2014-03-26

Exploring how Homeless Youth Perceive the Working Alliance between Themselves and Youth Workers: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Exploring How Homeless Youth Perceive the Working Alliance between Themselves and Youth Workers: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

By

Jan Gilroy

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTERS OF SCIENCE

EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

CALGARY, ALBERTA

MARCH, 2014

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ABSTRACT

Youth homelessness continues to be a concern across Canada. Previous research has demonstrated that the working alliance between youth who are homeless and youth workers is an important factor in breaking the cycle of homelessness. The purpose of this research was to explore the working alliance from the perspective of the youth. Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine youth (ages 16 and 17) who were recruited from overnight shelters in Calgary, Alberta. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin’s (2009) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to analyse the data collected from the interviews. From the data the Working Alliance Stage model was developed. This model consists of a pre-stage: entering and five stages: the friendly foundation, the right environment, they “got my back,” the working part of the working alliance, and the outcome. While this model was developed for youth who are homeless the generic outline may be applicable for other youth populations.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

There are many people who have supported me through the both the process of developing my research project and writing my thesis. Without this support the challenges that were presented may not have been overcome with any grace.

First, I would like to thank the youth that participated in this study: Hunter, Domonic, Brad, Dakota, Dan, Joni, Austin, Devon, and Aarika. Their openness and insightfulness guided the research project and continues to inspire me to share their stories. In addition to these youth, I would like to thank all the youth I have worked with over the years as those interactions created the research question. I would also like to thank the Boys & Girls Club of Calgary who allowed me to come into their program and talk with the youth.

My work was supervised and guided by Dr. Christine Walsh and Dr. Sharon Cairns. Dr. Christine Walsh guided my ideas, forming them into a concrete and doable project. She listened to my findings at the beginning, asking questions that allowed the findings to become clear. Dr. Walsh ensured that my research was the best it could possibly be at every step of the way.

Dr. Sharon Cairns pushed me to expand my work in ways that allowed the complete project to be a success. She encouraged me to keep working and normalized the process when I felt discouraged. Dr. Cairns developed an environment where I was free to share my ideas and ask any questions I needed. Together their support and patience allowed me not only compete this project but to grow as a student and writer.

I would like to thank my dear friend Dr. Laura Craig who gave me hours of her time to help develop the project. This time was used to answer my never ending questions and reading
countless pages of my writing. In particular she helped me develop a research proposal that was doable and unique.

I am not sure I could have completing this thesis without the support and love of my partner, Sarah Harvey. She encouraged me when things were challenging, believed in me when I no longer believed in myself, and celebrated the successes. Sarah was always available to share my ideas with and we spend many hours writing together.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My research investigated how youth who are homeless develop relationships with youth workers, specifically those who work at overnight shelters for youth. There has been increasing attention in the North American research literature on the relationship between adults who are homeless and their service providers (Thompson, Pollio, Eyrich, Bradbury, & North, 2004; Walsh, Rutherford, Sarafincian, & Sellmer, 2010). However, this interest has not been shown to the same extent with youth who are homeless, despite the fact that they are one of the most vulnerable populations within society (Meade & Slesnick, 2002). The importance of this relationship should not be overlooked. Studies completed by Eyrich-Garg (2008) and Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis, and Nackerud (2000) have demonstrated that the help of a youth worker has a significant positive impact on breaking the cycle of homelessness. However, to date, there has been minimal literature that explores the factors (e.g., what makes the relationship helpful, how the relationship is built) that create good working relationships between youth who are homeless and the workers who are responsible for assisting them, and even fewer studies tackle the question of relationship building from the perspective of youth who are currently homeless.

The relationship created between youth who are homeless and youth workers can be described as a working alliance due to its therapeutic potential and the focus on meeting the needs of the youth (and not the youth workers). Bordin (1979) determined that a working alliance has three areas of focus: tasks, bonds, and goals. This study was designed primarily to explore the bonds that youth who are homeless experience with youth workers. In addition, the youth participants in this study described how the youth workers helped them determine the necessary tasks to reach their goals and assisted them in achieving their goals.
This topic was of interest to me due to my many years of work experience as a youth worker who interacted with youth who ranged from being at-risk to those who were experiencing absolute homelessness. During my employment with various not-for-profit agencies, I noticed that youth who seemed better able to connect with youth workers tended to escape street culture much quicker and more readily than those who did not establish this type of relationship. While this generalization was based on anecdotal evidence, I have always believed in the importance of these relationships and feel that understanding the way these connections work may allow for youth workers to broker better connections with the populations they serve.

I also believe that each youth is valuable, and thus, it is important to help those who are homeless in the most effective way possible. Youth who are experiencing homelessness likely have faced abandonment and/or abuse from adults in their lives; therefore, they may have developed a distrust of all adults (Ferguson, 2009; Levy, 1998). Additionally, once they leave their homes, the social service system and the people who work in the system may have let them down (Evenson, 2009; Worthington et al., 2008). Therefore, in some cases, the youth worker is facing multiple challenges in order to connect with youth who are homeless. Rather than attempting to study this issue second-hand through the youth workers, I take the stance that the affected group (i.e., youth who are currently homeless) has the necessary information, and thus, I believe that through their eyes, the working alliance relationship can be further clarified. Further, although homelessness is largely the consequence of structural factors, reducing or eliminating homelessness is possible with the appropriate assistance (Calgary Homeless Foundation [CHF], 2003; Evenson, 2009; Worthington et al., 2008). In my opinion, youth do not choose homelessness; rather, societal and individual factors place youth in this context. We as service
providers can help, but we need youth to have relationships with adults who they can trust, someone to tell what is going on, and what they need. Elaborating on this point, the youth in a study by Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, and Nackerud (2000) reported that they needed to learn to trust and receive help from adults, specifically from the youth workers whom they saw on a regular basis. This is where the working alliance comes in; the relationship between the youth who are homeless and youth workers may be the catalyst that promotes change in the youths’ lives. Karabanow and Clement (2004) found that one way to help youth who are homeless is to develop trustful, respectful, and safe relationships. Therefore, it can be concluded that the relationship between youth workers and youth who are homeless has the ability to first engage youth then deter them from a persistent life of homelessness.

**Methodology**

According to Vivar, McQueen, Whyte, and Armayor (2007), qualitative research is a preferable design when four conditions are met: (a) when the goal is to have a deeply descriptive understanding of the data; (b) when the variables cannot be easily identified; (c) when there are no, or underdeveloped, theories; and (d) when there is little known about the research topic. My goal is to develop a descriptive understanding of the experience of forming a working alliance from the perspectives of the youth who are homeless. Therefore, the outcomes and variables are not easily identifiable, there is a lack of directly applicable theories, and there is relatively little known about the working alliance as viewed by youth who are homeless.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as the method to collect and analyze my findings for a number of reasons. First, the desire is to explore the experiences of the youth who are homeless in a detailed manner, which fits well with the goals of IPA (Smith, et al.,
2009). Second, I found it essential that the individual voices of the youth are heard while still detailing the commonalities or themes among the youth. Finally, IPA provides a step-by-step method, which gives concrete direction to those new to qualitative research (Smith et al., 2009). Briefly, IPA is influenced by idiography, hermeneutics, and phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009); each philosophy will be explored in detail in the methodology chapter.

It was essential to interview the youth who are homeless themselves to gain information about the working alliances they have with youth workers. Previous research on youth who experience homelessness strongly encouraged other researchers to involve the youth in future research (Evenson, 2009). Additionally, Hawley and Weisz (2005) found that the client’s perspective of the working alliance is the most predictive of positive outcomes. Youth who stayed at overnight shelters were chosen for the focus of study for three reasons: 1) their ease of access; 2) because youth who access services are more likely to have a relationship with youth workers; 3) because 72% of youth who are currently homeless make use of overnight shelters more than any other service; and 4) the difference between youth who use overnight shelters and those who do not, keeping the sample homogenous (Worthington et al., 2008).

**Research Question**

Through the use of IPA, this research will answer the following question: how do youth who are homeless understand the working alliance between themselves and youth workers at drop-in centres and overnight shelters?

This relationship, between youth who are homeless and youth workers, is explored from the viewpoint of the youth by asking a semi-structured series of open-ended questions that explored seven concepts: (a) basic demographics to provide a profile of study participants; (b)
what youth who are homeless feel is important with regards to the connections they make; (c) the relationship between youth and youth workers from the point of view of the youth; (d) what youth workers do that is important to youth when developing that relationship; (e) what characteristics of youth workers are important to youth when they are developing the relationship; (f) how youth develop relationships with youth workers; and (g) how the relationships have helped the youth.

Aim, Purpose, and Objective

The overall aim of this project is to gain a better understanding of what is important to youth who are homeless when they are developing relationships with youth workers. The purpose of this study is to share this information with youth workers in the hope that it will expand their knowledge and improve their skills regarding the formation of connections with youth who are homeless. Exploring this relationship will (a) provide an understanding of how youth who are experiencing homelessness view the connection they have with youth workers, (b) provide youth workers with information about what is important to youth who are homeless in forming relationships, and (c) add to the literature on youth homelessness. Developing a greater understanding of this relationship is necessary as it may impact the depth and duration of a youth’s entrenchment in homelessness (Eyrich-Garg, 2008; Kurtz et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 2004). This information will be shared with youth workers to help them be better prepared to develop relationships that have the potential to engage youth in service that can end homelessness for them.
Conceptual Framework

In accordance with IPA, theory was introduced during the final stages of analysis to strengthen conclusions from the data (Smith et al., 2009). There are two theories that proved to fit well with the findings of this study: Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (SLT; 1977) and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1973, 1980, 1982). This section will provide a brief overview of both theories, and the discussion chapter will provide a link between the results of my research and these theories.

Social Learning Theory. SLT is a theory of social behaviour that places a premium on how the learning process affects individual action. First developed by Albert Bandura in 1977, this theory continues to be used in multiple disciplines today, including psychology, where the theory can be applied to understand homeless populations (Boston University School of Health, 2013; Paradise et al., 2001; Whitbeck & Simons, 1993). There are a few central tenets of SLT that have affected the conclusions of this research: reciprocal determinism, informative function (observational learning), motivational function (expectations), and reinforcing function (Bandura, 1977; Boston University School of Health, 2013).

Reciprocal determinism is central to SLT and includes the relationships between personal factors, environment, and behaviour (Bandura, 1977). These three factors both influence and are influenced by each other; for example, one's behaviour is influenced by one’s current environment, and the environment is influenced by one’s behaviour. Bandura (1977) would argue that in real life (versus an experiment), one cannot separate the influence of one element of the equation, especially in complex social interactions such as developing relationships. Additionally, he highlights that the relative influence exerted by each factor will vary depending
on the situation and the behaviour. This complex set of reciprocal relationships drives social
behaviour and social learning.

According to Bandura (1977), SLT behaviour is learnt and maintained in three main
ways: (a) informative function, (b) motivational function, and (c) reinforcing function. He
defines informative function or observational learning as that which occurs as one observes the
outcome of an action conducted by another person (i.e., modelling). After observing people,
individuals develop a hypothesis about how they should act in a given situation, which in turn
influences their behaviour. Bandura (1977) stated that there are four things that need to occur in
order for a modelling event to become a matching performance: (a) attentional process, (b)
retention process, (c) motor reproduction process, and (d) motivational process. Modelling is
most effective when the model is someone with whom one regularly associates and who
possesses engaging qualities (Bandura, 1977). Because human behaviour is too complex to learn
by trial and error, it is essential that some learning occurs through modelling.

Bandura (1977) suggests that motivational function is the way that one uses past
experiences to create expectations about how others will react; therefore, people can predict
future consequences, which will motivate behaviour. For example, if using violence has worked
in the past to get what a person wants, that person would predict that violence would work again,
thereby using violence again in a similar situation. Expectations are influenced by four main
concepts: (a) performance accomplishment — whether or not one believes that they can
accomplish a behaviour; (b) vicarious learning — whether or not others are getting what one
wants with a behaviour; (c) verbal persuasion — conducted by others, typically weak and short
lived; and (d) emotional arousal -- how one interprets physiological feedback (Bandura, 1977).
Finally, behaviour is influenced by reinforcing functions. Reinforcement works to increase or decrease a certain behaviour and works best if it is an internal reinforcement (Bandura, 1977). When external, reinforcements are most effective when one is aware of what behaviour is being reinforced, the reinforcement is conducted by someone who affects one’s life, and it is developmentally appropriate. According to Bandura (1977), people typically go through the following developmental hierarchy of reinforcements: material consequences, symbolic consequences, and social contracting arrangements. Bandura clarifies that reinforcement is an effective way to regulate behaviour; however, it is a relatively ineffective way to learn new behaviours.

**Attachment Theory.** Attachment theory was initially developed by psychologists to help explain the relationship between a parent and her/his child (Ainsworth, 1979; Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1982). However, since its formulation in the late 1960’s, the theory of attachment has grown beyond the parent-child relationship to help explain attachment in later life. It is this expansion of the conceptualization that has proved to be an excellent analytical tool when applied to my data. However, because the expansion of theory rests on the initial theoretical developments made by Bowlby and Ainsworth and Bell, I will first outline the initial parent-child focused theory and then move into the later developments that are applicable to my own research.

Forming bonds is a basic human behaviour, and the attachment behaviour system is an innate system (Bowlby 1973, 1988). Bowlby (1982, 1988) contends that another system that is natural in all humans is the urge to explore. The attachment and exploration systems are antithetic (mutually incompatible); however, in order for productive exploration to occur, one
needs to have their attachment needs met (Bowlby, 1982, 1988). Therefore, everyone needs both a secure base to explore from and a safe haven with an available and warm caregiver to return to from exploring.

The interactions that a child has with a caregiver, especially regarding the caregiver’s creation (or lack of) of a secure base and a safe haven, create attachment styles. Attachment style is the chronic pattern of relational expectations, emotions, and behaviours that are developed through the interactions an infant/young child has with his/her primary caregivers (Bowlby, 1982, 1988). Primary caregivers need to provide a safe haven and secure base for their children to develop a secure attachment (Bowlby, 1988). According to Bowlby (1988), a safe haven means the child returning to the attachment figure for comfort and safety when there is stress or danger. A secure base means that the attachment figure is a place from which a child can safely explore (Bowlby, 1988). From her Strange Situation study, Ainsworth and Bell (1970) identified three attachment styles, (a) secure attachment, (b) ambivalent attachment, and (c) avoidant attachment, by investigating four specific behaviours: (a) separation anxiety, (b) infants’ willingness to explore, (c) stranger anxiety, and (d) reunion behaviour.

**Attachment theory with adults.** Adults, like children, also have an innate need for attachment and exploration. In fact, adults engage in similar activities as children in order to attach and explore (Collins, Ford, & Feeney, 2011). Safe-haven support is when a caregiver provides support in response to stress, and secure base is when a caregiver provides support for exploration (Collins et al., 2011). For example, adults will keep in contact with loved ones by using their cell phones throughout the day, and they will often debrief their days. Similar to children, adults are more likely to explore their environments and take on challenges when they
feel they have an attachment figure that is “available, accessible, and responsive” (Collins et al., 2011, p. 212). Therefore, it becomes clear that a caregiver (i.e., loved one) needs to provide two types of support, a safe-haven support and a secure base support, in order to create a secure attachment. The ideas of attachment theory continue to be important throughout an individual’s life, as the innate drive to form bonds still exists and influences behaviour.

Individual differences in attachment style continue to be important throughout one’s life. Adult attachment styles are created by two traits, anxiety and avoidance, and result in four different styles: (a) secure, (b) preoccupied, (c) fearful-avoidant, and (d) dismissing-avoidant (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Despite individual differences, everyone is more likely to succeed in life when they have significant relationships in their lives with people who are willing to help and care deeply (Bowlby, 1973; Collins et al., 2011).

Although attachment styles may be developed in early life, social support in later years can lead to the development of secure attachments (Collins et al., 2011). Ideally, an individual can develop different attachments to different people, thereby having multiple people to turn to in times of need (Bowlby 1973, 1980, 1982). Past experiences develop attachment working models, but new people, new relationships, and new situations can create small changes within an individual’s attachment model (Collins et al., 2011). It is with this idea that a youth worker can have a great impact, as they can potentially change a youth’s attachment style.

**Significance of the Study**

The importance of my research is two-fold: (a) the negative impact of homelessness on youth, and (b) the importance of the relationship between a youth who is homeless and a youth
worker. Therefore, this section will first briefly highlight the ways in which homelessness can have a negative impact on a youth. Second, this section will make arguments about the importance of the relationship that a youth who is homeless has with a youth worker at an overnight shelter.

In 2012, the CHF reported that 16% of the homeless population was youth, with 287 individuals under the age of 18 and 182 between 18 and 24 in Calgary. These numbers do not tell the whole story, as they do not account for those experiencing relative homelessness (i.e., the hidden homeless, couch-surfing; CHF, 2013; Karabanow, 2008; Worthington et al., 2008). There are many potential negative impacts of being a youth who is homeless. For example, many youth who are homeless witness, perpetrate, or are victims of physical or sexual assaults while involved in the street life (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Bao, 2000). Additionally, substance misuse and abuse is common among youth who are homeless (Taylor-Sehafer, Jacobvitz, & Steiker, 2008; Worthington et al., 2008). Youth who are homeless also have a higher prevalence of mental illness, although at this time, it may not be possible to determine if mental illness increases one’s chance of becoming street involved or if street involvement increases one’s chance of developing a mental illness (Evenson, 2009; Kidd, 2004; Worthington et al., 2008).

Youth who are homeless may have a difficult time forming trusting relationships with youth workers due to past experiences (Ferguson, 2009; Levy, 1998). Ironically, for many youth, it is this relationship that can help a youth break the cycle of homelessness (Lindsey et al., 2000). Most youth who are homeless will have negative or nonexistent relationships with their primary caregivers (Evenson, 2009; Worthington et al., 2008); however, during their adolescent years, they can begin to develop multiple attachment systems (Allen, 2008). Thus, even though youth
may have had negative experiences with some adults, they may begin to have the ability to form a counter-story that includes positive views and connections with other adults. Therefore, it is possible for youth who are homeless to have positive relationships with youth workers while simultaneously experiencing negative relationships with other adults.

Youth who are homeless typically do not have family support; therefore, they may be forced to rely on service providers, such as youth counsellors at drop-in centres, homeless shelters, medical services, and meal services, to meet their basic needs (Meade & Slesnick, 2002). Shelters and drop-in centres are the most common services accessed by youth who are homeless (Karabanow, 1999); in fact, many youth have limited contact with social services beyond drop-in centres that provide food, shelter, clothing, and other basic needs (Ferguson & Xie, 2007). Connections with youth workers at drop-in centres and overnight shelters are often the first point of contact for youth who are homeless to seek out other supports, such as schooling, social services, or addictions treatment (Karabanow, 2002). This highlights the potential importance of the working alliance between a youth worker and a youth who is homeless. Therefore, an increase in knowledge about what youth who are homeless think is important in the development of relationships may increase a youth worker’s ability to form connections with these youth. This improved relationship may increase a youth’s ability to trust adults, increase a youth’s access to essential services (e.g., addiction resources, food, skill building, and education), and ultimately assist youth in ending their homelessness.

There is limited research designed to explore what qualities youth who are homeless think are important to the development of a working alliance. However, several groups have reported that these relationships with service providers are important to exiting homelessness.
(Eyrich-Garg, 2008; Kurtz et al., 2000, Thompson et al., 2004). Nonetheless, there is still much to learn about what is important to the youth with regards to the relationships between them and youth workers.

My current research will add to the existing literature by focussing specifically on the relationships between youth who are currently homeless and the youth workers at shelters. Focusing on this by using semi-structured individual interviews allows for a more in-depth understanding of how youth who are homeless view the relationships they have with youth workers. Additionally, my research concerns youth who are currently homeless, rather than youth who have already broken the cycle of homelessness. Youth who are currently homeless may provide different information about what is helpful to them in order to form connections with youth workers, as they are currently developing relationships instead of reflecting back. Individuals who had overcome homelessness, both youth and adults, identified that the relationships they formed with service providers (often youth workers) was essential to their recovery (Kurtz et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 2004). Therefore, our knowledge and understanding of this relationship needs to be enriched in order to have the most effective youth workers possible.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

This chapter presents literature on the prevalence of youth homelessness and on the working alliance. Youth who are homeless are at risk for a multitude of social, mental, and physical concerns (Evenson, 2009; Worthington et al., 2008). However, having a strong working alliance with a trusted adult (e.g., youth worker) has been shown to decrease the amount of time a youth spends trapped in the cycle of homelessness, which may minimize any negative impacts that homelessness may cause (Eyrich-Garg, 2008; Karabanow, 2008; Kurtz et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 2004). I will begin with definitions of youth, homelessness, and working alliance. Following this, I will discuss youth development and youth homelessness. An in-depth discussion of the working alliance will end this chapter; topics will include working alliances and working alliances with youth, individuals who are homeless, and youth who are homeless.

Conceptualizing Youth, Homelessness, and the Working Alliance

Definition of youth. According to the Oxford Dictionary, a youth is defined as a person in the period between childhood and adult age (Youth, n.d.). However, there is variation in the operational definition of youth among the Canadian agencies that serve youth who are homeless. For example, Evenson (2009) suggests that although many agencies define youth as being between the ages of 16 and 24, others expand this definition to include individuals between the ages of 12 and 29. The upper limit of 24 years old has been adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (n.d). CHF (2012), an organization that supports youth who are homeless in Calgary, also uses an upper age cut-off point of 24 years; however, it typically provides two sets of data for youth: one categorized as those under the age
of 18 and one for those between the ages of 18 and 24. This indicates that within the CHF’s
definition of youth, there are distinctions between those under 18 years of age and those 18 and
older. Youth are distinct from adults in many ways; with regards to the homeless community,
specifically, they are enumerated separately and receive specialized services. In this study youth
will be used to describe individuals aged 16-18, unless otherwise stated.

**Definition of youth worker.** Previous research examining the relationship between
clients and youth workers uses the terms service providers, formal help, social workers, and
professional helpers to describe the professionals engaged in assisting youth (Eyrich-Garg, 2008;
Kurtz et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 2004). Organizations that serve youth in Calgary, such as the
Boys and Girls Club of Calgary, use the term youth worker to designate this role (Worthington et
al., 2008). For the purpose of this study, I chose the term *youth worker* to express the focus on
youth as well as the various educational and professional backgrounds of the workers at youth
shelters. Furthermore, in this study, a *youth worker* will be defined as an individual who works at
youth shelters and whose primary role is to support and assist youth who are homeless.

**Definition of homelessness.** There are many diverse definitions of homelessness;
however, most definitions focus on housing situation and the duration of homelessness
(Echenberg & Jensen, 2008). A simple definition characterizes a homeless person as an
individual who lacks a fixed adequate place to stay during the evening (Slesnick, Prestopnik,
homelessness as staying at emergency shelters, living on the street, or having an unstable
housing situation. Some definitions of homelessness are more complex. For example, Girard
(2006) defines three distinct types of homelessness: absolute, hidden, and relative. Absolute
homelessness, he suggests, includes individuals who are living in a shelter or on the street. Hidden homelessness includes individuals sleeping in cars or with friends or family. Lastly, relative homelessness includes individuals who are housed but spend a large percentage of their income on housing (Girard, 2006). Similar to Girard, the CHF (2003) defines absolute homelessness as including individuals who have no physical shelter of their own and are therefore living directly on the streets or using emergency shelters. People who are experiencing relative homelessness, according to the CHF (2003), include those who are living in places that do not meet basic health and safety standards.

**Definition of youth who are homeless.** It is valuable to highlight the differences between adults who are homeless and youth who are homeless. Youth who are homeless in Calgary and across Canada are viewed as a distinct population with differences in needs. This is evident in the enumeration process and the fact that they have separate support resources (CHF, 2012; Evenson, 2009). Youth need places where they can make mistakes without being severely punished and have the opportunity to try again, and youth who are homeless are no different (Evenson, 2009). Furthermore, the route to homelessness is different for youth than adults, for whom it is often driven by family and economic problems and residential instability (Evenson, 2009; Worthington et al., 2008). Homelessness in youth differs from homelessness in adults in a significant way: youth who are homeless do not have parental, foster, or institutional care, whereas the adult definition focuses on living arrangements (Girard, 2006; Slesnick et al., 2007). However, the definition of youth homelessness does include information regarding housing situations, as Girard (2006) suggests that youth who are homeless typically find places to sleep at emergency shelters, on the street, by squatting/camping illegally, or by “couch surfing.” Couch
surfing is defined as staying at one location for a short period of time before moving on to the next location in a repeating pattern (Girard, 2006). In one study, youth with various levels of street involvement in Calgary reported that while they were homeless, they had slept outside (“rough”), in group homes, couch surfed, temporarily stayed with family, and used emergency shelters (Worthington et al., 2008). For the purpose of this study, youth who are homeless refers to youth who are currently using shelters designed for youth who are homeless, indicating that they do not currently have parental or institutional care.

