Digital Storytelling: A Research Methodology to Empower Oppressed and Marginalized Individuals

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1. Introduction

Qualitative research approaches utilizing innovative arts-based methods (e.g., digital storytelling, photovoice) have been found to be empowering and liberating for vulnerable people (Liampootong 2007). Digital storytelling has emerged as an innovative research method in social sciences (Liampootong 2007). Numerous researchers have asserted that digital storytelling, as a research technique, can provide a means to empower marginalized and oppressed individuals by giving them a voice, assisting them in expressing themselves, and by helping others to understand their perspectives (Burgess 2006; DeGennaro 2008; Podkalicka and Campbell 2010; Reed and Hill 2010; Schneider 2010; Thumbran 2010; Walsh, Rutherford, and Kuzmak 2009). In contrast, it has been argued that conventional research methods, in particular, many quantitative research approaches, have been found to de-empower and alienate marginalized, vulnerable and oppressed individuals (Butler-Kisber, 2010).

Digital storytelling is a method for discovering, describing and sharing experiences, events, ideas and feelings through a short film that is based on a non-fictional, first-person narrative (Burgess 2006; DeGennaro 2008; Thumbran 2010; Walsh et al. 2009). This research method utilizes traditional storytelling and digital tools such as voice recordings, moving and still images, music, and/or other sounds to create a powerful work of art. Digital storytelling does not require prior experience in the realm of video production and can be learned and utilized as a research method. Researchers seeking to learn the method typically participate in a workshop where ideas can be shared and technical assistance can be received from skilled individuals (Thumbran 2010).

1.1 History of Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling emerged from the artistic and cultural movements taking place in the United States during the 1970s and 80s (Center for Digital Storytelling 2012). During this time, artists and educators across various disciplines challenged the notion that art should be restricted to those with advanced talents and skills in fine arts. It was recognized that lay people could make significant creative contributions, provided that access to the tools for making art were made available to them. Dana Atchley, a media producer and interdisciplinary artist, developed the first digital story titled NEXT EXIT, a multimedia autobiography. Subsequently, Atchley collaborated with Joe Lambert and Nina Mullin to establish the San Francisco Digital Media Centre (SDFMC). Together they discovered that people with little or no prior experience in multimedia work could produce strong personal stories by using digital tools. Over the next several years, the group refined a curriculum that became the basis for community workshops to impart digital storytelling skills to others.

The early years of the SDFMC were quite successful in that several organizations in San Francisco participated in digital storytelling workshops (Thumbran 2010). People with disabilities, youth, and those from minority groups created personal stories that were used to educate others about their perspectives. Eventually, the academic community began to notice the work and the SDFMC relocated to Berkeley, California and was renamed the Centre for Digital Storytelling (CDS) (Center for Digital Storytelling 2012; Thumbran 2010). The establishment of the CDS enabled a larger number of people across the United States, Canada and eventually worldwide, to create digital stories.

1.2 Principles of Digital Storytelling

The digital storytelling method is based on several founding principles (Center for Digital Storytelling 2012; Thumbran 2010). The first principle is that every individual has a story to tell. This principle is based on the belief that all people are equal and every story is as important as any other.

The second principle is that the sharing of stories can lead to positive change within society (Center for Digital Storytelling 2012; Thumbran 2010). This principle also embraces the notion that the digital medium of storytelling can evoke emotions and actions among viewers (Center for Digital Storytelling 2012). This medium can inspire actions that may help to achieve and/or preserve equality amongst humans (Thumbran 2010). Other principles include the importance of listening to others, the recognition that autobiographical stories can be told from different points of view, and that creativity is a human activity that can be enhanced when coupled with digital technology.
1.3 Relevance to Social Justice and Social Work

The digital storytelling method is particularly relevant to the disciplines involved with social justice and social work practice. This method empowers marginalized and oppressed individuals (Thumbran 2010). The objective of the method is to raise community awareness regarding the issues faced by marginalized and oppressed people and to mobilize viewers to initiate collective action directed towards public policy changes (Reed and Hill 2010; Thumbran 2010). To initiate social and policy change, it is important to validate and share the issues of marginalized and oppressed people with dominant groups and decision makers. For example, Radley, Hodgetts, and Cullen (2005) used a photo-production technique to illustrate how homeless people depicted their lives on the streets of London, England, as well as to communicate to others the desperate situations and compelling needs of this group. Similarly, Walsh et al. (2009) found that the use of digital storytelling method led to a greater understanding of the needs of homeless women. In addition, the digital stories of these homeless women affirmed that services must be better designed in order to assist with the process of exiting homelessness and building a sustainable future for homeless women and their families.

