Using both images and metaphor proved an effective qualitative method in our study with adolescent girls who use crystal methamphetamine. The combination increased the depth of learning by inviting less calculated responses and the breadth of learning by allowing for consideration of societal and contextual dimensions of experience. In this article, we demonstrate how combining images and metaphors in qualitative inquiry can enable researchers to resist the tendency to distill complex experiences down to manageable forms. In so doing, we offer a contextualized perspective of how change may occur, thus reconceptualizing our roles as practitioners.

Cognizant of the complexity of identity, our commitment to reconceptualizing the role of clinical practice and support has been both complicated and affirmed by our research with adolescent girls who are involved with methamphetamine use. Rather than trying to understand our participants’ struggles with addiction in a reductionist way that strives toward “mastering” the problem, we argue it is in complexity that rich learning and support can occur. Visualizing crystal meth use as one element in a dynamic matrix of our participants’ experiences, we aim to appreciate the relationships among addiction and other aspects of life embedded in this matrix in order to practice in a way that is relevant to individuals’ experiences.

We will start with a general overview of the study, to ground the reader in our process. Then we will make a case for the use of images in qualitative research, followed by a similar case for
the use of metaphor. In so doing, we will illustrate the value of coupling the two in order to increase the depth of learning (by accessing nuanced and less calculated ideas) and breadth of learning (by incorporating societal and contextual aspects of experiencing the world), which can occur in research conversations. Finally, we will suggest some implications for both research and practice that can result from such an exploration—a process that benefits from critical engagement on the part of participants, researchers, practitioners, and families. With the suggested shift, the onus for positive change does not merely lie within individuals to conform behavior to fit societal norms but also with their formal and informal supports, to challenge those norms, the discourses that perpetuate them, and various meanings made of them.

To begin, we will share a series of interview excerpts in order to immerse you into our study. The excerpts that follow are from one interview with a 21-year-old woman who uses crystal meth every day and has done so for about five years. She is the oldest of five participants in our study, entitled “Understanding Adolescent Girls’ Processes of Moral Weighting: Amphetamine Use as a Context in Which Participants Took Photographs to Convey Their Experiences.” With the details of the theoretical underpinnings, methodology, and data collection documented elsewhere (Newbury & Hoskins, 2008), this article will highlight the learning that emerges when images and metaphor are used in qualitative inquiry.

(Interviewer) Janet: So why did you take this picture? (See Figure 1)

(Participant) Tara: It’s just how I am. Even though I know I can do anything I want, I always feel pieces missing. Like, there’s a piece of my life that I’ll never get back.

J: Really?
T: I can’t even remember yesterday sometimes. My memory is so bad that sometimes I can’t even remember how old I am.
J: Wow. Do you remember what it was like not to feel that way?
T: [Shakes head].
J: So these different pieces, are these specific things that you feel you’re missing?
T: Just parts of me.
J: Yourself.
T: [Nods].
J: Yeah, that’s a great image. It’s very whole—it’s very complete. . . .
You know what goes right here, but it’s just not there. So does that make you feel frustrated or sad or . . .
T: More disappointed.
J: Disappointed in what?
T: Myself.
FIGURE 2 Puzzle 2.

J: Why? Do you think it’s your fault or something?
T: We all make our own decisions.
J: So you feel like it’s a choice?
T: I feel like it was a choice. Now it’s a dependency.
J: Since you’ve reduced the amount [of meth] you use . . . have some of these pieces come back? (See Figure 2)
T: Some. Or I just started a new puzzle.
J: Oh, wow. So you see yourself completely differently?
T: Before I was this grubby little bike tech that rode around on a BMX with another bike strapped to her backpack in pieces.
J: Wow, and you’ve redefined yourself.
T: Mm hm. Like now I eat regularly, I sleep every night, I have a boyfriend that’s not abusive—and cooks! I have things to do when I get up in the morning. Yeah. It’s a whole different puzzle. But this puzzle is still not completed.
J: And if you were to imagine down the road, would there be another puzzle, or do you imagine more pieces going in on this puzzle, or . . .?
T: I don’t think I’ll ever get the pieces of this puzzle back. My mind is still like a child sometimes.
Overview of the Study

Interested in understanding the connections among identity, context, and meaning-making processes, we invited girls who have experience using crystal meth to participate in our study. We wanted to explore not only the various dimensions of the three aspects of their lives listed, but, perhaps even more importantly, how they (identity, context, and meaning-making processes) can mutually inform one another and what that might look like. With such an understanding, we hope to develop a more contextualized awareness of how change occurs in the lives of these girls, and thus to clarify our roles as practitioners. By engaging in a qualitative study, we are working from the assumption that “close, often intimate connections to the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon ... produce the clearest and most informed understanding of the topic” (Stanczak, 2007, p. 5). We explored together with our participants—five adolescent girls—how they make meaning of their lives, including both identity and context in the discussions.

