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Exploring homelessness and Indigenous food systems in northern British Columbia

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Abstract

People experiencing homelessness are known to be highly food insecure, but outside of emergency aid little is known about their overall experiences with food, particularly in Canada's northern communities. This study examined experiences that influenced access to food for people experiencing homelessness in a small city in northern British Columbia. Early findings underscored the importance of the impacts of colonization when seeking to understand food access in this context, and the value of lived experiences (including people with experiences of homelessness) when seeking to understand Indigenous food systems and food sovereignty as part of a re-emerging food system. The research drew on ethnography and case study methodology with modified community mapping to explore the food systems of the participants, who identified as First Nations, Métis or had mixed Indigenous and European ancestry. A focus group and subsequent interviews revealed a dynamic and complex food system. The flexible research design enabled participants to creatively express the food-related issues, challenges and successes most pertinent to their lives. Key food-related themes were social connections, as well as connections to the land and to culture. Participants' experiences, actions and desires regarding food, health and well-being highlighted Indigenous food sovereignty as an overarching concept which offers an adaptable, holistic approach that can accommodate complexity. It is a valuable direction for future research and practice seeking to improve food security and health.

Keywords: homelessness, Indigenous food sovereignty, Indigenous food systems, northern food systems, emergency food aid

Introduction

People experiencing homelessness are known to be highly food insecure, but outside of their use of emergency aid little is known about their overall experiences with food—particularly in Canada's northern communities (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002). Understanding food use, availability, desirability and appropriateness has the potential to lead to enhanced services and improved health and well-being for people experiencing homelessness. These issues are pertinent for people of Indigenous descent, who are noted to be among those most at risk for food insecurity (Desmarais & Wittman, 2014; Li et al., 2016; Richmond & Ross, 2009; Tarasuk, Mitchell, & Dachner, 2016) and are also disproportionately represented within homeless populations (Hwang, 2001).

This paper shares some of the findings from a study on homelessness and food access in Prince George, a small city located within Lheidli T'enneh First Nation territory, in northern British Columbia (BC). This paper offers insights about the relationships between homelessness and food systems, and in this case, Indigenous food systems in particular. Homelessness in Prince George is associated with a history of migration into the city by Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals and families to access services. As the largest city in the northern BC region, Prince George offers multiple locations where emergency food aid is provided. Social services, including emergency food provision, tend to be provided in a centralized, and individualized manner, which offers a stark contrast to some of the family, collective and contexts of the First Nations and rural and remote communities from which people are migrating.

The purpose of this paper is to explore elements of Indigenous food systems and Indigenous food sovereignty in the specific context of homelessness, informed by the study titled "Consuming connections: Experiences of food systems during times of homelessness in Prince George, British Columbia" (Russell, 2015). This study aimed to explore experiences with food during times of homelessness in a small northern BC city and, in the process, shed light on range of food systems dynamics in the region, including some specific insights relevant to Indigenous food systems and Indigenous food sovereignty. The study was conducted as part of a Masters in Community Health Science at the University of Northern British Columbia during the period of 2012-2015.

This paper begins by introducing the concepts of Indigenous food systems and Indigenous food sovereignty, describes the research methods, and presents the results under the themes of social connections, connections to the land and reconnection to culture. A discussion follows, relating the results to Indigenous food systems and Indigenous food sovereignty.

Background

This research was informed by the recognition that "mental health, biological and nutritional mechanisms may be inseparable from the cultural and social aspects of traditional lifestyles"

(Earle, 2013, p. 4). For Indigenous peoples, colonization and the resultant changes in lifestyle severely disrupted food systems and had devastating effects on health and well-being (Alfred, 2009). Three notable examples include: the exertion of colonial control through banning important cultural events such as the *potlatch*[1] (McIlwraith, 2012); the prohibition on Indigenous farmers from vending their goods in the nineteenth century (King, 2012); and the destruction of the bison herds leading to starvation on the prairies (Daschuk, 2013; Hiebert & Power, 2016).

Johnson (2014) frames the benefits of consumption of traditional food in relation to physical activity and spiritual grounding, for community food security, and for greater sustainability. Kuhnlein and Receveur (1996) have defined traditional foods "as being composed of items from the local, natural environment that are culturally acceptable" (p. 418). Traditional diets are diverse, nutrient dense (Earle, 2013), sustainable, and in terms of market value, expensive.

