

# Societal Constraints, Systemic Disadvantages and Homelessness: An Individual Case Study

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## ABSTRACT

Research utilizing the individual case study method examined the complex issues related to pathways into and out of homelessness for an Aboriginal man from a First Nation community on the western James Bay in Canada. This instrumental case study focused on an individual's story, rather than on a site or a group of individuals, an incident or a series of incidents, or a program [6] [15]. First, as a research tool, it provides insight into the issue of homelessness and some of its causes from the perspective of an Aboriginal person. Second, the in-depth data gathered allowed us to understand some of the factors that work and those that do not work in facilitating transitions out of homelessness. Third, as an educational tool, it allows people from the outside to have a better understanding of how systemic disadvantages contribute to individuals falling into homelessness.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal, Cree, Case Study, Homelessness, Northern Ontario.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge about the living circumstances of homeless indigenous people in northern regions of Canada is limited and superficial. Those who have not experienced homelessness, including service providers who support this population, often have difficulty comprehending the nature of the challenging life experiences and circumstances and their varied impacts on homeless persons, particularly amongst Aboriginal people. Given the human and systemic costs, it is vital to acquire a better understanding of the phenomenon of homelessness among Canada's Aboriginal people in northern regions of the country. The case method provides a way to access, through an individual's narrative, the larger story of First Nations people and the particular effects of cultural loss on individuals. The use of the individual

case study method allowed us to gather great detail about the life history and circumstances of a formerly homeless person—George. As set out by Gill [8], the case method provides for a profound understanding of a single situation and enables greater insight into the pertinent issues in contrast to quantitative approaches which are based on less detailed observations of a large number of subjects.

## 2. BACKGROUND

On a per capita basis, poverty, housing need and homelessness are as acute in northern communities as in the southern regions of Canada and they have been persistent problems through times of economic boom and bust. While little information is available about homelessness in communities north of Sudbury, Ontario, we know that the extent and nature of the homelessness problem in Sudbury remained largely unchanged between 2000 and 2009 [10]. However, the quality of housing available to low income people has deteriorated since 2000 given low rental vacancy rates, strong rental demand and increases in rents [4]. Communities of northeastern Ontario in the Arctic watershed and the western James Bay region have strong links to the northern city of Greater Sudbury, a key provider of health and social services to communities further north. People migrate to Sudbury in search of employment, education or services. Nine studies of homelessness have indicated that up to 28% of homeless people in Sudbury have migrated from other communities [9] [10] [11]. However, little systematic research has been conducted on experiences of migration and homelessness among the Cree people of the western James Bay communities of Moosonee, Moose Factory, Fort Albany and Kashechewan.

Migratory homelessness is of interest because individuals leaving rural and First Nation communities often become homeless in the urban centres in the near-north of Ontario. There is a gap in the published literature on homelessness and migration

in Canada; however, our research has shown that Aboriginal people are greatly over-represented among homeless migrants and that grappling with homelessness in northern and First Nations communities requires an understanding of interconnected historical, economic, geographical and legal processes [10] [11].

First Nations communities of the James Bay have been deeply affected by the experiences linked to colonialism and residential schools. Europeans began to explore the Hudson Bay region in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, which led to extensive trading relationships between the Omushkegowak or Cree of the James Bay lowlands by the late 1700s [2]. The effects of colonization, religious conversion by Christian missionaries, residential schooling, the legacies of treaties and the establishment of reservations have been well documented [20]. The over-representation of Aboriginal people in the homeless population in Sudbury is reflective of the failure of policy reforms to address the underlying causes of crises such as core housing need, homelessness, lack of employment opportunities and out-migration from First Nations.

This case study was undertaken to amplify George's voice—an objective that is consistent with his personal goals of sharing his story, enabling others to understand the pathways into and out of homelessness and making positive change in the services offered to homeless people in northern communities. The individual case study method allows us to locate George's experiences within the larger historical, economic, geographical, social and legal contexts, and to explore the interconnections between these contextual factors and the circumstances related to movements into and out of absolute homelessness in northern Ontario. We also consider the concept of resilience in relation to George's life story.