Recognizing that as researchers we are, at least for a time, part of the context, we could not ignore that consideration when developing our methodology. After toying with various options, we decided to use photography in our data-collection process and interviews. (The rationale behind this choice will be illuminated in the following section.) Our interactions with participants, then, ceased to be “interviews”; instead, we refer to them as research conversations, as they consisted of the researcher and participant sifting through the images together and allowing conversation to unfold around them. This is what the process looked like:

Once our participants had been provided with a digital camera and a journal, they set out to take pictures and reflect on two questions:

1. What images represent who I am at this point in my life?
2. What images represent who I believe others think I am at this point in my life?

After two weeks, one-on-one conversations took place between researchers and participants, exploring their experiences of this process, reflections, and ideas. Although the questions
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did not specifically address the use of crystal meth, the girls introduced the topic when and how it was meaningful to them. In each case it was a central topic of conversation, which the photographs helped to illustrate, as seen above in the conversation with Tara.5

The girls were then provided with two more questions to photograph over two weeks:

1. What images represent who I hope to be five years from now?
2. What images represent who I think others expect me to be five years from now?

By exploring past, present, and future identities (Markus & Nurius, 1986), the idea of change could be explored. Again, we met one-on-one, discussing the images and the meanings around them. We wrapped up the process with a dinner out with all the girls, during which we asked them if they wanted to be involved further, and if so, to what extent.

“Data” for the study did not consist only of research conversation transcripts. Our learning was and is an emergent process that includes consideration of the photographs taken by participants, e-mails and conversations among researchers, reflections, literature, and cultural artefacts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) shared by participants, such as music and Facebook postings. We present this as one (not the) effective way of engaging with youth in qualitative research. As do all approaches, ours has both limitations and strengths, which in our experience can often be one and the same. For instance, we will argue in this case that using images and metaphors in research can help to complexify the subject at hand. This complexity can be both an asset and a difficulty when researching human experiences.

The Use of Images in Research

The use of photo elicitation in qualitative research is an effective way to engage participants and move beyond the concrete aspects of life, making it a valuable method for research that aims to explore meanings (Barry, 1996; Carleson, Engebretson, & Chamberlain, 2006; Harper, 2000; Quinney, 2001). It has been
noted that using visual methods in research or therapy with adolescent participants can be beneficial in that “it is closely related to the medium of video/television, which is an integral and accepted part of young adults’ terrain. As a consequence, the method has an appeal that can be readily ‘tapped into’” (Riley & Manias, 2004, p. 399). This claim certainly reflects our experience. Using digital technology in particular seems to be relevant to the girls in our study, as they often chose to alter their photos in order to achieve different effects. Harper (2000) pointed out that with these new technologies, photographs are no longer viewed as objective representations as they once were. We observed that the interactive nature of digital technologies (such as Facebook) has changed the way people experience images and media, shifting from passive recipient to co-constructing participant. Thus, the images served as a bridge between us and our participants.

As practitioners as well as researchers, we value the process of engaging with participants (and clients) in activity as a way of connecting that is meaningful and generative. Meeting in and using the life-space of youth provides an entry point for positive, therapeutic relationship building and problem solving (Mattingly & Stuart, 2002). Thus, inviting research participants to take photographs and then genuinely exploring those images in conversation can generate authentic and deep inquiry with participants, not merely about them. In these moments of mutual engagement, researchers are able to experience not only the emergence of meanings but also the construction of them (Gergen, 1999; Mahoney, 2003; Peavy, 2004).