Moreover, the digital storytelling method enables individuals to share their experiences in a therapeutic manner and may give them hope for the future (Reed and Hill 2010). For example, Finley (2005) conducted an arts-based research project with street youth by using different art media such as visual arts and drama as a way to build self-esteem among children. The project enabled participants to redirect or externalize their internal anger towards the persistent poverty that affected them.

2. Digital Storytelling with Indigenous People

Indigenous people have been found oppressed and marginalized for centuries in Canada (Kirmayer, Brass, and Tait 2000; Neckoway, Brownless, and Castellan 2007; Sochting, Corrado, Cohen, Ley, and Brasfield 2007; Stewart 2008). The social and historical forces of colonization, residential schools, racism, poverty and high rates of child welfare involvement have caused a great deal of pain and suffering to Indigenous people (Stewart 2008).

Sharing stories can be helpful in educating others about the processes of colonization and their impacts on Indigenous people (Iseke 2011). Moreover, sharing stories through digital storytelling can be therapeutic as it can help the storyteller release difficult emotions. Using film to express stories can have a healing impact upon the storyteller, particularly when the story involves retelling the traumatic events of the past and connecting them with the ongoing external forces of societal oppression and marginalization.

Iseke (2011) and Thumbran (2010) state that the use of digital storytelling is a culturally safe and appropriate medium when conducting research with cultures that have strong oral traditions. Oral storytelling has long been utilized in Indigenous cultures and the view has been put forward that digital storytelling may be a new way of preserving these stories (Christie 2005; DeGennaro 2008; Iseke 2011). The stories are vital since they originated through several generations and carry important cultural messages. Video and digital media can be effective in transmitting history, beliefs, and values to future generations (DeGennaro 2008; Lewis 2006).

In recent years, attempts have been made to merge Indigenous oral storytelling traditions with new materials and technologies, including video and digital media (Hopkins 2006). The transition from oral storytelling to an approach that incorporates new media and materials does not threaten traditions, but rather affords a continuation of what Indigenous people have done traditionally, throughout their history. The Internet has revolutionized the way Indigenous ideas can be communicated. Many isolated Indigenous communities have benefited from the Internet because it allows them to connect over great geographic distances and to reduce isolation. In the past, Indigenous persons traditionally travelled extensive distances for long periods of time in order to communicate and trade with others. The Internet now makes it easier for this to occur. Hence, many of the traditions of Indigenous people have remained but have now been transformed by digital technologies.

Moreover, the Internet is useful for creating public awareness and education about the long-standing social issues faced by the Indigenous People (Hopkins 2006). The websites created by Indigenous people are places where the public can obtain information on Indigenous communities, traditions, and stories. In addition, on some websites, people can meet and talk virtually, view artwork, read and express ideas pertaining to Indigenous issues. The Internet, video, and digital media have been effective tools in communicating Indigenous perspectives and stories.

For many years, Indigenous people have had limited opportunities to explain their views on issues and events (Lewis 2006). The mainstream media and the Canadian government too often neglected the perspectives of Indigenous people. Most of the Canadian mainstream media were oriented against Indigenous activists and were supportive of the oppressive policies of the Canadian government (Lewis 2006). For instance, films were created by non-Aboriginal people who made
Indigenous people appear primitive (Christie 2005; Hopkins 2006). As a result, many libraries have been filled with inaccurate images of Indigenous people (Christie 2005).

However, over the past two decades, attempts have been made to capture and communicate the authentic experiences, beliefs, traditions, and sociopolitical and cultural perspectives of Indigenous people by using digital media (Hopkins 2006; Lewis 2006). One example is a film titled *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, which was created by an Indigenous filmmaker to portray the Oka crisis from the perspectives of the Indigenous people (Lewis 2006). Films and documentaries are a modern extension of Indigenous oral traditions (Lewis 2006). Moreover, films and videos are powerful media for changing the ways in which Indigenous people have been portrayed. In addition to filmmakers, many advocacy groups, community members, and cultural groups have utilized films and videos to challenge dominant media perspectives about Indigenous people and their cultures (Hopkins 2006) and communicate to the external world about the experiences of assimilation, discrimination, and displacement faced by Indigenous people.