### **Method**

A collaborative form of research was central to the goal of achieving social change by conducting a qualitative case study for research, teaching and public education. Sensitivity was required in recruitment since formerly homeless persons are part of a vulnerable and marginalised group; for example, a significant proportion of homeless people have been traumatized by experiences of abuse and violence [9]. When conducting research with Aboriginal people, a heightened sensitivity to the perspectives of colonised peoples and subordinate groups undergirds an appropriate methodology. By adhering to principles and practices of research with vulnerable populations, such as those outlined by Liamputtang [14], we aimed to engage in a co-operative inquiry that is practical in promoting positive social change and respectful of the perspectives of the participant of this individual case study.

### **Design**

The study was conducted over two years in 2011-2013 in a manner which ensured that the data collection process, results and conclusions were culturally appropriate. This required the institution of safeguards to capture the meanings of the narrative provided by the participant and safeguards to protect against the subjective bias of the researcher. On the one hand, this required that the study design and procedures consider the varied aspects of Aboriginal history, culture, and ideology for the participant. On the other hand, given the subjective role of the researcher within qualitative case studies, we acknowledged the role of the research team in developing meanings throughout the research process. To enhance sensitivity to

Aboriginal perspectives, the research team included a Cree research team member. A narrative approach to presenting the findings enables the voice of our participant and his understanding of his living circumstances to be present within this paper.

### **Ethical approval**

Approval for the study was obtained through the Research Ethics Board at Laurentian University. The participant of this project, George, provided informed consent each time he was interviewed. We have conducted 12 interviews to date in order to explore certain questions that arose as we reviewed the interviews. Following a presentation of this paper, George participated in a review and discussion of the article. This "member checking" process provided for verification of the themes, quotations and the analysis [7]. He also provided further information regarding varied issues.

We have previously used a pseudonym in order to provide a measure of confidentiality to George, even though he has consented to the use of his real name in the research. With regard to the use of the pseudonym, he expressed a strong desire for his real name to be used. Thus, we have accommodated this request with the approval of the Research Ethics Board at Laurentian University and with written consent from George. He wants to tell his story publicly in order to be active in taking steps to achieve positive change in the lives of other homeless persons. However, as there are some parts of his narrative that are personally sensitive, it was decided that he should be given a first level of protection by enabling him to review the analysis, themes and quotations.

### **Participants**

We used multiple qualitative methods to generate in-depth narrative and visual data about a single case, a 49 year-old Cree man who, in his early adulthood, had stable employment as a police officer but whose use of marijuana led to the termination of his employment, subsequent prolonged homeless, and incarceration on several occasions. Homeless for more than 20 years, he also had an extensive history of long distance migratory homelessness within Canada. However, two years prior to participating in the current study, he became housed in an urban centre in northern Ontario. With consent from George, we also interviewed some members of his former "street family", service providers and a professor of Indigenous Studies, Dr. Emily Faries, a Cree woman who was also born on the James Bay.

### **Procedure and analysis**

We conducted multiple semi-structured interviews with George and collected visual data in the form of photographs of his housing and video footage of his daily life to gather detailed information about varied aspects of his life history and current living circumstances. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to capture the narrative in the words of the participant and to allow for subsequent detailed analysis of his life story. We followed the principles and practices of thematic qualitative analysis to organize and analyse the data [6].

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results are presented and discussed in relation to seven themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis. These themes pertained to historical, economic, geographical, social and legal aspects and the interconnections between these

aspects that were present in George's narrative about his life, as well as resilience.