Leitch (2006) advocated for the inclusion of images in qualitative inquiry for a number of reasons. First, images enable participants and researchers to “go beyond the limits of language and capture the meaning of lived experience in more holistic ways” (Leitch, 2006, p. 549). Second, images enable us to explore in nonverbal ways those experiences that “lie below the threshold of consciousness” (Leitch, 2006, p. 551) and thus cannot be addressed through direct questioning. Third, Leitch (2006) reminded us that “writing and traditional forms of inquiry do not completely convey the sense of felt embodied knowledge in the same way that an image, a poem, a sculpture or a play does” (p. 552). Finally, and importantly, she says,
[Arts-based research methods challenge empirical forms that reduce human experience to knowledge claims of certainty. ... Arts-based inquiry encourages the expression of multiple truths and the interaction of these truths to make new, individual and collective meanings. Furthermore, arts-based methods trouble the relationship between knowledge and power in our society, exposing knowledge as socially constructed. (Leitch, 2006, p. 553, emphasis added)

It is this point that resonates most clearly for us. In fact, it was not the functional qualities of photograph elicitation that initially drew us to this approach, but the philosophies of equality and social justice that underlie them. Our first introduction to visual methods was through Photovoice, which is not primarily a research tool but a process of community engagement intended to provoke social change (see Wang et al., 2004 for details). The theoretical basis for this approach comes mainly from Freire’s work on the role of critical consciousness in educational reform, in which there is an intentional move from dialectical transfer of knowledge to dialogical (egalitarian) construction of knowledge (Carleson et al., 2006; Freire, 1970). The approach also draws from feminist assertions that every personal story is “mediated by the forms of representation available in a culture” (Wang et al., 2004, p. 911). By addressing social issues through exploration of personal stories, these deeply nuanced, complex relationships among individuals, cultures, discourses, power, and more can be addressed. Although the ideas and practices of Photovoice were integral in the development of our particular methodology, it is important to distinguish our approach so as not to misrepresent Photovoice: Our primary goal was inquiry, not social action. That said, we are indebted to the movement, as it has deeply affected the way we engaged with our participants and our topic. The use of images invited an openness that serves to challenge linear notions of knowledge and makes room for embodied ways of knowing to be explored. For example, in the conversations with Tara that opened this article, we spoke more of the “puzzle” than of any concrete aspect of her daily experiences. In so doing, abstract ideas were explored without having to be connected squarely with her drug use or other tangible aspects of her life, making room for emotions such as disappointment and shame without having to explain them.
The Use of Metaphor in Research and Practice

The photographs also granted us the freedom to speak metaphorically, and we were able to ground our metaphors (in the previous case, the puzzle and the pieces of the puzzle) in the images themselves. This enabled both the researcher and the participant to feel confident we were on the same page. Through the use of metaphor, we were also able to draw connections from one experience to another throughout our conversations.

The following passage comes from a research conversation with Brittany, who is 18 years old and for whom crystal meth was a central part of life until recently. She was in the process of transitioning into an apartment after living on the streets at the time this conversation took place. The photograph of a park taken through a fence provides a metaphor to which she and the researcher refer repeatedly throughout their conversation:

(Interviewer) Dave: What were you thinking about when you took this picture? (See Figure 3.)

(Participant) Brittany: That I'm on the other side of the fence now, I can't really see my childhood that clearly anymore, but
I did use to play at the parks and stuff, and have a good time. Clean fun.

D: So what does this side of the fence look like? Tell me about that contrast between how you see that park and how you see this side.

B: It was a lot of fun when I was a younger kid, compared to now. This side of the fence as I put it, it’s a lot more strict and not sure how to put it, just more responsibility.

D: Sounds like that is a happy time. . . . In the picture it’s kind of blurred. Was that intentional?

B: Yeah, yeah, that’s intentional, and most of the time I go to the park after dark. My dad would take my little sister and I. We would go after dark because this was an off-bounds park because it was a private school and you could only get there at night time.

D: I like the idea of a park; I can relate to that, too. Parks are so much fun; tell me about that.

B: You can just run around, be yourself. You can scream your head off, fall down and get back up, run around some more.

D: So real freedom?

B: Yeah, real freedom.

D: The image of the chain makes it seem like you’re really not able to go there anymore.

B: Yeah, that’s pretty much how it is now.

D: What makes you feel like that fence is so tight?

B: It makes it feel like that because everyone else is grown up, and they have families or they started their own families, or they’re still trying to grow up themselves. They’re either grown up and have kids of their own to take care of or they’re still kids themselves. I’m in between.

D: In between which two places? Just to clarify for me.

B: Between being a kid and being an adult. . . . But then again, I look at it like I’m not a teenager; most teenagers are still smoking and drinking a lot. I’m not. I’m working at trying to get my life straightened out.

D: Do you feel that that image of the park has to happen at childhood, or can it happen at all different ages? Is it only kids that can play at the park?

B: I think so, yeah, that’s what it seems like. That’s probably why the fence is in the picture.
D: Tell me about the fence. What do you think in your life is that fence?
B: Boundaries, boundaries. I don’t know yet, that’s why the fence is blocking me. It’s like a wall, but you can see through it.