**Definition of working alliance.** The term *working alliance* refers to the relationship between a person seeking change and the person assisting with that change (Bordin, 1979). This can encompass a range of individuals, including psychologists, social workers, service providers, and youth workers. According to Bordin (1979), the working alliance has three distinct parts: goals, tasks, and bonds. For the working alliance to be successful, there must be an agreement between the counsellor and the client with regards to the goals of the session (Bordin, 1979). Task completion must also occur as a collaboration between a client and their counsellor in a therapy session; this cannot be directly done to the client (Bordin, 1979). Lastly, bonds refer to the connection between the client and counsellor (Bordin, 1979). Castonguay, Constantino and Holtforth (2006) highlight the interactive and collaborative aspects of a relationship that make it a working alliance: it is not the helper doing to, but rather the helper and client doing together. In this study, the working alliance will refer to the relationship between a youth worker and a youth who is homeless.
Youth Development

Youth is a time period of physical, cognitive, moral, and identity development (Allen, 2008; Eyrich-Garg, 2008). Everall and Paulson (2002) commented that youth can struggle with physical changes, identity formation, independence, and cognitive development. None of these processes occur in isolation; rather, internal, physical, and psychological changes interact with external and social changes (Christie & Viner, 2005). Arnett (2004) identifies five key themes that separate this stage of development from both childhood and adulthood: identity exploration, instability, being self-focused, feeling in-between (childhood and adulthood), and having lots of possibilities.

The developmental period of youth can be filled with instability, transitions, experimentation, and exploration (Arnett, 2004; Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys, & Averill, 2010; Meeus, 2011). Others contend that despite some instability, adolescent identity development is generally progressive and less dramatic than previously thought (Meeus, 2011). By exploring themselves and how they fit into the world, youth begin to develop their unique identities (Sdorow & Rickabaugh, 2002; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Although this developmental stage may include dangerous or troublesome behaviours, teenagers’ explorations do not typically lead to the development of lifelong problems (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Most problems that youth experience are gone by early adulthood, as externalized behaviours show an increase that typically peaks in mid-adolescence, decreasing afterwards until early adulthood (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). An important skill in the development that occurs in adolescence is abstract thinking, which becomes increasingly differentiated and organized and which allows people to make more effective long-term decisions (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).
An individual’s brain is still developing until age 25. During this period, there is an increase in abstract reasoning and problem solving abilities, which are also linked to the development of formal operational thinking (Allen, 2008; Keating, 1990; Sdorow & Rickabaugh, 2002). In addition, until the age of 25, youth develop progressively complex abstract thinking, verbal abilities, morality ideas, and increased impulse control (Christie & Viner, 2005). These changes in thinking can be directly related to physical changes in the brain, such as increases in white matter (Lenroot & Giedd, 2006). These progressive changes also highlight the importance of having different expectations and services for youth who are homeless.

Other physical changes that occur during adolescent development include hormone fluctuation, height and weight increases, development of secondary sex characteristics, and either spermarche or menarche (Wheeler, 1991; Sdorow & Rickabaugh, 2002). The onset of puberty can influence a youth’s life. In girls, early onset can lead to an increase in internal concerns, such as depression, as well as delinquent behaviours (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Early-maturing boys are more likely to engage in antisocial behaviours, drug and alcohol use, and early sexual activities (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Steinberg and Morris’ 2001 review found that the early onset of puberty can be influenced by family relations, in particular by decreased closeness and increased conflict. They conclude that adolescent development is influenced by a complex interplay between genetics, family interaction, and non-family interaction. Physical changes such as brain development and puberty are indeed linked to the social changes and relationships observed during that period of development (Christie & Viner, 2005).

Due to the brain development and other physical changes that occur during adolescence, one’s attachment to others is being further refined and becoming increasingly more complex.
(Allen, 2008). Attachment to peers and parents plays an important role in the development and level of adjustment in adolescents. Laible, Carlo, and Raffaelli (2000) found that youth who assess themselves as highly attached to both peers and parents have the highest level of adjustment, followed by high peer/low parent attachment, then low peer/high parent, and finally low on both. This study shows that attachment to both parents and peers is related to level of adjustment. In this study, lower peer attachment was linked to depression, aggression, English efficacy, and sympathy, whereas low parent attachment was linked to depression and aggression (Laible et al., 2000). Therefore, peer attachment and parent attachment are similar, and both are linked to adjustment; however, they may serve slightly different roles.

**Youth who are Homeless**

Youth who are homeless comprise a substantial part of the homeless population in Calgary and across Canada, indicating the importance of research in this area (CHF, 2012; Rachlis, Wood, Zhang, Montaner, & Kerr, 2009; Worthington et al., 2008). Homelessness amongst youth is a complex concern, as youth who are homeless are a diverse population and there are many ways for youth to enter (and exit) the cycle of homelessness (Kidd 2004; Worthington et al., 2008). Additionally, there are many negative issues that are linked to youth homelessness, including drug and alcohol use, delinquency, and mental health concerns (Evenson, 2009; Kidd, 2004; Worthington et al., 2008).

**Demographics.** Youth who are homeless can include individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Rachlis et al., 2009). A study by Worthington et al. (2008) examining the health of 335 street youth in Calgary found that 62% identified as White, 26% as Aboriginal, and 12% indicated “other” as their ethnic identity. Males (61%) constituted a greater proportion of the
youth homeless population than females (39%). The majority of homeless youth were young: 52% of the participants were 19 years or younger, and 42% were between the ages of 20 and 24. Most respondents identified as “strictly heterosexual” (92% of males and 71% of the females; Worthington et al., 2008). They identified three categories of street-involved youth: those who were currently homeless, those who had been homeless in the past, and youth who were street involved but had never been homeless.

**Prevalence of youth homelessness.** In Calgary, youth homelessness is a concern that is fuelled, in part, by the dramatic increase in prevalence within a relatively short period of time. On May 10, 2006, a homeless enumeration found 444 youth between the ages of 13 and 24 currently staying in shelters, an increase of 500% from the previous decade (City of Calgary 1996, 2006). In 2008, the City of Calgary reported that since 2006, there had been a 34% growth in the number of youth under the age of 18 who were experiencing absolute homelessness and a 41% growth in the number of homeless youth between the ages of 18 and 24. In 2008, there were a total of 355 youth under the age of 18 who were homeless and 327 between 18 and 24, which is approximately 20% of the total homeless population (City of Calgary, 2008). In 2012, the CHF reported that 16% of the homeless population were youth, with 287 individuals under the age of 18 and 182 between the ages of 18 and 24. Although there appears to be a decline in the number of youth who are experiencing homelessness, this type of direct comparison cannot be made as the City of Calgary changed the method of enumeration. For example, in the 2008 count, individuals living in permanent supportive living were included, whereas this group was not included in the 2012 enumeration (City of Calgary, 2012).
Calgary is five years into The 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness. The Plan’s goal is to end homelessness in Calgary, specifically stating: “by January 29, 2018, an individual or family will stay in an emergency shelter or sleep outside for no longer than one week before moving into a safe, decent, affordable home with the support they need to sustain it” (CHF, 2011, p. 1). The Plan has adopted a Housing First model, which is the movement towards getting people into housing prior to working on other issues that they may face (e.g., addiction, mental health; CHF, 2011). In the first five years of the Plan, approximately 4,500 people have been housed, according to the CHF (2013). In 2012, 759 people received housing; of those, there were 161 families and 145 single people between the ages of 18-24. However, none of those housed under the Plan were single and under the age of 18 (CHF, 2013). Therefore, families who were housed may account for some of the decrease in the number of youth enumerated as homeless. It is therefore likely that there has been a minimal decrease in number of youth who are alone and living on the streets as a direct consequence of the Plan. It is also important to note that prevalence statistics on youth homelessness in Calgary may not be accurate, as they do not account for youth sleeping outside, couch-surfing, or those experiencing relative homelessness (often referred to as the hidden homeless; CHF, 2013; Karabanow, 2008; Worthington et al., 2008). Evenson (2009) estimated that up to 80% of the youth homeless population was hidden. Using these estimates, there could be up to 1,435 youth who are experiencing some level of homelessness in Calgary, as of 2012.

Youth homelessness is not just a phenomenon that occurs in Calgary; it is a widespread concern across Canada. The number of youth who are homeless in Canada is difficult to determine due to the invisibility and transiency of the population and the variance in the way
they are counted (CHF, 2008; Evenson, 2009). Despite the difficulties in estimating youth homelessness, Evenson (2009) reported that there are approximately 65,000 youth that are homeless in Canada, among them an estimated 80% who are the hidden homeless. Therefore, there are between 8,000 and 11,000 youth who are staying in shelters on any given night (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2001). That is one third of the total homeless population, making youth the fastest growing sub-population of individuals who are homeless across Canada (Rachlis et al., 2009).

**Routes to homelessness.** The notion that those youth who become homeless do so not by choice but by circumstance is supported by research. Worthington et al. (2008), for example, indicated that homeless youth often frame their less-than-ideal living circumstances as an outgrowth of family dysfunction and negative experiences within foster and/or group homes. Of the 355 homeless youth surveyed, 54% indicated that their parents abused alcohol, while 41% of the parents abused drugs. Furthermore, those youth who were currently living on the street reported the highest rate of parental problems with alcohol use (63%) compared to youth with a history of living on the street (53%) and youth who never lived on the street (38%).

Evenson’s (2009) research confirmed these findings, restating that in addition to unstable home lives (fuelled by physical abuse, substance abuse, or both) and involvement in group homes, experiences of parental abuse and substance use often result in youth fleeing to the streets in (futile) search of a stable environment. For example, in Evenson’s study of 689 homeless youth from across Canada, 42% of the youth reported growing up in a chaotic environment and 63% in families that had a hard time maintaining steady housing (Evenson, 2009). Involvement in child protective services was also prevalent; 68% of the youth in the study had come from
foster care, group care, or a youth center (Evenson, 2009). Child abuse is relatively common among this population; 24% of respondents stated that they experienced sexual, physical, and/or emotional abuse (Evenson, 2009). Additionally, unhealthy use of alcohol and other drugs within families of homeless youth is relatively high; 37% of youth reported having witnessed substance abuse in their families of origin (Evenson, 2009).

Beyond familial abuse, substance abuse, and neglect, the research literature indicates that support, positive influence, and care have substantial impacts on the risk of a youth becoming homeless (Evenson, 2009; Karabanow, 2008; Worthington et al., 2008). Evenson (2009) found that 22% of Canadian homeless youth reported that they had no positive role model. Worthington et al. (2008) discovered that 33% of youth who experience homelessness had been asked to leave their house by a guardian. In addition, Karabanow’s (2008) work indicated that youth who are homeless typically described their families as lacking love, care, interest, and support, while those who are in foster care reported negative experiences such as being treated like a criminal or feeling unwanted after several moves within the foster care system.

**Consequences of homelessness on youth.** As one may imagine, the challenges of familial instability and abuse are not erased by fleeing to the street. In their pathway to homelessness, youth are typically leaving one abusive and unstable environment for another. In fact, current research seems to indicate that the experience of being homeless can often exacerbate many issues while simultaneously eroding any attachment to remaining supportive environments such as school and work (Evenson, 2009). Rachlis et al. (2009) found that youth who are homeless are at increased risk for public drug injection, frequent use of crack cocaine,
experiencing violence, and attaining lower levels of education. Mental health issues are also a concern among youth who are homeless (Evenson, 2009; Worthington et al., 2008).

Focusing on education, Evenson (2009) found that 62% of youth who are homeless had dropped out of school. CHF (2009) reported that among youth who are homeless, 45% had been suspended from or dropped out of school. Worthington et al. (2008) reported similar numbers as CHF, but expanded by stating that compared to youth who had never lived on the streets (17%), youth who were living on the streets at the time of the study (53%) and youth who were previously homeless (52%) were more likely to have been expelled/suspended or dropped out of school.

Substance abuse is common among youth who are homeless. Worthington et al. (2008) found that 94% of youth who were street-involved reported using an illegal substance in the two weeks prior to the interview. Similarly, Taylor-Seehafer et al. (2008) found that alcohol and illicit drug use is a problem among youth who are homeless; 82% of whom reported medium-to-high risk alcohol or other drug abuse. According to Worthington et al. (2008), youth who were living on the street at the time of the study were more likely to report using substances in the past two weeks (99%) compared to youth with a previous history of living on the streets (93%) and those street-involved youth who had never lived on the streets (87%). They found that most commonly used drugs among youth currently living on the streets are: tobacco (93%), marijuana (87%), hashish (67%), ecstasy (41%), crack (41%), cocaine (40%), LSD (32%), crystal methamphetamine (24%), heroin (15%), and gas or glue (13%). In addition to using drugs, youth who are homeless may not be practicing harm reduction techniques. Worthington et al. (2008) found that 21% of youth who were homeless reported using an injection drug at least once in
their lives, and of those, 29% reported that they had shared needles. Unfortunately, despite the prevalence of high-risk behaviours such as drug and alcohol misuse, youth who are homeless are less likely to receive treatment for alcohol or drug misuse and addictions (Rachlis et al., 2009).

Life on the street is dangerous for youth. Many youth witness, perpetrate, or are victims of physical and sexual assaults (Whitbeck et al., 2000). Physical violence in particular is a major concern among youth who are homeless. Approximately 76% of youth who were street-involved reported being victims of violence, and 62% reported being perpetrators of violence (Worthington et al., 2008). Victimization rates were lower for youth who were street-involved but had never lived on the street (43%) compared to youth who at the time of the study were homeless (83%) and youth who were not currently homeless but with a history of homelessness (83%). This violence often leads to youth who are homeless having legal concerns, with 30% of homeless youth identifying legal issues as a barrier to change (Evenson, 2009). Youth currently living on the streets (78%) were also more likely than street-involved youth who had never lived on the streets (37%) to be charged with a crime (Worthington et al., 2008).

At this time, research has not been able to conclusively determine if mental illness increases one’s chance of becoming street-involved or if street involvement increases one’s chance of developing a mental illness. However, it is apparent that youth who experience homelessness have a higher prevalence of mental illness (Evenson, 2009; Worthington et al., 2008). There is some indication that mental illness may be a factor leading to homelessness: Worthington et al. (2008) found that 43% of youth who are homeless reported that they had a diagnosed mental illness while growing up. This, however, may be due to an unstable home environment. Some disorders were found to be more prevalent than others among youth who are
homeless. For example, Embry, Vander Stoep, Evens, Ryan, and Pollock (2000) reported that youth who were homeless had higher rates of conduct disorder, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and posttraumatic stress disorder. Similarly, Evenson (2009) found that 33% of youth who are homeless reported a diagnosis with either major depression or posttraumatic stress disorder. Kidd (2004) also found that youth who are homeless have an increased prevalence of mental disorders such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder. Alarmingly, 57% of youth living on the streets reported suicidal ideation, and 39% reported an attempted suicide, indicating that they are not getting the help that they need (Worthington et al., 2008).

There are many negative consequences of homelessness for youth, including: decrease in education involvement, substance abuse, violence, and poor mental health. Breaking the cycle of homelessness can minimize and reverse the impact. A strong working alliance with youth workers may help youth who are homeless access the resources they need to break the cycle.

**The Working Alliance**

Professionals from many theoretical backgrounds recognize the importance of a working alliance (Shirk & Karver, 2003). Regardless of therapeutic approaches, treatment modalities, or clinical issues, the working alliance has been shown to be positively associated with therapeutic change (Castonguay et al., 2006). However, there tends to be significant variance in the views of the working alliance between therapeutic styles. Rogerians would believe that the relationship (built on unconditional positive regard, empathy, and being genuine) is enough for therapeutic change to occur, whereas cognitive-behavioural therapists state that the relationship is not effective, in and of itself, but will create the proper environment for change to occur.
Clients and counsellors do not have the same understanding of the working alliance (Bachelor, 1995). Additionally, when determining if a working alliance contributes to the outcome of therapy, it is the client’s perspective that is most important (Hawley and Weisz, 2005). Clients report that the techniques used by and the personality traits of the therapist were important to the development of the alliance (Bedi, 2006). In particular, Bedi (2006) found that clients identified eight categories as important to the working alliance: (a) nonverbal gestures, (b) emotional support and care, (c) presentation and body language, (d) setting, (e) session administration, (f) client’s personal responsibility, (g) referral and recommended materials, and (h) guidance and challenging. Clients do not identify collaboration as part of a working alliance; rather, they put most of the responsibility on the counsellor (Bedi, 2006).

Many studies have listed similar therapist qualities that are effective in creating a positive working alliance. Ackerman and Hilsenroth (2003) provided a list of characteristics that are important for a therapist, which includes flexible, experienced, honest, respectful, trustworthy, confident, interested, alert, friendly, warm, and open. Horvath (2000) found that counsellors who are successful in forming a positive working alliance regarded their clients in a positive manner, worked within a collaborative framework, and were active and respectful. The quality of the working alliance can be increased by therapists who are adaptive, flexible, challenging, and more focused (Kivlghan & Schmitz, 1992; Norcross & Wampold, 2011). Additionally, therapists who took time to talk about mundane things before getting to the concerning issues were able to develop a better relationship with their clients, because simply talking with a client can decrease the tension and increase the working alliance (Bordin, 1979).
Shattell, Starr, and Thomas (2007) interviewed 20 adults about the working alliance and found that client desires fall into three categories: “relate to me,” “know me as a person,” and “get to the solution” (p. 274). Relating to the client appeared to be especially important at the beginning of therapy (Shattell et al., 2007). Counsellors who related to the client were described as non-judgmental, patient, soft-spoken, open, genuine, calm, and stable (Shattell et al., 2007). Relating can be demonstrated with the following techniques: restating, summarizing, clarifying, questioning, and reflecting (Shattell et al., 2007). “Know me as a person” could be defined as the counsellor having a deep understanding or knowledge of the client (Shattell et al., 2007). It takes time, understanding, and skill in order for a deep knowledge of a client to occur. Shattell et al. (2007) stated that the clients in their study described an understanding counsellor as being genuinely concerned, caring, and sincere. Finally, is it important to clients that their therapist is able to “get to a solution” (Shattell et al., 2007). Counsellors can help with this by offering advice, information, diagnoses, suggestions, feedback, information, and resources. Shattell et al. (2007) clarified that clients want this feedback to occur with a counsellor who gently guides and is collaborative with a client so that they feel they are equal.

Additionally, there are actions that therapists need to avoid if they want to achieve a positive working alliance with their clients. Wubbolding (2008) stated that counsellors who argue, encourage excuses, hold grudges, instil fear, or give up easily are unable to form good working alliances. Ackerman and Hilsenroth (2003) claimed that when a counsellor is rigid, critical, and inappropriate with self-disclosure, the likely result is a weaker working alliance.
**Working Alliance with Youth**

Typically, a working alliance can be thought of as two individuals coming together to form a trusting relationship. However, with youth, a counsellor (or youth worker) may find that they are doing the majority of the work (Oetzel & Scherer, 2003). Developing a working alliance with youth can be potentially more challenging than developing one with adults, as youth may have developed a distrust of adults, which can be manifested as refusal to engage, angry outbursts, or not disclosing important information (Everall & Paulson, 2002; Oetzel & Scherer, 2003). It is essential to note that this distrust may be a coping mechanism for youth who have been mistreated; it is a way for them to adapt to their world (Schofield & Beek, 2005). The lack of trust and fear that confidentiality will be broken by a therapist also discourages youth from seeking services and developing relationships with service providers (Ensign & Bell, 2004).

The challenge of gaining a youth’s trust is compounded with the possibility that youth and adults may have different goals. Hyde (2005) found that if the goals of service providers and youth do not match, the youth will simply not engage. Service providers who are helping youth may inadvertently, and often with good intentions, impose their ideas of what the youth needs to do instead of determining goals collaboratively with youth (Levy, 1998). This can prevent a working alliance from being formed or cause damage in one that has been developed. As Bordin (1979) stated, in order to have a strong working alliance, one needs to be aware of the bond, the goals, and the tasks.

Martin, Romas, Medford, Leffert, and Hatcher (2006) conducted a focus group with seven youth to determine the helping skills that adults use that might increase the strength of a working alliance. They found that the youth discussed the importance of respect, shared time,
openness, role characteristics, recognition, guidance, identification, trust, freedom, like/dislike, responsibility, and familiarity. The top three factors that influenced the working alliance were: (a) adults inviting adolescents into the conversation and thus being treated as equals, (b) adults enjoying the time spent with adolescents, and (c) the ability to listen without judging or lecturing.

It is not only the adult helpers who influence the working alliance; the youth themselves play a pivotal role in this development. Different types of youth characteristics may foster or complicate forming relationships with youth workers. For example, Shirk, Karver, and Brown (2011) stated that it was more difficult for youth with externalized problems to form a working alliance. However, once established, the working alliance will be more critical for youth that have externalized behaviours (Shirk et al., 2011).

A positive working alliance is just as important when working with youth as when working with adults and can be a predictor of the therapeutic outcome (Hawley & Weisz, 2005). Although it may be more challenging to develop a working alliance with youth, it is still essential to do so, as it contributes to positive outcomes (Oetzel & Scherer, 2003). Youth need to be able to trust youth workers in order for a positive result to occur. Both techniques and personality traits of the youth workers can be considered imperative to the development of a working alliance (Bedi, 2006). When the client views a youth worker as authentic, open, caring, sensitive, sympathetic, and kind, it is more likely that a positive working alliance can be formed (Everall & Paulson, 2002).
Working Alliance with Persons Who are Homeless

A working alliance between a person who is homeless and a service provider can have a positive impact in the life of the person who is homeless (Chinman, Rosen, & Lam, 2000; Thompson et al., 2004). There are many different things that can contribute to a successful working alliance, some of which are specific to this population (Levy, 1998; Walsh et al., 2010).

Studies have shown that there is a link between working alliances and the amount of time an individual is involved in homelessness (Chinman et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 2004). Chinman et al. (2000) found that the strength of the working alliance between an individual who is homeless and their case-worker was related to a reduction in homelessness after nine months. Thompson et al. (2004) found that individuals who were homeless identified the relationship with professionals as a key part of getting off the street. In this study, Thompson et al. (2004) interviewed 12 adults who had at least 24 consecutive months of stable housing following a period of homelessness about the roles of significant relationships in helping them exit homelessness. Thompson et al. (2004) found that 80% of the comments regarding relationships with service providers were positive and indicated an appreciation for encouraging, positive, and supportive characteristics. They concluded that relationships with service providers were considered essential in breaking the cycle of homelessness.

Levy (1998) stated that when working with individuals who are homeless in an outreach setting, engagement is the most critical aspect of helping. Walsh et al. (2010) found that individuals who were homeless indicated five things to be important to a working alliance: respectful engagement, casual nature of conversations, having an alternative setting for conversations (e.g., a coffee shop), effective listening, and establishing trust. Service providers
need to be cautious, as highlighted by Levy (1998), who found that when individuals try to “rescue” a person from a life on the streets, it may be interpreted as offensive and coercive. Therefore, it is important to develop collaborative goals and work with individuals who are homeless, which has been found to be true of most working alliances (Bordin, 1979).

Additionally, Levy (1998) acknowledged that building a relationship with an individual who is homeless may not be a linear process. Therefore, service providers need to understand that persons who are homeless may distance themselves from the relationship at times.

**Working Alliances with Youth Who are Homeless**

Homelessness can have a profound effect on youth. The impact can be global. However, one area of significant impact includes their desire and ability to form a trustful working alliance with adults. While developing a working alliance with youth who are homeless may be challenging, it is essential and rewarding (Oetzel & Scherer, 2003). This working alliance may help a youth connect with resources and ultimately break the cycle of homelessness (Eyrich-Garg, 2008; Karabanow, 2008; Kurtz et al., 2000; Meyer, 2005).