Indigenous food systems may be based in part or entirely on traditional diets, and offer an ecological orientation to fostering both environmental and social determinants of health (Elliot, Jayatilaka, Brown, Varley, & Corbett, 2012). Elliott and colleagues (2012) identify empowerment, knowledge renewal, and renewal of family and community relationships as values which are central to Indigenous food systems. The Indigenous Food Systems Network identifies different but related values of interdependency, respect, reciprocity, and ecological sensibility (n.d.b). The Indigenous Food Systems Network explains, "Indigenous food systems are maintained through our active participating in traditional land and food systems" (n.d.b, para 4). People with a responsibility and relationship to the land are an active and necessary element of place based Indigenous food systems (Manson, 2015; Morrison, 2011). Food, health, and well-being are closely linked to one another. Indeed, among some Indigenous communities, the concepts most related to health include the ability to engage in land based activities, such as hunting, and eating appropriate food (Grey & Patel, 2015). Indigenous food systems are an element of Indigenous food sovereignty.

The concept of Indigenous food sovereignty (IFS) is described by Dawn Morrison, Coordinator and Chair of the B.C. Food Systems Network Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty, as providing "a framework for exploring, transforming and rebuilding the industrial food system towards a more just and ecological model for all" (2011, p. 98). Morrison also notes that the concept is necessarily amorphous because of the diversity of Indigenous communities. Morrison describes Indigenous food sovereignty as follows:

> The newest and most innovative approach to achieving the end goal
> of long-term food security in Indigenous communities. The
> Indigenous food sovereignty approach provides a model for social

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[1] The potlatch is common to many First Nations in Western Canada. Carrier Sekani Family Services, an Indigenous organization based out of Prince George, British Columbia, explains that the potlatch is the "core economic, political, social, legal, and spiritual institution of Carrier people"(Mann, 2016, para. 5). Food has a significant role at the potlatch.

> learning and thereby promotes the application of traditional
> knowledge, values, wisdom and practices in the present day context
> (2011, p. 100)

Four key principles of Indigenous food sovereignty have been articulated: spirituality or sacredness, participation, self-determination, and policy relatedness (Indigenous Food Systems Network, n.d.a.; Johnson, 2014; Morrison, 2011). The composition and delivery of typical emergency food aid provides a stark contrast to the precepts of Indigenous food sovereignty.

While it has been theorized that food sovereignty can be mobilized as an approach to increasing health equity, there remains little research in this area (Cidro, Adekunle, Peters, & Martens, 2015; Jones, Shapiro, & Wilson, 2015; Skinner, Pratley, & Burnett, 2016; Weiler et al., 2015). Although promoting and working from a framework of Indigenous food sovereignty is challenging, there are changes that can be readily implemented to begin the process of decolonizing food systems (Bradley & Herrera, 2016; Cidro et al., 2015; Elliot et al., 2012; Figueroa, 2015; Tobin, French, & Hanlon, 2010).

In Prince George, 11 percent of the overall population is Indigenous (Milligan, 2006), which is notably higher than for the province of BC (5 percent) (Statistics Canada, 2016a) and Canada as a whole (4.3 percent) (Statistics Canada, 2016b). Data from the 2006 Canadian census indicated that there was a high level of housing instability among the Indigenous population of Prince George, and that this population has incomes that were significantly lower than for non-Indigenous people (BC Stats, 2010). In the 2010 homeless count in Prince George, 27 percent of people identified themselves as experiencing absolute homelessness (Kutzer & Ameyaw, 2010).

Methods

This research set out to explore the food systems of the people with experiences of homelessness in Prince George. Methodologically informed by case study methodology and ethnographic methods (Creswell, 2009; Denscombe, 2007; Yin, 1994), the study was intentionally designed to be exploratory, namely to learn and share insights from participants' ideas and lived experiences, rather than to derive global statements on the subject matter. Participation in the research was open to adults who, within the past five years, had experienced at least six months of homelessness in Prince George. The participants who engaged with the study were people who identified as First Nations, Métis or had mixed Indigenous and European ancestry, and this background created a foundation for insights around Indigenous perspectives and orientations. The study received ethics approval from the UNBC Research Ethics Board (Approval number: E2013.1211.120.00). The findings presented in this paper offer a subset of the findings from a larger study that sought to explore experiences with food during times of homelessness in Prince George, BC.