The role of metaphor in qualitative research has been studied extensively by those seeking a creative way to understand the relationships between individual and social meanings (Atleo, 2008; Barry, 1996; Hoskins & Leseho, 1996; Johnson, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1987; Polkinghorne, 2007). Although some view metaphor merely as a linguistic exercise, many recognize it as much more deep-seated and involved. The latter theorists understand metaphor as fundamental to knowing. They assert it is at least in part through the creation and use of metaphor that we understand the world. This understanding, in turn, determines the role we see for ourselves in it, affecting how we behave. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1987),

Metaphor is not a harmless exercise in naming. It is one of the principal means by which we understand our experience and reason on the basis of that understanding. To the extent that we act on our reasoning, metaphor plays a role in the creation of reality. When that created reality is a grim reality, it becomes all the more important to understanding the mode of reasoning that helped create it. (p. 79)

From this perspective, it is through metaphor that we can begin to comprehend the beliefs, reasons, and assumptions that might underlie the very behavior and phenomena we are exploring. For instance, in the example above with Brittany, the conversation about freedom was made possible by drawing on the meanings that lie beneath the image of the park. The conversation about boundaries was made possible by drawing on the meanings represented by the fence. In both cases, the conversation about the emotional experience took place before the words “freedom” and “boundaries” were spoken. Through metaphor, the researcher and participant communicated by transcending the limitations of language (Polkinghorne, 2007). The value of metaphor to both research and practice is thus made explicit in enabling us to explore the meanings we make of our experiences in the world (Mathieson & Hoskins, 2005).
But that is not all. Most of us reading the conversation above could understand why Brittany chose a park and a fence in order to communicate ideas of freedom and boundaries, respectively; she did not independently create these images. If she did, much more explanation would have been required in order for her to communicate her intentions to the researcher (and readers). Lakoff and Johnson (1987) reminded us that “if these metaphors and folk theories were not readily available to us for use in understanding—that is, if they were not ours in some sense—the passage would be simply incomprehensible to us” (p. 78). In this sense it becomes clear that individual meaning-making processes are inextricably linked to collective understandings of the world. Indeed, metaphor does not only illustrate the connection between identity and context, it can also aid in the creation of certain contextual understandings of identity, as it enables us to draw from our social realities in order to give meaning to our personal experiences (Hoskins & Leseho, 1996). It is through metaphor that we realize identity and context are inseparable, as they simultaneously inform one another.

Interestingly, although we share many contextual realities, this process occurs differently for each person. Hoskins and Leseho (1996) suggested through the exploration of metaphors of self that how people “construe their world, their life experiences, their sociocultural influences, and their beliefs, values, and assumptions will determine which metaphors will resonate with them and which metaphors will be most useful in promoting . . . growth” (p. 251). Listening closely to the language used in conversation is therefore important, as vocabulary, phrases, and metaphors “will be cues as to the kind of perspectives [participants] hold” (Hoskins & Leseho, 1996, p. 251; see also Mathieson & Hoskins, 2005). To be clear, metaphors do not exist for us to discover as “findings.” Rather, they are social constructions that function to help us collectively make sense of an otherwise chaotic world (Atleo, 2008).

Hoskins and Leseho (1996) identified several metaphors of self that are regularly drawn on for various reasons. These include cohesive self, authentic self, core self, subpersonalities, the saturated self, dialogical selves, and possible selves. Attentively listening for which metaphors of self a person might identify with can help explicate their understandings of how change occurs. In the
case of our study, all of our participants identified themselves as working toward recovery from crystal meth use. Thus, listening for and understanding the metaphors of self that ring true for them is helpful in understanding their change processes.

Returning to the first example (Figures 1 and 2), by taking pictures of a puzzle that was missing pieces, Tara communicates her understanding of self and how change occurs for her. From among the various metaphors of self identified by Hoskins and Leseho (1996), Tara’s understanding seems to align most with the metaphor of “possible selves” (p. 247). She may see herself as a process that changes, but feel limited when attempting to envision a future self that might work with her previous ways of being. Desirable change might require her to abandon her old identity and start from scratch, or to start a new puzzle.

Tara indicates that she does not believe in “finding the missing pieces,” which may explain why she would rather find new supports (such as her boyfriend) than spend time trying to rekindle broken relationships. This metaphor has proven a useful tool for her in some ways: By envisioning the success of a past self in starting a new puzzle once before (getting two jobs, developing eating and sleeping routines, and entering a relationship that feels healthy for her), she can recognize the positive changes she is making and even entertain possibilities of starting a new puzzle once again down the road.