### **Historical and cultural aspects**

George noted the impacts of colonization and religious conversion in his home community: "They split us up, like I said, when they first blew onto my shore. All [was] lost... We lost our culture when England and France came to fight over our little piece of swamp back home." He expressed the view that Cree people did not experience homelessness traditionally: "We had simple lives. That's why we were never homeless. I'm talking way back now. No, as long as you had a jacket, you were not homeless back then, eh? That little wigwam was a home". George explained that his father had shared knowledge of traditional Cree ways of living. He stated, "You got a jacket, you're good to go. That's what my Dad used to tell me. Oh yeah, [to stay warm in the winter, there are] ways out there. Getting buried under snow, we knew enough to use our little cover between the snow and us". While George stated that he did not practice a traditional Cree lifestyle, he knew about practices that enabled him to survive while living on the streets and sleeping rough in northern Ontario, Canada. When goose hunting with his family, he had learned skills for survival on the land in the sub-arctic, James Bay region. He recalled these times as being extremely positive: "It was a happy time for my family—happy, happy. Like, we're in the bush. We're free. We're not in Moosonee. We're not in a little shack. We're outside." These comments reflect the perspective of some Indigenous and people of the north who view life in the Canadian wilderness as liberating [12].

Dr. Faries [7], a professor of Indigenous Studies, elaborated on the impact of colonialism in relation to homelessness: "Traditionally, in the pre-contact era before the influence of Europeans, no Cree person was ever homeless. All members of the community had a home because our society was based on large extended families in which everyone was cared for and included. The traditional society was egalitarian in the sense that everything was shared. But because of what has happened with colonization, we, as a race of people, have become homeless. This is mainly because our traditional homelands, which are now known as Canada, have all been taken away from us. We don't even have legal access to any of our traditional homelands. So, a race of people, on a macro level, has been left homeless. If you look at it historically, all of us are homeless through colonization and the oppression that came with it." In the pre-contact era, Indigenous people were part of sovereign independent nations with well-developed systems for addressing issues and problems [13]. Within the current project, George agreed with Emily Faries that the housing challenges and homelessness among Cree people have roots in the actions of the colonial powers and the social structures arising from the policies and practices that emerged after European contact.

**Missionaries and religious conversion:** The Cree community where George grew up, Kashechewan, had become divided over time by the influence of the English and French missionaries of different Christian denominations. The nearby community of Fort Albany was originally a Hudson's Bay Company trading post and those who later created Kashechewan were members of Fort Albany. As George explained the situation, "England would leave for one winter. They went home and found India, right? Then France would come in and baptize everybody. Then England would chase them away again. Then they would baptize the rest of them [the Cree

people]. Ahhh [they think] there's an Indian; they'll start looking like us [through assimilation]. '[You're] Anglican, no you're Catholic.' Fuck. Or get the fuck out. Anyways, yeah, that's how we got there. And it's still like that too. We live across the river from each other. [It's] about an hour and a half walk." Thus, the communities of Kashechewan and Fort Albany, originally one community, are located about 12 kilometres apart on the James Bay. They separated in the 1950s over questions of religious orientation; today, Anglican influences persist in Kashechewan while Fort Albany retains a largely Roman Catholic outlook.

The religious division was reflected in his own family since his mother was Catholic and his father was Anglican: I didn't belong in the Anglican community; I didn't belong in the Catholic community. I was both. Yet the Catholics look at me as an Anglican. Then the Anglicans know me as Catholic". George felt the tension within the community over the mixture of religions within his family. George was raised as a Catholic and he mentioned that religious practices are deeply ingrained, even though he now thinks critically about his early religious beliefs: "You know Catholic kids—I was more into fish and chips on Fridays. I still [am]. I'll eat fish on Fridays. I won't eat meat. It's so ingrained in me. It's crazy. Well you have to quit something for lent or whatever. That's so silly". Through the religious nature of education—a day school operated by Anglicans in Kashechewan and a Catholic residential school in Fort Albany—George was taught that traditional Cree spiritual teachings were "bad, terrible, devil worship".

Many years later, George met an Indigenous Elder who was working in a prison where George was incarcerated. Following his release from prison, George met the Elder again at an AA meeting. The Elder invited George to help him with traditional ceremonies. George explained the influence of this experience: "For the next three years, I was with him in the bush most of the time. Out there, sitting on a cliff and just talking and talking." This respected Elder came to have a profound, positive influence on George's life.

