
> some middle class dream that he could never hold (p. 93).
> - and –
> At first glance Nathaniel is an average looking twenty-something man ....
> his brown eyes betray a hole inside his spirit .... Although the holes have
> been patched up they still exist to destabilize his life and relationships (p.
> 93).

Jennifer A.'s story also works to disturb dominant ideologies. Her story is a warning that the assumption that academic achievement equals success and wellbeing is not necessarily correct. Further, such a narrow view can obfuscate harm and vulnerable functioning. Jennifer A. describes her experience of depression that is underpinned by social workers assuming that she requires minimal attention due to her ability to perform well in school. She sets out:

> I remember sitting in that Ministry office and overhearing the conversation between the workers talking about me, but not including me in their meeting:
>
> "She's smart, she'll make it", I hear one of the social workers say. Another social worker replies, "She won't fail. She doesn't need help. She's the least of our worries on the list."
>
> I sat there listening to them talking about me. Social workers think that because you are smart and because you're doing well in school, that you are so called 'normal.' You can still be angry, mad, depressed and suicidal even if you do well in school. The things I went through as a child had very serious effects on me and still affect me today. Those experiences helped shape how I think and feel about myself today. Inside my head I'd be screaming, "WHY CAN'T ANYONE SEE THROUGH IT? HOW CAN YOU NOT KNOW THAT I'M NOT OKAY?"
>
> ... The workers would say things like "She's going to be one of the success stories." I just continued to ask myself, "Why can't people just hear what's inside my head?" (pp. 98-9).

Fraser (2004) suggests that narrative analysis should pay attention to intrapersonal exchanges or conversations held with the self but not communicated to others in the story. She encourages a reflection to wonder why hidden or secret exchanges form a part of the narrative. Jennifer A.'s inner dialogue may be a manifestation of her marginalized position. There appears to be a wall between the social workers' assumptions that are re-enforced by dominant ideologies and Jennifer A.'s actual experience. Further, her sense of isolation in being left alone may have her retreating further away from the mainstream that she somewhat ironically is supposed to epitomize into her own world of isolation and depression. Jennifer A. is able to communicate

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what is happening "inside (her) head" through the writing of her story. Her message pokes and provokes dominant assumptions that someone is on track for success if they are able to achieve well in school. There is a taken for granted way of thinking that if one can gain a good education that success and well being will flow from that outcome. Jennifer A.'s story shouts through the too narrow assumptions that can block and even hinder ideas of emotional recovery.

Sarah M.'s story also questions dominant assumptions of what it means to be a success. Sarah M. makes the point that indicators of success such as the completion of a university degree do not have the same meaning if the success cannot be shared with others. The individual making strides into the dominant culture world is not necessarily so "rugged" or content to rely only on their self. Sarah M.'s story stresses the importance of ongoing family relationships which become disrupted and typically ended when a youth "ages out" of the system. She expresses her sense that successes need to be shared to be truly validating:

> I am one semester away from graduating from university with a major in Psychology and a minor in Cognitive Neuroscience. It would be nice to have a family to celebrate that with. I suppose this has made me a stronger person ... however even strong people need support (p. 46).
> - and –
> Family should not come with an expiration date (p. 46).

Dominant Cultural Ideologies of Success – Love Relationships

Several of the stories either directly attribute success or describe their recovery as being successful due to the experience of reciprocally loving relationships. Some of the stories conform to dominant ideologies of family with marriage and children signalling a high point or happy end point of success. Yolanda LT states:

> When I was in the system I never dreamed that I would marry, and I was renowned for "hating children." After all, I didn't have any relationships that were authentically healthy. I never had what one would consider a "childhood" and even though I learned to love, the underlying insecurity I felt about my life had never completely dissipated. I put all of my trust

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and faith into my best friend and took the plunge .... when my boyfriend proposed to me. .... we had a beautiful wedding with our family and friends back home in Newfoundland. Having been married now nearly four years, I really know what love is – it is unconditional, it is mutual and it is okay if you rely on another and put yourself in their hands when you can't take it anymore (p. 111).

Some of the stories have a main love theme but do not conform as readily to dominant ideologies. An anonymous writer structures her story so that the successful ending is her ability to receive a hug from a caring foster parent (p. 94). Similarly, Jen C.'s expression for success is summed up as follows:

Eight years. A million things can happen in eight long years. Babies grow up, values change, and wars are won and lost. Someone can even learn to say, "I love you." And I did. It wasn't easy, spontaneous or even earth-shattering, but as I stood in that hallway facing my foster dad – the only one I had every really known – I spoke those three words that finally conveyed everything that had grown in my heart. All of the emotions, the gratitude, the sense of belonging, the love was right there, and I had finally been able to claim and deliver them (p. 118).

These stories work to unsettle dominant ideologies of the love inherent in the parent and child relationship. Dominant family ideologies assume that children are supported with unconditional parental love. Telling a parent that you love them or extending a show of affection such as a hug are both taken for granted happenings in mainstream constructs of family. These stories highlight the journey of process for the writers to arrive at a point where they are able to receive and communicate simple expressions of love. In both stories, the parental love transactions are the main theme with success being signalled by an exchange of mutual caring that is a somewhat a routine happening in many mainstream families. The stories highlight the specialness and import of these acts in ways where the exchange is not constructed as a taken for granted experience. The stories further work against a harmful dominant assumption that "system kids"

are too "damaged" to know how to love. Further, the system or society should be accountable

for ensuring sustained relationships; permanence should be a taken for granted assumption.

Dominant Cultural Ideologies of Success – Self Reliance/Self Sufficiency

Some of the stories communicate that success is linked with the status of education, good

jobs, home ownership and families. These stories do not specifically address the ability to be

self sufficient financially but it is implied in the impression of economic stability. Travis S.

shares his experiences of adversity in the child welfare and young offender system. He describes

the messages he heard from adults which repeat the theme that he will grow up to be a "drain" on

the system. Travis S. states:

> I never really trusted adults. The ones I knew or encountered all had a
> pretty consistent message – that I wouldn't amount to anything, or that I
> would end up dead or in the jail at an early age (Vol.2.7).

Travis S. describes his current status which disproves the negative predictions to celebrate the

success of self-sufficiency and being a contributing member of society:

> But now, as an adult, I am a proud father, husband, university graduate
> and respected child welfare professional (Vol.2.7).

Sometimes the theme of self reliance is better described as success in the transition from

child welfare control to independence and self agency. The agency is not always celebrated as a

success but more a necessity due to the failings of the system to adequately support. Still, a

sense of success is attached to moving into a future that is of someone's own making and free of

system dictates. Amanda K. mentions that she is attending college but it is not stated in the

context of what she is identifying as successful in her life. Success is attached to her decision to

take control over her own body and stop taking medications prescribed to keep her behaviour

more manageable. Her physical and emotional health greatly improves after the medications are

purged from her system. There is an ongoing consequence from the years of unnecessary

medications but there is an impression that she feels invigorated by the stance of claiming

ownership to her health care decisions. There is also a sense of hopefulness linked with her

transition into self reliance. She explains:

> Once the drugs were out of my system, I began to have much clearer
> thoughts. I lost a lot of weight, performed better academically and felt
> more energetic. My largest frustration now is 5 years later I still have the
> ovarian disorder, whose symptoms were written on my prescription bottle
> with clear warning – warnings I never got to see – for disorders that were
> contextual, *not* genetic.
>
> It is unlikely I will ever be able to have children of my own, but I am
> creating new dreams for myself, and redefining family (Vol.1.1).

Dominant Cultural Ideologies of Success - Giving Back

Many stories include the idea that success is linked with the ability to work with youth in

care; there is an emphasis on the satisfaction incumbent in "giving back." Several stories frame

success as the ability to do this work without mentioning the post secondary education that may

have been needed. The idea of success rests more firmly on the mentoring and supporting than

on academic achievement. The high number of stories that celebrate this aspect is perhaps not

surprising given that the storytellers are part of the YICC who have a strong advocacy mandate

for children and youth in and from care. The narrators describe a mix of both positive and

negative experiences of the child welfare system. Both kinds of experiences underpin motivation

to return in the supporting role. Brian L. describes a negative experience of the system linked

with more attention being paid to his medications than his emotional well being:

> I was diagnosed with depression and prescribed Prozac ..... My friends
> and family noticed the change in my personality. I wasn't depressed
> anymore, but I definitely wasn't myself either. I felt isolated, left out, left
> behind and came to believe that I was going to a doctor and taking meds
> because I was damaged goods. That's not something that fills a twelve
> year old boy with confidence – especially when the staff paid more
> attention to my meds than my feelings, I remember one of the staff
> calling them my "happy pills" instead of meds, and that made me smile.

> I *hated* taking meds, but I actually didn't mind taking happy pills
> (Vol.2.2).

Brian L.' s story ends with his successful transition from a group home resident to a group home

worker:

> It's been almost 20 years and I have to wonder whatever happened to the
> girl who attempted suicide by eating a box of thumbtacks on my second
> day – or the boy who tried in vain to smoke French fries when he was
> bored – or the two cute teenage girls who were prostitutes and cutters. I
> wonder what they'd think of *me* being the guy administering the happy
> pills now (Vol.2.2).

Tanya G. experiences significant adversity with multiple placements in the foster care

and shelter system. She wants to focus on the positive aspects of her time in care but

acknowledges the negative when saying:

> There were certainly people who gave up on me and walked away; but
> those people aren't the ones that I have to thank for my success (p. 37).