3. **Purpose of the Study**

Digital media provides a useful set of tools to empower Indigenous people and to communicate with the world about the social issues faced by them. Given the relevance of storytelling through digital media among Indigenous people, the project was designed to capture nonfictional stories about housing, homelessness and mental health issues among Indigenous people living in northeastern Ontario. The objective of the project was twofold. The first goal was to learn how digital storytelling could be a useful research and healing tool for Indigenous people. The project was designed to determine whether digital storytelling with Indigenous people can lead to a sense of empowerment through the telling and sharing of stories. The second project aimed to examine how digital storytelling can be used for public education.

4. **Methods**

4.1 **Settings**

The study was conducted in two communities in July and August 2012. A trained facilitator conducted a series of sessions in July 2012 with people living in the rural, remote Indigenous community of Moosonee on the James Bay coast, Ontario, Canada. With no road access, this community of 3,500 people is accessible only by train or air travel. The residents of the community are primarily Cree people (85%) from the western James Bay region. In August 2012, two digital storytelling workshops were held in the City of Greater Sudbury in northeastern Ontario. Sudbury is the main urban centre in the region, with a population of approximately 160,000 people. Indigenous people comprise about 6% of the population (Statistics Canada 2010).

4.2 **Sample**

The sample consisted of nine Indigenous people living in or having grown up in northeastern Ontario. Six women and three men created 10 digital stories. The sample size was appropriate as qualitative projects utilizing arts-based methods typically involve between five and twelve participants (Andonian 2010; Bukowski and Buetow 2011; Fleming, Mahoney, Carlson, and Engebretson 2009). Each participant created a unique autobiographical story by using digital media. The ten digital stories (Table 1) captured a range of experiences of Indigenous women and men and provided a unique database for analysis since digital storytelling has not been used in prior research with the Cree people from the James Bay region or Indigenous people living in Sudbury. The combined length of the short digital stories was more than 30 minutes.

One of the digital stories, *Will to Live* (2012) began as a digital story that became expanded into a twenty-nine minute documentary film as interest grew on the part of the participant to elaborate upon his narrative. Due to the length of this video, there was a substantial database to analyze. A short digital story, *How I Got Home* was made by the same participant. While the participant gave written consent for his real name to be used, as he is now a peer helper with homeless programs and an activist in this area, pseudonyms have been used for all participants to ensure confidentiality. Anonymizing data is a common practice in qualitative research since it assists with ensuring confidentiality (Gibbs, 2007).

4.3 **Procedure**

Indigenous people in two northern Ontario communities—one urban and one rural/remote—were invited to create digital stories on the themes poverty, homelessness, migration or mental health. Two variations on digital storytelling methods were used. During the sessions, participants living with homelessness or extreme poverty had opportu-
Table 1
Digital Stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Length (minutes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drugs and Alcohol</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason for Living</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleeping Couch</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Housing</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing through the Cracks</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing Left, Only Home</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Floor, Street or Bush</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>6.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How I got Home</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>5.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost and then Found</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Will to Live</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>29.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

nities to remember, explore and develop ideas about an aspect of their lives that was significant for them. Through a facilitated discussion, they were encouraged to consider aspects of their living circumstances that may have been obscured by the social context.

4.3.1 Procedure A

Sessions conducted in the northern Ontario City of Greater Sudbury followed the procedures outlined by the Centre for Digital Storytelling. In a meeting prior to the workshop, participants were informed about the ethical issues and they provided written consent for attending the workshop and developing a digital story. The process was documented through note taking, audio recordings, and video recordings. Participants attended a 12-hour digital storytelling workshop held over four days (three hours per day). The workshop provided detailed explanations of the process, including a screening of sample digital stories and a general discussion of issues pertaining to representation in the media. A central aspect of the workshop was a group discussion in the form of a "story circle" which enabled participants to share their ideas for a digital story with others in the group. Participants were encouraged to think about the following questions in deciding what story they wanted to tell.

