

# **First Nations and Rural Youth: Career Exploration Narratives**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the current climate of economic uncertainty and socio-political restructuring, it is vitally important that young people participate actively in life-career planning (Feather 2000). The situation is particularly urgent in coastal and rural communities, especially First Nations communities, which have been devastated by recent fishing, forestry, and mining closures. These youth face challenges associated with living in areas where there are dramatically changed economic bases, limited work experience options, high unemployment, isolation, and other factors that limit their knowledge of and exposure to the world of work (Bollman and Biggs 1992; Lehr and Jeffrey 1996). In addition, young people in families and communities that are experiencing stress related to social and economic restructuring are at high risk for injuries and health problems. Substance abuse, peer violence, depression, and high-risk sexual practices are examples of behaviours associated with the effects of societal restructuring and the resultant family stress, economic hardship, and reduced community services (Daily 1988; Jackson, Highcrest, and Coates 1992; Shucksmith and Hendry 1998). Communities and families are deeply concerned about the diminishing educational and work opportunities available for their children.

Although there are programs and research directed at youth employment, health issues, and education, most carry what Jeffrey, Lehr, Hache, and Campbell (1992) term an “urban assumption.” Young people living in small towns and villages have often been ignored. The counselling and life-planning needs of these youth are different from those for urban youth (Cahill and Martland 1994; Lehr and Jeffrey 1996). Isolation, health risks, lack of occupational role models, limited access to training or education, and cultural or identity differences are continuing concerns. The situation is particularly challenging for Aboriginal youth, who are often dealing with barriers related to literacy, education, health, and community losses (Martin and Farris 1994; McCormick and France 1996; Neumann, McCormick, Amundson, and McLean 2000).

## **RESEARCH STUDY**

The present research is part of a large multidisciplinary project entitled Coasts Under Stress ([www.coastunderstress.ca](http://www.coastunderstress.ca)). In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the following questions: What life-career supports, issues, and barriers do First Nations and rural youth experience? What has helped them to address any challenges? The conceptual framework for the research is constructivist life-career development theory, which maintains that people’s life-context or life situation has a strong influence on both their understanding of and their choices about work and lifestyle (Cahill and Martland 1994; Peavy 1993; Savickas 1993). This approach emphasizes the central importance of a person’s physical, social, and cultural context, and how these affect life planning and decision making. Interactions among these factors in people’s lives influence how they perceive

education and work options, gender and family roles, available resources, and lifestyle opportunities.

In this initial phase of the research, an ethnographic narrative approach is being utilized to explore young people's meaning making regarding their experiences. A unique approach to interviewing has been developed for the project (Shepard and Marshall 1999, 2000). In addition to verbal descriptions of their lives and future plans, the youth construct life-space maps and explore their "possible selves" (Markus and Nurius 1986). These multiple forms of data provide rich and meaningful pictures of the young people's lives, as well as a flexible, hands-on approach, which is so important when working with youth.

Youth aged 16 to 19 have been targeted for this research because they are making the transition from high school to work and/or post-secondary education. The participants in the present study are from three small coastal and rural communities in British Columbia: a southern coastal town (about 5000 people), a north coastal First Nations village (about 250 people), and a southern interior rural town (about 2000 people). Their economies are largely based on forestry, small businesses, agriculture, tourism, and fishing (in the two coastal communities). Recent cutbacks in the fishing and forestry sectors have resulted in substantial job losses and elevated levels of social assistance.

High-school teachers, counsellors, community residents, and the researchers themselves gave young people information about the research and asked for volunteers. The present group of 18 participants included 13 females (two were 18 years old, nine were 17, and two were 16) and 5 males (one was 18 years old, three were 17, and one was 16). Numerous informal interviews were also conducted with adults and other youth to obtain a broadly based pictures of the communities.

## **INTERVIEWS**

The aim of the specific interviewing procedure was to obtain rich descriptive material in order to understand the ways young people view their community and its impact on their life-career plans. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and focused on four broad questions:

- 1. Context question:** What has it been like for you growing up in this small community? Tell me about your friends, family, school, and activities.
- 2. Life-career plans:** Since you are nearing the end (have finished) high school, you are probably thinking about your future. How do you see your future unfolding, in work, relationships, education, and elsewhere?