In the second example (Figure 3), Brittany leans toward a different metaphor of self: the narrative self (Hoskins & Leseho, 1996, p. 245). In discussion around the image of the park and the fence, she describes her life as a story that moves from childhood (a time to be taken care of and to have uninhibited fun), to adolescence (a time of being stuck in-between), and finally to adulthood (a time of truly being). At present, the tensions of being an adolescent leave Brittany feeling she does not have a distinct and valuable societal role. This is a phenomenon that has been described elsewhere as historically recent, mainly European, and socially constructed through patronizing discourses of adolescence in the minority world (Kessen, 1979; Lesko, 1996). Brittany explains a sense of “not fully being,” which is unsettling to her as she both looks back with nostalgia and forward with envy. On the other hand, the metaphor of becoming provides her with a sense of hope and possibility and gives meaning to her current
struggles. Although she sees other youth her age drinking and partying, Brittany recognizes herself as unique in that she is getting her life “straightened out” as she works toward becoming a self she values.

Although each participant makes use of different metaphors, in each case, metaphors can be seen as both limiting constructions that reduce the realm of possibility and as motivating ideals that bring meaning to circumstances and even motivate them. In fact, during a study on identity among adolescent girls with eating disorders, Hoskins (2002) observed that the use of metaphor can serve to help people “shift from a closed-systems perspective of the self to one that is more open to change and self-creation” (p. 245). Johnson (1993) explained how this is possible with an assessment of metaphor as an imaginative process that is “primarily expansive and constructive” (p. 31) in that it allows us to extend from one domain of experience into another (potential) domain, a process without which we would be “doomed to habitual acts” (p. 33).

Although it might be tempting to conclude here by noting that each of the two participants above identifies with a different metaphor of self, that would be dishonestly simplistic. It is crucial to keep the doors of possibility open in order to entertain alternatives to our current modes of making meaning. With this as our intention, we find ourselves observing that each participant seems to embrace many metaphors of self, depending on the particular context being addressed, thus indicating the fluid and contextually contingent nature of identity. It was the use of photographs that enabled this to come to light in our conversations.

Putting the Pieces Together: Image and Metaphor Combine

As Wagner (2007) noted,

Rather than demanding only an objective reading, images also elicit various subjectivities from our participants. . . . Just as subjectivity and realism interact in the space between the image and the viewer, the same occurs between the producer of the image and the subject or content. (p. 7)

In much the same way that metaphor enables people to move beyond the concrete and immediate to more nuanced aspects
of experience, images serve the same function. The use of images facilitated metaphorical ways of communicating, helping to explicate some of the very things we were interested in exploring deeply with our participants: meaning-making, moral reasoning, and identity construction. With the image/metaphor combination as our “can opener” (Stanczak, 2007, p. 15), we seamlessly moved from concrete conversations about the images into dialogue in which meanings not only emerged, but were co-constructed.

By doing research in this way, we are centring the production of knowledge, embodied knowledge, and multiple ways of knowing, rather than the more “possessive,” fixed, hierarchical, and individualistic traditional notions of what valid knowledge is (Freire, 1970; Lather, 1995; Polkinghorne, 2007). Specifically, images add depth to our understanding of our participants’ experiences as they bring the conversation to more nuanced and less conscious aspects of experience. Metaphor adds breadth to our understanding as it enables us to connect individual processes with the societal, cultural, and environmental contexts in which they occur and are shared. Thus, taken together, they provide us with a rich opportunity for learning.

With each participant taking multiple photographs, conversations traveled in many directions. With each new direction, different metaphors were used in order for many new meanings to be made. To illustrate, we will return to Tara, who was described as relating with the metaphor of “possible selves” in order to make meaning of her experiences. However, with different photographs came different stories, and each story does not follow neatly along with that script. Tara is a dynamic human being, and it is through the combination of images and metaphors that we can see the multiple ways she makes meaning.

T: It’s my security blanket.

Here, Tara is using the metaphor of a security blanket to communicate the importance of her knife (see Figure 4) to her. With this metaphor, she draws on ideas of comfort, security, and safety, and also childhood, dependency, and helplessness. The metaphor serves to articulate the personal meaning of the knife in a way that she feels can be understood by the listener by drawing on strong
values held within the mainstream of society. The idea of a security blanket is one with which most people can identify. This metaphor is likely to create a mental image of something that contrasts drastically with the photograph in Figure 4, and with the story she relays about being attacked and protecting herself with her blade. In this way, the use of the security blanket metaphor is even more powerful, as the meaning behind the blade and the practical function of it are so distinctly different. By using such contrasting images, the metaphor helps Tara in developing and communicating her unique construction of self as compared with that which she sees as mainstream.