The authors of the paper include the lead researcher, Russell, and her graduate supervisor, Parkes. Russell is a non-Indigenous person who has lived and worked with various Indigenous

communities and organizations over the past several years. She is a vegan with experience in *silviculture*[2] and small-scale agriculture. Parkes is a non-Indigenous researcher, originally from New Zealand. Her research focuses on the interface of health, ecological, and social issues, and has involved working with Indigenous communities in New Zealand, Hawaii, Ecuador and Canada. She has lived and worked in northern BC since 2009.

Methodologically based on case study and ethnographic research (Cresswell, 2009; Yin, 1994; Denscombe, 2007), the overall research design drew on a modified community mapping approach, adapted from methods applied in Amsden and VanWynsberghe (2005) and Blanchet-Cohen, Ragan & Amsden (2003). For the community mapping, each participant was provided with two large sheets of paper and art supplies. Participants were asked to draw or write elements of their food systems, responding to questions of what the current food system looked like, and what an ideal food system could, or should, look like (Brown, Harris & Russell, 2010) thus creating food system "maps". The final products were personal, the creation process was accessible, and each participant was able to identify their contribution. Two pairs of participants decided to collaborate and created their maps together. While the maps may not contain geographic data, as Amsden and VanWynsberghe (2005) explain, diverse forms of mapping still "support the power and capacity of people to represent themselves and their understanding of the world around them" (p.361). This arts-based tool, was selected as a way to undertake the research in a manner that was inclusive, valuing both individual perspectives as well as group discussions about food systems in Prince George. The full set of data collection methods included a modified community mapping event, a focus group and semi-structured interviews, all with people who have experience of homelessness. Data were collected through participant observation, recorded in field notes, and via audio recording of the focus group and interviews.

In total there were 12 participants in this study: eight women and four men, who had all experienced long-term, and/or cyclic homelessness. Three participants described having spent their "entire life" homeless. Participants were living, or had lived, in shelters, single rented rooms, hostels, motels, apartments, with family, or camped outdoors. All participants identified having limited financial resources as a serious issue in their lives. Participants identified as either First Nations, Métis or had mixed European and Indigenous ancestry. Most participants were originally from First Nations reserves in northern BC or from small towns but now lived in Prince George. During the process of consent, all participants were asked whether they preferred their own names or pseudonyms to be used when presenting results. Quotes have been presented with relevant names or pseudonyms below.

Ten participants agreed to be part of the community mapping event. While the maps produced in the community mapping were not analyzed as data, they were used to help facilitate discussion in the focus group and the semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews with participants following the community mapping activities allowed for in depth discussion and elaboration of reoccurring themes that emerged within the larger group setting.

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[2] Silvicultrure is "a branch of forestry dealing with the development and care of forests" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.)

Data collection was followed by transcript checking, development of dissemination tools, and casual discussions about the research with participants occurring between May 1 and August 31, 2014. Of the 11 people who participated in interviews, six reviewed their transcripts and five provided feedback on the transcripts and emerging themes. Participants were aware that the results of the research would be shared through presentations and publications, and they were invited to participate in the development of a booklet that would highlight their experiences accessing food in a highly visual and easy to read manner. Five participants contributed to this booklet. Honoraria were provided to all participants in the form of gift cards to a nearby grocery store. Gift cards and coupons have been used before as a form of compensation in research with homeless populations (Breuner, Barry, & Kemper, 1998; Kendzor et al., 2016). Thematic analysis was used for data analysis (Braun & Clark 2006; Patton, 2002).

Findings

The findings presented here provided insights into a range of connections and relationships involved with the food systems of the participants, highlighting how these dynamics unfold across social, land, and cultural concerns. Although focused on people in Prince George with experiences of homelessness, the specific findings from this small exploratory study revealed themes and ideas relevant to Indigenous food systems and Indigenous food sovereignty in both Prince George and the northern BC region that will be discussed in the following section.

Social connections

The participants had close, existing social ties with one another. As part of their experience of homelessness, participants described using food to forge social connections with others. Access to food was enhanced by relationships that were caring, by generosity and a sense of respect. The participants benefited from social connections with other people experiencing homelessness through enhanced knowledge and support, for example, how participants orient to the services and options available to them. One participant described the act of sharing knowledge related to social services and food options as being akin to a "street people welcome wagon" (Mary, Interview). The foundations of positive relationships were laid in the participants' actions and maintained through mutual respect. Participants constantly reiterated the importance of respect within relationships, as Mary explained, "Basically it just all comes down to […] communicate to one another and respecting each other. Helping each other, loving one another, you know" (Mary, Interview).