- What part of my story has not been told?
- How do I want to present myself using my own words and images?

- What are my lived experiences of challenges related to mental health, poverty, homelessness or migration?
- How can I explore alternative ideas about mental health, poverty, homelessness and migration that help with understanding the complex issues involved?

Participants considered how the digital stories created through these workshops could be used to help viewers to question their assumptions and to re-evaluate the judgements of some people as "less than".

Following the story circle, participants worked individually to develop their narratives in the form of a script. Each participant was provided with writing tools including paper, pencils, and a laptop computer. The final scripts were approximately 250 words in length. Facilitators assisted participants with the audio recording of the narratives; these recordings formed the basis of the digital stories to which images and sounds were added using the software Final Cut Pro.

The digital storytelling sessions were co-facilitated by project staff members who had been trained in the use of digital media. Immediately following the digital storytelling sessions, we conducted narrative interviews with participants to explore the process and the impact of creating digital stories. The final individual stories were shown to the group in which it was created, to other digital storytelling groups, and to mixed audiences of homeless persons, service providers, the general public and students in an interactive format that included time for questions and discussion.

The workshops thus invited participants (women and men) to explore, remember and develop ideas about mental health, poverty, homelessness and migration that were particularly salient to them and yet that may have been obscured by the social context. Through this process, the participants documented their personal stories and circumstances using narratives and images which illustrated their struggles, preferred ways of living, understandings and perceptions.

4.3.2 Procedure B

The procedure followed with the Cree people from rural and remote communities of northern Ontario was similar to that described above except that the facilitator worked with participants individually. In individual sessions with the facilitator, participants worked through their ideas for their digital stories, created their scripts, recorded the narratives and then made decisions about the images to be included in their digital stories. An important difference between the approaches
used in Moosonee and Sudbury was that the Moosonee participants preferred not to use a group workshop format for the creation of their digital stories; they preferred to create their stories individually.

4.4 Approach to Analysis

A generic, thematic approach to the analysis was utilized for the narratives and images within ten digital stories (Gibbs, 2007; Tesch 1990). The analysis drew upon the mechanics of data-driven thematic coding as described by Gibbs (2007). This approach is similar to the procedures for open coding within the grounded theory approach (cf., Strauss, Corbin, 1990).

In the first step, the narratives of seven digital stories were reviewed in their entirety. Subsequently, the coding process was initiated where the words capturing the essence of key concepts were written in the margins of the scripts of the transcribed narratives of the stories. Once all data were coded, the relevant text segments and themes were highlighted using different colours. The text segments were copied and pasted into separate MS Word documents for each theme. While highlighting the segments, the connections between the segmented text and the larger dataset were retained. Hence the text segments were collected in a manner that retained the original meanings. When text segments contained more than one meaning, they were assigned more than one code.

Later, the formulation of sub themes on the basis of similarities between several codes was initiated. Several sub themes were found to be clustered together and gave rise to more abstract themes. The process was guided by the purpose of the research and was grounded in the available data. Gradually an organizing system was developed and refined further by examining the codes and data several times throughout the process. Through this process, minor codes were dropped, related categories were merged and codes were re-worded to adequately capture the meanings conveyed by the participants. In the last step, the themes and subthemes were described. The process was iterative and nonlinear.

Along with textual/transcribed verbatim transcripts of the narrative material, the images in the videos of the ten digital stories were analysed. A somewhat different approach was utilized when analysing the visual content of the videos. Two guiding questions, “what is the visual content of the video?” and “what does the video communicate?” were utilized in the analysis process (Bach 2007). Viewing the videos with the sound muted was important for maintaining a focus on the visual material. Codes or themes relating to the guiding questions were written on a notepad. Segments of the videos were assigned more than one code when they conveyed multiple meanings. The codes developed from the visual data in the videos were compared with the codes established from the analysis of the narratives. Subsequently, the codes were clustered into major themes and sub themes. The process was iterative as it required the researchers to compare and contrast the visual data with the narrative data in the videos. Constant comparison of the narrative data, visual data and the emerging organizing system of themes and sub-themes focused on ensuring an accurate representation of the participants’ stories.