**Impact of homelessness on youth’s ability to form a working alliance.** Adolescent development is influenced by social and psychological factors, both of which are strained while adolescents are living on the street (Lindsey et al., 2000). Yet, it is important for adolescents to develop relationships with others, both adults and peers (Allen, 2008). According to Keating (1990), adolescence is an important time regarding the individual conceptualization of attachment, and it is possible that an individual’s experience with relationships during adolescence will impact their perceptions about attachment during their entire adult lives (Allen, 2008). Adolescence is a time of changing relationships, and these relationships occur in a social
environment; youth who are homeless are at a disadvantage regarding this process due to their strained social and psychological environment.

Youth who are homeless can have a particularly difficult time developing a trusting working alliance with adults. Typically, youth who are homeless have faced abandonment from important adult figures in their lives, which has led to attachment concerns and ultimately the distrust of others, especially adults (Ferguson, 2009). This lack of trust applies to both social institutions and adults; therefore, adults who work at social institutions may have an even more challenging time. However, relationships that are formed with youth workers may be among the first positive relationships that these youth have with adults, indicating the importance of this relationship (Ferguson, Kim, & McCoy, 2011; Karabanow, 2008). Therefore, although difficult, it is critical to develop a working alliance with youth who are homeless.

**Phatic communication.** Phatic communication is communication with little content, and it can be a powerful way to begin to connect with youth (Burnard, 2003). This type of communication can be used to develop rapport with clients, as it indicates solidarity, involves turn-taking, and is focused on non-personal subject matter (Burnard, 2003). Phatic communication will enable a service provider to slowly engage the youth while being responsive to the youth’s needs, rather than focusing on what the youth needs to change. Morrissette (1992) found that youth workers should encourage youth who are homeless to ask them as many questions as they want and to highlight and compliment youths’ survival and coping skills.

It is only once trust with youth workers is established that youth will engage in the services and programs that will help them improve their lives; therefore, building rapport and trust with youth is an essential first step (Kurtz et al., 2000; Levy, 1998). Consequently, many
programs in Canada are developed around the idea that to help youth who are homeless, they first need to be engaged, perhaps though the use of phatic communication. Therefore, programs need to develop a space where youth can come and feel comfortable in order to begin to develop trusting relationships with the adults who work there (Karabanow & Clement, 2004).

Impact of the working alliance on youth homelessness. Kurtz et al. (2000) interviewed 12 youth, who in the past had stayed in a homeless shelter, group care facility, or other alternative living situation but had had stable housing for the last two years, to determine what had helped them break the cycle of homelessness. Together, they explored how informal (friends and family) and formal (youth workers and counsellors) helpers assisted the youth to exit homelessness. All the youth in the study identified the importance of relationships with their family, friends, and professionals; 11 specifically shared how professionals helped them leave a life of homelessness. Notably, youth did not talk about the programs they used; instead, they talked about the people they encountered at the programs. A key finding of this study was that most youth noted that although they were resentful towards the professionals at the time they were homeless, they could now see the value of the relationships.

Eyrich-Garg (2008) made use of a focus group with five female youth residents at an emergency shelter to further understand therapeutic alliances. Eyrich-Garg (2008) found that the most important components of a therapeutic alliance with the female youth were: wanting to be respected, listened to, and not judged. More specifically, seven themes emerged: “treat me like I’m on your level”, “tell me a little about yourself”, “ask my permission to take notes”, “pay attention to what I am saying”, “tell me what you are doing,” “don’t tell me what’s in my file,” and “don’t call me names” (Eyrich-Garg, 2008, p. 379-381).
Karabanow (2008) described six stages of homelessness in street youth: precipitating factors, courage to change, securing help, transitioning from, change in routine, and successful exit. Karabanow stated that the relationship between a youth worker and a youth who is homeless is important at the second stage, courage to change, and the third stage, securing help (Karabanow, 2008). During the courage to change stage, youth are looking for supports and someone who cares. The influential factors relating to relationships with adults in the securing help stage are using services, drop-ins, and structured programs (Karabanow, 2008). The youth in this study cited the importance of having help, stating that if one does not have help from one’s family, there are resources that can help, and at times, outside help is key (Karabanow, 2008).

In a study examining working alliances, Meyer (2005) found that there is a link between behavioural intervention strategies used and youth reports of the working alliance. In particular, she found that a high working alliance rating was correlated to the use of personal reward, compromise, and expert role strategies. In her study, she explored how behavioural strategies are linked to different parts of the working alliance and found that personal reward and expert strategies were related to the bond and compromise was related to goals. Meyer (2005) used the definitions of McCarthy and Frieze (1999), who characterized personal reward strategies as the influencer (youth worker) using their approval of another person (youth who is homeless) to encourage them to act a certain way. An expert strategy is when a person uses their knowledge of a subject to influence another person. Finally, a compromise strategy is when the influencer tries to compromise with an individual to influence them to act the way they want. Meyer (2005) found that there are behavioural strategies that weaken the working alliance. For example,
personal coercion weakened the working alliance in this study; personal coercion is when a person uses the threat of disliking a person to influence another’s actions (McCarthy & Frieze, 1999; Meyer, 2005).

**Conclusion**

Even in a city as prosperous as Calgary, a large number of youth are homeless. Homelessness is an enduring factor in an individual’s life; many adults who are currently homeless in Calgary report that their first encounter with homelessness occurred while they were youth (CHF, 2012). Youth who are homeless are at increased risk for violence, dropping out of school, alcohol and drug use, and mental health issues; there is a link between the amount of time an individual is homeless and the listed risk factors (Evenson, 2009; Worthington et al., 2008). Thus, effective interventions are imperative in order to stop the cycle of homelessness as early as possible. An important part of any effective intervention is the working alliance that occurs between individuals who experience homelessness and service providers. Multiple studies have shown that individuals who have overcome homelessness, both youth and adults, identified that the relationships they formed with service providers (often youth workers) was essential to their recovery (Eyrich-Garg, 2008; Karabanow, 2008; Kurtz et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 2004). Therefore, it is critical that an enriched understanding about the working alliance is developed to be able to train youth workers to enhance the working alliance between themselves and youth.
CHAPTER 3
Methodology

The methods for this project were chosen to best address how working alliance relationships form between youth workers and youth who are homeless. As Smith et al. (2009) assert, when developing a research project, it is essential to ensure congruence between the research question and the method selected. Qualitative research allows for a rich, complex, and detailed inquiry into a particular area (Vivar et al., 2007), and as such works best with research questions that are exploratory in nature. Since very little has been written on the topic of the working alliance between homeless youth and youth workers, and my intent is to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon through rich and descriptive interview data, my research question and overarching methodology pair well. However, not all qualitative methodologies are well suited for my particular point of inquiry. Qualitative research methods are as rich and diverse as the data they produce. Since the goal of my research is to focus in on how a particular group (youth who are homeless) perceives and understands a particular phenomena (the working alliance with youth workers), IPA (Smith et al., 2009) is the qualitative technique selected for the study at hand. Reasons for this selection and a complete description will be found in the following section.

Research Design

The guiding question for this study was: “How do youth who are homeless understand the working alliance between themselves and youth workers?” According to Vivar et al. (2007), qualitative research is a preferable design when four conditions are met: (a) when the goal is to have a deeply descriptive understanding of the data; (b) when the variables cannot be easily
identified; (c) in situations where theories do not exist or are generally undeveloped; and (d) when there is little known about the research topic. I think that my topic fits well into this frame for the following reasons: the goal of this thesis is to have a descriptive understanding of the experience of forming a working alliance from the perspective of the youth who are homeless, there is a lack of directly applicable theories, and there is relatively little known about the working alliance as viewed by youth who are homeless. Therefore, the outcomes and variables were not easily identifiable.

The main goal of IPA research is to explore in detail how people are making sense of their personal and/or social worlds (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The idea of this research is to explore how youth who are homeless are making sense of their interactions and connections to youth workers that they meet. IPA is particularly well suited to any investigation that is concerned with “complexity, process or novelty” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 53). This research question is aimed at the youth perspective regarding the formation of a working alliance; forming a relationship can be a complex occurrence, particularly for youth who are homeless. Additionally, relatively little has been published on this topic.

Although IPA requires analysis to be firmly grounded in the data, it allows the researcher to freely engage with prior research, personal experience and knowledge, and psychological theory, and therefore permits the researcher to have an active role in the data analysis (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2008). This seemed to fit well with the topic and myself; I do have personal experience working with youth who are homeless and have researched this topic (working alliance) and population (at-risk youth), and therefore felt as
though I had the ability to play an active role in the analysis process by adding the necessary interpretations.

Further review of previous studies illustrates the congruence between the current research and the methodological frame chosen. For example, a master’s thesis by Hassell (2008) used IPA to understand adolescent female athletes’ perceptions of the motivational influence of their coaches, parents, and peers. Gyllensten and Palmer (2007) also used IPA to explore the relationships between people, this time focusing on the coaching relationship in a workplace. Finally, a study completed by Macleod, Craufurd, and Booth (2002) examined the formal relationship between clients and counsellors and used IPA in the analysis.

In my research, it is essential that the individual voices of the youth are heard while still providing the opportunity to uncover the commonalities or themes among the youth. The phenomenological assumption that verbal accounts reveal meaningful information about participant’s thoughts, which in turn have a relation to lived experiences, is necessary in addressing the research question (Larkin et al., 2006). Finally, IPA provides a step-by-step method, thereby providing concrete direction to those new to qualitative research (Smith et al., 2009). For these reasons, the data collected was analysed using IPA.

**Influences on Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

IPA is influenced by three ways of knowing: idiography, hermeneutics, and phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009). Together, these three ideas are used to determine the methods and values that IPA prescribes. Therefore, in order to understand IPA, one must have an understanding of idiography, hermeneutics, and phenomenology.
Idiography. Smith et al. (2009) defined an idiographic way of knowing as a focus on the particular, on a small and individual level. This idea adds to the sense of detail and depth of IPA (and other forms of qualitative research). The goal is to get a detailed understanding of one phenomenon from the perspective of certain people within a particular context. Idiography highlights the importance of situating the participants in their own particular context by exploring the participant’s personal perspectives. This type of quest for knowledge asserts that a researcher should fully analyse the data from one participant before moving on to the next to ensure that each voice is properly heard.

Hermeneutics. IPA is heavily influenced by hermeneutics, which is a philosophy of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutics was originally developed to interpret Biblical text and is influenced by the thinking of Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer (Smith et al., 2009). A main underlying assumption of hermeneutics is that people are sense-making creatures and will use their internal resources to make sense of their environment and experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Any accounts that people provide, for example from semi-structured interviews, are reflective of the processes that they are using to develop an understanding of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The analyst will then try to understand the participant’s world using that data.

Therefore, any qualitative research that is done using the concepts of hermeneutics is actually considered to be a double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). It is a double hermeneutic because there are two separate people trying to understanding something on two levels; the researcher is making sense of what the participants say, which is the expression of the participant understanding his or her environment (Smith et al., 2009; Smith &
Therefore I, as the researcher, attempted to comprehend the data provided by the youth, who were, in turn, trying to understand their experiences with forming relationships with youth workers.

An important idea that this thinking adds to IPA is the concept of the *hermeneutic circle*, which speaks to the relationship between the whole and the parts (Smith et al., 2009). The idea is that the whole will not make sense without knowing the individual parts, while at the same time the individual parts will not make sense without knowledge of the whole (Smith et al., 2009). When researching using IPA, one needs to continually be checking the parts against the whole and the whole against the parts. One needs to be aware of the text (parts) and the participants (whole) at the same time in order to understand correctly, as the meaning of the words will be influenced by the speaker (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, in IPA, there is a lot of going back and forth between the detail and the big picture (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

**Phenomenology.** The third major philosophy upon which IPA was built is phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009). The main idea of phenomenology is that “there exists an essential, perceived reality with common features” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1373). It is concerned with understanding what being a human is all about by striving to understand an individual’s personal perceptions of an experience in great detail (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). In phenomenological terms, the personal perception of an experience is referred to as the *essence* (Dahlberg, 2006). Everything that occurs has an essence; this is what enables people to tell one thing (experience) apart from other things (experiences; Dahlberg, 2006). Here, the essence is the making sense, or the logic, of the experience as it is understood by its subjects (Dukes, 1984).
Phenomenology is about giving voice to a phenomenon or experience (Dahlberg, 2006). It is essential that participants are able to speak so that both their individual and collective voices are heard (Dukes, 1984). There is a certain degree of unity of meaning of the experience among different individuals (Dahlberg, 2006). Phenomenology is assessing the meaning of an experience for individuals while simultaneously looking for the commonalities among people (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

According to Dahlberg (2006), essence is something that is already there. As researchers, we are not adding the essence; rather, we are striving to see it. Phenomenology will add to an understanding by exposing the taken-for-granted assumptions that people have about an experience (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Essence is not something that can be interpreted from a data set; rather, it must be something that is found in the data set (Dahlberg, 2006; Dukes, 1984). Thus, the meaning is disclosed to the researcher instead of the researcher adding her own interpretations, knowledge, and research to find the answer. However, this seeing takes time; therefore, one needs to look at the data again and again (Dukes, 1984). The goal of phenomenology is about understanding, not interpreting, a phenomenon.

There is a double insight in phenomenology: first, the idea that human experiences already make sense to those who experience it, prior to outside interpretations and theories; and second, knowledge is the sole property of the experience itself (Dukes, 1984; Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, it is a researcher’s goal to see the knowledge that is already there, not to interpret, theorize, or add to it. One way to assist in ensuring that this occurs is a process referred to as bracketing, which is the attempt to set aside one’s own biases by first becoming aware of them.
Bracketing has been acknowledged as one method of increasing a study’s validity (Ahern, 1999).

In phenomenology, the essence would be the focus, while the particulars, which are still essential, would be in the background (Dahlberg, 2006). However, each detail needs to be taken up as a foreground and compared to the essence (which becomes the background) to ensure that there is a fit (Dahlberg, 2006). Both the particulars and the overall picture need to be brought to the foreground in order for a deeper understanding to form (Dahlberg, 2006). This is where hermeneutics and phenomenology meet, as in hermeneutics one needs to move between the detail and the big picture (Smith et al., 2009).

**Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

IPA is completed by integrating the three ways of knowing into one methodological frame (Smith et al., 2009). The idiographic stance is highlighted by IPA’s focus on the details (Smith, 2004). The idea that the researcher has a central role in making sense of the experiences of the participant is where IPA was influenced by hermeneutic thought (Smith, 2004). IPA is phenomenological in that it focuses on an individual’s perceptions of an event or phenomenon (Smith, 2004). The influence of idiographic, hermeneutics, and phenomenology is apparent in the way that IPA looks at both the big picture (essence) and detail (particulars).

Smith (2004) described IPA as an idiographic, inductive, and interrogative method of research. IPA is idiographic in the sense that it focuses on the details of one participant’s data before moving on to the next participant’s data. By doing this, it will be possible to allow the individual voices of the participants to be heard while still sharing the general themes of the experience. IPA is inductive: it does not start with a hypothesis that needs to be tested; rather, the
aim is to explore, in a flexible and detailed manner, the experience of the participants (Smith, 2004; Smith, 2007). Therefore, the analysis process needs to be flexible enough to allow for themes to emerge from the data. Finally, it is interrogative in that the results from IPA use theories from psychology and integrate them into the data to develop final results (Smith, 2004). Theories are commonly used to support the results from the data; however, the theories should not be added until after the close textual analysis or during the final stage of analysis (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009).

The overarching goal of IPA is to explore how people perceive and make sense of their worlds and to express this in the words of the participants (Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). In order to accomplish this, IPA asserts that people are able to make sense of their experiences and that there is a connection between what people say and what they think (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Typically, IPA will investigate one particular experience that a group of people share (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In this case, the particular experience was forming a relationship with youth workers and the particular population was youth who are homeless. Smith (2004) stated that IPA is a good fit when a research study is exploring the personal and lived experiences of a particular group of people and the researcher desires to provide a detailed account of how the participants make sense of their experiences (Smith, 2004).

IPA is more than just looking at the text; it goes beyond that to a more interpretative and psychological analysis (Smith, 2004). Smith et al. (2009) highlighted that researchers using IPA are trying to achieve an insider view; however, this is not strictly possible. Therefore, IPA recognises that the researcher is an active part of the process, bringing with them personal experiences and potential biases (Smith, 2004; Smith, 2007). One way that this is conceptualized
is through double hermeneutics: the idea that it is the researcher making sense of how the participants make sense (Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, throughout this process, it is essential for the researcher to identify biases that arise.

**Sampling and Recruitment**

Since the research was conducted with the plan of using IPA to analyse the data, a relatively small sample size was recommended (Smith, 2004; Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2009; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The point of this type of analysis is to ensure that there is enough depth to the data set, and therefore, there is less concern placed on the breadth (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The sample obtained was homogenous and purposeful, as suggested by Smith and Osborn (2008), with all the participants being youth who were homeless. Although there are no specific sample size prescribed, Smith et al. (2009) and Smith and Osborn (2008) suggested that a minimum of three participants be used and that 10 participants is typically at the higher end in order to achieve the desired details. Due to the fact that this research is a master’s thesis, the sample goal was between five and 10 participants. Participants were recruited until saturation of the data was reached. Saturation is the point in data collection when no new or relevant information emerges; therefore, it is the point that many qualitative researchers use to indicate that it is time to cease collecting data (Saumur & Given, 2008).

As previously discussed, the age range of the definition of youth can vary; for the purpose of this study, the targeted youth were between the ages of 16 and 18. Sixteen was chosen as the lower limit, as it is typically an age at which people can be assessed as being a mature minor and, therefore, capable of providing consent. This is important, as it was highly probable that guardians would not be available to sign consent, due to the fact that youth staying at
Avenue 15, which houses two programs, Loft and Link, do not need parental or guardian consent. Loft is an overnight drop-in program; the youth can enter the program at 10 pm and must leave by 7 am (Boys & Girls Club of Calgary, 2013). Link allows for more consistent housing and admits youth who are able to stay there 24 hours a day (Boys & Girls Club of Calgary, 2013). Both programs strive to provide basic needs, such as shelter, clothing, and food (Boys & Girls Club of Calgary, 2013). Additionally, there is not a requirement that youth have a case worker or status with children’s services to stay at these programs. Youth overnight shelters only accept those individuals who are under the age of majority; in Alberta, this would be 18 years (Age of Majority Act, 2000). The requirement that all participants in this study had to have experience with homelessness was met, as they were recruited from overnight shelters for youth. Although the youth may have made use of other services, it was a requirement that the youth had to be connected to the overnight shelters; all youth had spent at least one night at the shelter. Thus, the sample was purposeful, as it was youth who were currently using overnight shelters and were between the ages of 16-18.

Recruitment occurred between April and August of 2013 and was a multi-step process. First, the Boys and Girls Club Calgary (residences Avenue 15 and Safe House) was asked to support the study by allowing me to recruit youth from their site, conduct interviews onsite, and act as support for youth after the interviews if necessary. They were also asked to provide a letter of support for the purposes of obtaining ethics approval. After this step, the letter was included in the ethics application to be reviewed by University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. Approval for this study was received on March 1, 2013 from the ethics board. Next, the coordinator at each program was contacted to discuss appropriate dates and time for
data collection. Unfortunately, participants were not able to be recruited from Safehouse due to a flood that displaced Safehouse staff and the residents for a number of months during the recruitment process. After that, a poster was displayed at both programs of Avenue 15, Link and Loft, to inform youth of the study and dates and times that I would be at the Centre. Finally, I spent time at each centre talking to the youth, telling them about the study and how to reach me if they wanted to participate. All participants were recruited onsite and the interviews were conducted the same day.

**Data Collection**

The criteria for selection was (a) between the ages of 16-18, and (b) had experienced homelessness; youth who fit those criteria and expressed interest were asked to participate. First they were asked to read the consent form. All youth stated that they were able to read the consent form; however, I was prepared to read the consent form to them if needed. To ensure that the youth understood the consent form, I reviewed the purpose, what could be gained from the study, and the challenges the youth might have; in addition, the youth were reminded of the services they could access if they had any emotional responses. Finally, I highlighted to youth that their participation was voluntary and that participation or not would not influence the services they would receive from the Boys and Girls Club of Calgary. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time during the initial verbal and written informed consent process. Once all the information had been reviewed, the youth and myself signed and dated the consent form. During the consent process, the youth were informed that if they chose to withdraw at any point in their participation, any data collected up to the point of their withdrawal, including audiotapes, transcripts, and written records, would be stored in the same
secure manners as the complete data (i.e., locked filing cabinets and password-protected hard drives) and may still be used in the analysis. All youth who started the interviews, finished the interviews. The identity of the youth was and continues to be kept confidential. While the primary researcher will know the participants’ full names from the interview and the consent form, participants were asked if they preferred to use their own first name or a pseudonym to be used in data reporting in order to protect their identities. In this study, all youth chose to have their names used in the research; they were all aware that their names might be linked with their ages in quotes and that people might be able to identify them. However, their full names were not connected with their data in any way. Illustrative quotes were used in the write-up to support the findings. Occasionally, other identifying information, such as schools they attended, last names, and family addresses, were revealed as the youth related their stories. This information was not included on the transcriptions, nor was it reported in the results.

This research data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews, which are a common and recommended way to collect data in IPA (Smith, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith et al., 2009; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Because IPA is meant to analyse in detail how one perceives and makes sense of a phenomenon, the data collection needs to be flexible. There are multiple advantages to collecting data in this manner: (a) it allows for rapport to be built with the participant, which was especially essential due to the nature of the participants (Smith & Osborn, 2008); (b) it allows the researcher to probe and follow up on interesting or important issues (Smith 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2008); and (c) it allows the researcher to follow the participant’s lead while still ensuring that the information that they gather is what they need (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Semi-structured interviews allow the participant to introduce concepts and ideas that the
researcher did not think of and thus sits well with the exploratory nature of IPA (Smith, 2004). Interviews that do not have a semi-structured format will typically be harder to control, longer, and more challenging to analyse (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Individual interviews that were conducted at Link and Loft lasted between 22 and 53 minutes. As suggested by Smith and Osborn (2008), the interviews took place in a setting that was familiar to the participants, in this case the shelter from which they were recruited. Afterwards, there was a short debriefing in which I asked what it was like to participate in the interview. This was an opportunity for the youth to express any hardships they had and provide some general feedback to myself. Some commented on the irony of talking to an adult about forming connections with adults and that some of the questions were hard; most stated that they enjoyed participating. The youth were compensated for their time with a $20 gift card to Tim Horton’s, Subway, or Cadillac Fairview-operated malls.

After each interview, I briefly made notes in a Word document about the interview, including general impressions of the participant and the interview, any personal biases that arose, and other factors that could be relevant to future interpretation of the data. This data was used to aid analysis, as it allowed me to see my initial observations without having it influence further interviews or steps of analysis.

**Interview Structure**

As suggested by Smith and Osborn (2008) and Smith (2004), the interviews were semi-structured with concepts and potential questions for each concept; these were developed from reviewing relevant literature and taking into account my own personal experiences (Appendix A). I developed seven concepts with a number of potential questions under each concept; this
was used as the field guide for all the interviews. Throughout each interview, I remained aware of the topics that had or had not been discussed and ensured that all topics had been addressed by the end of the interview. Topics addressed were: (a) basic demographics to provide a profile of study participants; (b) what youth who are homeless feel is important with regards to the connections they make; (c) the relationship between youth and youth workers from the point of view of the youth; (d) what youth workers do that is important to youth when developing that relationship; (e) what characteristics of youth workers are important to youth when they are developing the relationship; (f) how youth develop relationships with youth workers; and (g) how the relationships have helped the youth. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim in order to allow myself to have constant and ongoing access to the original data (Smith et al., 2009). I transcribed six interviews myself; the final three interviews were completed by a professional transcriptionist who signed a document requiring her to uphold confidentiality. This change in procedures was indicated on a new consent form and approved by the CHREB on May 23, 2013.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis in IPA can be described as a flexible but guided method of interpreting qualitative data (Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). Although multiple books provide guided instructions on the analysis phase of IPA (Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2009), I chose to use Smith et al. (2009), as they provide a detailed six-step process which I used to guide the analysis.

The first step involves reading and rereading the data with the intention of becoming as familiar as possible with it. Smith et al. (2009) suggest that a researcher should listen to each recording at least one time to hear the voice of the participant, which will help ensure that the
participant is the focus of the analysis. For this study, this initial step was done for the first six interviews while the data was being transcribed. Following ethics approval, a professional transcriptionist transcribed the final three. Therefore, for the final three interviews, the audio recordings were listened to as the first reading was being conducted. Following the initial review, the transcription was read and reread multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. During this stage, I recorded initial impressions in order to be able to place them aside, to not hinder further analysis, without fear that they will be forgotten. This was recorded in point form and was accessible for later data analysis.