She defines her success as follows:

> To come full circle and be a youth worker, a board member and now a
> wife and mother have been a wonderful gift.... My hope for my life and
> future is that I can continue to use my experiences to help those who need
> it in whatever capacity I can. I understand hardship, I understand pain but
> most of all I understand the triumph of overcoming all of those things ...
> (p. 38).

The aspect of giving back somewhat tampers with dominant ideologies that link ideas of success

with post secondary education and economic stability. Success in most of these stories does not

appear to be motivated by a desire to move from the social margins to mainstream validity.

While a child welfare professional has more power and social standing than the children/youth,

the motivator for success appears to be the desire to make meaningful connections with

children/youth in the system. There is an awareness that their lived experiences of the system

translate into an acquired knowledge. The former youth giving back are perhaps more validated

through their experience of being experts in the system than the desire for middle class

"normalcy." This group of system workers may help to expand dominant understandings of

what it means to be a child welfare professional. Their status is a blending of typical dominant

markers such as a post secondary education/economic stability and their often marginalized

experiences of the system. There is a sense that they have never completely left the system; the

child growing up in the system matures into a worker. There is an impression that for many of

youth who are giving back that ideas of overcoming adversity do not include a clearing of their

history or a desire to stay clear of child welfare. They have an intimate understanding of the

work in which they are engaged; there is satisfaction and pleasure in knowing they can do the

work well and make a difference. It is possible that their system experiences translate into a

sense that they are elevated within the ranks of child welfare professionals as they possess more

applied knowledge and a greater depth of understanding.

Richard R.'s story discusses the difficulty of having a career that is separate from the

system. He has experienced successes in giving back to the system through advocacy work. The

experience has been empowering yet he worries that his opportunities are limited to being of

value only in the context of child welfare. His sense of well being appears to be eroded as he

contemplates the viability of moving his life beyond the parameters of system work. Richard

R.'s story raises the possibility that senses of success linked with professional competency may

be somewhat of an illusion as there may be a social gate system that keeps former youth from

care corralled within the child welfare system. Feelings of success and wellbeing linked with

professional competency could be deflated if former youth attempt to transfer their education,

work experiences and skills to other opportunities. Richard R. explains:

> What I eventually found out was that the transition out of government
> care did not come without its price. Although I have achieved many of

> my goals in regards to making an impact on policies and legislation for youth in the child welfare and youth justice systems, I have come to realize that the stigma of being a "system kid" has stuck with me through my years with the youth in care network, well beyond my life as a "system kid." I am now preparing to age out of the network as I am approaching 30, and I am now realizing that my accomplishments made after getting out of the system are still being overshadowed by my years in the system. Potential employers shy away from hiring me when they find out that I was once in government care.
>
> My colleagues in various government agencies have seen the work that I have done with the youth in care network, yet they seem to only acknowledge how much I have grown and matured since I was a teenager. I don't believe that these professionals would make the same comments to their colleagues within their departments. It is partially because of this reality that I am struggling to make the transition from youth in care networking to the "real world", from life in and after care, to life truly beyond care (p. 59-60).

Yvonne A. also discusses the struggle inherent in separating identity and professional accomplishments from matters connected solely to the system. She has a more positive experience of the separating process:

> The second realisation was that during the year I was no longer employed at the [YICC] I went through a transformation. I didn't refer to myself as "from care," something I have done since the age of twelve. I was learning about myself as an individual rather than a product of a bureaucratic system or organisation. This transformation and learning process has been a healthy and necessary one. Had I remained as a staff at the [YICC] past the retirement age of 25, I do not believe that I would have benefitted either personally or professionally. If anything, I think this would have been damaging to my own personal growth and the professional development of my successor (*from the roots up*, 2001, p. i)

Alternative Views of Success

Herndl (2006) makes the point that collections of personal stories are in "dialogue" with each other and create a more public or political forum (p. 232). Narratives tend to be more interesting if they are not overly formulaic and accept that the offering of perspectives may sometimes contradict (ibid). The author assesses that cancer narratives tend to be respectful and

not overly didactic; there is not a loud voice yelling "be like me" (ibid). The co-existence of different voices, views, journeys and messages supports a more fluid and multi meaning way of looking at experiences of trauma and recovery (ibid). The collection of YICC stories similarly builds a "dialogue" with variety of voices that keep the dominant message of resilience from being formulaic or an instruction to "be like me." While many of the stories have comedic shapes with dominant factor ideologies such as post secondary education, professional work and traditional family, there are enough other stories that present alternative views of success to keep the "dialogue" engagingly varied. Further, as previously discussed, most of the stories that are constructed with dominant ideologies have nuances that soften ideas of mainstream conformity.

Several stories structure success more in terms of coming to terms with inner struggles that form a part of emotional healing. These stories have a narrowed scope of exploration. There is a sense that success is more linked with taking a "one day at time" perspective as opposed to a happier or firmer declaration of a lasting accomplishment of success and well-being. An anonymous youth frames success more in terms of a shift in his perception that perhaps strict group home rules may help instead of hinder him. He states he hopes that the structure will help him to "grow to be someone other than just another aboriginal youth statistic" (p. 42). Another anonymous youth explains that a successful outcome of her pending transition to independence would be to find a place to live close to her current group home for continued emotional support (p. 126). Nichole H.'s story delves into her emotional journey to feel a connection with and to forgive her long estranged mother (Vol.1.7). Marie C. has some success in resolving her feelings of shame for leaving university to care for her nephews (Vol.1.6). Amanda C.'s success is attributed to the fact that she did not die when attempting suicide. She is now "finding hope in little things" (Vol.2.1).

An anonymous youth writes a story where success is expressed in a more complex way of reconnecting with a voice that "once gave me strength to make a change" (p. 70). The story expresses that the voice is an aspect of him but that he experiences it as a separate entity. He describes this incident when he was nine years of age which he frames as a success:

> I begin to hear the cries and screams of my mother as my father begins to bash her. But something is different. I could not throw a pillow over my head and go back to sleep like I had done so many times before. I heard it, that voice. "This is wrong, someone should go and do something or he is going to kill her. Do something. Get up and make him stop. You can do it. Just GET UP!
>
> ... I look to my right and my father is punching my mother in the head.
>
> Just say it! The voice says.
>
> "Leave my mother alone!" I scream at the top of my lungs. My father stops and looks at me. He takes off his belt and walks over to me and says, "So you a big man now boy?"
>
> ... Tears are streaming down my face. He grabs me by the arm and begins to whip me with his belt. The voice comes back, You did good, you got him to stop hitting mom! (p. 69).

The youth explains that eventually he and his siblings are brought into care. He loses the "voice" and feels burdened with pain as he transitions through several foster homes. Possibilities for recovery begin when he is placed with foster parents who help him to reconnect with the lost voice. He privileges the voice with the power to help him make positive changes for himself; there is an impression that success is linked with a continuing relationship with his "voice." He states:

> When I run it is my time, my time to heal and to free myself from pain and frustration. I listen to that voice when I am given some opportunities, whether good or bad. It has given me guidance in the dark and has relaxed my body in times of pain.
>
> "Come on you're there, just keep pushing. Come on!" (p. 70).

While many of the stories stress recovery, most discuss the painful experiences of adversity.

Even when the proportion of recovery is greater within a story, the smaller piece expressing pain

is often as or even more powerful. The voice and the experience of youth who do not define

success as mainstream living is not subverted within the context of the collection as a whole. The

voice may be smaller but it is deeply impactful.

TURNING POINTS – IDENTITY

Riessman (2000) suggests identity is best explored through a narrative's turning points.

A turning point signals a clear change; the person is not the same after a pivotal point in the story

(ibid). Further, it is helpful to think about how the person is positioned in the story – do things

just happen to the person or does the person make things happen (ibid)? A person writing about

past events has the vantage point of clarity; the import of life events is often not understood at

the time but later with reflection on the events' consequences (ibid). Moreover, she suggests that

a storyteller chooses a particular representation of their self in a story that focuses on specifically

selected events. It is important to think about why those choices are made.

A re-reading of the stories shows that sometimes a narrative contains the term "turning

point" but most often the point needs to be inferred from a statement about how an event

changed a person with story content supporting a before and after shift or fuller transformation in

identity. Several of the stories have turning points that mark the time of their introduction to the

YICC. These stories have an added or enhanced element of a community identity to self

identities. I coded stories for "self identity" or "community identity" themes. The categories are

somewhat artificial in that some of the "self identity" stories include positive experiences of the

YICC but their involvement is not structured as a narrative turning point. Also, stories of

"community identity" include self identity development but the self development is structured by

a narrative turning point of YICC involvement. The themes for "self identity" were varied and there were too many to practically include in the analysis section. I decided on three that may have a stronger resonance in collection but there are certainly other moments in individual life stories that were pivotal for identity formation.

SELF IDENTITY

Depression

Some of the turning points are experiences of depression; when the depression lifts, they are a changed person. Samuel P. (Vol.1.9) identifies the "turning point" in his life as his graduation from high school which allows him to set goals such as "pursuing my passion in university, and being a key rugby player for my varsity team." Yet, there is an earlier turning point in the story where his identity transforms. In the first part of his story Samuel P. is a guy that things happen to: living in a group home makes him an "instant outcast"; social expectations make him live up to a "trouble maker ideal"; he "found himself" skipping school and getting involved in illegal activities. Samuel P. does not identify himself as "depressed" but employs the metaphor of "digger deeper and deeper into the pits of despair." During a period of incarceration he realizes that he has "lost" himself and starts the process of piecing himself back together. He simply states, "I wanted to change." After he is released from secure custody with the further suggestion of being released from a depression, Samuel P. is changed. He is now a guy who makes things happen. It is not easy and his story makes it explicit that he requires help, but he sets his goals and masters them. Jessica A. identifies herself as being depressed, "(b)eing left behind and left at the bottom of my social worker's list because I didn't cause trouble .... fuelled my depression" (p. 98). She describes a turning point in her life; life is different when the depression ends:

> I finally broke out of my depression just this past summer. I got really sick and actually went to the hospital and almost died due to an infection. I never phoned anyone until a few days later because I didn't want to worry anyone. The moment I phoned people and realized that they actually cared and that I really wasn't alone was the turning point in my life and since then my outlook on life has changed for the better (p. 99).