5. Results

The videos and scripts of the participants revealed four major themes and five subthemes. A key finding was that the same themes were present in the digital stories of the Indigenous people from rural, remote communities and those living in the main urban centre of northeastern Ontario. The major themes comprised homelessness, mental health issues and substance abuse, family life and childhood abuse, and resilience. The theme of homelessness encompassed five sub themes including colonization, absolute homelessness, inadequate housing conditions, lack of assistance and transience. The remaining four themes were not divided into subthemes.

5.1 Homelessness

Homelessness was a major theme explored through this digital storytelling project. All participants had experienced forms of homelessness or poverty during their lives. In the following passages, the sub-themes are described.

5.1.1 Homelessness and Colonization

In The Will to Live, Dr. Emily Fairies, Professor of Indigenous Studies at the University of Sudbury, explained the link between homelessness and colonization. Her narrative revealed that traditionally, in the pre-contact era, before the influence of Europeans became widespread, no one was homeless. Every community member had a home because Indigenous societies were based on large extended families in which every individual was included. Moreover, in the traditional societies, food, shelter and material goods were shared. However, due to the historical processes associated with colonization, Indigenous peo-
Effects of Colonization

Many participants experienced living conditions that are below Canadian housing standards. The buildings in which people were living were deteriorating, were affected by water leakage and mould and had drafty windows or doors. Moreover, there were not enough houses in the participants’ First Nation communities to provide homes for those who needed them. Some people were compelled to live in overcrowded circumstances or even in tent frames. Helen explained the problems with the dire living conditions:

The place that we lived in was condemned, frosted windows in the wintertime. We had to use 3 electric heaters and the oven and stove on all night just to keep us warm (Helen, My Housing, 2012).

Participants stated that these substandard living conditions adversely affected their physical and mental health. The overcrowded housing and living conditions experienced by many participants were evident in the following statement by Peter:

There were just two bedrooms, in one little house, 13 people crammed in there... Think of it this way, I never had a bed, let alone a bed in my parents’ house, ever in my life. I was always that kid, sleeping on the floor or on the couch if I was lucky (Peter, Will to Live, 2012).

Similar instances of families living together in overcrowded houses in the First Nations households have been reported in previous studies (Clatworthy 2009; Laird 2007; Layton 2008; Waldbrook 2008).
crowding was a result of efforts by Indigenous people to avoid absolute homelessness. This situation is consistent with traditional, pre-contact patterns of living in which extended family members took in those who needed shelter.

5.1.1.3 Lack of Assistance

Lack of assistance was a reoccurring sub-theme across several digital stories. Participants spoke of the unavailability of formal supports to address financial, housing, emotional, and physical needs. In some instances, the shortage of formal assistance exacerbated physical and mental health conditions. Moreover, participants identified barriers related to inadequate and unaffordable housing, and the low levels of government financial support through social assistance programs. In addition, the digital stories revealed the need for public health inspectors, to address deficiencies in the rental accommodations available to people with little or no income.

The struggles in gaining access to formal services and supports were conveyed by Peter, even on a cold Canadian winter night:

I walked to the, Salvation Army hostel for men and I wasn’t allowed in there. And I asked that guy, ‘Can I stay there for the night, sleep on the bench for half an hour’ and he said ‘No, you smell like alcohol, you can’t come in, go to detox’ he said... So I went to men’s detox and they said, ‘Peter, you’re not drunk enough. What are you doing in this weather? Go back to your bridge. You’re not drunk enough Peter. You can’t come in’. I said

‘Come on, I’m freezing’. They said ‘Peter, you’ve burned a lot of bridges, get out of here before we call the cops’. ‘Call them, maybe they’ll give me a cell (laughs)’. But they didn’t, they just kicked me out. This is like 2 or 3 o’clock in the morning in a raging blizzard in January. I was wrapped up in my blanket. I ended up going to the Cop Shop and they said ‘No, Peter, you’re a waste of space and paper. Get out of here. Go find a blanket or something’ (Peter, Will to Live, 2012).

5.1.1.4 Transience

Many of the participants were transient, while they were homeless. They reported having to move or change communities due to a lack of housing, being homeless, leaving an overcrowded or an exploitative situation, as narrated by Helen.