Step two, the “initial notes,” is the most time-consuming stage and requires the researcher to create a comprehensive and detailed set of notes. During this stage, the researcher moves from sensing the participant to identifying the way that the participant talks, thinks, and understands. In order to accomplish this goal, the notes that I developed focused on a variety of areas: first, descriptive comments that focused on characterizing the content of the participant’s interview, and second, notes that were more interpretive in nature, which were compiled using conceptual comments and were focused on the youth’s understanding of forming connections. Finally, I included comparative comments. These typically fell into five categories: similarities, differences, echoes, amplifications, and contradictions. This stage adopts a primarily phenomenological approach, as I was focused on giving voice to the experiences the youth had regarding the formation of a working alliance with youth workers. These notes were recorded in point form and were available for later analysis.

The goal of stage three is to develop emerging themes in the data. This means that I had the task of simultaneously reducing the amount of data while maintaining its complexity. To
capture the whole picture, the data that was worked with were the notes that had been developed in the previous stage rather than the raw data. In doing this, it was anticipated that there would be a synergy between the notes and the original transcript because of the comprehensive exploratory notes. At this stage, the hermeneutic circle became important, as I looked at the parts while remembering the whole, often going back and forth between the two. After I felt I had captured the whole experience, or the big picture, the text was reread, going back to the parts. Here, I assigned codes to meaningful segments of the text and then proceeded to categorize the codes. In IPA, an inductive approach is used; therefore, the codes were developed by myself through review and examination of the data, rather than starting with an outside theory (Smith et al., 2009). Ideally, this allowed the voice of the participants to be clearly heard. From the codes, themes were developed by looking for codes that were relatively consistent across the interview. Attention was paid to commonalities between emergent themes so that they could be clustered around overarching themes. This stage took me further away from the client to a more interpretive stance.

Stage four is “searching for connections across the emergent themes” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 92). Here, I started to put the themes together. Themes were then condensed to form clusters, and thus fewer, more comprehensive clusters were developed. To complete this task, I took on Smith et al.’s (2009) recommendation and printed off the lists of themes, and then cut up and divided the list so that each theme was free to move around. This allowed me to “explore spatial representations of how emergent themes relate to each other” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 96). Smith et al. (2009) stated that there are six ways to minimize the number of themes without missing any important data: abstraction (developing super-ordinate themes), subsumption (when one theme
swallows other themes), polarization (oppositional data), contextualization (identifying contextual or narrative elements), numeration (frequency-number of participants that seemed to endorse the emerging theme), and function (interpreting meaning-to help develop flow in the data). These six ways are not mutually exclusive, nor do all of them need to be done; therefore, I found that I primarily relied on abstraction, subsumption, and function as a way to look for connections across the themes. I subsequently created both a table and flow chart of the themes.

Step five is moving onto the next case; therefore, the previous four stages were conducted with the each participant’s data. In this stage, it was essential to do two things: first, the information from the previous participant(s) needed to be bracketed, and second, I needed to ensure that I was keeping with the ideographic commitment in order for the individual voices to be freely expressed. Bracketing was accomplished by writing down any key points to be able to set them aside without having to worry about them interfering with the next participant’s data nor forgetting potentially important ideas. This also helped to ensure that I was focused on the individual’s voice that I was currently working on, which is idiography.

The final stage, stage six, is looking for themes across all the participants’ interviews. A similar process to that described in step three and four occurred: developing themes and finding connections across the emergent themes. In this stage, I placed the tables and flow charts of each participant on a large surface and looked for connections across the cases. In doing so, I identified the themes that were most potent. This was done by being mindful of the frequency and function; abstraction and summation were used to minimize the number of themes while maintaining the complexity of the data. It is here that I found I was beginning to think of a theory to add that would enrich the data. I was mindful of IPA’s focus on hearing the individuals and
collective voice during this final stage; therefore, there was frequent checking between the whole and the parts. Themes were considered and then checked against both codes and raw data to ensure that I was capturing the voice of each of the participants to the best of my ability.

Through this entire process, there were a few key ideas that were reflected upon to ensure that the highest standard of IPA was conducted. First, the analysis is semantic in nature (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Using IPA, I was not necessarily concerned about the frequency of comments made during the individual analysis, as more references to an idea does not mean that it is more essential to the participants’ experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). When analysing the data, there needs to be a strong understanding of one participant’s data before moving onto the next (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Further, it is the detail that needs to be looked at before developing generalizations (Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). Starks and Trinidad (2007) suggest this can be a process of decontextualization and recontextualization. First, I took apart the data, looking at the parts, and then put the data back together. However, as suggested by Smith et al. (2009), I found myself moving back and forth from detail to whole in order to obtain whole-part cohesion.

**Study Rigour**

To ensure the data was collected consistently, I ensured familiarity with the questions being asked of the youth (Smith & Osborn, 2008). To facilitate open and honest participation, the youth were assured about the confidentiality of their individual answers. To assist with reliability, all interviews were audio–recorded, then transcribed verbatim to ensure that I had ongoing access to the information; transcriptions were reviewed by myself for accuracy. Finally,
data were analysed with the support of an experienced researcher to increase accuracy and decrease researcher bias.

Vivar et al. (2007) describe four measures of rigour in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Credibility is ensuring that one has a true reflection of the participant’s meaning. The data was analysed with the support of an alternative experienced reader to help ensure accuracy and minimize researcher bias during this phase (Dukes, 1984; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Transferability speaks to the generalizability of the results, which was ensured by comparing my results to theories and research that are available in order to identify similar trends. The final two, dependability and conformability, were strengthened during the discussion by adding supporting data (Vivar et al., 2007). This strengthening occurred by presenting an in-depth description of how the study was conducted, what and how decisions were made, and any issues that occurred throughout the process.

Creswell (2007) describes eight validation strategies that can be employed to add to the validity of a study; here I will describe the ones that I used. First, prolonged engagement was used minimally in this research method, as I did spend time with the youth in the recruitment process and parts of the interview were designed to build trust with the youth. Second, triangulation was used, as I made use of previous research in my literature review and discussion, and used theory in the final stages of analysis and in my discussion. Third, I believe that through the supervision and defense process, this research has employed peer-review to assist with validity. Fourth, I identified and was up front about any biases I had at the onset of the research and any that came up throughout the process. Finally, I strived to provide rich
descriptions in my analysis in order to allow the reader to make their own decisions regarding transferability.
CHAPTER 4

Findings

In this chapter, I will describe the findings from the semi-structured interviews I conducted with the youth. I will begin with a demographic overview of the participants before moving into descriptions of each participant to help ensure that individual voices are being heard. Following the participant summaries, I will provide a table of the working alliance model that was developed from the interviews. The main focus of this chapter will be explaining the working alliance stage model through a discussion of each stage and the themes found in each of the stages. Quotes from the participants and interpretations will be provided throughout this chapter.

Participants

I interviewed a total of nine youth in the spring and summer of 2013. All youth were recruited from the Boys and Girls Club of Calgary, specifically from Avenue 15. Avenue 15 has two programs, Link and Loft, from which I recruited youth participants. One of Avenue 15’s aims is to meet the basic needs of youth who are homeless in the community; this can include food, clothing, shelter, and safety (Boys & Girls Club of Calgary, 2013). I interviewed six youth from Link and three youth from Loft. Of the nine participants, four were 16 years of age and five were 17; six of the participants were male and three were female. I did not ask about ethnicity, although all appeared to be Caucasian. The youth had their first experience of homelessness from one month to six years prior to the interview.

Despite the fact that this study’s main themes are generated from cross-case analysis, one requirement of IPA is that individual participants’ voices are heard within the results. Therefore,
the quotations included in the following chapter serve a dual purpose: to support a theme and to show the richness in their unique stories and perspectives. To help provide their background and to get to know each participant, I will begin with a brief introduction of each participant – Hunter, Domonic, Brad, Dakota, Dan, Joni, Austin, Devon, and Aarika.

Participant 1: Hunter. Hunter was a 16-year-old female who had been living at Link for about one and a half months at the time of the interview. Hunter reported that her biological parents, whom she described as abusive and manipulative, were separated. She also had a stepmother and a younger sister. At the time of the interview, Hunter had minimal to no contact with her family and expressed no desire to have a relationship with them.

Hunter’s first experience with homelessness was when she was 14 years old; since then, she has slept outside, used shelters, couch-surfed, lived with family, and lived in group homes. She estimated that she had spent approximately 12 months of the past two years absolutely homeless; the rest of the time, she was living in group homes, during which time she considered herself to be housed.

Hunter stated that at the time of the interview, she was not in school, but was looking into starting again soon. Hunter had recently acquired employment and was looking forward to starting her new job. Overall, she reported that she typically enjoyed the company of young children and adults, including the youth workers at shelters and group homes.

Participant 2: Domonic. Domonic was a 16-year-old male who had been staying at Loft. Domonic had been involved in social services for a number of years and at the time of the interview was waiting for his caseworker to find him a new group home. He reported that his first stay at a shelter designed for youth who are homeless was when he was about 14 or 15.
Domonic had never defined himself as homeless, instead stating that he stayed at Avenue 15 or at group homes when his caseworker was able to secure him shelter. However, he was commonly in a situation where the only place for him to stay was at a shelter for youth who are homeless.

When asked about his family, he stated that they were “gone.” He occasionally talked to his mother on the phone but had not lived with her in three years. He did not know his biological father and had no siblings. Overall, Domonic reported that he has had few positive relationships with adults. At the time of the interview, Domonic was in school taking a trade that he said that he was enjoying.

**Participant 3: Brad.** Brad was a 17-year-old male who at the time of the interview was staying at Loft. He reported that his parents were divorced. He grew up on a farm, but when his parents separated, he moved with his mother to a city. He had a large family, consisting of three stepbrothers and four sisters, of which he was the oldest. Brad described his family as “a bunch of cock suckers,” explaining that his dad beat him his whole life and that his mom was “still a sweetheart but she’s a bitch.”

Brad reported that his first experience with homelessness was about three and a half years previously, when he was 14 years old. Since becoming homeless, Brad had lived with friends, slept outside, and used shelters. Additionally, Brad had been in and out of jail for the last few years for various charges, such as assault and theft. In the last two years, Brad reported that he was homeless the entire time. Brad reported that he was connected with the adults at Avenue 15 and referred to it as “home.” At the time of the interview, Brad was trying to remain sober and
was hoping that Avenue 15 could help him change his life. He wanted a “simple” life, which included: an apartment, a full-time job, a girlfriend, a best friend, and a dog.

**Participant 4: Dakota.** Dakota was a 17-year-old male who was interviewed at Link, he reported that he first stayed at Avenue 15 when he was 16 years old. Dakota stated that he did not want to talk too much about his family, as it brought up too many negative memories for him; however, he reported that he had been homeless since he was 12 years old. Dakota reported that out of the last 24 months, he had been homeless the entire time, staying on the streets and at overnight shelters for youth who are homeless.

Dakota reported that he had a caseworker but had little to say about their relationship. He reported that he did not typically connect with adults, but he had recently found a supportive relationship with a youth worker that he "really" liked. Outside of professional relationships with adults, Dakota mainly stayed away from socializing, claiming that it got him into trouble, although he did report that he had a few friends.

**Participant 5: Dan.** Dan was a 17-year-old male who is staying at Link. Dan asserted that he had never been homeless, stating that “this place is my home; I eat, sleep, and shower here.” This was his first time he had stayed at any type of shelter, and he had been there for about a month; prior to coming to the shelter, he lived with his mother, who was a single parent. He reported that he was close with his whole family, including his mother and four siblings; three were older and one was younger. He did not know his biological father.

Dan told me that he liked school; in fact, he would be graduating high school that year. After taking a year off, Dan planned to do some postsecondary education in welding. In addition
to welding, Dan stated that he enjoyed playing sports, particularly rugby and football. Dan described himself as very sociable, connecting easily with both peers and adults.

Participant 6: Devon. Devon was a 17-year-old male who had been staying off and on at Loft for a number of years. He reported that his first experience with homelessness was when he was 11 years old, because his family "kicked him out" when they were moving towns and did not want to take him with them. Through the years, he had lived in a variety of settings, including group homes, on the streets, in shelters, at friends’ places, and sleeping outside in tents. He reported that he moved around a lot and enjoyed being in new places. He told me that in the last two years, he had been homeless for approximately seven or eight months. When he was not homeless, he was staying in group homes or renting a room.

He reported that relationships were very important to him, and he was able to form them with both peers and adults. Devon would like to have a “normal” life one day with “a best friend, a good girl, and a dog, and a place.”

Participant 7: Aarika. Aarika was a 16-year-old female who had been staying at Link for about one month at the time of the interview. Aarika considered her family to be her mother, stepfather, and her three brothers, one older and two younger than her. She told me that she was homeless for the first time when she was 13 years old and was couch surfing before seeking services from an overnight shelter when she was 14 years of age. In the past two years, she considered herself homeless for about 14 months; when not homeless, she would stay at a group home or with her mother and family.

She really liked school and had plans to graduate with the rest of her year and then go to postsecondary education. She also enjoyed playing sports and played football on a community
team. Aarika spoke passionately about her love of “unicorns and sparkles and rainbows.” Aarika described herself as outgoing and enjoyed connecting with people.

**Participant 8: Joni.** Joni was a 16-year-old female who had recently been using the services provided by Avenue 15. I had interviewed her at Link, although she had stayed at both Link and Loft recently. Joni reported that she was raised primarily by her aunt, as her mother left when she was a toddler and her father was sexually abusive to her when she reconnected with him as a youth. She reported that in the last few years, she had moved around a lot: “I was, like, all over the map and went across Canada, just on my own.” She reported that the first time she was homeless was when she was 12 years old, and in the past two years, she had been homeless for about 20 months. During times when she was homeless, she reported that she couch surfed, slept rough, and used shelters as a last resort.

Joni stated that she was shy and that it usually took her a while to connect with people. Joni had a passion for animals and had many pets, including four lizards, ten snakes, two spiders, five scorpions, and a goat, which she hoped to be reunited with soon.

**Participant 9: Austin.** Austin was a 17-year-old male who had recently stayed at Link. He reported that his parents were separated and described both of his parents as abusive. He had a younger sister and brother, but he was not close to any of his family members. His first experience with homelessness was when he was 14 years old; he had been homeless for 12 out of the last 24 months.

Austin had a hard time talking about relationships but was able to identify occasions when he felt that he developed connections with adults. Austin almost immediately told me
“everyone likes me, I guess,” and hypothesised that it was because he was "funny". He really enjoyed movies, and his favourite genres were horror, action, and comedies.

**Organization of Findings**

The following section will describe in detail the findings from this research project. Initially, I was expecting to find that a number of different and independent themes would develop from the data, which could be put together to depict the youths’ ideas of a working alliance. Instead, what I found was a five-stage model describing the formation of a working alliance. However, in order for the model to be initiated, something needs to happen to bring the youth into a shelter; therefore, there are pre-conditions that begin the model. Following the pre-stage, the five stages of the model are: (a) the friendly foundation, (b) the right environment, (c) they got my back, (d) the working part of the working alliance, and (e) the outcomes. See table 1.
Table 1

*The working alliance stage model with superordinate themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-stage: Entering</td>
<td>No adult to rely on Basic needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage One: The friendly foundation</td>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal attributes of youth workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage two: The right environment</td>
<td>Being relaxed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Youth workers creating space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being accepting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage Three: They “got my back”</td>
<td>They care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I trust them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage Four: The working part of the working alliance</td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responsive emotional support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage Five: The outcome</td>
<td>A place to call home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experiencing positive changes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The youth made it clear that for the most part, with each youth worker they met, they had to go through the model. However, if they were connected to one youth worker, it made it easier to connect to others. In contrast, if a youth had negative experiences with past youth workers (and other adults), it was harder for them to form a working alliance with current or future youth workers.

This model focuses on how youth who are homeless view the role of the youth worker; however, the role of the youth cannot be overlooked. For example, youth bring their own set of
personal attributes (e.g., shy, outgoing) and unique personal histories (e.g., abandonment, abuse), which will impact the way in which they form relationships with adults.

A key part of this model is that at any stage, there are three different things that could happen: (a) the youth may be unwilling to enter into a working alliance with the youth worker and eject themselves from the model; (b) the youth may decide to remain at the current stage; or (c) the youth may develop a deeper working alliance with a youth worker and move onto the next stage. It seems that movement though the stage model is relatively linear; however, there is some overlap between the stages. There may be some flexibility of movement between the stages. One participant, Austin, highlighted how the youth actively decide how to move though the stages: “Well, I could form connections no problems, but the people that I would trust with my deep personal stuff, that took a bit longer. So when shit hit the fan, I basically knew which staff I could open up to and get help from.”

**Working alliance stage model**

The following section will describe each stage of the working alliance stage model that was developed through this research. Each stage will include the superordinate themes that make up the model as well as supporting quotes from the participants.

**Pre-stage: Entering.** Entering is the pre-stage to the model in that the youth need to have a life event, or series of life events, that leads them to needing to have their basic needs met by a homeless shelter, as well as being ready to accept services that shelters provide. Without the need for the shelter, there would be no opportunity or necessity for the youth to meet youth workers, whose primary role is to assist youth while at the shelter. Therefore, there are two distinct themes in this pre-stage: (a) no adults to rely on, and (b) basic needs. These together are
the driving forces for youth to seek services from shelters for youth who are homeless. Their relationship with youth workers, as described by the working alliance, is the way in which youth are able to access these services. The proposed working alliance stage model depicts this relationship.

**No adults to rely on.** Although there was great variance in their experiences, all of the youth in the study had life events or ongoing life histories that led them to becoming homeless and ultimately to seek shelter services. All of the youth commented on their pasts, sharing that they had faced a childhood filled with abuse and/or abandonment from their family of origin, a foster family, group home youth workers, or any combination of the above. Their pasts left them without significant, healthy adults in their lives that they could consistently rely on. The following quotes highlight some dysfunction that the youth had while growing up, starting with physical abuse. Brad stated, “my dad beat me my whole life.” Devon told me, “I got beat up when I was a kid, right.” Brad and Devon both expressed that they faced physical violence in their childhoods; Devon linked his childhood experiences of abuse to his current homelessness, saying “I have been on the streets for a long time.”

Right, so basically my mother and my stepfather split up. Like, I was living with them forever really . . . They split up and I went out to live with my dad, like, last August to, like, this February. And he was abusive; it was abusive with both parents so it really didn’t matter. (Austin)

Brad, Devon, and Austin illustrated how violence in their homes was a precursor for becoming homeless. The youth also shared the realization that if they were to go home, they would again be in a physically abusive situation. Some youth experienced multiple forms of
abuse within their families. Joni shared her family history, including abandonment by her mother and sexual abuse from her father, which led her to a life on the streets. Joni uses the term “goof” in describing her father, which is common street language for a child molester:

No, my mother walked out on me when I was two. . . . Yeah, I met [my biological father] last year and he tried shit with me. Let’s just say he’s a 43-year-old goof. Now there’s a warrant out for his arrest because he tried the same shit this year. Nobody knows where he is now. (Joni)

Hunter also experienced abuse and neglect from her family, primarily in the form of verbal abuse, manipulation, and abandonment. She described a long history of disrupted family relations, which resulted in multiple relocations for her:

I lived with my grandma for the longest time and then she kicked me out to live with my dad and then . . . my dad got abusive, so I moved out and in with my mom. . . . She likes to play mind games so I kinda’ got tired of it and after like the longest time she put me away in the hospital, I ended up at [another shelter] and was there for like two months, and then I was, like, here for, like, three months and I moved into [group home] and I was, like, there for a month, came back here for, like, three months and tried living with my dad again, tried living with my mom again, and then came back here. (Hunter)

Similar to Joni’s and Hunter’s experiences, Aarika shared how her parents abandoned her: “I just turned 14 and [was] like in a shelter, [and had] nowhere to go. Umm, my mom and dad just couldn’t deal with it.” Aarika stated that her mother and stepfather could not “handle her.” Joni’s mother left her when she was a toddler, and Hunter fought to live with her mother, only to be asked to leave after a short stay. These youth were being told by their families that
they were not wanted or that they were too difficult to parent. In addition to being abandoned, Joni and Hunter discussed how their parents abused them. Being asked to leave home by multiple family members potentially indicates to youth that they cannot rely on the adults in their lives. In addition to the profound histories of childhood experiences of multiple forms of violence that youth shared, it is evident that their lives lacked stability, as they had multiple relocations involving multiple and inconsistent caregivers from group homes, to shelters, to their families, and back to shelters. Dan had a slightly different perspective on why he was staying at a shelter for youth who are homeless.

I am tired of being angry at the people I love, so I just left . . . I still have a good relationship with my mom, like, she’s sad that I don’t go home anymore every day, but she’s, like, happy that I am happy. (Dan)

Although Dan did not expand on his reason for his anger, he described it as the precursor to his leaving his family home and ending up in a shelter for youth who are homeless. Dan seemed to imply that he was active in his choice to leave, blaming his actions on his own anger. Although Dan did come from a single parent family, he did not attribute this or other family factors to his current circumstances. He still cared for his family and knew that they cared for him. Despite this seemingly good relationship, Dan indicated that he could not rely on any family members to provide him with consistent care.

The background of the youth can have an impact on the way in which they form connections to youth workers. In reference to his relationship with youth workers at Avenue 15, Dakota stated, “I don’t feel connected with them, I don’t, I try to just kinda’ stay away from them, I just don’t want to connect with them period, ‘cause I don’t need more people backing out
on me.” Dakota illustrated how he actively avoided forming connections because of his past. It seemed that through his life experiences, Dakota had learned not to trust or count on people, so he lived his life relying only on himself. Dakota’s experiences illustrate the impact that past relationships can have on present or future relationships. For the youth in this study, their negative and often abusive family histories left them in a position of not having adult caregivers to rely on. This led them into the shelter to seek resources to meet their basic needs. It is also the negative history of youth that may make it challenging for them to form working alliances with the youth workers at the shelter in order to have their basic needs met.

Although there are differences in the family histories of the youth in this study, all had life events that were outside the realm of regular adolescent life. As Dakota summarised, “I’ve had a fucked up life.” Generally, the youth talked about abuse (manipulation, physical abuse, and sexual abuse), broken homes, neglect, and abandonment. This type of negative family history is both implicated in the need to seek shelter services and the challenges youth experience in forming connections with youth workers in the shelter system.

**Basic needs.** Because the youth have no consistent adult upon which to rely, they have limited options to meet their basic needs. Therefore, basic needs become a major contributing factor that brings the youth to the overnight shelters in the first place. This too sets the precondition for the development of a strong working alliance.

The youth shared that they were able to get their basic needs for sleep, clothing, and food met at Avenue 15. For example, referring to Avenue 15, Dan stated, “I eat, sleep, and shower here.” When explaining some of the ways that Avenue 15 helped her, Hunter stated that “I get
my food here . . . they are helping me to get into a group home right now, and they helped me get clothes just yesterday, right.”

Hunter and Brad were youth who were homeless and did not have status with child protection services at the time of the interview. They both highlighted how this had limited their options for getting basic needs met, specifically housing. As Brad explained, he was no longer in the care of child protection services: “Social services has recently dropped me, so I’m stuck.” Hunter, a 16 year old female, stated: “Cause it’s hard to get into group homes right now, because there is only, like, three of them that are non-status [open to youth who do not have child welfare involvement].” Brad used to have status with child protection services, but for reasons that he did not expand upon, was no longer a ward of the state. Hunter had been trying without success to gain status with child protection services; she suspected that because of her age (16), she would never receive status. Because they did not have status, Avenue 15 was the only formal organization where they could get their basic needs met.

Others highlighted that they accessed programs at Avenue 15 for reasons of safety. For example, Joni said, “I don’t know, it’s the fact that you can sleep at night inside without having to worry about some, like, creep coming up on you.” She shared that other places she had slept, such as outside, had not provided the safety that one needs to get a good rest. Inside the shelters, the youth described that it was easier to sleep without having to worry about the threat of physical or sexual violence or having their belongings stolen.