Turning points and identity changes do not always have a positive direction; sometimes turning points and change can be harmful. An anonymous youth describes his change in identity from being a child who put his trust and love in his adoptive "forever family" (p. 39) to a youth who will count on no-one but himself. The breakdown of the adoption triggers an episode of depression. He emerges from the depression a changed person. He explains:

> I fell into a depression for about six months. I'm generally a strong person, but I think I just needed to go through that and reflect on my life. The only person who was there for me, or who will always be there for me is myself (p. 40).

The three storytellers refer or allude to depression without mentioning mental health diagnoses or medications. The experiences of depression and change make sense in terms of their exposure to emotional trauma linked with both their backgrounds prior to and after entering care. A recurring theme in some of the stories is the idea that youth are often overmedicated in care. There is a sense that the medications are for the benefit of social workers, foster parents and group home workers more than for the child/youth; the idea of easier management versus mental health. Amanda K.'s (Vol.1.1) story's turning point happens when she stops taking medications. She is changed; she has clearer thinking and better physical and emotional health. She also transforms into a person of self determination. Her previous self was compliant and dependent on the system's decision making as well as the effects of the medication. The motivating factor to prescribe medications for the in care population may also be linked with views that flow from the dominant biomedical model. It can be difficult to watch someone struggle and be in pain; there may be an impulse to "stop", "fix" or "correct" through

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medications. It is possible that unnecessary medications may block experiences of struggle and

self healing that may be necessary for emotional healing after adversity. Amanda K. makes the

point that her emotional struggles are "contextual", not "genetic." The child welfare system

could only benefit from listening to the youth voice advocating that the issue of medications for

the in-care population be afforded some thoughtful focus and systemic change.

Self Determination

Lisa D.'s story is entitled "Journey to Me" which captures the sense that her identity

transformation is plotted along a path with a beginning point of her birth: "(o)n a stormy first of

January, I was born." The "stormy" beginning resonates with tragic descriptions of childhood

victimization. She states:

> My childhood memories include fear, loneliness, violation and destruction. ...
> (my mother) attracted men in her life that she thought would love her and help
> her belong. Instead, they victimized her but most especially me.

> Man One seemed like a nice guy. He imparted many of my first memories. As
> a toddler, he beat me often. He burned me in what he called a "bathing
> accident" – unrecognizable, and in hospital for weeks ...

> ... My time was spent with the new man of the house, building model cars and
> singing to Elvis. We played a lot of games, but the games turned sour. He said
> he would hurt my mum if I ever told ... (Vol.2.4).

Lisa D. explains that what happens next sounds like it should be the continuation of tragic tale –

she tells her mother and their relationship falls apart. At the age of nine years, she asks her

social worker to stop seeing her mother and she becomes a permanent ward of the state: "It

seems terrible, but was it?" Lisa D.'s turning point is her crown ward designation: "I was safe

and in a permanent home ..... I felt valued, loved and strong." She states that she now "cherishes

every moment" of life. The last part of her story has a sense of animation and fun; she is

engaging and lively. Lisa D. transforms from a victimized and powerless child to an adventuress

stating: "(m)y future holds many new adventures." Taking a stand of self determination at the tender age of nine with her decision to stop seeing her mother becomes a moment of transformation and change. Lisa D. has the benefit of clarity in hindsight as she most likely did not have an awareness in the moment that it marked such a pivotal time in her life (Riessman, 2000, p. 5).

Self determination can be confused with dominant ideologies of self sufficiency and self reliance. Several of the stories have turning points that signal an identity change from victim to self determination and agency. Most of the stories however also make it clear that others have helped and often confirm that the positive empowerment could not have happened without significant support. Self determination is likely a more complicated concept for the in-care population due to family experiences of powerlessness and victimization. Further, while many, like Lisa D., experience child welfare as positive support, many others feel further victimized by their experience of the power and control of an uncaring system. Lisa D. ends her story with what is likely meant to be a declaration of enthusiastic positivity: "My future holds many new adventures. Despite the challenges, I will not be held down." When reading the final sentence, an uncomfortable image surfaces in my mind. "I will not be held down" has associations of violation. As a worker in the system, I hope to be more sensitive to matters of self determination for the in-care population. Sometimes decisions are made where the child or youth has no decision making power. However, I will attempt to be more aware of the times where their input can be accommodated to hopefully build up identities better aligned with self determination than victimization.

Disrupted Identity

Nichole H. seeks to piece together disconnected parts of her identity from fragments that she previously did not value or hold as integral to her emotional healing or sense of wholeness. She explains:

> I grew up not knowing anything about the other half of my heritage [aboriginal], and until relatively recently, it didn't matter. I never experienced a proud moment or fond memory of my mother, so who she was and what that meant to me, was never really an issue (Vol.1.7).

Nichole H.'s story's turning point happens during her contemplation of a photograph depicting three generations – herself as an infant with her mother and grandmother. She does not really know the women; her grandmother died "on the streets of East Vancouver" and her mother is "lost" to the same streets. Nichole H. starts to reflect upon their relatedness instead of their estrangement. They have similar physical appearances but she further detects a weight of sadness that is also familiar to her. Further still, she realizes they have a shared connection through "each one of us touched personally by the child welfare system and each taking our turn at fighting the cycle, but only one surviving it." Nichole H.'s realizations coalesce into a moment of change:

> In holding this photo of my mother and my grandmother and me, suddenly that bothers me – she is lost in the world, and I think she has come to a place where she doesn't want to be found. But I feel like I need to know who she is and where she comes from, in order to know my whole self (Vol.1.7).

Nichole H.'s identity changes from a person disconnected from her maternal family to a daughter seeking her mother in a quest for wholeness. She wants to integrate her mother into her sense of self; she wants to know her mother to better understand herself.

Nichole H.'s story raises complexities that are often difficult to navigate in child welfare. She states that she has been lovingly supported in the system. The positivity of her experience

gives her the "courage" to explore a severed and disvalued aspect of herself and her heritage.

Child welfare guidelines include planning to encourage connections to heritage or culture in times when family of origin relationships cannot be maintained. In my experience, if the youth does not identify this aspect as meaningful, then these connections do not get overly explored. Emotional healing is a delicate process and workers and foster parents often do not want disturb signs that a youth is making gains by introducing topics that may be disruptive to their sense of security. Nichole H.'s story is complicated by the ending which reports that her mother was found dead a mere ten days after she produced her story. Her story highlights the difficulties linked with the idea that emotional healing includes a need to know the "whole self." Childhood trauma and entry into the system can disrupt and fragment family relationships and cultural heritage. There is an imperative to help children integrate a fuller sense of their family and culture to experience a sense of wholeness in their identity. Such processes do not avail readily to formula. It is possible that in earlier stages of forming attachments with an alternative family that Nichole H. may had needed to splinter off her maternal family for the purposes of emotional healing. She may have needed a more secure base from which to explore her "cultural instinct" in a later quest for a fuller understanding of herself. Alternatively, being raised by a foster family that encouraged a fuller knowledge of her maternal family throughout her in-care years may have benefitted her. Such considerations are variable and complex; too often a worker does not have the time or resources to consider fuller consequences in as thoughtful a way as is needed for positive identity formation and support.

A further layer of complexity is that Nichole H.'s assessment that her maternal family or her Aboriginal heritage is not valuable is supported by dominant discourse. Her grandmother and mother form a "lost soul" contingent in our society; Aboriginal women struggling with

complicated lives and addictions are not afforded dignity or value. Women in East Vancouver quite often "get lost" or "go missing" without anyone noticing to report the "disappearance"; they become statistics without a human face or life story. Nichole H.'s story does not provide any insight into how her mother or her cultural heritage was discussed when she was growing up in the system. It is possible that her personal sense of shame in her mother and her heritage was re-invigorated with dominant social discourse. The subject may have felt too "taboo" and possibly disruptive to new family attachments and emotional healing. However, even with all the positive support, Nichole H. recognizes that she is not "whole"; her identity has been fractured and requires further healing.

COMMUNITY IDENTITY

Herndl (2006) confirms that narratives of self healing or recovery often include an element of identity transformation. Typically either a new identity is formed or an enduring identity is enhanced through the process of rewriting the self into being a member of a community (ibid). Further, the community identity is deepened if there is an added layer of becoming a helper to those in the community still suffering (ibid). Many of the storytellers highlight the positive impact that the YICC has had on their life. Some of the narratives are constructed with turning points being their introduction to the network. There are several factors underlying positive impacts on identity, including: a sense of relatedness or an "all in the same boat" comfort in connection; the YICC is "family" for the youth – sometimes an expansion of family and sometimes the only family; involvement in the YICC promotes opportunities for personal growth and political awareness through travel, advocacy and skill development; the experience of support promotes emotional safety and healing; and becoming a "helper to those still suffering" is a role change that positively transforms or enhances identities.

In the first part of her story, Delia T. describes her experience of coming into care in a

way suggestive of a displaced refugee; there is sense that her membership in this "new world" is

fledging. She describes:

> I distinctly remember the arrival of the police in our home – middle of
> the night confusion .... being given a black garbage bag to put my clothes
> and personal items in ....
>
> Entering foster care took me into an unknown territory – as though I had
> suddenly been thrust into a foreign country .... Everything about my new
> world required adjustment ..... You didn't ask questions, you just did it
> .... Over time, the foreign became more familiar (Vol.2.3).