**Sexual Abuse at Religious Residential and Day Schools:** George stated that he had suffered sexual abuse by Catholic school staff, a religious "Brother" at the residential school in Fort Albany. The events occurred after George's parents had taken him to the hospital in Fort Albany for medical treatment at the age of six. After a course of treatment for scabies, a Catholic Brother took him from the hospital to the residential school. George stated: "That's where the abuse started—in that school. Yeah, he sexually abused me when I was there." After six months, members of Kashechewan brought him back to his parents' community where he attended a day school. George was also sexually abused by a female teacher at his new school: "[Much] abuse was right there in front of the people, in front of kids, right. In that school I was abused differently, quietly, alone. That's where I was sexually abused by this lady. It was a born again Christian girl that got lonely, I guess, I don't know. She had issues. I don't know. I was a young boy, I was scared." In later years, in discussions with a friend, George compared experiences within Anglican and Catholic schools. He concluded that the experience was equally bad in both: "Everything, abuse and sexual abuse, beatings". In a Catholic-run residential school, his mother had experienced repeated beatings. George said: "She blamed herself for everything that happened there. She wasn't allowed to blame anyone else."

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was established to investigate what happened in Canada's residential schools. The TRC is examining records and the testimony of school officials as well as survivors and other witnesses. An aim of the TRC is to provide a public record of the experiences and to make recommendations regarding a settlement agreement. Like many Cree children, George was directly affected by the policies of the Canadian government which removed children from their families and placed them in schools that were often operated by religious organizations which, according to the TRC [18] "were set up to eliminate parental involvement in the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual development of Aboriginal children".

**Child welfare policies:** The effects of colonialism and the school system eroded children's pride in their cultural heritage and were institutions of control, domination and intimidation [20]. Child welfare policies were another strategy for removing Aboriginal children from their families. When George was born in the early 1960s, his family was living in the James Bay town of Moosonee, Ontario. The timing of his childhood coincided with a phenomenon known as the "Sixties Scoop", a period during the 1960s when there was a dramatic increase in the number of Aboriginal children apprehended by child welfare authorities [20] [21]. George understands that the nuns at the hospital intended to take him into their care: "I guess the nuns wanted to tell my mom that I died at birth. And they took off and hid me somewhere. They probably believed that I belonged to them. They tried to take me when I was a baby. But my [oldest] sister was there and, you know, took me as her own. [My sister] just took me home—just walked out." In discussions for this paper, George stated that he has heard much about "the early 60s and about [medical or religious staff] kidnapping children from hospitals from Native moms". He has come to believe that many apprehensions of Aboriginal infants took place in order to provide babies for adoption by childless white parents.

A few years later, when George was brought to the hospital for medical treatment, he was apprehended again: "And that's where I was [taken from my family]. Four of us went there and this priest picked me out of my little crowd of sisters and brothers and told me that I couldn't go home. They told my mom that I had to stay behind and heal... I remember crying for my mom." While George was later reunited with his family, the time spent with the nuns was terrifying and traumatic; he was physically abused and he suffered fear, loneliness and isolation.

Indeed, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation [1] reports that, for over a century, the systematic removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities was the cause of tremendous suffering. In addition to the pain and loss associated with being torn away from parents, siblings and extended family, by missing out on the experience of being part of a loving family, generations of Aboriginal people did not have opportunities to learn parenting skills.

George acknowledged that he did not know how to be a parent. The experiences of being removed from his family have continued to impact on his life, with adverse effects: "I took part in a program to find out about George—where it came from, all that meanness towards ladies that love me. [It came from] being abandoned, feeling abandoned as a kid by my real mom, my sister-mom, my foster moms. I always have this feeling of

impending doom when I'm happy with somebody. It's gonna happen, fuck, I'll do something to make it happen, why wait, you know?" After years of introspection and attending programs on anger management, George has been learning how to react in a different way: "I'm learning about it, how to curb that [negative behaviour]".