Together, the themes “no adult to rely on” and “basic needs” draw the youth into the overnight shelters. Because of the youth’s history, they may need to rely on shelters to meet their
basic needs of shelter, food, clothing, and safety. This is a necessary pre-stage in order for youth in this study to begin to develop a strong working alliance with the youth workers.

**Stage one: The friendly foundation.** The first stage of this working alliance model is the development of a friendly although somewhat superficial connection between youth who are homeless and the youth workers. Here, although the youth do rely on the shelter and youth workers to meet their basic needs, the youth are not wanting and might not be ready for a deep connection, for someone to solve their personal problems, or to more deeply share their life stories. However, they do want to spend time with youth workers. While spending time with youth workers, they are looking for things in common, assessing the way in which the youth workers are treating them, and evaluating personality traits that individual youth workers have in order to determine if they can have a strong working alliance with a particular youth worker. There are four themes that describe this stage: (a) time, (b) equality, (c) respect, and (d) personal attributes of youth workers. It is important to note that the characteristics of the youth will also influence this stage; for example, each youth may find different things in common with youth workers. The progress through this stage is also youth-dependent; some youth may move rapidly through this stage, while for others it can take months. For example, Aarika stated that she formed deeper connections with youth workers within days, whereas Brad stated that it takes him months of hanging out to move past this stage. This stage sets the foundation on which the working alliance is built.

**Time.** It takes time for youth to develop a connection with youth workers. In this stage, time is referring to activities described by youth as “hanging out”. Although time has somewhat different definitions and compositions for each youth in this study, it is generally comprised of
three main factors: (a) availability of youth workers, (b) feeling special because of having individualized time, and (c) having things in common with the youth worker. The youth in this study highlighted that time is an important factor in developing all relationships, particularly friendships with peers and working alliances with the youth workers. Spending time together is essential and does not need to be complicated. As Aarika said, “[it is] the small things that can make somebody’s day really.”

The availability of the youth workers, as an important factor in developing a strong foundation of a working alliance, was highlighted by most youth. The following examples depict how youth who are homeless appreciated the youth workers being around to “hang out” with and talk to. Like many of the youth, Joni and Aarika talked about how time is important in order to form a connection with someone. In referring to the availability of youth workers, Joni said she appreciated having “somebody to hang out with,” while Aarika noted, “there’s always somebody there to listen if you need to talk.” Both Aarika and Joni speak to the idea that the youth workers are available to spend time with them, essentially the definition of availability. Dakota stated that one of the reasons youth chose to stay at Avenue 15 was because of the availability of the youth workers. He said, “They are always there to talk to you, they are always there to hang out with, unlike at [another program] where the staff are never there.” Fundamentally, the idea of time, as depicted by youth who are homeless, is to be available.

A common theme that the youth talked about is how important it is that the youth workers spend individual time with them; the youth refer to this as “one-on-ones.” For example, Hunter said, “I can be like, hey [youth worker], we need to chat, let’s go on a one to one, and she would be ‘ok, give me five minutes and we will go.’” Here, it is both the availability of the youth
worker and the individualized time that is important. When I asked Dakota what he appreciated about a certain youth worker, Dakota responded, “the fact that he will take me out on one-on-ones . . . Usually go for a coffee and just sit and talk.” These “one-on-ones” allow for individual connections, time to talk, and gave the message that the youth workers were available to the youth when they needed them. Sometimes, the youth workers would actively recruit the youth to do something fun together in order to promote this individual time.

They ask me to go on one on ones, that kind of thing, my one, the one staff woke me up at like 9 am. ‘Austin, we’re going bowling in half an hour.’ She hasn’t talked to any other kids to see if anyone wants to go. It’s like ‘We’re gonna’ go bowling in a half hour, wake up.’ I’m like, ‘What the fuck, ok.’ (Austin)

In this quote, Austin told a story of when he felt special because of the actions of a youth worker, mainly when he was taken out on a one-on-one. On this occasion, a youth worker woke him up in the morning to go bowling, just the two of them. Although he would not typically wake up at 9:00 and may not even like bowling, he felt special that a youth worker wanted to spend some time outside of the program with him alone. He emphasized that it was meaningful for him and made him feel valued when the youth worker approached him and engaged him in a “one-on-one” activity. Again, the key point here is the individual time together and the youth worker wanting to spend time with the youth.

Aarika expanded on how youth workers might be able to spend time with the youth in a way that will increase the connection between them.

Or just, if they, like, see you by yourself, and you’re, like, quiet and stuff; they’re like, ‘oh, let’s do a board game.’ And you’re like, ‘board games are so gay,’ but you do it
anyway because they’re so nice. Just do something. I don’t know, they’re always trying to engage you in something . . . they make an effort to include you. (Aarika)

This quote highlights multiple concepts with time: “one-on-ones,” the youth worker’s awareness that she was alone, and the effort that the youth workers put in. She appreciated that the youth workers were reaching out to her and that spending time with the youth workers made her feel included. She clearly stated that it does not need to be anything in particular, rather “just do something.”

The youth in this study talked about how it is important to find things in common with them and do those things in order to develop the connections necessary to begin forming a working alliance. For example, Austin identified that he was able to form connections with youth workers who did “stupid food challenges with me.” Connecting can be found when doing simple things: “I’ll talk to them, I’ll like, we were, [youth worker] and [youth worker] we all throwing around a little football that I had. . . so it was fun” (Joni). Although spending time with the youth is necessary to form connections, spending time with the youth talking about or engaged in activities that they enjoyed seemed to have a greater impact. As Dan noted, “they talk to you, they will talk to you about video games, movies, they will talk about shows, just stuff that you’re interested in.” This can be a wide range of things, such as food challenges, video games, or sports. What seems to be important is that the youth workers are entering the youth’s world, which shows the youth that they are interested in them.

Hunter spoke highly of some of the youth workers at Avenue 15. Here, Hunter illustrated how finding things in common with her could lead to a better connection.
She is my favourite, we would go shopping for craft stuff together, and we would, you know, I would tell her about my baking, she would let me test her baking, right, like, I really connected with her cause we had a lot in common. Like, last time, I did not really know her well, but she was talking about spoken word, and I was showing her some spoken word, and then she had a spoken word session down here where we all like. You know, whoever wrote spoken word, you know it was just really cool and . . . we had so much in common, it was great. (Hunter)

This quote begins with her showing how much she liked this youth worker by proclaiming that she is her favourite because of the activities they did together. By saying, “I did not really know her that well,” in this context, she showed how spending time together, doing a mutually enjoyable activity, helped her form a bond with a specific youth worker.

Time is part of the foundation for building a deeper, more meaningful connection. The participants in this study were able to articulate how time is needed to connect with people, specifically youth workers. Devon, Dan, Hunter, and Dakota articulated the impact that time had on the ability for them to form connections with the youth workers.

Like, if I can get along with somebody, like, really well, and then I will start chilling with them some more, and that’s how the trust is built, you have to chill with someone a lot for trust to build up with, right. (Devon)

In this quote, Devon talked about how he formed connections with peers, but later in the interview, he identified the importance of time in forming connections with adults in his life as well. This quote highlights how time can specifically lead to trust. For Devon, it seemed like he
needed to spend a great deal of time with someone before he would trust them; trust might not come easily, but it is possible over time.

Dan, Hunter, and Dakota used the same concept as Devon but applied it to their connections with youth workers. Dan stated, “It’s always, like, when you see someone more and more, you get, like, a better connection.” Hunter mirrored what Dan said, stating that “they are here more often, you know you’re here more often, so they really get to know you.” Finally, Dakota illustrated the importance of time when he said, “I think that just time was just . . . there to develop it.” As these youth state, time leads to trust, connection, and deeper knowing between youth and youth workers.

Unfortunately, time is not always available, and when it is less available, the potential for connections to form is negatively impacted. Domonic shared how a lack of time can lead to little or no connection being formed: “I don’t really know them and I don’t really care. . . . Well, I am not here that much, so I don’t really care.” Because Domonic commonly stayed at friends’ places, he did not spend as much time at the shelter, and as a consequence, did not find things in common or engage in individual time with youth workers.

Spending time with youth who are homeless is part of forming the foundation for a meaningful working alliance. Time can mean many things, from talking to “hanging out.” However, three things seem to make time more meaningful: being available, individual time, and doing things together that the youth enjoyed. Spending time with youth makes them feel special, included, and will hopefully lead to trust and a deeper connection. The youth in this study seemed very aware that more quality time together meant a better connection, as they were easily able to articulate this connection.
Equality. During the interviews and analysis, I learnt that equality was important to the youth in this study and was clearly something that they needed to see almost immediately in order to begin the process of developing a working alliance. According to the participants, equality is comprised of two components: (a) the youth wanted to be treated like people of value, not “just a street kid,” and (b) the youth wanted to be treated equally as compared to other youth at the shelter (or within group homes).

When the youth in this study encountered youth workers who did not treat them like “street kids,” they noted and appreciated it. When I asked Brad what it was about the youth workers that he liked, he responded with, “They don’t treat me like a piece of shit because I am a street kid . . . [they] talk to [me] like [I am] a human being, not a piece of shit.” It was more than once that Brad talked about being treated better than a “street kid”: “Yeah, they treat me like I am one of their friends almost, and they treat me like I am their friend, not like some street kid who’s going nowhere in life.” The youth just wanted to be seen as whole persons and expected to be treated as such. Aarika’s statement, that “they talk to us as people rather than somebody who was depressed, or somebody who is depressed, or somebody who is, it’s just — they accommodate our needs, but not while making us feel different,” showed how she wanted to be seen as more than someone with a label, and she appreciated youth workers who were able to do that. Dan discussed the importance of being treated as a valuable, equal human being: “They [youth workers] all . . . talk to you like a human being, they don’t try to talk down to you like they are better than you and that they know better.” It seems simple: we are valuable human beings; treat us as such. Brad, Aarika, and Dan highlighted how the youth workers they liked talked to them as though they were people of value, not just “street kids.”
Unfortunately, the youth did not always get to experience being treated like an equal or valued person. When asked what they did not appreciate about youth workers and other adult service providers, the youth in this study commonly commented on how they got the sense that sometimes adults thought that they were better than the youth. For example, Austin noted, “I think some of [the youth workers] are on power trips. They just don’t see you as a person, they just think they’re, like, above you.” Devon also commented on how he was not always treated as an equal; when referring to a youth worker, he commented, “She is pretty rude, she is kinda’ stuck up, thinks she is better than me.” The youth were able to provide examples of occasions when they were not being treated as equals. Dakota offered, “He [a particular youth worker] puts me down.” This treatment did not only occur with youth workers; Joni talked about how sometimes she was treated poorly by other adults as well.

Well, you see some of the older people that are like ‘those fucking teenagers’ and shit. It’s like ‘piss off, you were a teenager before too.’ It’s like; they just look down on everyone that’s younger than them because they think we’re all troublemakers and shit. (Joni)

Being treated as less than equal seemed to create great distance between the youth and youth workers and damage any working alliance that may be developing. The youth seemed to be very aware of when youth workers did not see them as equals, and they questioned why individuals with those beliefs were working with youth in the first place.

Individualized time with youth workers was important to the development of the working alliance. However, the youth highlighted that it was also important that the youth workers treated everyone equally. The youth wanted to see that they were being treated fairly in relation to other
youth; they preferred that youth workers not have favourites. At one point I asked: “What do you think the worst thing about the staff at [another program] were?” to which Joni responded:

Favouritism. They would take the same kid out on one-on-ones like every day. We were allowed one hour of video games on weekends for the entire weekend. Some people wouldn’t even get that hour because the same person would be on the gaming console for the entire day.

Joni made it apparent that she did not appreciate favouritism; she would have liked the same options and treatment as all the other youth at the agency. Similarly, Aarika commented on how she appreciated equal treatment: “There’s some rules that are enforced for everybody, and they don’t give anybody special treatment on that.” Aarika seemed to emphasize consistency, which may help the youth know what to expect from the youth workers. It was both about having the same consequences for the same behaviours of different youth and about different youth workers having the same consequences. This would help the youth to see that they were being treated fairly. Aarika and Joni clearly stated that they do not appreciate special treatment.

Being treated as an equal, or like a valuable human being, was extremely important to the youth in this study. The youth made it clear that they did not like it when youth workers only saw them for their psychiatric diagnoses or only as “street kids.” Unfortunately, this happened for them sometimes, which they suggested destroyed any chance of a connection forming. The youth also talked about the negative impact that favouritism could have on the working alliance.

**Respect.** The youth talked about how important respect was to them with regards to their life on the street and to their connections with various youth workers. The youth depicted respect
as reciprocal and as establishing the baseline for being able to listen to the youth workers and take their advice seriously.

In referring to his relationship with a friend, Domonic highlighted the importance of respect in his relationship: “Cause we respect each other, cause we have a good connection and trust each other, and we look out for each other.” This quote illustrates the way in which respect, connection, and trust work together. Domonic noted that respect was a key element in building the relationships that he had. Respect was also important in relationships with youth workers, as Dan identified: “it’s like they respect who you are — alright, almost like a teenager, but they are an adult.” Here, Dan was talking about how youth workers respected who he is; they knew him well and still respected him. There also seemed to be an element of equality here, as he said that they saw him like another teenager might. In describing the mutual respect the youth in this study had with youth workers, they commonly related it back to the respect they developed with peers.

When asked how he knew that he was being respected, Devon provided great insights into what respect meant to him.

I don’t know, it’s hard to explain, it’s all how you talk to someone to . . . it’s like the way they approach you, the way their tone is, how they go about things, I mean, you can tell me what to do; just say it in a specific way, like, you know, meet me half way, like, they [say] can you please go do this, not hey, fucking go do this. Like, what am I supposed to do with that, ‘like, no’. (Devon)

Although respect was commonly identified by youth as necessary to establish a strong working alliance, it was hard to define. Devon said that talking to someone with respect is about
tone, using manners, and compromising. He stated that he would do what youth workers asked if he was asked in a polite manner. Further, he seemed to suggest that he would not comply with a youth worker’s request if this were not the case. If the youth were required to do something, they would like to be asked kindly. Whereas Devon highlighted manners with regard to respect, Brad, a Caucasian male, stated that eye contact is important.

Another aspect of respect, according to youth in the study, is that it must be reciprocal. “If you show me respect, I will show you respect . . . I have nothing but respect for the people here” (Devon). Brad mirrored Devon’s comment on the reciprocity of respect, but added that it was foundational to develop the other pieces of a working alliance, such as trust. “Honestly, if they show me respect, I will show them respect. And then the more they respect me, the more I will respect them . . . eventually, I will trust them” (Brad). In order for the youth to respect the youth workers, they must first feel respected by them. When working with youth who are homeless, youth workers should not expect that youth would respect them unless they too show the youth respect. Additionally, Brad talked about how respect was a foundation for other pieces of a working alliance, such as trust.

In addition to being the foundation for trust, respect may be the precursor for youth feeling cared for by youth workers. When I asked how his favourite youth worker treated him, Domonic responded, “very respectful and actually told us that he gave a shit about us, yeah, it was good.” Later, he stated, “I respected him a lot of the time, and I got along with him pretty well.” Domonic depicted the link between developing positive feelings towards a youth worker as a consequence of being shown respect by a youth worker. Being respected, for Domonic, was related to being cared for in that the youth worker “gave a shit.”
The youth in this study talked about how they knew when they were not being respected; key points were over-control and not listening. The lack of respect, they suggested, will cause a breakdown in the connection or make it more challenging to form a connection. It will also result in youth not seeking services from youth workers or listening to advice or directions offered by youth workers.

In situations of conflict, the youth thought it was disrespectful when youth workers did not listen to their sides of the story.

When they think that they are always right, and when they don’t let you say your side of the story, it’s like, ok cool, so what’s the point of even trying to talk to you . . . they always think that they have to be right, so it’s like, I don’t even want to talk to you guys about anything. (Dan)

Dan illustrated the relationship between respect and listening. In order to feel that he was being respected, he needed youth workers to take time to listen to him. It becomes clear that a lack of respect can quickly lead to a breakdown in communication and cause harm to the relationship. As Dan noted, “what’s the point of even trying to talk to you.” This disruption is not only acute; it has longer standing implications: “I don’t even want to talk to you guys about anything [emphasis added].” This shows how important it is for all adults to listen to youth, and when they do not, the youth feel disrespected, which can damage a developing working alliance.

I don’t like it when adults talk to me like I am stupid. Like, tell me to do obvious things. . . I hate being controlled by adults as well. Like, I hate it when adults tell me what to do. . . they act like they know what I’m thinking and think they know what’s best for me and stuff. That’s really aggravating . . . Or if people . . . sign me up to go to places and they
don’t tell me about it. ‘Like, oh, I signed you up for this group home.’ I’m like, ‘What?’ That really pissed me off. (Austin)

Austin shared how the youth worker was not respecting him in this quote. It was important to Austin that youth workers did not talk to him like he was “stupid” or told him what to do, as it made him feel disrespected. He also brought up the issue of adults trying to control his life, which spoke to his desire to set his own life goals and work at his pace. In a major life decision where to live, Austin expressed anger that this was determined without consultation with him. Respect here could mean that Austin wanted to have his opinions heard, and when they were not, he felt as though he was not being respected.

Brad described having people assume the worst as disrespectful. While he was discussing a youth worker that he did not particularly like, Brad offered:

[The youth worker] doesn’t talk to me with respect, doesn’t look me in the eyes when I am talking to him, he doesn’t fuckin’ . . . half the time he won’t even respond to me or he’ll act so scared . . . it just pisses me off cause I am not gonna’ hit the staff; I have no reason to, this is my house . . . it’s just his fucking attitude towards me.

He clearly articulated that what he did not like about this youth worker was that he did not feel respected by him. In the story he told, it seems as though the youth worker assumed that he would hit a youth worker, which Brad clearly did not appreciate.

Respect was important to the youth in this study. For them, respect meant feeling that they were being listened to, not having decisions made for them and not having people assuming the worst in them. Respect was described as reciprocal. Signs of not being respected, such as
negative assumptions about youth and not listening to youth, can damage or destroy a working alliance. Finally, respect sets the foundation for trust and caring.

**Personal attributes.** I asked specifically what types of personal characteristics the youth liked in youth workers with whom they connected. Overall, the youth commented that they liked friendly, funny, and easygoing people. When a youth worker had these characteristics, youth in the study stated that they were more likely to want to spend time with them.

Simply being nice and friendly on the part of the youth workers can help the youth to get along with youth workers. As Dan suggests, “they [youth workers] are really nice and they talk a lot.” Being nice and friendly is linked to other important themes, such as equality and responsive emotional support, as seen by Dan: “they are super friendly and they also listen and give good advice and they always listen to what you have to say, they don’t be like, ‘oh, you are wrong’.”

Being funny and happy seemed to help the youth like the youth workers: “[youth workers are] always like wild and funny, always smiling and stuff” (Austin). When talking about her favourite youth worker, Joni stated, “She’s really cool. She’s funny.”

Brad highlighted the characteristics that he liked (funny) as well as things that he did not really care for (strict). He also talked about how he wanted to see that the youth workers were having fun with the kids, highlighting a connection between personal attributes and time.

I mean, it’s easier to get along with them if they have a sense of humour, if they are going to be the strict prick, they can go fuck themselves . . . they got funny and make responsible [sic], have fun, you know, have fun with kids. (Brad)

It was important to the youth in this study that youth workers were easygoing; this spoke to how they responded to situations and their general personalities. I asked Aarika about her
connection with the youth workers; part of her response was they were good at their jobs, and to Aarika, this meant that they responded calmly to crisis: “Like, really messed up situations, but they’ll, like, stay calm. They keep their head in situations that a lot of people couldn’t deal with” (Aarika).

When describing the youth worker that he connected with, Domonic said that he was a “laid back kinda’ happy guy.” Dakota stated that he appreciated youth workers who were calm: “They are just really calm, and they chill.” In this quote Dakota is talking about their general demeanour — “They are just really calm” — as well as highlighting the importance of time: “They chill.” He wanted to spend time with youth workers when they were “cool,” showing a connection between time and personal attributes at this stage. Dan also highlighted the connection between time, “hanging out,” and the youth workers being cool. The youth workers being cool can be defined as not being “snappy” or “controlling.”

Just cause I came in with a good attitude and so did they, so it was just, like, alright, this kid is cool, I guess, and I was like, these people are cool cause they weren’t just, like, snappy off the bat or, like, controlling or demanding, they were just, like, yeah, hang out, just chill and yeah. (Dan)

Prior to this quote, I was talking to Dan about how fast connections were made between him and youth workers. He talked about his part in making the connection work, saying that he came in with the right attitude, which allowed the youth workers to perceive him as cool. Additionally, he commented on how the youth workers being “cool” could lead to a more relaxed environment where he was encouraged to just hang out.
The following two quotes by Hunter can be used to compare what youth are looking for in different relationships, indicating that they are looking for similar characteristics in all relationships. First, Hunter talked about what helped her make connections with peers, mainly them being easygoing and funny.

They are funny, they are more easygoing, then it is easier to start a friendship . . . especially cause I am really nervous around people, right, like, I don’t like people, so if they are funny and stuff, I am like, oh, ok, this is ok, I can deal with this.

When describing the personal attributes of youth workers, Hunter expressed that “as weird as this is, I actually seem to get along better with adults. . . . A lot of the staff here are all funny and laid back.” Hunter highlighted similar characteristics among her peers and youth workers; she appreciated laid back and funny people.

It is important that the youth workers have some characteristics that the youth like, as it influences their choice to come to the program and spend time with the youth workers. For example, Brad expressed that “if I did not like them as much, if they weren’t cool, then I would not come here as much.” In addition to Dan’s quotes above, Devon illustrated how personal attributes can lead to the next stage of the working alliance model, relaxed environment. Devon suggested that the personal attributes of the youth workers allowed him to sit and talk: “they are cool, they are the chilliest, it doesn't bother me to sit in the office when no one else is here and talk to them.” Therefore, having personal qualities such as being cool, relaxed, fun, and happy will help create the right environment so that the youth want to continue coming to the program and engaging with the youth workers.
Stage two: The right environment. The above four themes in the friendly foundation help to create the right environment, which is essential to developing a stronger working alliance. The right environment stage consists of three themes: (a) being relaxed, (b) youth workers checking in and creating space, and (c) being accepting. It is important that the youth feel as though it is a good place for them to be; they do not always want to be hounded for intimate details about their lives, but they do like when youth workers notice that they are having a hard time. The youth in this study expressed a need to feel the youth workers are not judging them and that the youth workers will accept them even when they do not approve of certain behaviours.

Being relaxed. The youth in this study talked about how it is important to be able to talk about superficial things and take things slowly. They do not want to disclose their life stories to everyone they meet or be talking about “intense” issues all the time, as this creates lots of unnecessary stress. Keeping to light-hearted topics helps the youth to feel relaxed and enjoy their time at the shelter.

The youth in this study expressed how they did not want to always be working on or discussing their lives and their troubles. Austin commented on how it is important to not be serious all the time: “I just do not talk about personal stuff just every day to day. Yeah, I definitely need that. It cannot be serious all day.” It seems that Austin knew that at times, he needed to work on personal stuff, but it was very important to not always be in that space. Aarika also commented on how she did not want to talk about serious issues all the time. She commented on how the youth workers did not pressure her to talk when she did not want to.
They don’t feel the need to like push everything. Like, they’re not, like, ‘why and when well what’s going on,’ it’s like, they’re always so natural. It’s nice to not always be pushed about everything . . . I feel like the connections are better because they’re not like, ‘Oh, it’s the new girl, why are you here, what happened in your life? Like what, like, how did you get here, it’s like, how is your day.’ They weren’t all, like, pounding for, like, information and it was just nice. . . . They asked the questions when they were needed, but it wasn’t like right off the bat. Like, ‘we wanna’ know every single secret you have.’ It’s nice. (Aarika)

Austin and Aarika both highlighted how they wanted an environment that was fun and relaxed sometimes. Austin said, “I just don’t talk about personal stuff just every day.” Rather, he sometimes just wanted to have fun and do silly things with the youth workers. Aarika talked about how she did not want to be bombarded with questions, especially when she was new. However, Aarika did appreciate when the youth workers asked her about her day. It seemed that she appreciated that they gave her the space she needed and allowed her to talk about her secrets or personal issues when she was ready. Being forced to talk about serious, personal issues all the time is exhausting and not going to strengthen a working alliance.

The relaxed environment does positively impact the development of the working alliance, and it includes the personal attributes of the youth workers.