The tentative quality to Delia's identity transforms with her introduction to the YICC. She

changes into a person who exudes confidence and energy. Delia T. loses her "immigrant" or

"refugee" wavering security to an identity firmly entrenched in family membership. She states:

> At the age of 15, I connected with the Network and began traveling
> across the country. I met strong, former youth in care, who provided a
> positive peer mentoring. With the support of my foster parents and core
> group of friends, I began to grow as a person and allow people into my
> life. Together we weathered the storms and growing pains, allowing me
> to nurture and discover love.
>
> The familiar finally became my *own* home – became my *own* family
> (Vol.2.3).

Shauna P-D. structures her story of emotional healing with a turning point of touring with the

YICC to talk about her own child welfare experiences. She states:

> I will never forget the opportunities I had to speak and to be listened to.
> These moments for me allowed a process of emotional healing to begin.
> Sometimes, as painful as it was to speak about those experiences, I would
> realize the impact of what the opportunity was doing to me .... I am in a
> much healthier state because of that experience (p. 18).

Tanya G. discusses a time in her life when she leaves university due to difficulties related to her

transition from care to independent living. She starts having some positive experiences such as

volunteering for a political campaign and working as a youth worker. The new experiences are

positive but there is still a sense of struggle. The story theme changes from struggle to success

after her introduction to the YICC. She sets out:

> There was a conference that took place in Saskatchewan with youth in care from all over Canada. It was amazing! Everyone there had an automatic connection. We had all been through the system; we all had something in common. I was completely overwhelmed. Never in my life had I been with so many people that I could relate to and understand. I decided at this conference that I wanted to be more involved in the Network. There were so many stories of young people who had been mistreated in the system, people who had been left to fend for themselves and who had absolutely no support system.
>
> The Network was looking for board members and I immediately knew I wanted to be a part of that. I thought it would be a good way to learn more about issues involving youth in care and to learn how to be a role model and to be a support for those who had none, It really and truly changed my life .... To be a part of something so phenomenal makes me feel incredibly proud and like everything in my life was for a purpose (pp. 36-37).

AUDIENCE

In a narrative context, identity processing as a two part component of (1) a recovery for

the self and (2) when the subject position of "I" is taken, there is an assumption of an audience

being addressed (Herndl, 2006, p. 25). Writing about one's own experience for the purpose of

publishing is a political act if the author is cognizant of the audience and shapes the message for

a particular impact (ibid, p. 1). Herndl (2006) makes the further point that if this is done

"correctly", the writing is also an "ethical act" (p. 1). The author explains that as a "witness" to

the trauma, the teller is both "an eye witness and one who testifies" (ibid, p. 1). The teller

assumes that the audience is in a position to respond emotionally to the teller's story; and, also,

that the audience is positioned to respond ethically to the story by taking up political action

(ibid). Herndl (2006) maintains that the individual teller's "deep need to make some sort of

meaning of the experience" is coupled with a sense of responsibility to make such realizations

public (p. 25). Further, telling one's own story in a collective way through a series of autobiographic accounts is a political strategy in that it heightens the visibility and voice of those more subverted by dominant discourse; the volume of voices is amplified (ibid).

When reviewing the stories I am aware they carry the disclaimer they have been produced to demonstrate that resilience is possible for those still navigating the child welfare system and those who have transitioned into independence. The stories are meant to encourage children and youth in and from care, but, also, to instruct the intended wider audience of child welfare workers, foster parents and policy makers of a system user's perspective of what works and does not work in the system. The youth are advocates for change. They are the voice that has difficulty commanding respect but should be listened to as they are the experts who have lived experience of the system. The anthology stories are produced for sensitivity training for care giving professionals and students (p. 10). These stories focus more on life events after entering the system as the targeted primary audience is system workers. The introduction sets out:

> Storytelling is one of the most powerful and effective communication tools we have. When youth in care reclaim their stories, we have the opportunity to not only take back control of our lives, but also change others and make a difference. And when we share our stories with care giving professionals and other interveners, we are sharing with them a real chance to experience what we experience, and to own up to their responsibility to improving the system (p. 11).

The digital stories carry a similar disclaimer of being produced for child welfare professionals as well as their "brothers and sisters" still in the system. The audience is slightly expanded with the wording, "and to change the way that others think" which invites the broader spectrum of society into the audience.

A way into looking at how life stories are "packaged" or "performed" for an audience is to analyse the narratives as moral stories (Coffey & Atkinson, 1998, p. 58). Stories that have a point or moral typically follow either a "fairytale" format where success is signalled with an "and they lived happily thereafter" ending; or, a "moralistic tale" with a sad ending of "what not to do or how not to be" (ibid). The moralistic tale typically contains warnings about how to avoid the unfortunate ending (ibid). I re-read the stories to code them as either a "fairytale" or "moralistic tale." Most of the narratives set out life events in a chronological order. Coffey and Atkinson (1998) advise that chronicling events is an entrenched storytelling convention that helps the storyteller to make sense of their sometimes confusing experiences through a selection and sequencing process (p. 68). The structure sends a message to the audience of "this is how it all happened" or "this is how I came to be where I am today" (ibid). I find that more of the stories have a "fairytale" format which is not surprising as it corresponds with the comedic shape already identified as the collections' prominent story shape.

I also considered issues related to the stories being "rehearsed", "formulaic" or "imitative" due to the predominance of "fairytale" stories (Dampier, 2008, pp. 368, 373). However, Dampier (2008) cautions that it is not fair or correct assume that stories in a collection are formulaic or imitative when the only evidence is that they have the same shape or structure as most stories conform to storytelling conventions (p. 367). Similarly, it may not be fair to identify stories as "rehearsed" as it suggests a manipulation of the audience by either the storyteller or the entity controlling story production. The YICC stories are produced in the context of YICC production for the purposes of showcasing resilience. The YICC state there is a dual context of stories being produced for (1) individual youth empowerment through the reclaiming of their story and (2) political advocacy. I did not get the sense that the political

context of production "manipulated", polished or shaped the individual stories into a "rehearsed"

or "imitative" sameness (Dampier, 2008, p. 367). While it could be argued that the story

production has been controlled to conform to a particular agenda of showcasing resilience, the

purpose of the stories is declared upfront and youth are invited to tell their own story. Some of

the narratives deliver the moral or point through highlighting success stories while others make

the same point but through unfortunate tales of what can happen if youth are not sufficiently

supported. There is an element more akin to "dialogue" than propaganda within the collection

(Herndl, 2006, p. 232). While there may be a sameness in point being made, the story content is

varied and often dialogically opposed. Some narrators set out positive while others express

harmful experiences of the system. Many of the stories broker a mix of positive and negative

experiences. Most of the stories appear aimed at the broader audience of child welfare

interveners; youth in and from care; and society generally. Some stories shift the greater balance

of messages to one audience over the other. Stories that contain direct appeals make the primary

target audience more obvious. The overall impact is "persuasive;" the stories are effective in

building up a predominant message that youth can or could be resilient.

Fairytale – Primary Audience of Children and Youth

Angie C.'s story is structured more obviously as a fairytale with a narrative rhythm and

classical conventions; it reads like a bedtime story. The story is a letter from the wise, adult

Angie to her infant self:

> Dear Angie,
>
> Welcome to the world! You have your whole life ahead of you. Your
> journey ahead will have tough times. There will be times of sadness,
> heartache, desperation and pain. You will come into care at twelve years
> of age, and will experience a great injustice, misdiagnosis and be
> overmedicated. You will experience so many homes that you'll slowly

lose count of how many, or when what homes feels like. Hang in there (Vol.1.3).

Angie C. uses classical fairytale word choices such as: "... will push you *far, far away* (emphasis added), harden your heart, and teach you sad lessons about trust." A YICC event is presented as destiny or a magical happening:

> You will attend an event when you are 16 that will change your life and heart. You will meet other people from care at this event, and you will experience a sense of belonging .... From that event, you will achieve more than ever expected. It will feel like climbing a mountain of success and at the peak, you will learn that you're pregnant. Congratulations (Vol.1.3)!

The tale chronicles marriage to a prince - "the perfect man – your wonderful husband" – and a transformation into "the beautiful and passionate person those around you will come to love and appreciate." The tale ends with this promise: "you will grow up and realize how blessed you were, all along, -- and have always been destined for greatness."

The story engages an audience in its lullaby quality of tone and the comfort that is triggered from reading a familiar fairytale format. There are a number of direct appeals that stand out even in a structure that is formatted as a direct appeal in its entirety. For example: "hang in there"; "you'll get through it, I promise"; "Not so easy at first. Hold on"; "Be assured, you are *so* worthy" and "Even your tough experiences will not be a loss of time. I assure you." The story is structured as an invitation to youth primarily still in the system to reframe their adversities as trials; something to endure on a path to greater rewards. Cinderella suffered the abuse of her step family and was a slave to domestic chores. Yet, she must have been always destined for greatness; the slipper fits, she is the prince's true love; and they live happily ever after. Classic fairytales are structured with adversities that need to be overcome; the destined find their way to their destiny regardless of the roadblocks. Angie C. emphasizes only one word in her story: "Be

assured, you are *so* worthy." While the main appeal is intended for the child and youth audience, it also has an impact on the broader audience. As a child welfare professional, I am touched by the sentimentality of the appeal. Further, it encourages me to reframe children and youth struggling with adversities as worthy beings working toward their destinies of greatness. The message suggests that I can help by not being a roadblock, but, also, by being a helper to make the journey a little easier.