We moved back to Fort Albany, our home community; we lived with grandma at her place until I moved to Kashechewan and started a family of my own—there wasn’t enough room at my partner’s place—where we struggled, and had decided to move to Moosonee. We sold our furniture, beds, and etcetera. Just took our clothes and flew by “Tuzer airlines” which cost $600. We arrived in Moosonee and I stayed at the resource center, me and my kids (Helen, My Housing, 2012).

Similarly, Kauppi, Gasparini, and Pallard (2009) found that many migrant homeless people in northern Ontario had left their communities in search of better social services and housing.
5.2 Mental Health Issues and Substance Abuse

A second major theme was mental health issues and substance abuse issues faced by Indigenous digital storytellers. The following quote captures the dejection, depression, anger and marginalization experienced by Stella.

Rejection, lost, broken relationships, emptiness inside, loneliness, depressed, unwelcome, disowned, miserable, abused, broken, hopeless, sad, bitter, angry, helpless, hard hearted, isolated, shy, division (Stella, Reason for Living, 2012).

There were many examples of participants’ struggles with mental health issues. Some reported feeling overwhelmed and depressed to the point of wanting to end their lives or engage in self-harm, as explained by Kelsey.

Our father has struggled with mental health issues most of his adult life. This has had a deep influence on my life. Handling my Dad’s mental health hindered my own. When I was 17, I moved out. I first experienced mental health issues, drowned my emotions away with alcohol, and began cutting myself. When I was 18, I came to realize I couldn’t live that way. I started on antidepressants, and stopped taking them. When I was 19, I started handling my health naturally. Now, at 23, my mental health is still disintegrating (Kelsey, Lost and Then Found, 2012).

First it was this homelessness, then the addictions came, right. And then homelessness just kind of stayed, it just kind of sticks to you. It doesn’t leave, especially when addictions are there too. So homelessness is always there (Will to Live, 2012).

Many digital stories revealed the participants’ struggles for survival—which were sometimes related to addictions—and for basic necessities such as food, shelter and clothing. These findings are consistent with the literature that noted a link between mental health challenges, homelessness and addictions (Clatworthy and Ramage 2011; Layton 2008; Nabigon 2006; Skott-Myhre, Raby, and Nikolaou 2008; Waldbrook 2008).

The theme of mental health struggles among Indigenous participants was supported by previous research, which indicated higher levels of mental health challenges, self-harm, and suicide rates linked to the racism and colonization among Indigenous people (Kirnayer et al. 2000; Nabigon, 2006; Neckoway et al. 2007; Stewart, 2008).

5.3 Family Life and Childhood Abuse

Many participants commented on their experiences with family members. Both positive and negative experiences with family were conveyed through the digital stories. Roxanne recounted the positive experiences:

If it wasn’t for my grandparents, I don’t know where I’d be. I really don’t think that I’d be alive. I always see them praying for me as a child. And part of me believes that those prayers were answered (Roxanne, Seeing through the Cracks, 2012).

In contrast, some participants narrated sad and painful memories of their childhood and family life where they felt unwanted and neglected. At times, separation from the family caused by the interventions of child welfare authorities generated feelings of rootlessness and lack of belonging. A perceived absence of love and bonding among the family members was apparent in Stella’s words:

No home, no love, no food, no hugs, no parents, no family, no security, no safety, no acknowledgement, no joy, no point of living, no place of belonging, no acceptance (Stella, Reason for Living, 2012).

Many situations in the digital stories pertained to participants’ experiences of some type of abuse during their childhood. The participants disclosed different forms of abuse with physical, sexual, verbal and emotional dimensions. At times, participants recounted traumatic
experiences of maltreatment and neglect and their involvement with the child welfare system. Helen explained her family circumstances:

Three days after my tenth birthday, I was taken away by CAS [Children's Aid Society] because there was no love in my home. There were naked drunks passed out on the floor. They were covered in blood, urine, puke, beer, bodily fluids, and mud. It was no place for a child... I never knew love, hugs, or hearing the words I love you... Back when I was a child, I felt unwanted by many in my family tree, felt neglected (Helen, My Housing, 2012).