They are easy to talk to, they are funny, they are easy to get along with, and they, I don’t know, it’s hard to explain, I guess, like, some of the youth connect to them, some of us don’t, some of us just come here and do our thing and leave. I connected to the staff, I like a lot of the staff here, that's why I don’t mind coming here so early, and I like being
here right at opening, come upstairs, chill with the staff, I am already asleep before any of
the kids get here. I am just that tired, I will talk to the staff for like an hour, and if no kids
show up then it's off to bed I go, you know. (Devon)

Here, Devon showed how the youth have some control over the level of connection, as
was seen when he said that some youth connect and others do not. Devon showed how this
relaxed environment, being able to just “chill” with the youth workers, made him want to come
in early and talk to the youth workers. He showed that some personal attributes, such as being
funny, may help create a relaxed environment where is it is easy to talk to the youth workers.
From the other quotes, it seems that youth workers were open to connection; however, they did
not push too much if the youth did not want to connect. This quote showed the connection
between the themes creating space and being relaxed.

Having an environment that is relatively free from pressure seems to be important to the
youth. The youth want to be able to have fun sometimes, rather than always being focused on
serious topics. Additionally, being relaxed means not being forced to talk about things that they
do not want to talk about yet. It seems that having a “chill,” positive, and relaxed environment
encourages the youth to spend more time with the youth workers and open up when they are
ready.

Creating space. Although they did not always want to talk about deeper issues, they still
felt that it was important that the youth workers created the space for them in case they wanted to
talk about their lives. The participants in the study talked about how they appreciated that the
youth workers would allow them to talk freely by actively reaching out and checking in.
Reaching out meant asking the youth regularly how their day was, whereas checking in meant
being attuned the youth and asking if they needed help when the youth were upset. By doing these two things, the youth workers became people that the youth could and would talk to about their days.

Joni talked to me about how she was able to talk to the youth workers about her day, “just talk about what I did throughout the day and shit. . . . But they’ll ask questions, they’ll be like, ‘what’s wrong, are you ok, do you need help’.” Here, she showed how these conversations allow the youth workers to see if she needed help with anything. It seems to be a juxtaposition in which she would tell them what was going on, and the youth workers offered help when they could. Both the relaxed environment and the checking in was important to Joni as she was able to “just talk about her day,” yet the youth workers also asked if she wanted help.

Simply asking the youth how their day was is an important aspect of reaching out. It initiated the conversation and allowed the youth to direct the conversation and talk about whatever they wanted to.

When I was at home, like, having my issues and stuff, nobody asks, like, ‘How is your day and how is it [sic].’ Nobody asks that, nobody does that, then to come here and have, like, seven people ask me how my day was, it’s like, wow, this is nice . . . When somebody asks you, like, ‘How was your day?’ You can tell if they’re, like, just expecting you to say ‘fine’ and move on, or if they actually legitimately care about how your day was. I feel like they did and just, like, they always wanted to, like, make sure you’re ok and see if they can support you. It was really helpful. It was great. (Aarika)

Here, Aarika showed how the youth workers created space by sincerely asking her how she was doing. She contrasted this with her relationship with other adults (i.e., her family) and
stated that it demonstrated that youth workers actually cared about her. Aarika also shared that these conversations were like talking to friends, which suggests that she was free to say whatever she needed to and that there was little pressure from the youth workers. Like Joni, Aarika articulated how these conversations opened the doorways to see where the youth workers may be able to provide some support.

In addition to reaching out to the youth on a regular basis, it was important to the youth that youth workers check in. This consisted of being attuned to them, noticing when they are upset, and asking them about it. Hunter stated, “If they notice that you are upset, they will actually like come up and be like, ‘What’s up’.” Two pieces are important in Hunter’s quote: that youth workers notice when she is upset and that they do something about it. Dan also talked about the importance of being attuned and checking in:

They are always trying to help you, they always wanna’, like, to, like, if they can tell you are not having a good day, they will be like, ‘What’s wrong, do you wanna’ talk about it.’

They are always there if you need them.

Dan highlighted the importance of the youth workers being attuned, checking in, being available when he needed them, and framing talking as an option. Austin also appreciated how the youth workers reached out to him; in fact, he said that without the staff checking in on him, he might not have engaged youth workers with his personal issues.

It takes me a long time to make connections with adults. Like, people here, like, the staff come to me to see if I’m ok and stuff. Like, I won’t have to, like, chase staff around. If I’m feeling ok, or whatever, staff just, like . . . check in with me basically. . . . Pulling me on the side, seeing if I’m ok kind of stuff. (Austin)
Hunter, Dan, and Austin all stated that it was important to them that the youth workers approached them when they seemed upset and invited them to talk about their days and what was going on. Dan and Hunter’s quotes demonstrated that it was important to the youth that the youth workers noticed when they were having a bad day. Austin needed youth workers to approach and check in with him; he would not otherwise seek them out. Therefore, in order for youth workers to effectively create space, it is important that they are attuned with the youth and know when they might need some support. Dan speaks to the importance of the youth workers letting him know that they were available and that he had control of when to approach them for help. Austin showed us how checking in helps him connect; he said that he would not chase youth workers down.

The youth in this study talked about the importance of the youth workers creating space for them. This idea contained two parts: actively reaching out to and checking in with the youth. Reaching out may be asking the youth how their day was, whereas checking in may be pulling them aside and asking if everything is okay when they seem upset. These two acts allowed the youth to talk freely, which seemed to open up areas in which the youth workers could ask if they needed support while still letting the youth lead the conversation.

**Being accepting.** The participants in this study talked about how important it is that youth workers accept who they are. It seemed like the more the youth workers accepted them, the more that the youth would tell them. Acceptance means that the youth felt they could be who they truly are, that the youth workers took time to get to know them, and the youth workers heard them out. Feeling as though they are respected will encourage the youth to talk about what is going on, which will hopefully lead to the youth feeling as though they are accepted.
Both Aarika and Austin talked about how it was important that the youth workers were accepting of them rather than judgemental. Aarika said, “I don’t know, just like general acceptance. I mean, like, I really hate being judged.” Austin expanded on the idea of acceptance, saying:

Kind of understanding. Like, kind of hear people out and hear where they’re coming from first . . . Like, they’re just not judgmental, they just wait and see who you are, see what you’ve been through kind of thing.

Here, both youth were commenting on what they liked about the people and program. Austin highlighted how for him, it was important that they listened to him instead of jumping to conclusions that may not have been accurate. Feeling accepted may be a slow process; the youth may slowly test the youth workers to determine if they will be accepted. In the following quote, Austin was answering the question, “How do you let staff know that you are ready to connect?”

I don’t know, kind of like discreetly, like, reveal something personal about myself, I guess. I wouldn’t be like ‘I wanna’ talk about this, this, and this.’ It would be in ordinary conversation, I would just kind of reveal something kinda’ thing.

To Austin, it was important that he could know that the youth workers would accept him, but he did not want to be vulnerable. It is almost as if he was testing to see if the youth workers would accept what was happening in his life. He was looking for acceptance but was also trying to keep a low profile about it.

Acceptance and respect could be linked together. “They give me respect because they know me . . . they know who I really am, not the person on the outside” (Brad). He seemed to be
saying that the youth workers respected him, and that respect is one way that they showed that
they both knew and accepted who he really was.

Aarika demonstrated how acceptance from youth workers still existed even when she did
something wrong. “They just, feel like people that it’s ok to be who we are. . . . Even if you are
in trouble or did something wrong, it’s not like they’re just going to abandon you. They’re
always still there” (Aarika). This acceptance allowed her to feel secure in the relationships,
knowing that they would not abandon her just because she made a mistake. Aarika illustrated the
power that acceptance can have for the youth in this study.

Joni expressed how the youth were looking for a similar type of acceptance with both
friends and youth workers. “I just look for someone that I can be myself around, that’s not
gonna’ judge me for stupid shit I’ve done in the past” (Joni). In this quote, Joni talked about how
she started to develop connections with peers; essentially, she looked for people who would not
judge her. Joni also talked about what she liked about the youth workers: “[they are] more
understanding . . . like, you can tell them anything and they’re not going to freak out.” These two
quotes indicate that acceptance is importance from both peers and youth workers. Her quote also
shows that the youth will tell youth workers things about themselves when they know it is safe to
do so.

There is a link between acceptance and resources, as illustrated by Devon. Devon was
talking about potentially moving to Link from Loft, comparing it with other options. “This is one
of the places that they truly accept you and give you a good opportunity, which is [Avenue 15],
which is a great opportunity, and you don’t have to have a social worker to get into it” (Devon).
He thought that Avenue 15 would have the resources he needed to help him break the cycle of homelessness and showed that acceptance was necessary for him to even want that opportunity.

Unfortunately, not every youth had a positive experience with every youth worker; Joni’s comment shows how being unaccepting can break a developing working alliance: “So if they start giving me dirty looks and shit, it’s like, yeah, I am moving on.”

The youth in this study commented on the importance of feeling accepted by youth workers in order to form a connection with them. Acceptance is linked to respect and being able to accept or ask for help, as it allowed the youth to tell youth workers what was happening in their lives without fear of abandonment or being judged. When acceptance was not present, the youth would break any connection that might have been forming.

Stage three: They got my back. After setting up the right environment, it is important for youth to know that they can count on the youth workers, or as they would say, that the youth workers “got their back.” This stage is comprised of two themes: (a) they care and (b) I trust them. Both of these elements can take some time to develop, and the amount of time will vary from youth to youth; however, it will typically come after the previous two stages. This stage is important, as the youth learn that they can rely on the youth workers and that an adult has their best interests at heart.

They care. The previous stages all lead to the youth feeling cared for. This caring speaks to the idea that the youth workers are more than professionals in the youth’s lives. This theme shows that the youth feel connected to the youth workers and that they know someone is truly concerned about them. The youth were readily able to identify that being cared for is one thing they really liked about certain youth workers. Caring is an important aspect at every stage of the
The following two quotes by Brad and Domonic show how caring is an essential part of the working alliance. First, Brad said that “most of them really are amazing fucking staff that actually give a shit.” Domonic stated, “I guess I like adults that give a shit.” Brad stated that he liked the youth workers at Avenue 15 because they cared, and Domonic stated that he liked adults who care. It seems so simple, yet a lot of things need to go into the working alliance before the youth will feel cared for.

The youth described the way that the youth workers care about them by comparing the feelings to other relationships. Primarily, they were compared to friends, as seen below:

[Youth worker A] is a complete sweetheart, she cares so much about everybody, same with [youth worker B], they are both like, well her and her and [youth worker C], they are the three biggest sweethearts I have ever met in my life. And they honestly care so much about the kids, they put their hearts into it, and they just do everything like a friend would. (Brad)

Brad linked the caring that the youth workers had towards him to that which friends have for each other. Here, he was able to identify certain youth workers that he knew truly cared about him, referring to them as “sweethearts.” Brad showed that the caring extends past himself when he observed the youth workers caring for other youth.

The youth articulated that many elements went into feeling cared for; those elements have been shown in previous stages: creating space, creating time, and personal attributes.
Even like the whole spiel, ask how their day is and then chatting like friends. It’s nice to have somebody who cares about what you say. I feel like that’s important. When somebody asks you, like, ‘How was your day?’ You can tell if they’re, like, just expecting you to say fine and move on or if they actually legitimately care about how your day was. I feel like they did [care]. (Aarika)

For Aarika, knowing that the youth workers care about her and how her day went contributed to the working alliance she shared with them. She knew that when the youth workers asked her how her day was, they actually cared about the answer. This quote shows that there is a relationship between creating space and caring: one way to show her that you care is to ask her about her day. This caring appears to have led Aarika to be truthful in her answers, which ultimately led her to getting the support that she needed. She also linked this support and connection to that which she receives from her friends, suggesting that it goes beyond a professional connection.

They, I don’t know, I find that these staff actually give a shit . . . They give a shit cause you are here, they care about you as a friend . . . and you know I respect that, and that’s why I like the staff here. Group home staff, the only reason they give a fuck is because they are paid to give a fuck, you know, these staff actually care beyond the whole Ave [Avenue 15] thing . . . they, like, sit down and talk to us, you know, like, how’s your day and stuff, they even go on one-on-ones with us. You know, like, ‘Wanna’ go for coffee,’ or something, they see you outside, you know, in public, and they will stop by and be like, ‘Yo, wanna’ go for a coffee.’ (Devon)
Devon talked passionately about how the youth workers here truly cared about him and the other youth that use the shelter. In this quote, he compared them to other youth workers that he had met that do not care; he clearly could tell when someone cared and when someone did not. He talked about how this is more than just a job for the youth workers at Avenue 15; rather, they seem genuinely concerned. Devon seemed to know that the youth workers at Avenue 15 cared about him because they asked about his day (creating space), went on one-on-ones with him (time), and when they saw him on their time, they would still check in with him.

Hunter illustrated how caring is important to the development of a strong working alliance:

A lot of them genuinely care about you and, like, what's going on, like, I have been to [another program] and they are, like, sweet and stuff, but they don’t really care because they don’t see you that much, and [another program] doesn’t really care, they just want you to do what you are supposed to do and that's it. So, like, yeah, I just — the staff here actually care and they talk to you.

In this quote, she said that at other programs, youth workers have the right personal attributes (“sweet”) but that they do not quite make it to a level of connection that Hunter would describe as caring. She showed how time (“they don’t see you that much”) and talking (“they talk to you”) are precursors to caring. It appears that from time and talking, personalized care can occur, which feels like caring.

Feeling cared for can positively impact the youth. Throughout our interview, Dakota was able to identify one adult that he felt he was connected to; he felt that everyone else did not care, had used him, or had abandoned him. “Yeah, you’ve gone so long without someone giving a shit,
it feels good when someone finally cares” (Dakota). In the following quote, Dakota was talking about how he felt that this one person cared for him and how good it made him feel. This quote shows that although it may be tough to form connections with some youth, the connection can make an impact on them.

The staff actually give a shit, you know . . . they care about you as a friend. . . . Finally, someone who actually kinda’ gave a shit and cared . . . he actually gives a shit and he wants to see me straighten up and do . . . better. (Dakota)

Although it can take many things for a youth to feel cared for, including the right personal attributes, time, respect, and the right environment, this feeling of being cared for can drive the youth to try to make positive changes or ”straighten up.” Knowing that someone in their lives cares whether they succeed or not can help a youth stay motivated. Sometimes a youth may not care about their own life; perhaps no one ever has, so having someone that truly cares may be life altering.

All the youth in this study talked about how important it was that they felt cared for. Some youth were able to show how certain things needed to happen before they felt as though the youth workers cared for them. They spoke about the importance of respect, time, personal attributes, and creating space in order to feel cared for. Additionally, the youth were able to highlight that this caring has impacted their lives, from saying that it felt good to saying that because someone cared, they were able to make some positive changes. Feeling that someone cares about them is important to the youth in this study.

*I trust them.* The ability to be able to trust the youth workers is an important part of this model. The youth shared with me that trust is important in both their relationships with peers and
their relationships with youth workers. The following quotes will illustrate that the youth thought that trust was important, how trust was formed, and how trusting the youth workers had influenced them.

The youth in this study talked about how important it was to be able to trust someone. Domonic expressed, “I can trust them, I like them.” Austin commented on the importance of trust when he said, “I think trust is, like, number one really.” Dan also commented on the importance of trust: “I really trust them . . . that’s a great thing. Ahh, they gotta’ be respect . . . they gotta’ be, like, truthful, like, straight with you, and just like . . . a good person.” The quotes by Domonic, Austin, and Dan show the importance of trust. In fact, Austin said that when forming a connection, trust is the most important component. Domonic and Dan commented on trust being one of the things that they really appreciated about some of the youth workers in their lives. Dan linked respect to trust. Part of being able to trust someone is knowing that they are being honest and straightforward.

In most cases, trust does not come instantly. The youth talked about how trust may be formed; this consisted of time and talking. In order for Devon to be able to trust people, he needed time: “I will start chilling with them some more and that’s how the trust is built, you have to chill with someone a lot for trust to build up with, right.” It appears that nothing in particular needs to happen during that time; rather, he just needed to “chill” with someone for extended periods of time in order for him to learn that he can trust someone. Creating space and talking is important to the youth in order for trust to develop.

Hunter and Brad discussed the importance of talking to enhance trust, but with different ideas about how it worked.
I think for me, talking a lot helps to develop even more of a relationship, cause the more you talk, the more you get to know each other, and then that’s where you can start to build like a trust and a mutual understanding of what’s going on. And that’s kinda’ why [youth worker] and I have you know, I really like her, and that’s why we get along, that’s why I picked her as my key worker, because I spend so much time talking to her about everything. Like, seriously, I talk to her nonstop about everything, and that’s what I do still. I always tell her everything that’s going on. (Hunter)

Hunter stated that more communication would help the two persons get to know each other, which will start to build the trust. Brad said that talking to the youth workers helped him build trust, and one way that he knew he could trust them is that they did not share his private life with anyone else.

Talk to them. Like, I trust [youth worker A], I trust [youth worker A] and I trust [youth worker B] with my fucking life . . . I have told them some serious fucking shit. And I trust them with my life . . . And I just broke up with my girlfriend and I started crying shit and said, if you tell anyone, I am going to kill you, and she never told anyone, and I told her a lot of shit after that. (Brad)

For Brad, trust was very difficult to form; he said that he did not even trust his girlfriend, but this quote illustrates that he had been able to trust some youth workers. Hunter and Brad both illustrated how trust enables the working alliance to move forward; once trust was formed, they started telling the youth workers about more things.

Trust is a required condition in order for the development of a strong working alliance to continue. In the following quote, Austin was talking about how he contributed to the formation
of a connection between himself and certain youth workers. “Opening up to staff, like, when they ask you questions, I don’t lie about it. Actually, just trusting them basically. Just opening up. Sometimes I go and find them if I need help or whatever if I need to talk to them” (Austin). Trusting the youth workers meant that he could share what was really happening in his life, so that eventually, he could get that help that he needed.

Dakota seemed to know that his key worker (primary youth worker) would be there for him:

I have never really connected with an adult in my life except my key worker. It feels good to know that someone is actually there and not going to bail out on me, ‘cause that’s like the only thing anyone has ever done is bail out on me, so.

Unfortunately, this seemed to be a new experience; nevertheless, it seemed to be very important. Dakota trusted that his key worker would continue to support him and be available for him; he stated that this was a large part of why he felt connected to his key worker and why he has had some positive changes in his life.

Trust is an important part of the development of a working alliance. In these quotes, the youth highlighted how trust is essential, how trust is developed through talking and time, and the impact that trust has on their lives. For some, trust may be harder to develop than for others due to their past; however, if they are going to open up and be honest with the youth workers, they need to be able to trust them.

Stage four: The working part of the working alliance. Once the stage is set, the youth will be accepting and asking for help. This help primarily comes in two ways: (a) resources and (b) responsive emotional support. An important aspect of both themes is that they are imbedded
in rich communication: the youth made comments about how they needed to feel comfortable to be honest about what they needed. It is also important that the youth felt connected to the youth workers in order to take their advice and resources.

The youth in this study talked about how the youth workers had already helped them. For example, Devon expressed that the youth workers “got me on the right track again, like figuring out the right track is hard.” Dominic also expressed that youth workers have helped him: “They kinda’ help me to better myself and stuff, instead of fucking up and being at [another program] or some shit and getting screwed over. I actually did something.” Although in these quotes they were vague about how exactly they were helped, both youth still highlighted that the youth workers have helped them. Devon stated that the youth workers helped him figure out the right track; this sounds like a collaborative process in which he wanted their help. Domonic had an understanding that things could be worse if the youth workers were not helping him.

**Resources.** The youth in this study commented on how the youth workers were their access points to receive resources that might help better themselves. These resources could include social workers, school, or more permanent housing. Often, the youth could not identify exactly how youth workers were able to help them, but they did know that the youth workers had the resources and willingness to help.

The youth were able to identify certain resources that the youth workers might be able to help them get.

Well, I have the staff, I can get into school through here, I can get jobs through here, I can get information to all the day programs through here . . . there is a bunch of day
program which are specific to a certain objective, and this place is where I can get information about all that stuff. (Devon)

Here, Devon was able to highlight what sort of resources that youth workers might have been able to help him access, including school, work, and day programs. Another resource that he suggested that he had was the youth workers themselves: “I have the staff.” It seems that he knew that the youth workers could help him with a variety of things; all he had to do was ask them.

Brad said that access to resources was one criterion that he used to make a decision about where to live. “I feel if I go downstairs I have a better chance of success. Cause there’s a lot more, they can help, help me out a lot more downstairs than they can up here with like resources and stuff” (Brad). Downstairs is the Link program of Avenue 15, which provides more support and allows the youth to stay there 24 hours a day, seven days a week. At the time of the interview, Brad was staying upstairs at Loft. Additionally, he said that having access to resources would increase his chance of success.

A working alliance needs to be in place prior to youth workers providing resources, as it may feel as though the youth workers are being bossy and telling them what to do, versus helping the youth accomplish their goals.

Well, at [another program] there was this one staff . . . she was just very, very, very bitchy and very naggy and very demanding and, like, you are doing it wrong, you need to do this, this, and this and you need to do better, blah blah blah blah, and she — she didn’t even see me during the day, she did not really know what was going on. . . . You don’t know me. You can’t tell me this. (Hunter)
In the first quote, Hunter showed the value of having a connection prior to trying to help by talking about a youth worker who tried to advise her when she was not connected to said youth worker. Hunter stated she did not spend time with the first youth worker, therefore the youth worker did not know Hunter. She said that this past youth worker would make suggestions to her, but Hunter did not see them as valuable; therefore, the suggestions irritated her. In order for youth workers to provide resources to youth, they need to ensure that it is the right resource, one that the youth feels that they need and one that fits within their goals. When a youth worker does not know a youth well (i.e., there is a poor working alliance), the youth may see them as “naggy” or “demanding.” At other times Hunter appreciated the help she received from youth workers:

Well, they have helped connect me with a lot of . . . resources . . . they connected me with [program] right now which is working on relationships, that’s a program though Boys and Girls Club that I am starting, and I like it so far.

It seems that her youth worker was able to connect her to the right resource. It makes a huge difference; in the second quote, she said that she liked the program and seemed grateful that she got help to get into the program. The youth in this study do want the youth workers to help them with resources; they just need to be the resources they want.

Both Dakota and Domonic showed how talking and spending time with youth workers led them to receiving help that they wanted and needed. “The fact that he will take me out on one-on-ones and he will talk about how I am getting into independence or how he is going to help me get into independence soon” (Dakota). Dakota linked spending “one-on-one” time talking to getting into independent living. Domonic also commented on how talking and time
was linked to resources: “I don’t know, he was my key worker, we talked a lot and we went out. . . my issues with school and stuff, he helped me get into this school.” Domonic seemed to suggest that if he did not have the opportunity to talk to his key worker and develop a bond, he may have never gotten to a space where he could tell his key worker that he wanted to try to go to school. His key worker had the resources to help Domonic enrol in school, something that he perhaps would not have been able to do by himself.

It is important to the youth that they have access to resources, and they know that youth workers can help them get the resources they need. However, it is important that the youth workers are working with the youth to figure out what they need rather than telling the youth what they should do, or the youth will not appreciate it. The youth seem open to help, but it needs to be the right type of help. Time and talking aid the youth to get the resources that they want. Accessing resources needs to be a collaborative process that is based on the youth’s goals.

**Responsive emotional support.** The youth highlighted the importance of the emotional support that the youth workers provided for them. Responsive emotional support speaks to the flexibility of the youth workers, the personal support provided by the youth workers, and the investment of the youth workers. This seemed to involve lots of conversations where the youth felt supported, safe, and that they could trust the youth workers. It seems like they would take the advice that youth workers offered when the previous stages had set the foundation for some work to be done. Here, the youth talked about the dedication of the youth workers that they felt connected to, and it sounds like the relationships were collaborative.

The youth in this study spoke to me about how the youth workers could help with a multitude of things. First, Austin expressed that the youth workers whom he was connected with
had helped him with some concrete needs (i.e., housing), but they had also helped with personal issues. “Like . . . housing and personal issues. They’re . . . the ones that tried to talk to me and help me through situations.” Austin said that the youth workers were the people he had in his life to help him; he showed that he could rely on them. Austin showed that the youth workers helped him with concrete and emotional needs. Aarika also illustrated the range of help that she could receive from youth workers:

Umm, like, in certain situations, like, they’ll talk to you, like, if you need to talk. They’ll give you space if you need space. They will call your caseworker if she hasn’t answered her phone for a week. They’ll call your caseworker’s boss. Pretty much anything you need, they can help you with. (Aarika)

It seems that the youth workers let the youth lead, as is apparent when Aarika said, “anything you need.” Sometimes, the youth may need someone to talk to, someone to help them with resources, or just some space; the youth workers that Aarika was attached to were able to work with her needs.