### **Economic aspects**

The economic implications of treaties signed in the past reverberate into the present. The creation of the reservation system served the interests of the colonial governments in that the treaties specified that Aboriginal people were ceding and surrendering all rights to the land [20]. The "reserves" were often located on territories that, in rural or remote locations, offered few prospects for economic prosperity. Even though mining, forestry and electric power generation projects now take place on the traditional lands of the Cree people, most people in Aboriginal communities live in deep poverty [20]. George's narrative reveals his childhood experiences of poverty: "Ever since I came out of my mom's womb, I was homeless. Sad but it's true. Thirteen people crammed in there. Think of this way. I never had a bed let alone a bedroom in my parents' house, ever in my life. I was always that kid who was sleeping on the floor, or on a couch, if I was lucky. That's it, one room [for] everybody. It was a tiny house, eh. But yeah, we were poor but we managed." He stated that the poverty experienced by his family "was normal, there was nothing wrong with it". Indeed, overcrowding in First Nations households is still prevalent [3].

George recalled a time when his mother was sent out of Kashechewan to receive medical treatment in southern Ontario for a brain tumour and his father accompanied her. The children left at home were of various ages and extended family members provided some food to the children, but it was not enough. Hunger led George to search for food in the local dump: "Yeah, when you're hungry, you'll eat anything."

George described aspects of the poverty and homelessness in communities of the James Bay: "When I was a kid we used to walk this [pedestrian] bridge, yeah, we used to see these winos. When I was kid even, I wanted to be like them 'cause all they do is sit there and drink, they don't even work, like Dad. I used to think, eh, 'And you give them money, why are you giving them money?'" The visibility of homeless people in his community led to acceptance of these living circumstances. The prevalence of poverty and homelessness led George to think of it as a "normal" way of life.

Challenges with literacy were barriers to opportunities for employment in the past, as well as the present. George remembers being interested in books and reading from an early age but his mother was unable to read: "My mom used to take me [to the store] because I used to read the Campbell [soup] labels 'cause I knew how to read. She didn't know which one was tomato." Having good literacy skills may have been one reason that, many years later, George was offered employment as a police officer in Kashechewan.

### **Geographical aspects**

Living in the remote, fly-in community of Kashechewan had an impact on George in a variety of ways. When his mother became ill, she had to leave the family and travel to the city for surgery "She [mother] got sick. She had a brain tumour. She had an operation [in the city]. And when she came home, she wasn't all there. Something was wrong when she came home,

she started going crazy. So they sent her off again. And then she had another one. She had two brain operations, then she went blind, eh? So CAS [child welfare] started coming around my mom's house, asking questions about the kids, 'cause there was lots of us, eh. And my mom was blind. But my sisters were older than... So then that flood happened and I went to Manitoba with my brother. Somebody came and picked me and my brother up. Again I was ripped away from my family".

On several occasions, George was taken out of his community for schooling; he was sent to Manitoba during his sixth, seventh and eighth grades and again later on for high school. Since there was no secondary school in the community, he had to leave home in order to continue his education. He was sent to a city several hundred kilometres away where he lived in a foster home or group home setting: "Yeah they put us in foster homes, in group homes, whatever. Yeah and they put us in different families. Like Italian families, French families. So again, I was ripped [away]. I didn't want to go to those foster homes. Well I ended up there anyway, through [to] grade 12, one after the other, different homes". In reflecting on the experience of being taken away from his family, George stated that separation "was the norm for me by then. It was normal. To this day I can't stay in one spot. I've been there for a year, there at my place—my little cubby hole. I am ready to move now." Thus George was separated from his family on numerous occasions, during infancy, childhood and adolescence. Some of these separations were due to the remoteness of the James Bay from health and educational services, but others were due to flooding and the proximity of pack ice. Nevertheless, the repeated separations from his family were due to the decisions and policies of the Canadian government that did not take into account the needs and best wishes of Aboriginal children.