While many of the stories can be classified as fairytales for their moral of being a success story, Angie C.'s story stands out with its classical fairytale resonances. Some caution could be attached to this particular framework as it positions the infant as a hero in waiting. As set out in earlier sections, a dominant culture understanding of resilient children being "Teflon coated" heroes who overcome adversities to succeed can be a damaging mindset (Walsh, 1998, p. 9). The resilient child as a hero has associations of only the toughest rising to the challenge to prove their worthiness while the weaker falter. The concept links with neo-liberal ideas of self reliance; the worthy contribute to society, the weak are a drain on resources. I think this association would be more troubling if the primary intended audience is system workers and society generally. The story's appeals are directed more fully to other children and youth who may find the reframing of their adversity to the trials of a hero, inspirational. Further, some children and youth benefit from therapy that is based on Joseph Campbell's (1949) *The Hero's Journey* which has the same goal of reframing childhood adversity into the journey of a hero who must endure trials on his path of discovery and greatness.

Fairytale – Primary Audience Child Welfare Professionals

Travis S.'s (Vol.2.7) story has an easy going rhythm that engages an audience with a somewhat light tone and fairly liberal use of humour – despite content that discusses serious

issues of adversity. Travis S. is a misunderstood and mistreated child. He is diagnosed with

ADHD but the professionals in his life do not know how to support the diagnosis. As a result, he

spends a lot of time attending various schools, mental health facilities and the youth justice

system. The first part of his story not only describes his adversity but delineates what could have

been done differently: his diagnosis is not understood by all the adults in his life; he only

receives attention for his "not-so-good qualities" and not for his good qualities – which are

plentiful. His tale changes from a moralistic tale into a fairytale when he meets his true love at a

"last chance" school; she believes in him. Travis S. graduates high school and becomes a "proud

father, husband, university graduate and respected child welfare professional."

The seriousness of his message that professionals alienated him by basically getting it

wrong is made palatable by his use of humour and "no hard feelings" tone; there is a collegial

feel to the story. The primary intended audience being child welfare professionals is made

obvious with this direct appeal:

> In hindsight, I can remember a few adults who really did try to reach out
> to me, but I wasn't interested nor did I believe that there wasn't an
> ulterior motive. Sorry guys. And for what it's worth, I can now really
> appreciate your efforts (Vol.2.7).

The tone is set from the beginning with the title's play on words and witty sarcasm: "How I

spent my Daze as an Ideal Youth." Other examples of humour include:

> The thing I remember the most about kindergarten was the time out
> chairs. That's where I spent most of my time. My crime? I couldn't sit
> still. Even though I was diagnosed with severe ADHD, it was the 80's
> and ADHD was a pretty new thing. Most professionals didn't believe in
> it. That's okay, I guess. I don't believe in dolphins ...
> . . .
> I had always felt that none of my good qualities were given very much
> attention. At least my no-so-good qualities got me loads of it. Exciting
> trips to the psychiatrists, all expense paid retreats to mental health
> facilities, and lots of visits from adults with little letters behind their
> names.

> . . .
>
> After having been a connoisseur of Victoria area public and alternative schools
>
> . . .
>
> As twisted as it may sound, I wouldn't trade any of my hurts for anything. My experience has shaped who I am today. And I like the person I see in the mirror. And guess what? I still can't sit still (Vol.2.7).

The cautionary aspect of how professionals did not work effectively does not come across as angry or accusatory – the message is softened due to the collegial tone and "happy thereafter" ending. Further, as a system worker, the story has a hopeful message that perhaps youth who have not appeared helped by intervening efforts, may, at some point, come to understand the efforts as sincere. Other youth may, as Travis S. did, re-story their life events from a vantage point of hindsight and internalize more affirming messages from experiences not positively processed at the time.

Fairytale – Society Primary Audience

Jessica M.'s story "Expectations" to some degree includes the spectrum of self, the system and society at large. I determine the primary audience as society as dominant ideologies underpin both the child welfare and self expectations. Jessica M. is a fairytale heroine struggling against the current or the ebb and flow of social expectations. Expectations advance and recede as she is caught in the waves:

> There was always an expectation that I would graduate high school and go to university. In my Grade 12 year, I became pregnant, and I could see the expectations quickly turn to hopelessness ....
>
> [after turning 18 yrs] After 10 years in care, I felt like I was being kicked out. I was 5 months pregnant, not finished my Grade 12, and my supports were ripped away from me ...
>
> I graduated as valedictorian of my class with my baby girl by my side, and the expectations returned ....

> In my fourth semester of university, I became pregnant with my second child. When I told people about my pregnancy, I could see the expectations disappear and the hopelessness reappear ....
>
> I met Nick in my second year of university. He's a professor in my department and has taught me classes. We discovered that our kids are only about three weeks apart. He has offered my guidance and helps me stay grounded. When I get overwhelmed, and thinking I can do everything perfectly, Nick tells me: I have school, work, and my kids, and something's going to give. I can't keep expecting myself to do *so* much, *all* the time. The expectations are constantly there. But I've learned to relax a little and not be so hard on myself (Vol.1.4).

Jessica M. positions herself somewhat as a hapless victim who is tossed to and fro dependent on the ebb and flow of expectations that are primarily governed by dominant social discourse. Her message to society as an audience appears to be that she is competent and able to achieve her goals, but it would be easier if she experienced more support than judgment as well as less turbulence. The story has a subtle shift into a fairytale ending with the introduction of a special someone who is able to "ground" her which stops the oscillating motion. The pitching to and fro in the sea of expectations builds a sense of peril; the "grounding" by a special helper translates into a sense of safety and repose. Jessica catches her breath; she can "learn to relax a little."

The story also points out that when negative discourse is internalized, there is an ongoing experience of harm that works against opportunities for resilience. Jessica is a victim to social expectations. She attempts to be "perfect" to either meet or counter the society suppositions. If dominant discourse did not uphold that (1) good academic achievement equals success and civic engagement and (2) single parenthood equals failure and civic dependency – then Jessica M. may not have felt so hapless. Dominant expectations set up a hard edged dichotomy. It can be imagined as either being in the "club" if successful in university or having the membership card "ripped away" from your hand if you are a young, single mother. Choices appear limited to the "success" club or the "hopeless" club. The contest of dichotomies does help to pick away at

dominant ideologies to expose the dangers inherent in the assumptions. Further, the clash could create an opening to consider alternative discourses. Jessica M. may achieve her university goals but perhaps at a slower pace. There may be times that she needs to take semesters away from school for either family, financial or reasons linked with physical or emotional fatigue/stress – not a fast track to success but certainly not hopeless either, a mediated possible alternative.

Moralistic Tales

In keeping with the earlier finding that there are fewer non-comedic or borderline comedic stories, it is not surprising that there are fewer moralistic tales. However, the stories with unfortunate endings serve the same function as the fairytales. They simply go about it a different way. Instead of demonstrating what happens for a storyteller to arrive at a "happily ever after" ending, these stories warn about what did not happen. Moralistic tales are instructional in making it clear what series of events led to a downfall (Coffey & Atkinson, 1998). In the YICC stories, the moralistic tales centre on deficiencies in the child welfare system. It is clear that system workers and policy makers are the intended audience. The stories target specific system aspects such as group home culture, independence policies and adoption.

Andrew M.'s audience is system workers as he sets out what went wrong for him in a group home setting:

> The staff at the group home were always busy dealing with the kids who were being negative. Their lack of attention to the people who weren't acting out only made it worse, and other group home kids, as well as myself, acted out to get their attention. I felt staff focused more on enforcing the rules and they had a snotty attitude that made me not want to listen to them. I felt that staff were uncaring and I didn't feel like I could go to them for support. I didn't feel like I could talk to them about my problems. It's hard to explain. But group home staff just had this negative attitude which made me dislike them (p. 63).

adults are always truthful. The story warns against assumptions that children who have been

mistreated will lie. The youth writes:

> There were 4 of us; my older sister, and my 2 younger brothers. For the
> next couple of years we were divided into two separate homes. It was
> hard because we were always together. I was always very close to my
> brothers, and I saw them for probably a total of about 3 times in the 2
> years we lived apart.
>
> Then we met our adoptive parents. I was so happy! Finally, a place to
> belong to. A real family. They told us that we were a "forever family."
> That meant that no matter what, we'd always be a family. No matter
> what. I wouldn't move anymore, and I could be with my brothers and
> sister.
>
> [after the birth of a biological child] To her [adoptive mother], he was a
> miracle, and the best thing that could happen. It was after he was born
> that things really started to go downhill.
>
> She started to become physically abusive. We were thrown into walls,
> choked, slapped. My brother even had his head slammed into a toilet
> seat. We were spanked until our bums were raw. The truth was always
> believed to be lies, so we learned to lie so we wouldn't get hurt anymore
> (p. 39).

The youth continues his story to describe how one by one his siblings are removed from the

family. They are not removed due to concern for their wellbeing; they are removed due to the

reports that they are too difficult to manage in the home. Eventually the youth is removed as

well after his school notices some bruising. The story is moving; it highlights complexities in

ideas of adoptive "forever" families. The youth is not relieved to be removed from the abuse; he

clings to the idea that they are his "forever family." Regarding his removal he writes:

> The next thing I knew I was moving into another foster home. I could
> have pressed charges, but I didn't. To me she was my mother, she had
> raised me, been there for me. It was right before Christmas as well, which
> hurt the most. They had a tree and everything at the foster home, but it
> wasn't the same without my family there beside me (p. 40).