The youth talked about the emotional support they received from youth workers. This support included the youth workers giving good advice, listening, being honest, and giving constructive feedback.

They also listen and give good advice, and they always listen to what you have to say . . . they have been a teenager so they can, like, tell you how . . . they coped with things and, like, they just give you really good advice. (Dan)

Here, Dan was showing that he appreciated what youth workers had to say. The key point is that they listened so they could offer advice in a caring and meaningful way. It also seems that
the youth workers drew on their own experiences in order to help the youth, making it more personal and meaningful to these youth.

Umm, I think with the staff that I am connected to, I am open with them about what is going on and I try really hard to always be open . . . I think it’s because they are also open and honest with me about what’s going on . . . like my parents were never, ever open and honest. And that is something that I really value, like, being straight up. Even if I don’t really like it, I will act like I don’t like it, but I will appreciate it in the long run, cause then I know this is what is going on. Like, I don’t like not knowing what not like . . . I don’t like not knowing cause I feel, like, I am out of control of everything, so yeah, I think that is why I connected a lot with the staff, cause they’re very like, ‘Ok we did this this this, this is what is going to happen, we are waiting for this, I am sorry it’s going to take so long but we are going to do this.’ (Hunter)

Hunter’s quote shows that when she connected with someone, she would be open and honest with what she needed help with. This seems to be reciprocal; she expected that they would be open and honest with her (i.e., trust). It was important to her that she should be made aware of what was happening in her life, even when it was not good news; this speaks to the collaborative aspect of the relationship.

Aarika highlighted that the way in which a youth worker delivered a message is important. “You know, just like constructive criticism, they don’t beat you down but they point out your mistakes. They all give really good hugs” (Aarika). She linked receiving feedback or advice with how well the youth workers hugged; this suggests that it was important to her that there was a balance between feedback and being cared for. In this case, it appears that the youth
workers had found this balance. Another key piece of Aarika’s quote is that when they did deliver feedback, it was not meant to hurt; rather, it was delivered in a gentle way that encouraged growth.

The youth felt as though the youth workers were always trying to help them. This was shown in the way they were invested in the youth and always tried to help.

I feel like they did and just like they always wanted to, like, make sure you’re ok and see if they can support you. It was really helpful, it was great . . . Like, they just, there’s so many different ways they support all of us . . . I mean. Like, it’s hard to do things on your own . . . some things you just aren’t supposed to do by yourself. (Aarika)

In this quote, Aarika was saying something very important: that sometimes, she needed the help of youth workers. Many might agree with her; as 16 year olds, there are some tasks that they are not supposed to do by themselves, and they deserve to have a supportive adult that will help them. Aarika’s choice to use the word “wanted” highlights the caring factor that some youth workers seemed to have.

It’s just something about this place, like the staff seem to have, so much more investment in what’s going on, and I think it’s because it’s a shelter right, like, they are trying to help you get into other places and stuff, so they actually care more to get you into other places. (Hunter)

Well, positively, yeah, like, I don’t know . . . they are always just kinda’, like, trying to help you, they are always just, like, you feel you and like . . . trying to help youth with your problems . . . and stuff like that, and, like, even upstairs they tried to help me with my homework sometimes. (Dan)
Hunter and Dan’s statements speak to the dedication of the youth workers and how they made themselves available and wanted to engage with the youth. This was something that Dan appreciated about the youth workers; it appears that the youth workers made themselves available to help with a wide range of problems, including homework. In order to truly help the youth, the youth workers need to be invested and care about the youth. This caring is shown by the availability and the willingness to always help.

The youth workers that Austin felt the most connected to were those that had helped him when he needed it. “I’m really very picky. Like, I only have, like, seriously four staff that I will talk to. Like, I like all the staff but there’s, like, only like four that I open up to about stuff” (Austin). Austin stated that he picked youth workers that he felt a connection with to go to with his personal issues; therefore, the relationship has to be built before the work starts to get done. This shows the importance of taking time to build a strong working alliance with the youth in order to assist with deeper personal issues.

The youth in this study appreciated the responsive emotional support that their youth workers gave them. What becomes clear in this section is that the youth workers were flexible in meeting the needs of the youth. The youth in this study articulated that emotional support consisted of listening, good advice, being open and honest, and providing constructive feedback. Finally, the youth commented on how the youth workers were invested in them and wanted to help.

Stage five: The outcome. It is great that a working alliance is formed between a youth and a youth worker; but what does it mean? The results of the working alliance can be seen as
two separate themes: (a) a place to call home and (b) experiencing positive change. These results speak to the success of the working alliance.

A place to call home. First, the youth talked about how the programs and youth workers at Avenue 15 were home and family respectively. In this way, the youth in this study were saying that they knew where to turn when they needed help, and they knew that they would always be accepted. Avenue 15 appears to have been an important part of their support network.

When I asked if Dan, 17, considered himself homeless, his reply was, “No, this is my home.” Dan seemed almost shocked that I was asking if he was homeless, as though it was obvious that because he lived at Avenue 15, he would call it home. Dakota referred to Avenue 15 as his home when he said, “This is kinda’ my home base.” On two separate occasions, Brad called Avenue 15 his home, first saying that “this is my home, this is my house,” and again when he said, “I got evicted from my house and I had nowhere else to go, so I said, fuck it, I am going home [referring to Avenue 15].” Brad referred to his previous residence as a house, rather than a home, but Avenue 15 as his home. These quotes by Dan, Dakota, and Brad illustrate that Avenue 15 was a place that they could call home. Calling Avenue 15 home suggests that this is a secure base to which they can return when they need to.

In addition to Avenue 15 being their home, the youth talked about how the youth workers felt like family and treated the youth like family. “The way the staff treat me, it's my home, they treat me like family” (Brad). The relationships Brad had with the youth workers felt like family to him, suggesting safety, security, and acceptance. Austin’s quote highlights that the youth workers were still available for him even when he was not living at Avenue 15: “I don’t know, actually, I have someone to go to, I guess, now. Like even, like, during, like, the couple of weeks
that I wasn’t at the Ave [Avenue 15], I could still come here and talk to the staff.” When Austin said, “I have someone to go to now,” it sounds as though he may not have had other adults to turn to and that the youth workers had become the people that he could go to for support when he needed it. Devon explained why it felt like family:

It's kinda’ how they approach you, it, they approach you with open arms, kinda’ like a secure thing, it’s hard to explain. You can get good vibes and bad vibes from people, you know, it all goes into how you talk to them and shit. Most of the staff here are pretty cool and I got along with them from day one. And they help the kids — I have seen the way they treat some of the kids, they treat them like family. I mean, like, they hug you, they are like, ‘Hey, what’s up, you are back,’ like, sort of thing, like, ‘How did your day go,’ like that sort of thing, like they actually care.

This quote by Devon illustrates how it all comes together and ends with the staff members feeling like family. He talked about the youth workers being open, respectful, and how much they cared. He could see youth workers responding to other youth like they were family: “They hug you.” Hunter showed how her positive impression about the youth workers made her come back to Avenue 15 when she needed a place to stay:

I . . . freaking adore the staff here. No, seriously, I came back to Ave [Avenue 15] this time because of the staff, like I literally chose to come back to Ave [Avenue 15] because of the staff here, like I was going to couch surf until I could come back here.

Instead of the potentially more dangerous choice (i.e., couch surfing), she chose to come to a place where there were supportive adults that might be able to help her. This quote
highlights that it is more than a place to stay and resources that are important to the youth; the relationships that they form are clearly important as well.

The youth in this study showed that when deciding where to go, they considered the relationships that they had with youth workers. In this study, the youth considered Avenue 15 to be their home and the youth workers to be their family. They understood that they could rely on the youth workers even when they are not currently in the program. The youth may not have had any other family or any other place that they could call home.

**Positive changes.** In addition to the youth who are homeless being able to identify a place as home, they also talked about some of the changes that had occurred for them since being connected to Avenue 15. Sometimes the changes had already happened, while other times the youth talked about how they and the youth workers had been working towards positive change.

When asked where he would be without the youth workers, Dan replied, “I don’t know . . . I think that I would probably still be pretty angry all the time.” Dakota identified the following positive changes in his life: “I don’t physically fight anymore,” “I am doing better in my life now,” “try to be clean [sober],” and, “I don’t know if I am gonna’ go to school, but I am going to think about it.” Hunter also identified multiple positive changes that have started since being at Avenue 15: “I am trying to get into group homes like crazy right now,” “I am trying to get into school right now,” and “I recently got a job.” Brad stated that he is “trying to get back into school.” Domonic reported that youth workers have “got me to stop doing drugs at school.” The youth were able to show different areas of their lives that were positively affected because of the working alliance they had with youth workers. This shows that the youth come in with needs,
and youth workers were able to respond to those needs. Aarika talked about many ways that youth workers had helped her:

Um, I feel like I would probably be self-harming still if I didn’t have the connections here. Like, I was in a really bad place when I moved in here. . . . I have tried to kill myself in the past, and it was all, like, heading down that road again. There was all these opportunities for drugs and like alcohol and everything. Like, I really feel like I’d be in a, like, really worse place.

First, she commented that she was no longer self-harming and saw that she may have continued this if she had not had the opportunity to come to Avenue 15. Additionally, she commented on how she may have turned to alcohol or drugs to help cope, but instead was able to rely on the support of youth workers to help her though the challenging periods of life.

Brad showed that talking to youth workers decreased his level of stress: “Made my life easier to deal with . . . I can release a lot of fucking stress by talking to [particular youth worker].” Although Brad has had a lot to deal with in his life, having someone to share his troubles with had made this easier for him to cope with. He knew that he had someone on his side that cared for him and would always ask him how his day was and have time to hear the honest answer. Devon talked about how he was trying to make changes and was looking to the youth workers as models for his behaviour:

Like now, when I first started chilling here, I would not have been the type of person that I would have chilled with this kind of person, I still liked them cause they were really cool people to talk to and shit but they weren’t really my kind of people. But now I am trying to stay away from the street shit, so they are my kind of people.
It also shows that he had made some changes, as before, he could not see himself as the type of person that would “chill” with a youth worker, but now appreciated the time he got to spend with them.

Devon was recently kicked out of Avenue 15 for a few days, and since returning, he had been trying to change:

I guess they [other youth] did not feel safe, so they had to kick me out and shit and I just came back and I will stop being so mean to people,” and, “That’s mainly why I stopped drinking,” because “I am trying to keep my bridge here.”

Apparently, being able to continue staying at Avenue 15 motivated Devon to change his behaviour.

Unfortunately, not every youth has had a positive experience with youth workers. When I asked Joni if she thought that youth workers had impacted her life at all, Joni replied, “Frankly, they have made it worse.” Joni stated that this is mainly because of misunderstandings, favouritism, and youth workers over-reacting. She suggested that youth workers “try not to be so favouritism [sic]. Maybe actually talk to us once in a while, find out what the hell’s going on rather than just assuming shit,” and “deal with shit when it happens, not after somebody get sent to the hospital and then they’re just worried about getting sued.”

Overall, the youth indicated that the youth workers they had met have helped them make positive changes in their lives. The youth reported returning to school, gaining employment, decreasing drug and alcohol use, decreasing self-harm behaviours, and decreasing in stress because of the connections they had with youth workers. The youth workers encouraged positive
change and seemed to support them in any way they could. This support motivated the youth to try new things and make the necessary changes in their own lives so they could reach their goals.

**Conclusion**

The youth that I interviewed for this project were insightful about building connections with youth workers. I interviewed a total of nine youth, three from Link and six from Loft. There were three females and six males. Once all the interviews had been analysed, a working alliance stage model was developed; in this model, there is a pre-stage followed by five stages. The five stages are: (a) the friendly foundation, (b) the right environment, (c) they got my back, (d) the working part of the working alliance, and (e) the outcomes. Each one of the stages was made up of two to four themes. Each stage of the model is essential and builds upon the stage below to strengthen the connection between a youth and a youth worker. At each stage, there are three different things that could happen: (a) the youth may be unwilling to enter into a working alliance with the youth worker and eject themselves from the model; (b) the youth may decide to remain at the current stage; or (c) the youth may develop a deeper working alliance with a youth worker and move onto the next stage. Both the youth and the youth workers contribute to the development of the working alliance. The following chapter will discuss support of this research by focusing on the links to previous literature, attachment theory, and social learning theory. This chapter will also discuss implications for further research, practice and policy.
CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

This chapter will answer the original research question: how do youth who are homeless understand the working alliance between themselves and youth workers at overnight shelters? The intention of exploring this relationship was to (a) provide an understanding of how youth who are experiencing homelessness view the connection they have with youth workers, (b) provide youth workers with information about what is important to youth who are homeless in forming relationships, and (c) add to the literature on youth homelessness. Therefore, I will discuss the significant findings, the relationship between my findings and previous research, attachment theory, and SLT in relation to my findings, my experience with the research, limitations, and implications.

Significant Findings

From the interviews with nine youth, I developed a working alliance stage model. This model is a potential answer to the original research question. Three areas are key to understanding the answer to this question: (a) the themes that were developed, (b) the working alliance stage model, and (c) the youths’ active responses to the youth workers. A number of themes emerged as important to the development of the working alliance between youth who are homeless and youth workers, including instability, basic needs, time, equality, respect, personal attributes of youth workers, being relaxed, youth workers creating space, being accepting, they care, I trust them, resources, responsive emotional support, a place to call home, and experiencing positive change.
A working alliance is not typically acute; rather, it takes time and effort to develop. The literature suggests that developing a working alliance with youth, in particular those who are homeless, can be challenging (Everall & Paulson, 2002; Ferguson, 2009; Oetzel & Scherer, 2003). The participants in this study described what they needed in order to develop a working alliance with them. A key and novel finding was the working alliance stage model: the idea that certain things need to be in place before others could occur in the development of a working alliance. For example, youth and youth workers spending time together is needed in order for trust to develop, and it is unlikely that trust will be in place without the condition of time. The working alliance stage model that was developed includes: pre-stage - entering, stage one - the friendly foundation, stage two - the right environment, stage three - they got my back, stage four - the working part of the working alliance, and stage five - the outcome. This model suggests that the relationship needs to be strong before the youth will be ready to open up, discuss personal issues, set goals, and make positive changes in their lives.

In addition to talking about the actions of the youth workers, the youth also shared the ways in which they influenced the working alliance. It became clear through the analysis that the youth made active decisions about how, if, and when to deepen their relationships with youth workers. Specifically, at each stage, the youth decided to disengage from the relationship, remain at the stage with the youth worker, or take the relationship into a further stage.

The model suggests that with time, patience, and a genuinely caring attitude, youth workers can develop the necessary relationships with youth in order to positively impact their lives. Many youth credited the relationships they had with youth workers to some of the positive
changes that they were able to make. Additionally, the youth stated that they would return to Avenue 15 because of the youth workers and the relationships they had with them.

**Relationship of Findings to the Working Alliance Literature**

The majority of the themes I discovered are supported by other research. This section will highlight novel findings as well as explore how previous literature relates to each theme in the working alliance model. I have used working alliance literature in general as well as literature that focuses on the working alliance with youth, individuals who are homeless, and youth who are homeless to examine the findings of my research.

**Pre-stage: Entering.** The participants in my study described significant instability in their lives, which mirrors the literature. Similar to Girard’s (2006) work, the youth disclosed that while homeless, they had slept outside, in group homes, couch surfed, and stayed in emergency shelters. Worthington et al. (2008) reported that youth homelessness is an outgrowth of family dysfunction and negative experiences in foster or group homes. All of the youth in my study reported either (or both) family or institutional dysfunction. Similar to Worthington et al. (2008), the youth in my study reported physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse at the hands of their caregivers, as well as a history of alcohol and drug misuse among their primary caregivers. This instability leaves youth without the ability to meet their basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, and safety, which shelters for youth who are homeless strive to meet (Boys & Girls Club of Calgary, 2013; CHF, 2011). This combination of significant instability leaving youth without the ability to meet their basic needs and agencies equipped to provide for these needs brings youth into contact with youth workers who strive to develop a working alliance with the youth.
Stage one: The friendly foundation. This stage contains four main themes: time, equality, respect, and personal attributes of the youth workers. Previous research has identified similar themes to those that I found at this stage. For example, in their work on the therapeutic alliance as perceived by adults who were mental health care recipients, Shattell et al. (2007) reported a major theme that they called “know me as a person,” which they defined as having a deep understanding of the client. The researchers noted that time was necessary in order to obtain this deep understanding. Martin et al. (2006) found a number of helping skills that youth identified as important, among them were shared time and familiarity. The youth in my study expressed that they appreciated the youth workers spending time with them and finding things they had in common. They articulated that time would lead to a connection. One of the themes in the study by Martin et al. (2006), adults enjoying the time spent with youth, clearly mirrors my finding that the youth found it important that the youth workers had fun with them and appeared to enjoy the time spent with them. In a study of the working alliance with adults who are homeless, Walsh et al. (2010) found that it was important to have an alternative setting for conversations, such as a coffee shop. The youth in my study talked about how they appreciated having individual time with the staff. This often meant leaving the shelter to go for coffee or another activity. The literature has found that adults, youth, and adults who are homeless all find that time is important to the development of a working alliance (Martin et al., 2006; Shattell et al., 2007; Walsh et al., 2010). Although it is new information to this population, it is not surprising that the youth who are homeless in my study linked time spent with a positive connection as it has been linked with other populations.
The youth in my study talked about the importance of being treated as an equal, both in relation to other youth and to people in general. This was found in previous studies about the youth’s view of the working alliance. For example, Martin et al. (2006) found that adolescents identified it as important to be treated as equals. One of the seven main themes reported in Eyrich-Garg’s (2008) study using a focus group with females who were homeless was “treat me like I’m on your level.” Additionally, the youth I interviewed disclosed that they did not appreciate it when the youth workers made plans for their lives without including them, which parallels another of Eyrich-Garg’s (2008) major themes: “tell me what you are doing.” The idea that youth who are homeless wish to be treated as equals is not new and can be supported by previous literature on youth who are homeless as well as community samples of youth who have stable housing (Eyrich-Garg, 2008; Martin et al., 2006), but unique in this study is that the youth also commented on the importance of equal treatment of different youth by the youth workers, whom they advised should avoid showing favouritism among the youth clients. It seemed that equal treatment allowed them to better predict their environment, including consequences for their actions.

The importance of respect in a working alliance can be found in both previous literature and in the findings of my study. Adults who are homeless highlighted the importance of a respectful engagement, defining it as having three aspects: “warm connection, genuine interest, and honesty” (Walsh et al., 2010, p. 938). Of the 12 important characteristics of working alliances identified in Martin et al.’s (2006) study, youth cited respect most often. Female youth who were homeless expressed the importance of being respected by their social workers and counsellors in order for a working alliance to form (Eyrich-Garg, 2008). The importance of
respect can be found across populations, including youth, adults who are homeless, and youth who are homeless (Eyrich-Garg, 2008; Martin et al., 2006; Walsh et al., 2010). In addition to respect for the client, in this study, the youth highlighted the importance of reciprocity in respect. Meaning that if the youth workers showed them respect, they would show the youth workers respect.

The personal attributes of a therapist are commonly discussed in the working alliance literature with some overlap of the attributes identified in this study. Ackerman and Hilsenroth (2003) provided a list of characteristics that are important for a therapist, including being flexible, experienced, honest, respectful, trustworthy, confident, interested, alert, friendly, warm, and open. Martin et al. (2006) found that youth wanted counsellors who sincerely cared and who were authentic, open, sensitive, sympathetic, and kind. These studies have focused on what youth want from a counsellor, whereas my research focused specifically on youth workers. There does seem to be some level of overlap, including the concepts of being kind and friendly. However, my findings add qualities such as having a calm demeanour and a sense of humour, which may be particularly relevant to youth who are homeless.

Stage two: The right environment. The youth in my study talked about the importance of the environment at the shelter. Specifically, they highlighted three things: being relaxed, creating space, and being accepting. Previous studies also suggested that these elements are important to the development of a working alliance. For the youth in this study, an important part of a relaxed environment was talking about mundane things sometimes and not always being focused on the intense issues in their lives. Bordin (1979) suggested that therapists who take time to talk about mundane things improve the relationship, because this decreases tension. One of the
five themes that Walsh et al. (2010) found in their study with adults who were homeless was “casual nature of conversations” (p. 939). Burnard (2003) used the term *phatic communication* to describe communication that had little content. This type of communication can be used to develop rapport with clients, as it indicates solidarity, involves turn taking, and is focused on non-personal subject matter (Burnard, 2003). Phatic communication may enable a service provider to slowly engage the youth while being responsive to where the youth are, rather than focusing on what the youth need to change. Youth who are engaged with counsellors highlighted that talking about things that are not central to the main issues created a relaxed environment, therefore increasing the strength of the working alliance (Quesnelle, 2011). Among youth, adults, and adults who are homeless, it is important to talk about issues that are light, as it creates a relaxed environment (Burnard, 2003; Quesnelle, 2011; Walsh et al., 2010). My research adds to this literature by applying the importance of phatic communication in creating a relaxed environment with youth who are homeless.

For the youth in my study, creating space meant that the youth workers reached out and checked in with them by asking about their day and noticing when they were upset. Similarly, Martin et al. (2006) found that youth appreciated when adults invited them into the conversation. When creating space, it was also important that the youth workers did not press too hard. It was also important that the power was with the youth to decide when and what to disclose to the youth workers. The youth in my study appreciated when youth workers noticed that they were upset and sincerely asked how their day was when they returned to the program. My research contributes new information about how youth workers can create space with youth who are homeless, specifically by checking in and reaching out.
The final theme in this stage is feeling as though the youth workers were accepting of the youth who are homeless. Other studies have also highlighted the importance of acceptance in the development of a working alliance. As a general overview of the working alliance, relating to the clients is essential; relating includes being non-judgmental (Shattell et al., 2007). The youth in the study by Martin et al. (2006) stated that having adults listening without judging was important to them. Not being judged was among the three most important components to the working alliance for youth who are homeless (Eyrich-Garg, 2008). The importance of feeling accepted was expressed by female youth who were currently homeless (Kurtz et al., 2000). Feeling as though someone accepts them is essential to the development of working alliance with a wide range of populations (Eyrich-Garg, 2008; Kurtz et al., 2000; Martin et al., 2006; Shattell et al., 2007).

**Stage three: They got my back.** The youth in my study stated that they needed to know that the youth workers were there for them, which meant that the youth workers earned the youths’ trust and cared for them. It has been established that caring is important to the development and maintenance of the working alliance (Bedi, 2006; Everall & Paulson, 2002; Kurtz et al., 2000). Bedi (2006) found that clients identified caring as an important part of the working alliance. Everall and Paulson (2002) reported that youth wanted a counsellor who cared. Kurtz et al. (2000) found that youth who were homeless wanted helpers to be caring and nurturing without feeling sorry for them. The youth in my study placed much emphasis on caring, saying that the youth workers at Avenue 15 truly cared for them; sometimes, they were the first adults in their lives who cared for them. Knowing that the youth workers cared for them required time and acceptance. The youth viewed the youth workers as more than just
professionals, because they cared. This is one theme that every youth talked about during the interviews.

Trust was viewed as an important part of the development of the working alliance. Similar to the youth in my study, the youth in Martin et al.’s (2006) study declared that trust and openness was important to the development of the working alliance. My study indicated that trust needed to be built before youth would accept assistance they might need in areas such as enrolling in school and looking for work. Yet developing trust may be challenging: “Helpers invested a great deal of time, patience, nurturance, and acceptance into cultivating trusting relationships with skeptical youth” (Kurtz et al., 2000, p. 399). Being able to trust is a common theme in the literature of working alliance across a variety of populations (Martin et al., 2006; Kurtz et al., 2000; Walsh et al., 2010). My study helped to clarify the importance of time in the development of trust and showed that youth will slowly let information out to youth workers to see what they do with it. The youth highlighted that they needed to be able to trust youth workers with the “small stuff” before they trusted them with the “big stuff.”