Study participants also used food as a mechanism to remain connected with their families. This especially occurred through the sharing of memories:

I always remember what my Grandma taught me. I'll never forget.
This is how I know to survive in the bush. I know how to. I
wouldn't just go in the bush, get lost and starve. (Mamie,
Interview).

The family-oriented experiences participants described also provided insights into the preparation and sharing of traditional foods. Women in the study also spoke of and demonstrated caretaking and responsibility though the use of food by sharing food with others. Actions related to food and social connections led to feelings of personal empowerment. One participant described how when she was staying with a relative, being able to buy groceries is what enabled her to feel that she could contribute to the household. Participants also described how, if they had the financial resources, they would provide food and shelter to Indigenous people in need.

Connections to the land

Experiences of homelessness and food access for the participants highlighted complex and difficult situations, demonstrated by the following anecdote. One couple explained how they preferred to camp outside of the city during the summer months. While they had experience with hunting, trapping, netting fish, cooking, and gardening, they were largely prevented from engaging in these activities within the confines of an urban area. Thus, in order to access food within the city, they changed their behaviour. The couple binned for bottles and cans to return for the deposit, and then purchased prepared foods for the day or went to service providers for a meal. Although they identified abundant food sources outside of the city, they were unable to make use of them, even though they were sleeping "rough". The couple explained that while they preferred to live off the land, they became trapped in the city by their need to access services, which contributed to feelings of disconnection. The environment that the participants experienced shaped their access to food, and influenced their sense of health and well-being.

Natural environment as healing

Throughout the community mapping activity, and in the follow-up interviews, nature was identified as a source of healing and inspiration by the participants through food and other pathways. Participants described a sense of wellness came from spending time in nature, as well as through the benefits of food related activities such as gardening or hunting. The participants recognized the effect of the natural world on their well-being and actively sought it out to improve their mental state.

Where they have those little walking paths, I go through there,
those trees. I walk through there and I feel so calm. And my spirit
feels awesome [..] And I think about home. (Mamie, Interview)

Participants viewed the natural environment as a source of health and well-being, the provision of wild foods and medicines, periods of independence from social services, and connections to home. For example, one participant explained being given food while in the hospital:

> I […] basically had nothing again. And I couldn't access any of the food banks, or anything like that. I had to depend on my friends' goodwill, or they bring me care packages. It's what I survived on. And my brother brought me moose meat, and salmon. And that was, that kept me going for a month. (Anne, Community Mapping)

Natural environment as interdependence

The participants thought that having more involvement in their food systems would be a positive change. Many participants were raised hunting, fishing, berry picking, and growing vegetables. so they identified a lack of involvement with their food system now as detrimental. An example of this is offered by Mamie's explanation of her dream for the future:

> I'm going home, living the way I used to […]. I get my own food that way. It's clean, it's not chemical mix like what we buy in the store right now. Camping, I love camping, and I love trapping. In the winter I do that a lot. I used to 'til I end up out here stuck. Fishing, I do that a lot. Guiding. I love guiding. Taking out hunters. And picking berries and living off the land. That was before I end up on the street. I done all that, and I miss it, a lot. (Mamie, Community Mapping)

For other participants, connection to the land may also exist when living within the city. Even while experiencing homelessness, some participants continued to be actively involved with gardening, fishing or harvesting food. As Kat explained: "Yep! We go fishing at [the] park and you could go berry picking way the hell across [the] highway. You can go berry picking anywhere" (Kat, Interview). Another participate explained how he seized the opportunity to enjoy berries when he could: "When we walk towards that one place. I see this strawberry bushes eh, and my honey she always bugs, she keeps on walking eh? But I keep on eating my berries" (Dave, Interview).

Participants spoke of relationships of responsibility towards the land and reciprocity in the natural world. Several participants expressed concern about the environmental and health consequences of industrial agriculture, to plants, animals, and people, and described thinking "the old ways" of obtaining food were more sustainable and enhanced health and well-being. The experiences participants had in physical settings were mediated by the participants' past histories and, in particular, their perceptions of home. These connections influenced their access to food and shaped how participants experienced the food system, including during times of homelessness.