Moralistic or unfortunate tales have a different impact on an audience than fairytales. The mood of the story is not uplifting; the tone can be angry, accusatory or tragically sad. As a system worker listening to the stories, I feel an impact similar to a finger being pointed or wagged. The finger is a warning but also an accusation of wrong doing: you did this to me. As a worker, however, the anger is instructive. I frequently work with youth who are not able to articulate the sources of their anger or process ideas of what could be done differently. The anger is sometimes expressed with destructive words and actions. Sometimes the venting has a temporary emotionally calming effect; other times the anger has negative repercussions such as placement breakdowns or youth justice involvement. In the moralistic stories, there is a sense that the youth have made some sense of their harmful experiences and are able to articulate problems and identify specific injustices. Policies or "best practices" can have consequences that are not always fully thought through: a "no hands on" policy is meant to protect but it also leaves emotionally neglected children/youth further bereft of affection; a transition to independence does not have to mean you are on your own; and adoptive placements breakdown – promises of "forever" are meant to encourage stability but they can also harm.

Herndl (2006) suggests there is an absence of anger in breast cancer narratives which she attributes to women conforming to the presentation of the positive coping female entrenched in our patriarchal society. "System kids" may experience similar censoring in an audience response that may be more sympathetic to a dominant ideal of resilience where the admirable youth sets aside or "gets over" their anger in order to achieve. It could be argued that fairytale stories that place a happier spin on adversity with uplifting endings and tales of success could be a disservice to youth whose functioning is more aligned with their harm. However, the correlation between societal expectations of positive coping for women and youth in and from care is not really fair

in the context of this collection. Firstly, the stories have a function of being inspirational to

children and youth struggling with their system experiences. Stories of alumni youth who

acknowledge adversity yet make direct appeals to the child/youth audience of "hold on – it will

get better", are likely experienced as inspirational. The aspect of harm is relatable to the

struggling youth's experience; the message of a happier future may provide hope. Secondly,

ideas of "happy spins" on painful experiences, raises the question of formula or political

polishing with the negative connotation of manipulation. Some of the narrators of fairytales may

be aware that their message is more palatable to the wider audience of system workers, policy

makers and society generally. There could be some strategy in "playing the game" by creating

stories that will make an audience impact due to dominant ideology alliances. As the collection

forms a "dialogue" of voices, it is understandable that many of the voices will conform with

dominant ideologies – whether they are intended or not. The collection, however, does not

expunge or silence the angry voices. There is an angry voice; it is quieter within the collection,

but present and bluntly effective.

DISCUSSION

Limits to the Study

Fraser (2004) discusses the concern that narrative approaches can be co-opted into studies that examine the social stories of marginalized people and come to a finding that people simply need to re-story their lives (ibid). In such research, social stories are treated as "fictions amendable to simplistic notions of reframing and positive talk" (ibid, p. 182). It is possible that someone reading my study could come to a similar conclusion that children and youth in care can resolve their trauma by simply "storying" themselves differently. Such a reductionist take aligns with a mindset that resilience research can be boiled down into "quick fix" solutions (Howard et al, 1995, p. 133); it misses the point of the complexities and the potential for the research to strengthen opportunities for resilience through a thoughtfully developed storytelling process. There is another possible limitation to employing a narrative methodology in a project hoping to provide support for the further research, development and implementation of a new intervention. Stakeholders and funding bodies may prefer quantitative studies or studies that contain at least a quantitative component to have baseline figures to assess a programme's efficacy. If others are interested in taking up this research, they may want to consider doing a combined design study to augment its "saleability."

What the Analysis Did Not Uncover

Perhaps most surprising is the youth do not make statements or allude to a stance that they should not have entered care in the first place. I do not detect a voice declaring that their "apprehension" is unwarranted. As a system worker, I feel somewhat validated by the youth appearing to confirm a need for protection. It is not unusual for child welfare workers to be labelled as "baby snatchers" or cast in some other callous or overly intrusive role. Thus far, I

have not participated in actions to bring children into care that I do not uphold to be needed for

their imminent or longer term protection. I qualify the comfort of validation with "somewhat" as

I also wonder whether the youth – like society members generally – are influenced by dominant

discourses and have left this aspect unexamined. A further concern is the absence of voices

calling attention to the deeply embedded social inequalities that too often underpin experiences

of abuse and neglect. White (1995) makes the point that re-storying lives has the potential to

make obvious harmful social imbalances such as the way that men may control their partners and

children through violence. The advocate voice in the stories does not make explicit the life

contestations related to poverty, racism, sexism, addictions, mental health or domestic violence.

The stories do not query inequalities such as the over representation of single mother clients; or,

how fathers in our society have a lesser expectation to be responsible for their children. Further,

the over representation of Aboriginal children and youth in the system is referenced but not

examined when a youth reflects that he wants to: "be someone other than just another aboriginal

youth statistic" (p. 42). This observation is not intended as criticism of the stories or storytellers.

The collection has a disclaimer that identifies the scope of the political advocacy being primarily

focused on system changes. It is obviously an onerous task to take on a social justice context

that targets whole scale social changes. What is troubling, however, is the concern that in

narrating their stories – in the sequencing of life events that help to make sense of traumatic

occurrences – the youth may not have internalized insights that would reconfigure the

maltreatment in a way that stands separate and apart from them (White, 1995). The political

contextualizing of embedded social inequalities helps to "neutralize" and "externalize" the

experiences of abuse so that it is no longer an integrated aspect of identity (ibid, p. 89).

Herndl (2006) references the early cancer narrative of Lorde (1979) published prior to the proliferation of more current breast cancer autobiographies. Lorde (1979) is distressed by the lack of political advocacy by women living with breast cancer and envisions a "well informed army of single breasted women .... ready to break with medical and social codes of normalization" (in Herndl, 2006, p. 237). Herndl (2006) worries that the narratives do little to challenge the medical or social codes of normalcy. If there is so much cancer and other illnesses/diseases prevalent in the world: why is the idea of being ill not incorporated into being a "normal" part of living? Why is illness such a marginalized and marginalizing experience (ibid)? Similarly, if it is so apparent that many families struggle with raising children in our society, as is evidenced by the number of families that have contact with child welfare, why is the experience so stigmatizing? Why cannot the idea that some families require the assistance of the community or state in child rearing be better integrated into the spectrum of "normal"? I am not suggesting that abuse be "normalized" in society. However, if the view of abuse is re-aligned with social inequalities then child welfare involvement could be cast as an expected fallout of unjust social machinations; being raised by the state would be an anticipated sequelae until a time when society is not shaped by power imbalances and oppressions. The normalizing lens could lessen stigma for children and youth raised by the state. The children/youth would not be stigmatized for their "failings"; society would be culpable for failing to operate in ways that would make child welfare involvement less necessary – and ideally, redundant.

Upholding or Contesting Dominant Ideologies

The analysis supports that the stories have messages that both uphold and contest dominant ideologies. Some of the ways that dominant discourses are contested or perhaps softened, include: concepts of success that focus on smaller steps of emotional healing (for

example, resolving an inner turmoil of guilt for leaving university early; learning to say "I love you" or receiving a hug); transforming the heroic self-reliant individual into a champion whose accomplishments are dependent on a team effort; and providing evidence that state parented children meet the criteria for dominant society membership. They are not "dangerous", "bad" or "economic drains"; children and youth supported in opportunities for resilience are well functioning members of society. A further contest is the way the concept of resilience is expanded so that it is not limited to recovery overcoming adversity: harm and healing can co-exist. Herndl (2006) comments that this kind of co-existing or the idea that an identity can have more than one facet is a complexity not often articulated:

> The struggle with "Who am I now?" turns on the idea we are not always the same. But too often the notion of recovering an identity is to recover only one identity, not to embrace a multiplicity of identities; it is to claim the identity of a survivor or a woman who as healed rather than to embrace the transitory nature of embodiment (p. 241).

Within the YICC collection of stories, resilience is more often framed as an overcoming of past adversity. However, there are stories that support an expanded definition whereby a resilient person can be more than one story at one time; the identity of "survivor" is not embraced at the expense of an identity that acknowledges continuing struggles with the an ongoing impact of harm.

Many of the storytellers narrate events that largely uphold dominant ideologies in ideas of wellness overcoming harm and mainstream notions of success such as post secondary education, traditional family, good jobs and home ownership. I find that sometimes when I discuss concepts of dominant discourse and contestations that I appear to set up a dichotomy of adherences to dominant being "bad" and contestations being "good." My point is more aligned with definitions of dominant ideologies being too narrow; too many people are excluded – and

the exclusion can hurt. That many youth define success as experiences that uphold dominant ideologies is not "bad"; it is not a defection from the "good" fight against the "bad" dictatorship of dominant discourse. While mainstream goals on the one hand conform to dominant ideologies, their movement from the margins to mainstream membership also contest the ideologies as an expansion of the criteria of who can be included in the dominant "club." The disclosed aim of the collection is to demonstrate that such membership is possible when youth in and from care are supported in opportunities for resilience. Also, the YICC is not denying the voice of other youth who are not demonstrating resilience within their advocacy work as a whole. The "resilience" collection is one aspect of their political work; other projects include research focused on youth who are homeless, working in the sex trade or involved with the youth and adult justice systems. Further, while the "fairytale" stories of harm resolution with happy endings of success that uphold dominant discourses may be more prevalent, other voices more aligned with their harm are also included and help to expand the too narrow definition. A resilient youth does not have to be happy; a resilient youth can also be angry, accusatory or sad.