T: It’s the Chinese in me.

With this comment, Tara says she is referring to her stubborn nature; she believes it comes from her Chinese ancestry. The picture shown in Figure 5 was taken the day after the Chinese New Year, which she celebrated with her family. Her statement positions her as polyvocal (Gergen & Gergen, 2000), that is,
containing multiple selves. Indeed, a major task in our first inter-
view seemed to be for her to present to me all of the different
selves that comprise her: artist, goth, child, adult, employee, and
more. Even though Tara feels independent from her social world
in some ways (as in Figure 4), she has an internal system of sup-
ports from which she can draw on various personal strengths.

T: It’s my family. It’s my friends.

With the image shown in Figure 6, Tara addresses an impor-
tant contradiction in her life: the need for belonging and her in-
dependence from others. Most of these toys were given to her
by family members and friends over the years. Each toy is per-
haps a tangible connection to the “real world” family and friends,
with whom she does not have the contact she once had. Thus, she
is simultaneously valuing connection with family and friends and
valuing independence, self-reliance, and autonomy. This example
represents a self that is an integral part of its own environment
and recognizes that its own growth depends not only on what is
happening inside but also on those relationships outside. The “relational self” is contextualized. This calls to mind a wave metaphor as presented by Gergen (2001), by which he suggested that individuals and contexts are mutually constructed; one does not exist without the other. With the example in Figure 6, Tara highlights the importance of having friends and family (in whatever form) even when she has separated herself from hers. The relational self finds creative ways of connecting with the world to remain contextualized.

The use of images provided us with the opportunity to observe multiple metaphors working together in these, and other, ways.

**Implications for Research, Practice, and Relational Responsibility**

Having looked more closely at the research conversations with Tara, it is clear that her experiences cannot be neatly summarized and that we certainly cannot generalize from them. Her identity,
context, and experiences have come together in such a way that is entirely unique to her. As she, her context, and her experiences continue to change, so will her story. So how can we, as researchers and practitioners, learn from this?

A relational approach to qualitative research is about generating new ways of comprehending subjective experiences, not documenting results (Bochner, 2000). With this perspective in mind, our discussion of implications must involve something other than generalizing from our participants’ experiences to a larger but similar population. Although there are many valuable studies that contribute to our understanding of how to better engage on an individual level with adolescents who struggle with addiction (see Burrell & Jaffe, 1999; Saul, 2005), that is not the focus of the current discussion. Rather, our complicity in the conditions of the lives of our participants will be our focal point. Qualitative researchers have long understood that by engaging with a subject of study, we affect it, intentionally or not (Ellis, 2007). In the remainder of this article, we will focus on ensuring that we are intentional about these impacts.

*Translating Successes into Possibilities*

With the aid of the puzzle metaphor, Tara was able to articulate her sense of accomplishment with past successes, such as starting to sleep and eat regularly. Even though meth continues to be a part of her daily life, reflecting on those successes gives her a sense of hope when it comes to her potential for future change. This is an opportunity for us to widen our gaze, so as not to be limited by focusing strictly on the individual. Another participant, Kate, was entering treatment the day after our second research conversation. Throughout both conversations with Kate, she showed me pictures of her friends. It was partly the successes her friends had experienced that gave her the courage to enter treatment herself. Here are comments Kate made about three different people she photographed:

**K:** She used to do drugs, too, but now she’s getting paid like 20 bucks an hour. I don’t know exactly what she’s doing, but I know that it’s like really important and involves computers and stuff and smart people shit.
**K:** That’s one of the kids in my school. He used to be addicted to every single kind of drug there was, in Edmonton. And then he moved out here and kind of cleaned up or whatever.

**K:** That’s my friend Leanne. She used to be a crack whore on Rock Bay but now she isn’t.

It is unlikely that any of the three individuals know that their successes have contributed to Kate’s decision to “get clean.” It is also unlikely that one of those stories would have had that impact on her, taken in isolation. However, taken collectively, these experiences have contributed to Kate’s construction of a world in which positive change is possible, and in which she is capable of creating those positive changes. We can thus understand positive change as an emergent, relational process to be mutually constructed, rather than imposed. Such a perspective would entirely alter current reactions to addiction, which are often punitive and sometimes mandate treatment (Reinarman, 2005). A relational conception of change might also reduce the high rates of relapse presently experienced by those seeking addiction treatment (DiClemente, 2007).