Years after his schooling had been completed, the geographic location impacted on his life in a dramatic way. Following the deaths of family members and friends, George attempted suicide by walking onto the pack ice: "And going out on the ice breaking up. Like back home we have big rivers. Not like these little ditches around here, like, ah, really? (laughs) But the river I'm talking about, it takes an hour to walk across. An hour and a half, you know? That's a river. Anyway, the river was breaking up in spring. And it stopped for a while, so I guess I jumped on and then went for a walk. Dared it to move, take me, you know? Solid, my decision was solid that night. My brother-in-law came out, ran after me and saved me. That earned me quite a few months in the psych ward." His attempts at suicide resulted from the varied losses he had experienced: "That's what happened between me and life. Losing people, death, you know?" George explained that he was sent out of the community to a psychiatric hospital in a city of the near-north. "They tranquilized me and then, boom, the next day they put me in a cell". He was in the psychiatric hospital for several months. The abrupt removal from his community and the months spent institutionalized without family support marked the beginning of his transition into a life of homelessness.

### **Social aspects**

Racialization and racism continue to impact negatively on Aboriginal people in northern Ontario. George spoke about the stereotypes that are held by the cultural groups that are a majority—those of European backgrounds—and the discrimination and abuse he has suffered on the streets of Sudbury: "I get beaten up bad. Because I'm a lazy, no good, wino bum. Indian to boot. But you know what? Go all over this country, I

tell them, 'You don't like Indians? Pick up your ancestors' bones and go home'. Because in this continent, there's nothing but Indians, that you call us loosely, you know. We're North American Natives." George described several forms of racism he has experienced, including rude comments and even physical abuse by the general public: "I was scared of what I'm going to do if I punch back, you know. It's just being mean—she swung her backpack and hit me. People like that, I just ignore". Throughout many hours of interviews, George seldom spoke about experiences of racism. However, on rare occasions when he did so, it was with a depth of feeling that reveals the pervasive and systemic nature of racism in his life.

### **Legal aspects**

Aboriginal people are greatly over-represented in Canada's prison system; indeed, while Aboriginals constitute approximately three percent of the total population of Canada, they comprise about 19 percent of those serving federal sentences [17]. George was incarcerated several times. He explained his perspective on the justice system and prisons: "They had their own rules in prisons. Some, we don't even hear about. They've got their own little world in there, eh, their own little country, so to speak. Everything. We even have the courts. Monkey courts, we call them. See, if you hurt somebody in jail. You go into 'the hole' [solitary confinement]. That judge is down there. We get this little court thing and then you go back to the hole. (laughs) Anyway, I got out and I came back to Ontario." Because there are few services available for people released from prison, many become homeless [10]. Periods of incarceration followed by homelessness were central to George's experiences of life on the streets. He stated that he was incarcerated twice for offences that he did not commit. According to the Urban Aboriginal Task Force [19], racial profiling of Aboriginal people is a factor used to assess the probability of an Aboriginal person committing a crime in Sudbury, Ontario.

### **Interconnections**

George's life story illustrates the interconnections between the historical and cultural, economic, geographic, social and legal aspects of life for Aboriginal people. His life was adversely affected by the colonial past, including practices within government-funded, Christian-run educational institutions and child welfare policies. The assimilationist strategies embodied within policies, practices and institutions undermined traditional Aboriginal cultures and ways of life, disrupted family relationships and damaged self-esteem and sense of identity. Living through extreme poverty in a remote region governed by the Indian Act and the federal Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (now known as Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada) meant that his family life was controlled by external agents. He also mentioned that the effects were intergenerational—his mother had attended residential school: "My mom grew up in residential school. She did her best, which was awesome. And my dad was a very abusive man. He wasn't sent to residential school. It was just chaos from ahh family."

George associates the destructive experiences in his formative years with the trajectory into homelessness: "[I'm coping] through counselors and [dealing with] post-traumatic stress... The terrible experience as a kid—it's in me. It sticks with me and, yes, it did fuck up my way of thinking for a long time, as a kid. But as I learned what they taught me and what I went through, what I thought was right, is terribly wrong. You know?