These statements are consistent with the literature that discusses high levels of abuse endured by the First Nations people through colonialism and the legacy of the residential school system (Iseke 2011; Iseke and Moore 2011; Layton 2008; Nabigon 2006). Varied forms of abuse experienced by Indigenous people in school systems often operated by religious organizations on behalf of the Canadian government have left lasting impacts on their lives.

The disruption and dysfunction within the families in Indigenous communities have been deeply connected with the colonial processes and the actions of missionaries as explained by Peter.

Like my reservation, was mixed, screwed up because of the churches. England came, baptized a whole bunch of people and then left for the winter. Then France came and then baptized a whole bunch of us. And pretty soon they split the community in half. They had two churches, one for England and one for France. That's how my family got split up. (Fort Albany and Kashechewan). And I think that's where it stems from, that prejudice against other Natives. Even your own cousin because they're Catholic or Anglican, you know. I think that's where it came from, that way of thinking (Peter, Will to Live, 2012).
schools where attempts were made to destroy their Indigenous identity, culture, traditions, religion and language.

5.4 Resilience

Despite the difficulties and hardships, many participants demonstrated resilience through their digital stories. The participants noted that their hardships had eventually brought about profound changes in their lives and transformed them into better human beings. Participants reported that this transformation enabled them to feel empowered and provided a purpose for living. Stella’s words reflect aspects of the participants’ transformation:

But I did find love; I was transformed at the age of 17. I allowed love to enter my heart through the power of my faith. Now I love, now I forgive. Joy, peace, freedom, relief, complete, filled, sense of belonging, important, cared for, soft hearted, sensitive to hurting people, emotional, forgiven, protected, provided for, healed, transformed, comforted, renewed, restored, refreshed, cleansed, high on life, happy, calm, sure, hopeful, definite, accepted, held, helped, helpful, open, bold, mended heart, close relationship, restored relationships, welcome, lots of food, parents, family, community, reason for living (Stella, Reason for Living, 2012).

Peter demonstrated resilience by engaging in volunteering activities within the community. The title “The Will to Live” is symbolic of how Peter found strength within himself in the face of adversity and pushed forward with his life.

One of the most compelling themes that emerged through the examination of the narratives was the ability of participants to be resourceful. The participants expressed many challenging situations where the odds were against them. As illustrated in Figure Shane demonstrated resourcefulness, creativity and imagination by using the electric stove as a heat source during extremely cold weather. While such practices can lead to house fires, people develop coping and survival strategies when they find themselves in adverse living conditions.

Figure 9: A stove as a source of warmth

Peter also revealed resourcefulness in his explanation of a time when he was left on a highway by police, dozens of kilometers from any city or town.

I started walking towards Timmins. Somebody picked me up and then dropped me off at the [Arctic] Watershed. I got another ride, and I ended up back in Timmins and that’s when I went to see my late sister there. She was living there at the time. And I told her that I was gonna hitchhike to my reserve, Kashechewan. Make it as far as Cochrane and then jump in the boxcar, which I usually do when I go home eh? So I went to Cochrane, then I saw a buddy there with a vehicle, taking it back home on the train. So I hid in his vehicle so I could get a free ride. It’s a 5-hour ride to Moosonee by train. That’s how I got to Moosonee. From there, I went to my cousin’s house and I went to have coffee with her. I asked about my other friend who owns “Tozer”. It’s a little airline of field planes... And he charges back and forth to my reserve. So I hopped on with him. Well, I helped him load and unload right, so I earned my little jumper seat there. That’s how I got home (How I got Home, 2012).

This narrative reveals Peter’s resourcefulness when he had no money but he found ways to obtain transportation to enable him to make his way from the side of a highway to a remote fly-in community in northern Ontario.
6. Discussion

The digital stories captured the experiences of homelessness, mental health issues and substance abuse, childhood trauma and difficult family life and resilience of the Indigenous participants. These stories made a significant positive impact on the storytellers and the broader community where they have been shown in public screenings.