Reconnecting with culture

Caring for the environment and caring for people were seen as connected. Desirable diets were described by participants with reference to a range of characteristics, noting inclusion of traditional food and wild meats, eating more whole foods and less processed foods and avoiding meat raised in confined animal feeding operations.

As the participants described, food is impacted by, and impacts, many different areas of life. Reflecting on her childhood, Lisa explained how there were connections between her food, family life, and Indigenous heritage, and how this way of living was more environmentally sustainable and healthy. Participants described ways in which food was an aspect of culture that increased a community's cohesion. When describing her dreams for the future, Anne spoke of the interconnections between food, culture and community health and well-being:

> My dream is actually....my family has, uh, does a lot of hunting and fishing, [...]they can share their dry meat, their moose meat, their dry salmon, and between the people on my rez back home. And they have the old potlatch system. And they also have the old Indian Medicine which, they've tried to get me on but, um, I love fishing, I love berry picking, and I love having a garden. (Anne, Community Mapping)

The activities described by Anne were seasonal and connected to the cultures of the area. Different seasons involved different responsibilities; for example, another participant explained how summer was the time for making dry meat.

The participants described traditional foods as not only better tasting and healthier but also a manner in which to connect with their cultures. When asked if having traditional food would influence her attendance at certain service providers, one participant replied:

> Probably, because I would, I'm working on getting back in touch with my culture. My heritage, um, like ah, the, the food part of it. Like at potlatches. I haven't gone to a potlatch yet and that is just one thing that I am working on. I got to get there, I will. (Mary, Interview)

Participant experiences highlighted food as a way to experience culture, and the potential role for food aid in promoting Indigenous food systems. For example, some people who lacked familial relationships or were not raised within their culture saw Indigenous-led and -centered social services as providing an opportunity to learn about their cultures. The participants showed a strong preference for more culturally appropriate food and food related activities through food aid.

There were reports by a few participants that some food providers did occasionally make traditional foods available. Dan suggested that food aid would be enhanced if moose meat could be provided. Participants explained that the times when wild foods were available at emergency food providers were very positive. Participants felt positively about sharing food and increasing

accessibility of food aid generally, and were specifically interested in the sharing of, and access to, traditional food.

Discussion: *"It's not just a food struggle, everything goes with it"*

The participants in this study provided insights regarding food systems during periods of homelessness in a small northern city. The community mapping exercises and interviews revealed perspectives and concerns that are far beyond just food quantity and provision. Instead, the exploratory research revealed a range of tangible and intangible ways that the experiences and desires of people experiencing homelessness can be connected to issues of Indigenous food systems and Indigenous food sovereignty. This section will explore these themes with recognition that, in the words of one participant, "It's not just a food struggle, everything goes with it" (Lisa, Community Mapping).

Participants actively worked to renew relationships through the sharing of food and food related knowledge. Despite the challenges of homelessness some participants were active with gardening and they described that these connections led to feelings of self-efficacy, and contributed towards empowerment through active participation. Participants spoke of wanting to reconnect with how they used to obtain food through hunting, fishing, and gardening on a personal and community level. One participant described wanting to learn about traditional practices such as the *potlatch*. In many ways these actions and ideas overlap with concepts of Indigenous food systems and Indigenous food sovereignty.

These findings have implications for food security in terms of availability, accessibility, and use. As Webber and Dollahite (2008) explain, "[f]ood choice is influenced by the food 'context' (physical surroundings and social climate where food might be acquired)" (p. 188). In northern BC, as in other areas, issues of Indigenous food sovereignty need to be understood in relation to the context in which Indigenous peoples may be accessing food, including traditional foods (Cidro et al., 2015). Food-related problems were initiated by colonial forces, and are exacerbated for people experiencing periods of homelessness. This context must be understood in order to optimize the effectiveness of strategies to improve food security for people experiencing homelessness, and to minimize harm. By examining the foodscape with the participants, Indigenous food systems and sovereignty were illuminated as "potentialities for change" (Miewald & McCann, 2014), through the inclusion of "social, relational, and political constructions of food" (Miewald & McCann, 2014, p.537).