So, what kept me in the bottle [alcoholism] after that, even then, was shame. You know? I could not say I was raped because it wasn't supposed to happen. I wasn't supposed to say, anyway, if it did happen." George has experienced some of the most negative events imaginable, such as effects of colonization, racialization and the destruction of his traditional culture, extreme poverty, the intrusion of child welfare authorities, physical abuse, repeated sexual abuse by school staff, the death of his mother, several suicide attempts, divorce, the deaths of more than one partner as well as the death of a seven-year-old daughter, physical violence on the streets and in prison, substance use and addictions and life threatening illnesses. George coped with decades of homelessness by numbing his feelings through the use of varied substances including street drugs, alcohol and other substitutes such as Listerene and rubbing alcohol.

He survived the excessive use of varied substances over many years, violence on the streets, sleeping rough in sub-zero temperatures and the frequent denial of access to front-line services for poor and homeless people because of addictions: "Yeah. I was barred for life from the soup kitchen too. I ate outside the soup kitchen. I can literally say I ate with dogs on the streets. Literally. [People who eat at the soup kitchen] put their dogs outside while they go eat and I'll be sitting out there eating, feeding the dogs soup".

The organization of the service system was a barrier to overcoming addictions due to requirements on the part of treatment centres for people to be "clean" in order to be admitted: "And a prostitute helped me detox. Cuz I wasn't allowed at that detox. And 'George is a lost cause, he'll never sober up', I heard them say that. 'George, he is a lost cause, we don't want him here. He'll just intimidate and get people to get out of here'. I heard them say that, eh. And they barred me for life." Eventually, George made the decision to stop using drugs and alcohol and to quit "cold turkey". With the help of a street friend who cared for him, George entered the recovery phase of his life and obtained housing. He is now focused on healing physically and psychologically, is connected to various services and spends his time engaged in volunteer work to help people living with homelessness.

### **Resilience**

In many ways, getting to know George has revealed how he exemplifies the concept of resilience through his capacity to overcome adversity. Resilience can be understood with reference to human agency, resistance and survival [16]. Human agency and resistance are illustrated through George's decisions to quit taking drugs and alcohol "cold turkey" and to take himself off the street at a time when varied social service agencies had banned him from entering their premises. He stated: "I started thinking differently and everything started looking different. It just gets better and feels better and better. Every time I walk away, I get a bit stronger". Survival is a key theme that resonates throughout his life story.

Through a process of introspection, George has sought counseling to help him to deal with the abuse he suffered as a child and the various challenges throughout his adolescence and adulthood: "I go see my counselors or I go somewhere positive where I can just let it all out... It can never be behind me, but it'll be beside me, so I can pick it up once in a while... Somebody told me that, an Elder, 'maybe you walk beside it and look at it once in a while. But don't leave it behind. Just

walk beside it and pick at it. Eventually, it'll evaporate.' So I'm doing that, with [my participation in] all these programs."

Resilience is also demonstrated in his decision to remain in contact with street people and service providers who work with homeless persons. George is now motivated to help others who are living through the circumstances he left behind approximately two years ago: "Now, the only time I look down on people is when I give them a helping hand. All that misery. If I save one person out there, it will be all worth it, you know. I can smile. I can say I did my job." He gives generously of his time and effort by volunteering with various outreach services: "I've been working with the outreach—with the white coats—we call them, which is Access AIDS. And the blue coats are the POINT [needle exchange]. And the black coats which are Native. I work for them too. I volunteer. And I guess, in March, I can start with the red coats because you need at least two years of sobriety to get in with them; that's the hardest [organization] to get into."