There are further considerations regarding the benefit of upholding dominant discourse. The "fairytale" stories are likely better received by mainstream audiences; it is natural for people to relate to narratives that resonate with dominant culture ideals. Further, there may be political advantages to "performing" or "playing" to what is dominantly appealing. YICC could be demonstrating political savvy in "playing the game." This message appears on the YICC's recently updated website:

> Why care?
>
> Many youth in care live without stability and are twice as likely to:
>
> (1)   drop out of high school
> (2)   enter adult welfare

(3)   be underemployed

With an aging population, Canada needs all of its young people to
succeed to take their rightful place in society (http://www.youthincare.ca)

McKeen (2004) discusses the shift in social policy discourse from ideas of "social responsibility"
to "social investment" which adheres to a neo liberal political discourse. The author (2004) is
concerned that the shift may make it too difficult to expand social policy debate:

beyond the narrow realm of human capital/human resources theory to
include a broader range of options and actors, so new possibilities can be
created for achieving a truly meaningful version of social justice (p. 102).

McKeen (2004) notes that social advocacy language now upholds neo liberal politics by
adopting terminologies that effectively reframe a "social responsibility" perspective of child
poverty into a definition of an "inadequate investment in children as 'human resources' which is
seen has holding the key to a prosperous future" (p. 93). The change in language corresponds
with poverty being viewed as a responsibility of individuals over a social responsibility. Social
solutions offered are limited to micro level policies that are market driven and fail to
acknowledge social inequalities (ibid). The author qualifies her concerns are not criticism; she
understands that social policy advocates who have not played the neo liberal political game have
not been able to sustain their causes. Adopting, adapting, shifting – are all strategies to appeal to
policy makers and funding sources. Playing the political game may be needed for survival
(ibid). It is possible that some of the YICC storytellers package resilience as a sound choice for
"social investment" purposes in ways that appeal to dominant audience stakeholders.

Reflection on Expectations for What the Analysis Would Reveal

I admit that I hoped that more of the stories would communicate a more complex
composite of harm and healing to perhaps more firmly provoke dominant discourses. However,
on reflection, I wonder how I could really expect the storytellers to reveal even more harm when

vulnerability is encoded as "weakness" or a "liability" in dominant discourses driven by market ideologies. I recall a discussion in a social work seminar class about the stigma inherent in taking a "stress leave" from child protection work. There was a round table consensus that while it may not be "fair," admitting the need to take such a leave would likely alter co-workers' perceptions. There may be hesitancy in wanting to partner with someone returning from a stress leave. The person may be marked as "suspect" in being weak or perhaps even "damaged." Further, there was agreement that opportunities for employment advancement would effectively be quashed. In contemplating the past year and an unanticipated series of upsetting life events, I believe that if I was not already away from work on an education leave that I likely would have needed to take a stress leave. In making this disclosure I feel an impulse to preface it in a way similar to the youth who concedes that he was depressed following the breakdown of his adoption: "I fell into a depression for about six months. I'm generally a strong person ....." (p. 40). There is discomfort in admitting my own vulnerability; I feel the same need to explain that I am "generally a strong person." It is understandable that some of the storytellers steer away from more fully articulating their harm when entrenched dominant assumptions equate harm with irrefutable damage – a defect that can bar mainstream membership. I am thankful to the YICC storytellers for disclosing their personal negotiations of adversity and recovery. When considering my own struggles to somehow reconcile my identity as someone who is "generally a strong person" and someone who is hurt, I feel humbled by storytellers such as Nathaniel C. who acknowledges that his resilience embodies harm and healing when stating that "the needy glimmer in his brown eyes betray a hole inside his spirit ... Although the holes have been patched up they still exist to destabilize his life and relationships" (p. 93).

What the Analysis Did Reveal: Implications for Practice

The analysis upholds the crux of resilience research with stories that stress the importance of support through relationships sustained across time and environments that create a cross buttressing effect (for eg. Masten, 2006). The stories often resonate with Seale's (2001) observation regarding people whose personal identity is enhanced with a collective identity whereby individualized heroic efforts are reworked into camaraderie based accomplishments; there is a "call out" that names and honours specific people who "were there"; "believed" and generally supported (p. 320-21). Sometimes there is a "special someone" whose support may be integral to a pivotal point. Samuel P. has a social worker who stands up for him at school when he is attempting to turn his studies around (Vol.1.6). Jessica M. connects with a professor who helps her to calm her anxieties underpinned by social expectations (Vol.1.4). Sometimes the "special someone" provides a longer term support commitment. A professor that Ron E. meets years previously at a youth in care event is instrumental in re-instating his opportunity to graduate from university. Denny stays "true to her word" and does not give up on Travis S. (Vol. 2.7) and Sam P.'s foster mother is the "*one* person who never gave up" on her (Vol.2.5). The collection of supporters tends to represent various systems supporting the youth: foster family, biological family, social workers, school teachers, other YICC youth, and other community based relationships. Sometimes the support has been there but is not sustained. These tales also uphold the same research tenet as resilience can fluctuate across the life cycle dependent on varying levels of adversity and protective factors (for eg. Fernandez,2006). Sarah M.'s current state of resilience could perhaps best be described as a hardened vulnerability. She is a resilient young woman; she is set to graduate from university and works within the child welfare field. However, she is angry, disillusioned – and there is a sense she is tired – her

primary supports ended when she aged out of the system. Sarah M.'s experience of resilience when she was in care was stronger; it was strengthened by supportive relationships and having a "soft place to fall" (pp. 46-7).

The study also upholds the premise that storytelling has the potential to be a strand that strengthens opportunities for resilience through a dual lens of personal emotional healing and political advocacy. The benefits do not fall into two concretely different categories of personal and political as each frame influences and can bolster the other. The analysis reveals that narrating personal stories helps the storyteller to make sense of traumatic events to palliate a healing process; and, healing is augmented when the story is further positioned as political advocacy. Vulnerable senses of self are strengthened by the awareness that they are "giving back"; the contribution makes a political impact and is worthwhile. Conversely, many of the storytellers articulate their involvement with the YICC and politics as pivotal to their emotional healing. The youth describe opportunities in skill development that increase their sense of competency. Moreover, sharing stories with other youth strengthens and enhances their personal identity with a community identity; isolation and stigma is lessened with an "all in the same boat" validation. Shauna P-D identifies the start point of her emotional healing being the three years she spends on her "youth-in-care soapbox" sharing painful childhood stories with politicians and social workers; it is personal "therapy" and political advocacy at the same time (p. 18). The stories also make a political impact beyond the scope of practice and policy recommendations for the child welfare system. The digital stories' introduction explains that part of the purpose is to "change the way that others think" regarding youth in and from care. The stories are persuasive in nudging an opening to widen dominant discourses. Discourse expands with the ideas that resilient youth in and from care can meet the criteria for mainstream

membership which rebukes the stigmatizing discourse of state parented children being "bad" or "dangerous." Further, resilient youth do not have to overcome their harm to function well – harm and healing can co-exist.

The study reveals a recurring theme of identity that transforms victims to persons of agency. The metamorphosis does not echo the neo-liberal ethos of self reliance. Agency is more aligned with self determination and the capacity to make decisions beyond the control of past victimization and state regulation. It is sometimes a hybrid of competing notions of autonomy and dependency on the ongoing support of others. White (1995) isolates the embedded negativity of "dependency" to clear up concerns that the pairing is incongruent (p. 105). White & Epston (1989-91) explain that once an embedded notion is examined for its political contextualization, the once taken for granted idea can appear "strange" (p. 121). Why is the idea that a person functions better with supportive relationships devalued as weakness (White, 1995)? The concept can be reworked as an understandable need for social connection and support for people living in a social world (ibid). The terminating of supports is an adversity that filters throughout the collection as a key focus for change. Imposing a neo liberal self reliance onto the youth's version of self determination dependent on others, results in a clashing disjuncture. Resilience research and youth experience uphold the need for continuing supports; neo liberalism and child welfare policies disallow it. It seems "incongruent" and "strange" that youth marginalized by experiences of maltreatment and state care are held to the same criteria as mainstream youth. Youth in care who do not engage in dominant developmental tasks such as post secondary education, are cut off supports sooner. Youth who do go onto postsecondary education continue to have some financial support but their membership in foster families or group homes is ended. While being independent at age eighteen years may have been a norm in

earlier times, today young adults tend to be supported in the home for extended periods. Logic would suggest that youth disadvantaged by traumatic experiences would require more instead of less supports. A dominant culture assumption may help to gloss over the disproportionate support. As society is "footing the bill," youth from care should be "grateful" for what they have received. Moreover, they are "lucky" if they have received minimal supports without further experiences of the kinds of abuse that brought them into care in the first place.

The narratives attest to another tangent of self reliance in the idea that during periods when supports are provided, the supports fail. There is an ethos of self reliance by defect or default. Sometimes adamant voices insist they will do it on their own as they are on their own in any event, no-one is helping. Beyond not helping, others hamper and harm. The hardened voice belies a toughened overture of vulnerability. While the stories are weighted to give primacy to success after adversity, the gravity of the less articulated harm still permeates the collection. There is a heavy sadness. Some of the narrators who rejoice in "happy endings" still inject their story with an emphatic concern for children and youth in the system and others struggling after transition to independence. The concern is evidenced in direct appeals - and there are valid reasons to be concerned. Unsettlingly, several stories touch on suicide attempts or ideations as well as feelings of despair, despondency and worthlessness. Direct appeals such as "hold on", "hang in there" and "it gets better" are like life lines tossed from alumni to their younger "brothers and sisters." Angie C. emphasizes only one word in her success story – "be assured you are *so* worthy" (Vol.1.3). The emphasis has the effect of sharpening the word's resonance so that it can cut through even the toughened exteriors of vulnerability to reverberate within core senses of self that are cumbered by deep devaluation. Other direct appeals such as "you don't need to do it on your own" and "others are willing to help – you just need to find them" shift

ideas of self reliance from an isolated stance of self only to the more connective version of

agency dependent on support. The appeals are an attempt to ameliorate the "default" or system

failure underpinning hardened commitments to self reliance. Alumni whose identities have made

the empowering transition from victim to agency remember the powerlessness inherent in

childhood victimization. Further, fragile identities get further disrupted with the fragmenting of

biological family, heritage and culture- as well as the transiency incumbent in multiple

placements. Stories steeped in happier endings are not a gloss over of the hurt and pain. The

stories inspire hope that better things will come, they just need to hold on – and reach out. The

narratives are further inspiration to child welfare professionals and others connected with the

youth through various supporting systems to be there for them.