*Thinking and Acting Relationally*

In social science research, the implications for practice often involve finding ways to help individuals behave differently. Indeed, most research on the use of crystal meth has been conducted with the individual in mind (Saul, 2005). As the conversations with Tara and Brittany indicate, their individual selves are intricately linked to their social worlds. Thus, if Tara makes meaning of her world in part by drawing from her surroundings, then perhaps the onus for change does not lie squarely on her shoulders. Instead, through relationship, those with whom she relates can be an integral part of her recovery process. In another conversation with Tara about the puzzle photographs, she highlights an interesting paradox:

**J:** Do you think people realize you feel like you’re missing these pieces?
T: I try not to let them know. Because then they try to help, and then them trying to help just makes it harder sometimes.

J: How?
T: Because I keep seeing myself fail.
J: In terms of meth in particular?
T: And other things.
J: Do you wish people wouldn’t try to help, or do you like that they try to help?
T: I appreciate them trying to help, but most of the time the way they try to help just doesn’t work. So it’s just like, “I appreciate it, but you’re just making things worse.”

Here, Tara indicates that support from other people matters to her but can become counterproductive if it doesn’t resonate with her particular needs. Kate puts it this way:

K: My dad sent me to this AA meeting and there were all these 40-year-old men in it. That’s not helpful.
J: Because you can’t relate with them?
K: Yeah, I can’t relate with them because most of them were like, IV drug users and they were just looking at me like a fresh piece of meat kind of thing and it was really, really creepy.
J: And what was it that helped you reach a point where you realized for yourself—
K: My friends. Basically I think the most important thing is that if you have a friend that’s like doing drugs or whatever, let them know that you care about them and that you can’t be around them when they’re like that and that you miss them and that you want them to get better.
J: So if you felt like there was going to be no one there when you left that [meth] scene, it would be harder to leave it?
K: Yeah. I think so.

Both Tara and Kate affirm that it helps to feel supported. However, the kind of support they desire centers on their needs, their readiness, and their identities. As researchers and practitioners, then, prescribing universal approaches to “combating” crystal meth is unlikely to be successful on its own. As Lee and De Finney (2004) noted in their research with adolescent girls, when attempts were made “to replicate a specific technique . . . in strict
accordance with a . . . method, the girls would quickly lose interest and would begin to resist by removing their energy and presence” (p. 111). Thinking and acting relationally, then, means that establishing a relationship must come before determining the appropriate way to be of support.

*Socially Constructing a Context Conducive to Positive Change*

Although fostering nurturing, positive relationships with Tara might contribute to the likelihood of her experiencing positive change, we must once again extend the implications of this relational approach much further. Tara’s experiences with crystal meth are not isolated to her personal relationships. As Freire (1970) insisted, the oppression of certain groups within a society is often misinterpreted as marginalization. Freire argued that oppressed people are, in fact, integral to the functioning of the system as a whole, not outside (or in the margins) of that system. Thus, the responsibility lies with society as a whole to work toward changing the conditions that allow some people to flourish while others continuously struggle. Moving from individual blame to social responsibility means looking inward at positions of privilege and realizing that many of the changes required are systemic and multitiered.

Even the metaphors of self Tara uses are socially, not individually, constructed. Collectively we can contribute to the creation of new metaphors of self, new ways of making meaning to inform the actions and ways of being for individuals (Johnson, 1993). Indeed, Hoskins and Leseho (1996) illustrated that many of the metaphors of self we use are highly individualistic, reflecting the emphasis on independence that has been prioritized in the particular contexts from which these metaphors emerged. Understanding that, we can recognize the impact shifting social priorities may have on individual processes of making meaning of (and reacting to) certain experiences, enabling movement away from pathologizing discourses that lead to guilt and blame among people experiencing struggles (Moules, 1998; Rose, 1998). For example, throughout this study, we have chosen to never refer to our participants as addicts. Although they may be addicted to one or several substances, these people are more than their addictions. If they—and those around them—insist on the use of the term
“addict,” shifting away from that identity becomes a much more challenging task (Tupper, 2008).

Consider the conversation with Kate, who has used many drugs and continues to struggle with addiction, but who views IV drug use in a different light:

K: Well, the junkies . . . they don’t clean up after themselves. And it’s fucking disgusting, and I can understand. If I was the owner of a store and my back exit was in an alley and I had to go out there and see dirty rigs lying around all over the place, I’d want it boarded off too.

J: It doesn’t frustrate you or . . .