3. **Effect of small community:** When you think about your plans for the future, how has growing up in a small community affected those plans?
4. **Self-identity:** Think about who you are in this community and tell me about yourself. How would you name and describe your different selves?

During the discussion about life-career plans (question #2), participants drew a *life-space* map to visually indicate the importance of certain features in their lives, as well as the relationships among these different elements. Beginning with themselves in the middle of the page, participants depicted people, activities, plans, and any other elements that are important to their present and future lives. They then indicated the importance of these elements and their relationship to them by using connecting lines, drawings, words, colours, and shading, as well as the physical placement of the elements on the map itself. During the mapping, the participants described each element and what meaning it had for them. This activity provided both a concrete picture of the various life-career aspects of the participants' lives, and information about their relative importance. (For a more detailed description of the mapping process, see Shepard and Marshall 2000.)

In question #4, participants explored their *possible selves*, their future hopes, dreams, and fears. Possible selves represent a personalized form of self-concept, linked to motivation and future life planning (Cross and Markus 1991; Markus and Nurius 1986). Their development involves the use of self-reflection and imagination to create a set of hoped-for, expected, and feared future selves. Participants described and wrote down current selves, as well as future and undeveloped selves. They also were asked which selves were expected, or most likely to come true, and what they were doing to foster hoped-for selves or prevent feared selves.

## RESULTS

The interview data yielded several themes and sub-themes. Three consistently recurring themes across participants include staying in the community versus leaving it, the implementation of *possible selves*, and the development of self-awareness. Each of these themes will be briefly described and illustrated by quotes from the young people's narratives.

### **Staying versus leaving**

The young people could identify advantages and disadvantages to staying. All recognized that more work and education opportunities were available elsewhere, but many described strong ties to their families and to the place where they've grown up.

Anita: I don't think there's anyone saying "stay here"... everyone knows that you can't stay here. You really can't ... education is basically the only way to get out of this town because if you get trapped in here, and you end up having kids, then you, like, don't have a father ... there's no way out. You're kind of stuck here...

Sam: I want to live here forever ... I never want to leave, or live somewhere else. I really like to fish and be around boats ... All my family is here ... I want my kids to grow up here.

### **Possible selves**

Participants identified between six and twenty possible selves; however, the degree of development varied considerably. Some had clearly identified their paths and described a number of actions that supported their goals. Those with less developed selves had difficulty connecting behaviours to what they wanted to achieve or avoid.

Justin: Well, I'm already set around that, I guess, because I'm working for (company), logging, and I'll have my apprenticeship already started through the school. It'll be four years, then go to school for six months and a time at college...

Anita: You just kind of explore different opportunities and learn about different jobs. You do like sheets of who you are and things like that ... what your attributes are and what you need to work on ... things you're interested in and things that connect to you ... then you read all about the colleges, different places that would suit what you want to do and stuff. That's what's really helped me a lot. I needed to find things that I wanted to do.

Jessica: She took this [computer] course and she learned all about this stuff. There's like a 95% employment rate after graduation. She does a lot of designing Web pages, designing graphics for companies ... different advertising things. And she gets paid, like almost \$30 per hour. So to me, that is well worth it! This is something that has a huge employment rate afterwards. You're getting paid well. You can work out of your home.

Sharon: We want to start up our own daycare centre or something like that. Everybody always goes to the Hall and plays ball, and we can babysit ... and we can have one of those builders build us a place. There's an empty lot beside our place ... I have all the stuff from my auntie ... And I was kind of thinking that the parents here would like it too. They won't have to worry about their house being torn apart.

### **Self-awareness**

Identity and awareness of self were usually linked to the youth's roles as learner, family and/or Band member, friend, sports player, or other activity in which they invested significant time. When discussing work or career, most participants could identify their interests and values and relate these to occupational preferences.