What the Study Could Do: Suggestions for Practice

McLaughlin (2002) discusses the tension between clinical social work and social justice.

The author points out that a divided focus of the "individual" and "society" is a false dichotomy

as the fields are interdependent. Social work is sometimes criticized for building in supports that

have the impact of helping individuals adjust better to oppression instead of targeting the root of

the harm (ibid). Rooting out systemic harm has a more clearly defined affinity with social

justice. However, McLaughlin (2002) suggests that "the betterment of the individual and the

betterment of society of necessity do progress together" (p. 197). Similarly, it could be argued

that focusing on the life story of individual children could be linked with a pitfall in resilience

literature of "blaming" the child or as seeing the child as the system in need of fixing. However,

McLaughlin's (2002) insight on the symbiosis between individuals and society reframes the

dilemma. The idea of a child/youth produced life book depends on system changes that would

support the endeavour in a safe and mindful manner. Child welfare would need to strengthen

opportunities for resilience through implementing processes that support the emotional healing

and empowerment potential in the life book production. Ideas could include: (1) training for

workers on how to partner with children and youth in storytelling; (2) training for workers on

how to safely emotionally support a child or youth in the process; (3) training could include

understanding the different modalities of storytelling (prose, photos, drawings, paintings,

collages, poems, music, lyrics, digital images, digital storytelling, storybooks, plays) with

suggestions regarding mediums for developmental competencies; (4) training for foster parents

and group home staff regarding the same; (5) individual art therapy or workshops for children

and youth to help them navigate the process; and (6) introduction to crown ward support groups

of opportunities for informal and more formalized storytelling. For example, story sharing could

be a regular ritual at group gatherings. Also, the youth could be sponsored to attend the digital

storytelling workshops offered through YICC. Moreover, encouraging youth to connect with the

YICC may enhance their personal healing with the added benefits of a community identity and

political empowerment.

The study confirms the importance of storytelling but, also, cautions that the process

needs to be sensitively supported. Cortney G.'s level of resilience defies her young age in her

balancing of full time work and school and volunteerism. After attending a youth in care event,

she shares her story of maltreatment and subsequent child welfare involvement for the first time.

She feels "lighter", "calmer" – "and when I am laying in bed at night there's this warm sensation

that everything is going to be okay" (p. 23). Cortney G. advises that she did not previously share

her story as she feared being judged, misunderstood and blamed for her adversity (ibid). Jessica

A. admits that writing her story is difficult but necessary for healing. She explains why she

previously kept her experiences to herself:

> I didn't or couldn't talk much as a child because whenever I talked about my experiences and what was going on in my life, something bad would happen. For example, whenever I talked to a teacher at school or a First Nation's worker, my sisters and I would be taken away from our mother and placed into care (p. 97).

In partnering in a storytelling process, there is an imperative to remember that toughened exteriors protect inner vulnerability. Yolanda LT's direct appeal to system workers is on point: "even if the young person appears to be disrespectful and defiant – anger is only hurt disguised" (p. 110). Bearing witness needs to be governed by a philosophy of doing no harm; the storytelling process should be a balm not a further wounding or the dismantling of a protective guard. Cohen et al (2006) apprise that children and youth can be safely guided through a life story process with the caveat of a trusting therapeutic relationship. The child welfare culture contends with frequent worker turnover; the child-worker relationship is often disrupted. Strategies to circumvent this challenge to building trust need to be explored. White's (1995) idea of "nurturing teams" (p. 105) blended with resilience research's main assertion regarding cross system supports is a possible pathway (for eg. Masten, 2006). There could be a team approach with members representing various systems supporting the youth, for example: children service worker, crown ward worker, foster parents, group home worker, biological family member, a former crown ward acting in an alumni capacity, and any others identified as a positive support. In this way, if a worker vacates their team position, the impact would be lessened by the continuing support of others. Further, the child or youth could have the opportunity at a later time of "giving back" by acting as an alumni representative for another child or youth.

The study supports further implications or suggestions regarding the implementation of a storytelling intervention. The partnering process may be a forum to bring into a child or youth's consciousness some ideas of the social injustices that underpin their story in ways that a child or

youth may not be able to reflect upon without some guidance. The consciousness raising

element could help to separate out the social harm for a closer examination of its personal impact

that may, in turn, reduce some of the stigma associated with families that are not able to parent

their own children (White, 1995). Examining the political component also leads to further

considerations of "audience" and "purpose" for the story being produced through a partnering

process. A child or youth may have their own ideas of audience and purpose to which a

partnering worker would need to be sensitively attuned. For example, a younger child may want

the scattered pieces of their history gathered together to effect a healing sense of coherence; a

story whose main purpose is personal healing with an audience of their self. An older child,

youth or former youth reflecting on social inequalities and related political consequences may

want to complicate their story by expanding the audience to include, for example, others in care,

others formerly from care, child welfare related workers, politicians and the society generally.

This kind of implication would perhaps be an aspect of the "getting ready" stage as the

exploratory conversations could suggest the "audience" and "purpose" that would shape the

storytelling process. In addition to foundational considerations, this facet could be revisited and

filtered throughout the storytelling process. Further as White (1995) explains, separating social

injustices from personal stories of trauma can help to transform internalized harm into collective

political action to protest and demand changes for social reform. Providing the structure for such

transformations could be a way of introducing more complex and cross systems supports to

possibly foster more opportunities for resilience for children and youth in care.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

When researching the theoretical tenets of conducting a narrative research project, I was a little apprehensive that the slicing of stories to inspect the socio-political context may be a process of subjecting the stories and storytellers to a scientific gaze. Or, worse, I worried that a lens focusing on political contextualizing would split the personal and the political – a slicing that would sever and lose the stories' emotional content. I did not want to be the objective scientist in a lab placing stories under a microscopic lens. I imagined the storytellers would resist such subjugation and scrutiny. I also wanted to produce a study that had integrity as social science research. I did not want to be "timid" in stating observations; I did not want to tiptoe around or cushion any observations due to my intention to share the study with the YICC. I did not want to let any apprehensiveness of audience response influence my grappling with my findings. Fraser (2004) is helpful with this particular point. She suggests that the task of narrative interpretation is to "persuade," not to "prove" (p. 194). She cautions, however, that the tentativeness does not mean that arguments are not made for a particular position; a view can be advanced with persuasive arguments making the point (ibid). If there are other interpretations that could be inferred from the same frames of analysis, the contesting possibilities can be presented but the researcher must still "own" and not apologize for an assertion of a particular interpretation (ibid). In reflecting on the process, I believe I was able to balance my desire to be respectful of the YICC audience without softening or altering any findings to make them more positively palatable to the youth audience. It is quite possible that I missed the mark of some of the storytellers' purpose which could result in disappointment or frustration. I would certainly welcome any feedback from the YICC audience.

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I had further concerns about how I might answer the "so what" question if I was merely confirming themes already identified by the youth and former youth themselves. I remembered Kovach's (2005) thoughtful advisement that there is a moral imperative to integrate reflection regarding the value of the research for the research subjects. While she speaks from an Indigenous position, the message has a more universal resonance:

> Indigenous researchers are equally subjected to this system [pressure to publish], but we can only go so far before we see a face – our Elder cleaning fish, our sister living on the edge in East Vancouver, our brother hunting elk for the feast, our little ones in foster care – and hear a voice whispering, "Are you helping us? (p. 31).

What I find is that similar to McLaughlin's (2002) observation that individuals and society are a false dichotomy (p. 189), the "personal" and "political" similarly resist a scientific blade's attempt to separate out distinct categories. The personal and political influence each other; it is the nesting of a personal story in a social story.

Instead of feeling distanced from the emotional impact and meaning of the stories, a narrative approach brings the stories and storytellers into sharper and closer focus – and feel. I confess to having a somewhat unsettling sense of intimacy in feeling like I "know" the storytellers. There is an almost voyeuristic sensibility about delving into personal accounts from my removed position and anonymity. The "knowing" and being unknown also disconcerts with perceived notions of power imbalances. A narrative approach also helps to settle the qualms with the viewpoint that the stories are produced to be heard; they are crafted to offer a window into the storyteller's world for the purpose of making an impact. Such contemplation helps to correct power imbalances. The YICC storytellers are a resilient quorum of youth in and alumni youth from care; they are successful in making public their private stories for their own articulated purposes. As their audience I feel privileged to gaze through a window into their

world while appreciating that they have control over what can be seen through the glass.

Regarding end steps, I will provide the YICC with a copy of this study as it seems fair that they should have an opportunity to gage their impact on this audience member. A closing thought is really more of a hope that other researchers will access these stories to further the project of child welfare life books "going live" with the voice of children and youth instead of the current mode of production. Partnering with the child or youth in helping to gather pieces and provide sensitive emotional support seems do-able; deep listening and bearing witness feels socially just.

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