K: It does frustrate me because my friends and I used to drink in a lot of those alleys, but then junkies started taking over so we had to find other places, and that pushes us farther out of town and across the bridge and I don’t know, I think it’s lame.

J: So you don’t think it’s actually solving anything for you?

K: No I don’t think so.

J: What do you think would be helpful?

K: Shoot the junkies [laughs]. I’m just kidding—but really, shoot them [laughs]. But seriously, a lot of them don’t want to get better. They don’t even give a shit about anybody.

Kate distinguishes herself from “junkies” and, as a result, does not identify them as worth supporting. By actively resisting such pathologizing discourses, perhaps we can contribute to the social construction of a context that is more conducive to positive change. The language we use, the perspectives we hold, and the attitudes we perpetuate all contribute to the development of new metaphors of self (Hoskins & Leseho, 1996). And as we observed earlier with Tara and Brittany, these metaphors partially determine how identities are established and change occurs.

**Contextualizing Rather Than Isolating Experiences**

When pathologizing labels are used, the effect is divisive. For instance, if we were to label our participants as addicts, we would be separating *them* from *us*, just as Kate has done by differentiating her experiences from those of the people she labels as junkies. Such terms diminish the subjectivity of the labeled group and, in
effect, transform these people into objects (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Consider Freire’s (1970) perspective on the function of such social divisions:

One of the characteristics of oppressive cultural action which is almost never perceived by the dedicated but naive professionals who are involved is the emphasis on a focalized view of problems rather than on seeing them as dimensions of a totality. ... And the more alienated people are, the easier it is to divide them and keep them divided. These focalized forms of action ... hamper the oppressed from perceiving reality critically and keep them isolated ... (pp. 122–123)

This is why, rather than naming crystal meth use as the topic of our study, we have identified it as the context in which our study occurs. Exploring crystal meth use among adolescent girls in isolation prevents us from addressing the conditions that contribute to their experiences. For instance, many of the experiences of the participants in the current study resemble the experiences of adolescent girls who participated in a study for which eating disorders were the context (Hoskins, 2002; Mathieson & Hoskins, 2005). Negotiating their gendered identities amid conflicting messages from popular culture, finding a sense of belonging in a world where they feel isolated or rejected, and seeking independence and freedom are just a few of the thematic similarities (Hoskins, 2008, personal communication). By historically and culturally contextualizing these experiences and viewing them in relation to one another, we can resist the tendency to blame, further victimize, or pathologize these girls. Instead, contextualizing experiences can help us recognize the need for social reform that emphasizes equity over compliance (Friere, 1970; hooks, 2000) and can also help us recognize possibilities that would be overlooked by a more localized perspective.

Co-Constructing a New Puzzle

Through the use of image and metaphor in the research conversations with our participants, we were able to explore the subtle shifts in identity and perception of context that have led to positive change in their lives. Just as they have demonstrated on an individual level, we can extend this learning by illustrating the value of embracing multiple approaches, engaging in a shared
journey, focusing on small successes, and metaphorically reinterpreting achievements of one domain of life into other more challenging areas on a societal level. Indeed, by abandoning our quest for “the” answer as to how to support girls who struggle with the use of crystal meth, we can pursue multiple possibilities, generating alternative assumptions about knowledge and power, thus—over time—altering the very phenomenon we want to understand (Hacking, 1999; Johnson, 1993).

Interestingly, this brings us full circle, back to the underlying philosophies of Photovoice, which was an inspiration for us when developing our research methodology. As a reminder, Photovoice is a process that not only documents but attempts to provoke some change, thus providing an opportunity for participants and researchers together to reflect and take action (Carleson et al., 2006). We were intentional in distinguishing our study from Photovoice. However, when the photographs and conversations are explored critically, we find ourselves reaching similar conclusions in terms of the implications of this type of inquiry. It is not by reducing our findings to manageable sound bites that innovative ideas and pragmatic solutions are generated, but in large part it is by contextualizing and complexifying individual experiences that systemic and personal change can occur.

Notes

1. When we speak of practice we are speaking in general terms of the activities of all helping professions, which include but are not limited to social workers, counselors, child and youth care practitioners, and psychologists.
2. Methamphetamine (commonly referred to as crystal meth) is an inexpensive, easily manufactured drug, making it increasingly accessible to youth. For more details, see Newbury and Hoskins (2008) and Saul (2005).
3. Due to the nonlinear nature of these conversations, the excerpts and photographs used in this article appear in no particular order and are drawn from both stages of the research process.

References

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