**Stage four: The working part of the working alliance.** There were two main constructs that made up this stage: resources and emotional support. Similar to my results, Bedi (2006) found that clients identified the importance of referral and recommended materials for adult populations. It was important that a counsellor could “get to the solution” by offering information and resources to adults in mental health settings (Shattell et al., 2007). The youth in my study talked about how they were appreciative of the resources that the youth workers provided. Other research has highlighted the importance of ensuring that service providers and counsellors are working towards the goals of the client; failure to do so may result in a person
disengaging (Bordin, 1979; Levy, 1998). My findings add to the literature by confirming that youth who are homeless desire resources but will be less accepting of them until a relationship is established.

The working part of the working alliance is more than just resources; it also includes emotional support. The youth talked about how they sometimes needed advice or help with personal issues, which is similar to other research. Bedi (2006) found that clients thought that emotional support and caring were important to the working alliance. In a focus group with youth, Martin et al. (2006) identified the importance of guidance. Both Martin et al. (2006) and Bedi (2006) were speaking of the importance of emotional support with non-homeless persons. My research uniquely highlights that emotional support is important to youth who are homeless. The youth relied on youth workers to help them through personal issues, emotional times, and family concerns.

**Stage five: The outcome.** The working alliance between the youth in my study and the youth workers accomplished two things: first, they thought of the shelter as home; second, they experienced positive changes in their lives. Other researchers have found that the working alliance has a positive impact on the lives of people who are homeless (Chinman et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 2004). However, the idea that the shelter becomes the youths’ home, and the youth workers their family, was both unique and unexpected. The youth referred to it as “home” as they completed their daily functions there (e.g., showering) and could return under any circumstances (e.g., under the influence of alcohol or drugs or after being evicted from other housing situations). The youth stated that the youth workers were their family, accepting them, worrying about them, providing Easter dinner, and hugging them. This allowed the youth to
return when they needed help. It was clear that the youth knew that Avenue 15 and the people that worked there would always be there when they needed help. The idea that youth think of the shelter as home and the youth workers as family speaks to the strength and depth of the alliances that these youth are capable of forming.

Oeztel and Scherer (2003) reported that the working alliance may be more difficult to develop with youth, but it is still an important part of positive outcomes. Thompson et al. (2004) reported that adults who were homeless credited the working alliance with professionals for helping them get off the streets. In a study of 12 previously homeless youth, 11 reported that professional helpers (such as youth workers) helped them break the cycle of homelessness (Kurtz et al., 2000). What was of particular interest in their study was that the youth did not talk about how the program helped them but rather how the people at the programs helped them (Kurtz et al., 2000). Youth who are homeless often recognise that they need help, and when help is not available from their families, they will turn to youth workers (Karabanow, 2008).

**Support for the stage model.** The development of the stage model was unique to this research; therefore, there is little literature to support the movement between the stages. What little is available focuses on trust. Kurtz et al. (2000) reported that creating a safe space with youth who are homeless led to trust. This mirrors the results that I found: that having the space to talk about personal issues precedes the development of trust. This shows that creating space needs to precede trust. Ensign and Bell (2004) discussed the importance of trust, claiming that a lack of trust discourages youth from seeking services and developing relationships with youth workers. In fact, it is only once trust with youth workers is established that youth will engage in
the services and programs that will help them improve their lives (Kurtz et al., 2000; Levy, 1998). This indicates that trust needs to precede resources and responsive emotional support.

Most of the themes that were identified in this study have been found in previous research on working alliances. Some themes supported previously found data, such as instability, equality, respect, (most of the) personal attributes, creating space, caring, trust, and positive change. Other themes, while reported in other populations, were new to the literature on youth who are homeless, including a desire for resources and collaborative goals, emotional support, time, acceptance, and relaxed environment with phatic communication. Finally, my research provided some novel ideas, such as reciprocal respect, creating space by checking in and reaching out, taking time to develop trust, the shelter as a home, and youth workers as family. Additionally, my research is unique, as it adds a stage model of the working alliance that has not been found in the literature. While other authors have identified that safe space to talk precedes trust (Kurtz et al., 2000), and trust is needed before youth will engage in services and programs (Kurtz et al., 2000; Levy, 1998), none have articulated clear stages in the development of a working alliance with this population.

In addition to the support of themes in the literature, theories can be used to help explain and strengthen the results. SLT and Attachment Theory can be used to support the results of this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Social learning theory.** Some of the central tenets found in SLT can be used to strengthen and explain the findings in my research. The four tenets that I will discuss are reciprocal determinism and the three types of learning: informative function (observational
learning), motivational function (expectations), and reinforcing function (reinforcements; Bandura, 1977).

**Reciprocal determinism.** Bandura (1977) asserted that there are three major influences in social learning: personal factors, environment, and behaviour. It is the reciprocal relationships between these three elements that drive social behaviours and social learning (Bandura, 1977). Personal factors are characteristics that have been rewarded in the past; they can include expectations, beliefs, and personality characteristics. They will influence the way in which a youth develops a working alliance with adults; for example, a youth may have learnt to be violent towards adults as a way to protect themselves. Their actions may make a working alliance challenging to develop. The environmental component is all of the physical surroundings of the youth, including the youth workers. The environment is where the youth workers can have the most influence, as they can control many aspects of it, which will impact both behaviour and personal factors. In this study, creating an environment that is accepting and relaxed with space for the youth to engage helped the youth create attachments. The youth’s behaviour and personal factors can be altered through the environment.

**Informative function.** Informative function, or observational learning, is learning through observing the outcomes of actions by others (Bandura, 1977). The youth in this study talked about how they observed how other youth were treated in the program; this influenced their opinions of the youth workers as well as their interactions with them. Devon (17) showed how observational learning occurs:
And they help the kids - I have seen the way they treat some of the kids, they treat them like family, I mean, like, they hug you, they are like, hey, what’s up, you are back, like, sort of thing, like, how did your day go, like, that sort of thing, like they actually care.

It is clear that Devon was observing how other youth and the youth workers interacted with each other. According to Bandura’s (1977) information function and reciprocal determinism, Devon’s observation will likely influence his future behaviour. Devon indicated that the youth workers were his family; this close relationship was modeled by how the youth workers treated other youth, which enabled him to know that this relationship was possible.

When discussing the things that youth workers did that helped her, Hunter shared that youth workers were helping her get a housing placement and stated that she knew that she could rely on them for help because “they [had] helped other youth get into [a program] within a week.” This shows that she was relying on observing the interactions between others to confirm for her that she could ask for help when she needed it. Hunter had faith that the staff member would help her, not only through first-hand experience but also because she had watched others get the help they required. Observing others receive assistance creates positive expectations and beliefs.

The youth also talked about how the youth workers were examples of how they would like their lives to be. For example, they talked about how the youth workers went to work every day and did not drink or party all the time. It seems that they were aware that they could learn from the youth workers just by observing their behaviours and lifestyles.

The youth in my study were observing the interactions between youth workers and other youth. The information that they gained by observing seemed to be impacting that way that they
interacted with the youth workers. By observing, they learned to predict the actions of the youth workers as well as learned which of their behaviours yielded the results that they desired.

**Motivational function.** According to Bandura (1977), motivational function (expectations) is the way that individuals use past experiences to create expectations about how others will react; therefore, people predict future consequences, which motivates behaviour. All of the youth in this study had negative experiences with past caregivers that may have impacted their abilities to form relationships with youth workers. It seems that the more challenging the youth’s past was, the more difficult it was for them to connect with youth workers. For example, Dakota had been homeless since he was 12 and had only recently connected with one youth worker; Joni’s mother left when she was two, her aunt asked her to leave, and then her grandparents asked her to leave, and thus she had a hard time connecting to adults.

However, youth such as Aarika and Dan, who had only recently left their families, seemed to have a much easier time connecting with adults. Other research found that youth who are homeless are distrustful of adults (Ferguson, 2009; Levy, 1998). Bandura’s (1977) motivational function would suggest that their past experiences with adults have taught them to be distrustful; therefore, their behaviour would be to avoid connecting with adults.

**Reinforcing function.** Reinforcement works to increase or decrease a certain behaviour and works best if internal (Bandura, 1977). If external, reinforcements are most effective when the person receiving reinforcement is aware of what behaviour is being reinforced and the reinforcement is administered by someone who affects their life. Both Aarika and Joni talked about the consequences that the youth workers imposed on them due to certain behaviours and
how they appreciated fairness. Understanding the consequences may help the youth to learn new behaviours, as it becomes clear that some behaviours will result in consequences.

Devon talked about how the relationships he had with the staff made him more likely to learn from them. Devon had recently been asked to leave Avenue 15 for a few days because of problematic behaviour, and since returning, he had been trying to change. However, being able to continue staying at Avenue 15 motivated Devon to change his behaviours. Consequences, in these cases, seemed to motivate the youth to change their behaviours when they made sense and when they were connected to the adults who were enforcing the consequences.

SLT may help to explain how youth who are homeless develop a working alliance with youth workers. Primarily, it can speak to why these connections might be different for every youth (past experiences) as well as the stage of alliance development. Youth who are homeless may need to learn to connect with adults and may rely on informative function, motivational function, and reinforcing function to do so.

**Attachment theory.** There are three key ideas in attachment theory with adults that support the findings in my study: (a) past experiences create internal working models; (b) internal working models can change with new situations; and (c) people are more likely to succeed when they have significant relationships regardless of their attachment style (Bowlby, 1973; Collins et al., 2011). An individual’s internal working model is derived from the expectations and understanding of oneself and others, which inform how one behaves, feels, and thinks in relationships (Bowlby, 1982).

**Past experiences.** People develop an overall internal working model through interactions with caregivers and peers (Collins et al., 2011). The youth in my study had negative experiences
with past caregivers, such as manipulation, physical and sexual abuse, and abandonment. All of these experiences would lead to a non-secure internal working model with expectations of negative treatment by others. However, there was variance amongst the youth, and there seemed to be a relationship between the length and intensity of negative past experiences and one’s ability to connect with youth workers. For example, Aarika stated that she had a good connection with her mother and stepfather until she was 13 and at the time of the study had a good connection with her sibling; she reported that it was easy to connect to the youth workers. Dan reported that he lived at home with his mother until six weeks before the interview and still had a good connection with her; additionally, he had a positive relationship with his welding teacher and coach. Dan also stated that he was able to connect with the youth workers in just a few days.

However, on the other end of the spectrum, Domonic reported that he had been involved with social services for numerous years, and at the time of the interview, had no contact with any family members. Domonic told me that he had few adults with whom he connected; in fact, he felt as though everyone else had abandoned him. He advised that making connections with adults for him was very challenging and rare. Joni as well had an unstable childhood, starting when her mother left when she was two. Since then, she had lived with numerous relatives as well as by herself. Joni reported that she had very few connections with adults and did not feel that she could trust most of them.

One’s past may influence one’s ability to form attachments with others (Collins et al., 2011). The youth in this study had events in their lives that would threaten their abilities to form attachments with adults in general and youth workers specifically. The youth who had the most (and earliest onset) concerns typically expressed the most difficulty forming connections with
youth workers. Although the past will continue to affect one’s internal working model, the working model can be changed.

**Changing an individual’s internal working model.** According to Collins et al. (2011), new situations can create room and allow for change within an individual’s working model. The youth were able to express this idea. Hunter shared with me that she was connected to most of the youth workers at Avenue 15, but it typically took her a long time to connect. However, she stated that it was easier for her to connect to one youth worker because she reminded Hunter of another youth worker. Using attachment theory, one might suggest that Hunter’s internal working model had shifted; it was easier to form a connection with one person after she had a successful connection with another (similar) person.

People can create different internal working models with different people (Allen, 2008, Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). In adolescence and adulthood, people have a general working model and a specific attachment working model (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). As Dakota explained, despite a general model of expecting abandonment, he had developed a specific working model with his youth worker whom he trusted to be there for him.

The youth in this study discussed two ways in which their internal working models may have shifted. One observation that supports this change is that once they can trust one youth worker, it was easier to trust others. The other observation is that the youth were able to identify that they could trust a youth worker but no other adults in their lives.

**Success because of relationships.** Despite the differences in individual experiences, everyone is more likely to succeed in life when they have significant relationships in their lives.
with people who are willing to help and care deeply (Bowlby, 1973; Collins et al., 2011). The outcome stage of the working alliance speaks to this concept.

The youth in this study talked about how important it was that the youth workers cared about them and that the youth workers would do anything they could to help them. They also credited the youth workers with many changes that they were able to make. The youth in my study talked about going back to school, quitting drugs, and getting jobs. It was clear that they did not think they would have been able to accomplish their goals without the support of the youth workers.

Attachment theory can help to explain some of the working alliance development that the youth talked about. Past experiences may help account for some of the variance across youth in the time it takes to develop a working relationship with youth workers. The time it takes to move through the earlier stages in the model is likely related to the extent and severity of past negative relationship experiences. This idea may help youth workers to be more patient with how youth who are homeless interact with them, as their pasts may have not allowed for secure attachments. Additionally, attachment theory provides hope, as it is possible to change an individual’s internal working model through positive relationships. Finally, there is proof that positive attachments can create positive changes in one’s life.

**My Experience with the Research Project**

I was drawn to this topic due to the time that I have spent working with at-risk youth, including those who were experiencing homelessness. At times in my professional practice, I struggled to connect with some youth, unsure of what to do, what to talk about, or how to help them. I desperately wanted to help but was unsure as to how to or where to begin with the youth.
who were hard to connect with. Over time, and through many conversations with peers and supervisors, I developed a theory that the youth who seemed most connected to youth workers were also able to break the cycle of homelessness. The answer seemed clear to me that a stronger working alliance could help the youth more than anything else.

The answer of a stronger working alliance only seemed to produce more questions, such as: How does one develop a stronger working alliance? What do youth who are homeless appreciate about youth workers? How do youth think the working alliance is formed? Do youth think the working alliance is important? What is different about the youth workers that the youth like and do not like? It occurred to me that all of these questions were focused on how the youth viewed the working alliance. When I was a youth worker, my colleagues and I spent so much time learning about how to make the connection stronger by going to conferences put on by adults, reading books written by adults, and sitting in meetings with other adults. What was clearly missing was youth: what the youth are thinking and saying about this topic. I felt it was only the youth who could truly provide the answers that I wanted. Therefore, I decided to talk to the youth about their connections with youth workers to try to provide some insight to all the questions I had formed over the years.

I was touched by the stories that the youth shared with me and appreciated their individual personalities and thoughts about the working alliance. I was surprised at how frankly and articulately most participants could talk about the relationships they had with adults. They could all identify youth workers that they liked and those that they did not like; most importantly, they could describe why.
I found the results were surprising. Most of what the youth said seemed intuitive to me; however, I never had the ideas so concretely presented to me. I knew that youth needed youth workers to care, but after this project, I know that asking youth how their day was (and being interested in the answer) is one way that I can show them that I care. Additionally, I was not surprised that the right environment needed to be in place for a working alliance to develop, but I had never really thought about the importance of the role of the environment. To see that youth need a relaxed, accepting environment in which the youth worker creates space for the youth is something that makes sense to me but had not been broken down in such a manner before. It was interesting to have the youths’ concrete views regarding the development of a working alliance.

**Limitations**

The first limitation of the study is in relation to the recruitment process. Initially, recruitment was meant to occur at two separate locations, responsible for a total of three programs providing services to homeless youth. I was successful in recruiting participants from Avenue 15, which hosts both Link and Loft programs. The second location housed Safehouse, which was displaced during the recruiting process due to an unexpected natural disaster. Unfortunately, this may have skewed the data, because youth that use Safehouse are placed in this location involuntarily, while the youth who use Avenue 15’s services come to the location of their own volition. The circumstances under which the youth end up in one location or another likely have an effect on their lived experiences and perceptions, and so in this way, the data may not represent the experiences of the working alliance in youth who have an involuntary status.

Another major limitation of my research is the lack of member checking, which Creswell (2007) described as the gold standard of reliability in qualitative research. Due to the transiency
of the participants, it was not feasible to go back to the youth to discuss the results. The data was collected over a number of months, and youth who are homeless spend an average of 19 nights in a shelter at a time (Statistics Canada, 2010); therefore, it was not possible to return to the same youth to discuss results. Further research in this area might ask the youth on the consent form for permission to talk to either youth workers or a focus group of other youth who are homeless about the results to get their opinions and strengthen the reliability.

A final limitation of the study relates to the length of the interviews. Four interviews were relatively brief, under 30 minutes in duration. However, the brevity of these interviews is not necessarily problematic, as the participants appeared to be fully engaged throughout the interview and the participants still covered the topics outlined in the field guide. In two of these interviews, the participants stated that they had no to limited positive experiences with adults in their lives, limiting the depth of exploration for this issue. However, the data they provided was valuable, as it potentially provided insight into what not to do when attempting to connect with youth who may be more challenging to connect with.

As with most qualitative research, a delimitation of this study is the ability to generalise the results. First, there were a small number of participants, all of who were accessing services through Avenue 15 and residing in Calgary, Alberta at the time of the interview. Second, the interpretations are mainly that of one researcher with supervisors overseeing the work. Therefore, in order to increase the generalisability of the results, the study should be replicated with other youth who are homeless in other settings. Attention should also be paid to investigating this phenomenon in diverse samples (ethno-cultural, sexual minority, etc.)
Implications for Practice/Educators

One purpose of this research was to provide youth workers with information about what is important to youth who are homeless in forming relationships. The findings of this study can be shared with youth workers to help them strengthen the working alliances they have with youth who are homeless. It provides an outline that youth workers can follow in order to provide what the youth might want in developing a working alliance with them. For example, when first meeting a youth, a youth worker might want to spend relaxed time with them, watching movies or talking about phatic things prior to trying to develop goals with youth. Therefore, the following recommendations are made at each stage of the model:

- **Pre-stage — Entering**
  - Ensure programs are well known to youth and other agencies that they will meet the basic needs of youth

- **Stage one — The friendly foundation**
  - Spend time with the youth
  - Enjoy what you do and have fun with the youth
  - Find out what the youth like to do, and do those things
  - Be respectful (make eye contact, use manners, listen)
  - Avoid favoritism

- **Stage two — The right environment**
  - Create space for the youth to disclose by checking in and reaching out
  - Listen to the youth before reaching conclusions
- Create a relaxed environment by focusing on fun/light topics instead of the youth’s issues

- Stage three — They got my back
  - Build trust by showing acceptance and keeping secrets when appropriate
  - Tell the youth you care, show caring by being interested in their lives

- Stage four — The working part of the working alliance
  - Make goals collaboratively with the youth
  - Give advice but only once a relationship is established and you have thoroughly listened
  - Provide a variety of resources

- Stage five — The outcomes
  - Acknowledge and celebrate youth successes
  - Welcome back returning youth

Counsellors working with at-risk youth may also find this research of value. Previous studies have found that youth in counselling appreciate many of the same ideas that the youth in my study discussed. For example, youth in counselling appreciate being treated as an equal (Everall & Paulson, 2002; Quesnelle, 2011) and appreciate youth workers who care (Everall & Paulson, 2002). All youth may have a distrust for adults; therefore, it may take time for a working alliance that is focused on change to develop (Everall & Paulson, 2002). Quesnelle (2011) found that youth desire an environment similar to the one I described: informal, casual, and relaxed. Therefore, a counsellor may find it helpful to think of this stage model when forming connections with youth. Instead of moving right to change focused or high intensity
level conversations, they may take time to talk about mundane things or find things in common with youth. A counsellor could take the advice of the youth in my study and show respect by making eye contact, using manners, and not developing goals for the youth.

**Implications for Policy**

Although not directly asked about programs or policy and what they would change, there are some themes drawn from the data that may affect policy. The first recommendation is an increase in outreach services that would enable youth workers to remain contact with youth after they leave the program. This idea was also suggested by Kurtz et al. (2000), whose participants commented on the fact that they formed relationships with youth workers only to leave, resulting in yet another loss of a relationship. Perhaps even the knowledge that the youth workers they connected with could stay in their lives may help the youth form connections.

The youth in my study talked about how they disliked when adults made decisions for them. Therefore, I would echo previous recommendations that programs should be as broad and flexible as possible (Kurtz et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 2004) and prioritize youth’s autonomy and decision-making. Programs need to be adjusted when possible to fit with the (changing) needs of the youth, rather than encouraging youth to attend programs that do not fit for them.

**Directions for Future Research**

There are a number of areas that future research may wish to address to remedy some of the limitations of this study as well as expand on or test the working alliance model. First, it is recommended that future projects plan for member checking. This study’s timeline and design did not easily allow for member checking, as it was highly likely that the youth I interviewed had already relocated. Future studies might attempt to stay in contact with the interviewed youth,
have other youth who are homeless review the results, and/or ask youth workers for feedback. Given that some of the interviews with the youth were briefer than expected, it is possible that enabling the youth to share ideas with each other through the use of a focus group may provide another, perhaps richer, source of data (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001).

As with most qualitative research, the goal of this research was not to obtain generalisable findings but to obtain an understanding of how youth who are homeless view the connections they have with youth workers. An attempt to increase the generalisability may be beneficial. This may including talking to more youth who are homeless, increasing the ethnic diversity of participants, increasing the age range of participants, and increasing the range of homelessness (e.g., including youth who experience relative homelessness).

Although this model was developed with the help of youth who are homeless describing their relationships to youth workers, it may be applicable in other settings. Further research may focus on determining if this stage model is applicable with other populations or settings. For example, it might be helpful to know if these findings are transferable to youth in a counselling setting or to adults who are homeless.

Conclusion

This thesis sought to explore the working alliance between youth who are homeless and youth workers. The key was to understand the working alliance through the perspectives of youth who are homeless. To accomplish this, I interviewed nine youth who lived in a shelter for youth who are homeless in Calgary. After collecting the data, I used IPA to analyse the data. This resulted in the development of a stage model that spoke to how a working alliance might be developed between a youth who is homeless and a youth worker. The model is as follows: pre-
stage - entering; stage one - the friendly foundation; stage two - the right environment; stage three - they got my back; stage four - the working part of the working alliance; stage five - the outcomes. In addition to helping the youth workers figure out how to develop a working alliance, the working alliance stage model that I developed may help to normalise the experiences of youth workers as they work to form connections to youth who are homeless. This stage model shows that it takes time and various stages for a strong working alliance to develop, and this may validate some experiences of youth workers and increase their patience.
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APPENDIX A

Semi-Structured Interview

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to gain information about your views about the connections you have with youth workers. There are no right or wrong answers here; I truly just want to know about your thoughts and feelings. This interview will take about one hour; if you need a break just let me know. If any of the questions do not make sense to you, please ask for clarification. We will have a quick talk about the interview at the end, however if you find you are upset in the middle you are welcome to end the interview and we can begin to talk about it right away. Remember you have the right to stop withdraw from this at any time without consequence. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Questions

Themes One: Discover who the youth is.

- Who are you?
- Tell me about how you ended up staying here?
- In the past two years how many month have you been homeless?
- How long have you been experiencing homelessness?
- What sort of services do you usually use?
- How old are you?

Theme Two: Explore what youth who are homeless feel is important with regards to the connections they make.

- What is important to you in making connections (such as friendships)?
- What is important to you in making connections with adults?

Theme Three: Explore the relationship between youth and youth workers from the point of view of the youth.

- Tell me about your connections to the staff here
- How long have you been coming here?
- When did a connection start to develop with you and a staff member?

Theme Four: Find out what youth workers do that is important to youth when developing that relationship.

- What did the staff do to help in forming a connection?
Theme Five: Find out what characteristics of youth workers are important to youth when they are developing the relationship.

- What do you like about the people that work here?
- What sort of stuff do you think is important in a youth worker that helps you develop a connection with them?

Theme Six: Explore how youth develop relationships with youth workers.

- How did the relationship form between you and the staff?
- What did you do to contribute to the formation of the relationship?
- When are you typically ready to start forming a connection with adults (length know them)?
- How do you show others that you are ready for that connection?
- How are these youth workers different from other adults in your life that you are not able to form connections with?

Theme Seven: Find out how the relationships have helped the youth.

- How do you think that the relationship you have has impacted your life?
- What do you like about having these adults in your life?

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Debrief

What was it like to talk about forming connections with adults, in particular youth workers?

If you have any concerns you can contact me, my supervisors, or the ethics board; all this information is on your copy of the consent form. In addition to that you can talk to your youth workers here or their supervisors. A final option is to talk to a counselling service, again the contact information in on your consent form. There will be a blank copy of the consent form left here with all the contact information on it in case you lose your copy. Thank-you for your assistance.