The importance of relationships for people who experience homelessness in Prince George resonate with Masuda and Crabtree's (2010) findings of "paradoxical relationships" within the Downtown Eastside in Vancouver. These authors highlight ways in which people are able to build community despite the negative circumstances of homelessness or being underhoused (Masuda & Crabtree, 2010). Participants in this study were often actively concerned with improving the welfare of people around them, sharing food and knowledge. The

needs of others were constantly discussed in relation to food access and homelessness. Nearly all participants described moments of generosity that, as noted by Elliot et al. (2012) can contribute to the renewal of relationships which is an element of enhancing Indigenous food systems. The relationship values of caring, cooperation and respect that participants spoke of, and demonstrated through their actions, are important facets of Indigenous Food Sovereignty (Morrison, 2011; Northern Health et al., 2012). This could be enhanced through food aid, as recent research has indicated that planned institutional initiatives to facilitate engagement in traditional food harvesting activities can contribute to relationship building (Wesche, O'Hare-Gordon, Robidoux, & Mason, 2016).

        Power is gendered, and within patriarchial colonial society, Indigenous women (and Two-Spirit people) have been and continue to be faced with particular violence and oppression (Allan & Sakamoto, 2014). One way this oppression was accomplished was through displacing Indigenous women from their traditional food related roles during colonization (Grey & Patel, 2015). The women in this research used their control over food as a means of empowerment. Furthermore, the results support the findings of Allen and Sakamoto (2014) that Indigenous women experiencing homelessness are deeply concerned with the welfare of others and take a leadership role to assist and care for people. Through the reclamation of traditional food related roles, women who participated in this research are applying principles of Indigenous food systems which is increasing their own positive self image while creating tangible benefits for others in need.

        Those participants who were sharing food were motivated by being able to provide food for others, and felt empowered by this through respect and collaboration. Participants that were growing food were actively reinserting themselves within their food system. These findings reinforce important features of Indigenous food systems (Elliot et al., 2012). Empowerment has been identified as a core focus of value within health and dietary related research with Indigenous populations (Skinner, Hanning, Sutherland, Edwards-Wheesk, & Tsuji, 2012). Indigenous food cultures generally involve "stewardship", and sustainability is a key value described by participants—which they connect to respecting the environment and each other. Traditional foods and participation in land-based activities can also be used to foster relationships with the land and demonstrate respect (Grey & Patel, 2015; Martens, Cidro, Hart, & McLachlan, 2016).

        The findings of this study reinforce and expand on Vandermark's (2007) discussion that people experiencing homelessness are displaced people in regards to both social and physical environments (p. 241). The participants demonstrated that even though they are displaced, the connection between land and health can remain strong for Indigenous people (Kirmayer, Simpson, & Cargo, 2003; Northern Health et al., 2012; Parkes, 2011; Richmond & Ross, 2009; Wilson, 2003). Yet recipients of food aid typically have very little choice in what they are provided and the food given is highly processed, leading people to become "distanced" from their food, as argued by Riches (1999). However, when describing food access, participants spoke of a desire to be actively engaged in the production, cultivation, and harvesting of their

food, exemplifying the principle of participation—one of the four principles of Indigenous food sovereignty (Morrison, 2011)—and expressing a desire to reduce the distance from their food.

The participants' descriptions provided intimate, detailed insights into the interconnections between health inequities, society, and the natural environment as being interrelated determinants of health (Nelson, 2012; Parkes, Panelli, & Weinstein, 2003). Martens et al. argue that the concept of Indigenous food sovereignty, as opposed to Indigenous food security, is necessary to adequately address the complexity of these themes (2016). Yet the concept of Indigenous food sovereignty has been the focus of ongoing debate among Indigenous scholars and others (Desmarais & Wittman, 2014; Perry, 2013; Whyte, 2017). This suggests Indigenous food sovereignty should not be seen as immediately achievable, and should also not be considered a static goal. The experiences, actions, and desires of participants in this study highlight that Indigenous food sovereignty can also be usefully understood as embedded in their daily experiences, and manifesting in a variety of ways. There are social and environmental factors which contribute to enhancing or inhibiting food access. Health and well-being are deeply entwined with traditional food, and, as others have explained, it may be impossible to separate health and well-being from traditional foods (Earle, 2013; Morrison, 2011; Wesche et al., 2016).