In pursuing his healing journey, George has moved to a new subsidized housing unit. He stated: "it's nice, it's brand new. It's my first brand new home in my life. It's mine. Now, I'm asking myself, 'now what?' Do I pack a bag and go rock the boat or do I stay? Do I do my treatment? You know, [there are] a lot of questions. It's scary." There are strong pressures for George to return to his former street life. He faces both internal pressures, as noted above and external pressures from people who are still living on the streets: "Stubborn—that's what I [am]. It's like going back to the cigarette smoking or drinking. I don't want to do it. I'm too stubborn and I use that stubbornness for me. They want me down there with them, yeah, they do. I feel it. [It's] jealousy. They don't want to see, especially me, get to where I'm at. I see it in their eyes. One of them even said, 'I fucking hate you George', but at the same time, he's happy for me". These pressures are intense as George considers street people to be his family. In addition to the ongoing challenges associated with effects of 20 years of street life, coping with occasions on which he is rebuffed by people on the streets is a stressor.

Nevertheless, George finds many opportunities for positive engagement. As well as his volunteer work, participating in the research project provides a way for George to express his thoughts and feelings and to help others by sharing his life story: "Even talking to you, it's a healing process for me... After I talked about [various issues], I felt good, you know? I felt happy. And you are helping me too, as I am helping with your project... I got out some stuff and it really helped me. Thank you very much by the way. It does help. That's why I like helping with the project and all this. If it helps me, it will help people in the long run." At present, George is striving to change social and economic policies that serve as barriers for homeless people who desire improved life circumstances.

## **4. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The findings from this case study reveal links between historical factors such as the colonial history of the James Bay, the consequences of residential schooling and child welfare practices, as well as experiences of racism and social exclusion that led to an extended period of absolute homelessness. The study also revealed the circumstances that led to change in George's life, his success in obtaining housing and in being

reintegrated into the urban Aboriginal community. His interaction with researchers over a period of more than a year has enabled George to reflect more deeply on his early life experiences in James Bay communities and their impact on his transition into and out of homelessness. The findings show how the formal service system did not work for George, why new perspectives and service responses toward homeless persons are needed, and what changes are required to facilitate the movement of Aboriginal people out of homelessness.

One of the goals of this case study is to allow those who have not suffered the consequences of homelessness to better understand the challenges that homeless people face. For those who have not experienced homelessness at first hand, understanding homelessness and its attendant psychological and physical effects poses its particular challenges. Even service providers who support this population often have difficulty comprehending the nature of the challenging life experiences of homeless people and their impact on their well-being. However, it is important to remember the inherent limitations of this case study as it can only ever provide, at best, a partial understanding of the lived reality of the case. A housed person can live as a homeless person, but it is always with the knowledge that after a few days they will be returning to their home. Homelessness persons do not have that knowledge, and the absence of a home to which they can return structures the horizon of their experience of their life on the street in a very different fashion than the experience of housed persons. As a formerly homeless person, George's ongoing work as a volunteer on the streets brings a depth of understanding to the challenges faced by the homeless people with whom he interacts. This case study cannot fully capture and communicate that understanding that is grounded in his lived experience.

A product of this case study was a 30 minute video documentary of George's story to be used in public education as well as in the classroom. The video narratives were captured in George's real life settings within the downtown core where he resided. The video footage reveals aspects of his lived reality in a way that interviewing alone cannot capture. In addition, the use of videotaping yielded detailed visual information that could not be provided by field notes taken by researchers. The participant's narratives illustrate key themes revealed through the case study.

Notwithstanding the epistemological limitations inherent in this case study as outlined above, George's case study can be used as an effective tool for teaching about the issues pertaining to systemic causes of homelessness, the perpetuation of homelessness through the existing social policies and the formal service system, and changes required to effectively address the needs of homeless First Nations peoples and their transition into housing and community life. First, by revealing the varied dimensions of homelessness, this case study can inform service planning and delivery to mitigate the issues faced by indigenous homeless persons. Secondly, in educational settings, this tool can be used to teach students about the links between broad social, historical, legal and economic patterns and the lives of individuals. Thirdly, it also provides a mechanism for educating the public about challenges that confront systematically disadvantaged people and how discrimination contributes to homelessness. The presentation and analysis of complex real world examples [8] constitute a powerful pedagogical tool contributing to the transformation of

people's epistemological point of view about the responsibility of individuals for their personal circumstances.

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