Catherine: I devour magazines, like, like *National Geographic* and *Equinox* and *Discovery* ... I think because I'm an information person ... the Internet is ... just another way of obtaining information and I think it's really handy and I enjoy being able to connect things and look up Web sites.

Bruce: I felt that I wasted my time in hindsight (in high school). I did all my work and I thought, Well this is just a course that everybody takes, but it you know I made it through it regardless ... I got my graduation ... but something that my dad and mum said kind of made me think graduation is just a first step ... you've got to start thinking about where you're going after that ... they pushed me to take university transfer at the college ... and that opened my eyes.

Anita: I hate computer. I'm really a computer-ignorant person. There's something that I don't like about computers. But I have to for journalism. Like I have to know. I basically just do word processing. I don't go on the Internet at all ... I'd rather read a book or do something else. Like there's all these other options—I'd just rather not sit in front of the computer screen and fiddle around for hours.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The research findings have several implications for career development and counselling practice. Because connection and attachment to others is important to youth in small communities, practitioners need to pay particular attention to developing relationships that help clients feel secure and willing to engage in an exploration of life-career plans. Counsellors working in—or with clients from—coastal and rural small communities must understand the community's context—the economy, political power structures, value systems, and changes occurring within the region. Consideration of contextual factors such as “place identity” would be an important element in career planning, particularly when exploring staying versus leaving. Helping young people to consider multiple options within and outside their communities will be critical. This is particularly important for young women and First Nations youth, who may experience a narrow range of work and relationship options related to traditional gender and cultural expectations.

In communities similar to these, that have been dramatically affected by economic recession, restructuring, socio-political upheaval, and natural disasters, counsellors need to be particularly sensitive to the multiple losses and challenges. More basic survival and economic needs will initially take precedence over quality of life and long-term career goals. Instilling a sense of hope and future possibilities will be critical. The focus should be on generating alternatives, keeping options open, and support in practical areas such as health, economic planning, and housing.

Exploration of possible selves and roles is most effective when specific and contextually relevant. The participants in this research were able to name a number of available career resources; however, they did not see most of them as applicable to their lives. Life-career information can be made more "rurally relevant" by connecting clients to workers and mentors who could discuss the impact of the skills, values, and beliefs they learned by growing up in a small community. Local occupational possibilities could be explored through school and community partnerships. Print resources can be adapted to reflect familiar examples and scenarios. The young people in this research could describe the skills and attributes they possessed. They need help to picture how they might actually implement these transferable skills to real work and life roles. These youth also planned to find work, get married, have a home, and raise children, yet many did not seem to have a realistic view of the demands of juggling all these "possible selves." Nor did they have a concrete understanding of economic needs and costs of living. They need practical information and exploration of real-life scenarios, such as adjusting to a partner's work schedule, or combining work and parenting.

Developing self-awareness and cultural identity was paramount for these young people. Life-career development resources and programs should focus on the whole picture and include aspects of life other than work. For First Nations youth, values such as family and collective community must be considered. The widely accepted individually focused approaches to life-career exploration may not be appropriate. Bi-racial clients will have unique constellations of complementary and competing beliefs. Parents, extended family members, and guardians have much to offer in helping young people make informed life-career plans and decisions. It was noted, though, that the ambivalence toward familial expectations expressed by some participants indicated that a non-family member might be a more effective mentor or advisor.

Participants expressed sensitivity to being disregarded, so it is vitally important to involve them in community decision making. They can participate on committees and bring their concerns to the attention of community leaders. A youth council in one community provided a way to access funding for developing social and recreational opportunities.

Given the importance of role models in the lives of the participants, such councils could be established using a mentorship model, with adults and youth sharing positions and responsibilities.

The present research has focused on a largely ignored group—young people in small communities coping with widespread economic and social restructuring. Their narratives support and extend the research pertaining to the life-career development and planning process of First Nations and rural youth. While facing a number of daunting challenges and barriers, many of these young people nevertheless expressed optimism and hope for the future. In the words of one participant, “My grandfather believes in me. He says I can follow my dreams.”

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