Even while experiencing homelessness, the experiences and desires of participants in this study highlighted several themes that resonate with descriptions of Indigenous food sovereignty. They underscore that there are many ways that individuals can contribute towards building Indigenous food sovereignty across a range everyday lived experiences. Ultimately, Indigenous food sovereignty should be recognized as an everyday and vital component of people's lives or, as Indigenous food sovereignty has been described, as a "living reality" (Martens et al., 2016). This is consistent with the argument advanced by Meleiza Figueroa regarding Black farmers in Chicago. Figueroa stated that while the participants may not explicitly use the language of food sovereignty, their everyday practices are fighting against the oppression in a capitalist society and are creating transformative change, though they may be concurrently excluded from the food sovereignty conversations of more privileged classes who have a different vision of food sovereignty (Figueroa, 2015). Therefore, promoting Indigenous food sovereignty across a range of different contexts could contribute to improving the health and social conditions that impede access to food for the Indigenous people (Cidro et al., 2015; Earle, 2013).

Greenwood, de Leeuw, Lindsay and Reading (2015) among others, argue that colonialism is the most broadly influential determinant of Indigenous health (Loppie Reading & Wien, 2009; Richmond & Ross, 2009). The experiences of participants highlight the relevance of examining historical assumptions about eventual Indigenous assimilation into a capitalist economy (King, 2012) and the need to understand choices, actions and behaviours beyond their economic value – especially for those experiencing homelessness. This resonates with the fact that traditional foods have often formed the basis of a non-monetary economy (Earle, 2013) and the need for attention to supporting and respecting Indigenous food systems as a means to decolonize (Alfred, 2009; Morrison, 2011).

By undertaking exploratory research in an under-researched area, this study has provided initial insights into expressions of how lived experiences with homelessness intersect in an interesting way with notions in the literature of Indigenous food systems and Indigenous food sovereignty. By way of limitations, it is important to note that this study does not seek to fully represent the experiences of homeless individuals in Prince George which, as the largest centre in northern BC, is considered a destination for a range of people experiencing homelessness because of the services offered. Due to the small size of this study, the community mapping activity, and the semi-structured interviews, the experiences of the participants in this research should not be considered definitive for all people experiencing homelessness in the city, nor of all Indigenous people experiencing homelessness. The exploratory work does, however, offer insights that might otherwise be overlooked. It provides new perspectives on complex issues and underscores the interesting ways in which food, shelter, culture, and identity can interact among individuals and communities in different contexts.

Conclusions

Across Canada, there are creative initiatives that have developed to address food insecurity, including urban Indigenous food insecurity, in more holistic and empowering ways. However, these nuanced considerations have not occurred to the same extent in the context of the provision of food aid for people experiencing homelessness. There is an opportunity for food aid to foster culture, environmental, and community connections. Ultimately, consideration of the background of people experiencing homelessness, and the geographic location of service providers, should occur in the development of alternative aid models that are culturally and environmentally appropriate. There is potential to develop programming that takes advantage of the interest of participants in food citizenship, culture, and outdoors activities, in order to develop food policies that are of the location they serve, are sustainable, and actively work against oppression in society.

Thomas King explains that within dominant North American culture Indigenous people are often relegated to the past and romanticized by non-Indigenous people. These distorted perceptions extend to the point that non-Indigenous people may criticize Indigenous people for their "inauthenticity" (King, 2012).The reality is that Indigenous food system values and food sovereignty principles are tangible, but may be dismissed by dominant society due to the same tendency to romanticize, or due to a limited sense of what is possible in today's context. In contrast, the participants' experiences of food systems during times of homelessness has highlighted the timeliness and relevance of fostering Indigenous food systems and food sovereignty.

Promoting Indigenous food systems and Indigenous food sovereignty has the potential to foster a more respectful environment for service provision, as well as to promote aspects of social and environmental sustainability that are important challenges within contemporary food

systems. In the inherently unsustainable conditions of food aid, this approach could build elements of sustainability. An obvious challenge is the resource limitations and constraints faced by food providers; therefore any kind of programmatic innovation would likely require collaboration and engagement with the broader context of homelessness and food insecurity.

It may seem a radical shift to suggest that food aid—which has historically provided waste food to people to stave off hunger—should adopt Indigenous food sovereignty into food procurement, preparation and distribution policy. Yet, as Dawn Morrison describes, food sovereignty may offer a pathway toward reconciliation with colonial society by providing ways to apply traditional knowledge and practices to current situations (2011). In the context of homelessness, rather than viewing the provision of food as a charitable act and a temporary way to alleviate hunger, there are opportunities for society to embrace the potential re-emergence of Indigenous food sovereignty—and, in doing so, take a step forward towards decolonization.

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