6.1 Impact of Digital Storytelling

The digital stories were developed with the support of trained facilitators who were present to provide assistance in the creation of the digital stories—through the development and editing of the narratives and the process of creating visual components of the digital stories. The audio and visual aspects were sequenced effectively in order to transmit the emotional content in the films. Many of the stories contained elements of tragedy and pain mixed with personal strength and resilience. Participants expressed and depicted in images a wide range of experiences pertaining to homelessness, mental health issues, addictions, being misunderstood, and oppressed. With regard to the digital storytelling procedures, participants expressed the view that the process was constructive, validating and inspiring:

I wouldn’t hesitate to do another one. I didn’t think [at first] that I had a story to tell; but we’ve all got a story. If you sit down and you go through this process, you’ll be surprised what story comes out. And the emotion! Giving people the opportunity to speak their stories says a lot about the compassion, the empathy—what you’re doing is remarkable and amazing. I was so excited to be here today.

6.2 Impact of the Digital Storytelling Activities within the Community

Digital storytelling activities have had a major impact in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada in terms of creating awareness about the issues of poverty, homelessness, mental health challenges, and migration faced by Indigenous people. Seven digital stories were presented at a local theater for public viewing. The event was organized by the PHM project and attended by over three hundred people. The producers, director, and one of the digital storytelling participants answered questions after the videos had been shown.

Approximately one month later, a second public presentation of a selection of digital stories was organized in which the audience consisted of approximately eighty people. Viewers were homeless individuals, the general public, scholars, students, researchers, and service providers at both events.

Many of the spectators were moved by the digital stories, which allowed viewers to understand the perspectives of the participants. Public screenings of digital stories provided an opportunity for viewers to learn, for example, that homelessness is not only a problem in urban centers but also in remote Indigenous communities. Viewers commented on the significance and effectiveness of these types of videos in transmitting the messages of Indigenous people. Distress was another reaction, as some viewers appeared to be somewhat emotional due to the realization and sudden knowledge gained about the difficulties experienced by the people in the videos. Some viewers were shocked or angry that these types of issues have not had any media coverage and felt that the larger community ignored the issues. Yet newspaper and television crews were present to cover the events and to raise more awareness about the issues through print and television media. Lastly, many viewers expressed the need for more public screenings in order to further enhance public awareness of the issues faced by Indigenous people.

7. Conclusion

The digital storytelling process was a form of participatory action research as the participants engaged with the researchers and the power imbalance associated with traditional research approaches were greatly reduced. This project empowered the participants by enabling them to bring their experiences and perspectives to the forefront. The entire process was based on respectful and egalitarian relationships between the participants and the researchers. Through digital storytelling, the participants received opportunities to reveal their personal experiences with pressing social problems such as homelessness and mental health issues. In addition, they gained technical skills and knowledge in the use of digital media, and thus contributed to social change processes. The screening of these digital stories served a broader societal purpose by bringing awareness about the connection between colonialism and social issues faced by Indigenous people. This powerful medium helped to challenge the misconceptions held by the general public about the social issues encountered by Indigenous people. Aside from the general public, the digital storytelling approach informed community professionals about the importance of addressing the needs of Indigenous people and taking a positive step forward towards creating a more just and equal society.
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Methodological Challenges in Health Research Among Vulnerable Populations of Northern Canada

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1. Introduction

Over the past twenty years, researchers and policy makers have demonstrated a growing commitment towards health-related research among the vulnerable populations residing in the northern, rural and remote communities of Canada (Young and Chatwood, 2009). This enhanced interest in moving the northern health research agenda forward is grounded in the desire to reduce and eliminate the long-standing disparity in the health status among people living in the northern and southern parts of the country. A number of initiatives have been undertaken to enhance the capacity for northern health research. However, conducting health research in northern Canada is fraught with several methodological challenges (Loyns and Gardner, 2001). Before proceeding with the description of these challenges, the health issues prevalent among the vulnerable populations of the north are delineated.

Although northern Canada encompasses 80% of the landmass of the country, less than 5% of the population live in this vast expanse of land (Bone, 2003). A significant percentage of northern residents report poor health status characterized by lower life expectancy, increased risk of chronic diseases, higher morbidity, and greater disability resulting from personal (e.g., smoking and diet), social (e.g., isolation, domestic violence, racism and the legacy of colonialism), economic (e.g., unemployment, poor housing conditions, persistent poverty), health care system (e.g., supply and distribution of health care providers), and environmental factors (e.g., unavailability of clean drinking water, geography) (Adelson, 2004; Kirby, 2002; Romanow, 2002).