What Helps You To Stay?

A Phenomenological Description Of

The Personal Attributes Of

Yukon Regional Social Workers

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ABSTRACT

This research describes the personal attributes that help or support Regional Social Workers to practice in small Yukon communities. The importance of identifying and understanding the personal attributes of Regional Social Workers is reflected in the literature on the recruitment and retention of employees. A descriptive phenomenological method was used to identify the personal attributes of Regional Social Workers. Descriptive phenomenology is a qualitative method that describes people’s lived experiences and seeks to understand the meanings people ascribe to their lived experiences. Descriptive phenomenology is achieved through a grasping (intuiting) of the essential structure of phenomena as they appear in consciousness. Through thematic analysis, four personal attribute themes were extrapolated from the transcribed interviews with former and current Regional Social Workers. The four personal attribute themes are willingness to establish relationships, willingness to maintain boundaries and be visible, relishing flexibility and creativity, and thriving on a sense of independence.
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DEDICATION

To the people of Ross River, Yukon, for their acceptance of me into their lives, even under difficult circumstances. The attribute of Ross River people that I will treasure the most is their honesty. I also learned about being strong due to the prevailing strength and quiet courage and determination of the women in Ross River. Rita Grant, Marie Sterriah, and Dorothy John remain in my heart.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, men and women of varying ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds are practicing social work. In one form or another, social work is practiced in all regions and countries of the world (Hokenstad, Khinduka, & Midgley, 1992). Given the widespread practice of social work, I often reflect on the type of people interested in the social work profession. A brief review of the origins of social work in Canada reveals that early social workers, known as “friendly visitors”, relied for the most part on intuition, good-heartedness, an attitude of caring, and their genuine concern for helping the less fortunate, disadvantaged members of society (Yelaja, 1985). Today, social workers in Canada remain concerned about helping the less fortunate, and disadvantaged members of society.

Canadian social workers practice in northern and southern regions of Canada. In many northern communities, most residents are not as concerned with the professional qualifications of social workers as they are with the personal attributes of social workers (Collier, 1984, 1993). This concern with personal attributes extends to other professions, such as nurses, teachers, and police officers. Residents in small, northern communities tend to become acquainted with professionals in order to find out where they are from, what they like to do, and how long they plan to stay, before residents will accept professionals as members of their community.

The process of becoming acquainted with professionals includes clients getting to know the social worker in the community. In small, northern communities, clients know where the social worker lives, know his or her marital status and how many
children the social worker has, know what hobbies or sports the social worker is interested in, and so on. This familiarity with the social worker's personal life is a normal and natural aspect of living and working in small, northern communities. In contrast, clients in urban settings get to know social workers through the formal process of scheduled meetings and home visits. It has been my experience that social workers in urban settings demonstrate empathy and caring, while at the same time, maintaining distinct boundaries between their personal and professional lives. Given the differences between practicing in urban and small, northern communities, I wondered if it was possible to identify the personal attributes that contribute to social workers choosing to practice in small, northern communities instead of in large southern locations.

My early work experience in the social services field took place in two urban settings – Edmonton and Winnipeg. Upon completing my undergraduate studies, I willingly accepted a social work position in a child welfare agency in a small community in Northwestern Ontario. Although I was raised in Edmonton, the thought of working and living in a small community appealed to me. After practicing social work in Northwestern Ontario, I moved to the Yukon to work in Ross River as the Regional Social Worker. Ross River is a remote community with a population of approximately 350 people. Eighty percent of the community is First Nations, mainly from the Kaska Nation, and the remainder of the population is non-native. As I reflected on my experiences of living and working in small, northern communities, I questioned what "it" was about myself that led me to practice social work in the Canadian north. In particular, I experienced many changes when I moved to the remote
and small community of Ross River, Yukon. When I left Ross River, I reminded myself that it would be important to write about my experiences one day. My thesis provided me with an opportunity to not only write about my experiences, but to research other Yukon Regional Social Workers' experiences. In this research, I explored what it is about Regional Social Workers that led them to practice in small Yukon communities outside of Whitehorse. What “it” is refers to the personal attributes that help or support Regional Social Workers to practice in small Yukon communities.

**Research Question and Purpose of Research**

The job description for a Yukon Regional Social Worker lists a Bachelor of Social Work as the preferred education requirement in addition to previous work experience in areas such as child welfare, youth justice, and social assistance. Since few experienced social workers reside in the Yukon, Regional Social Workers are usually recruited from southern urban areas. Urban based social workers that move to small, northern communities often experience culture shock, and are generally not prepared to work and live in small communities where their former practice strategies may not be relevant for small, northern communities (Collier, 1993; Schmidt, 2000, 2002, 2004; Zapf, 1984, 1985, 1991, 1993).

I am aware from practicing in the Yukon that the employer of Regional Social Workers experiences difficulties retaining social workers for two of the nine small communities outside of Whitehorse. Both communities are located north of Whitehorse and average 300 predominantly First Nations people (Yukon Facts, 2002, December). After living and practicing as the Regional Social Worker in one of these communities
for three years, I became the social worker who had practiced for the longest period of time in Ross River. I was interested in understanding what helps social workers to stay and practice in small Yukon communities. In exploring what helps social workers to practice in small Yukon communities, I did not inquire into the external factors that contribute to worker retention, such as salaries, training opportunities, and competent supervision (Helfgott, 1991). Instead, I focused on internal qualities, seeking to find what it is about Regional Social Workers as people that help them to stay to practice in small Yukon communities. “It” refers to personal attributes. Specifically, my research question asks: what are the personal attributes that help or support Regional Social Workers to practice in small Yukon communities?

In an interim report prepared by the former manager of Yukon Regional Services (personal communication, December 19, 2001), it is noted that the key to recruiting and retaining Regional Social Workers is to obtain an accurate picture of the kind of social worker best suited to successfully work in remote settings. Moreover, Harvey and Stalker (2003) found that management must devote time to understanding the attributes of people who flourish in social work positions. According to Harvey and Stalker, the challenge is to determine how these attributes can be measured during the hiring process. By identifying the personal attributes of Yukon Regional Social Workers, the employer of Regional Social Workers could potentially formulate interview questions based on such attributes. According to the current recruitment policies of the employer, interview questions are divided into three areas: knowledge, abilities, and personal suitability. In my research, I discovered that Regional Social Workers prefer to practice with considerable autonomy. Thus, interview questions
could be geared to assess job candidates’ ability and suitability to practice with
minimal supervision.

I anticipate that Yukon Government employers of nurses and teachers may also
benefit from my research. Nurses and teachers are usually recruited from urban-based
areas to work in small Yukon communities. The personal attributes that help or support
Regional Social Workers to practice in small Yukon communities may apply to nurses
and teachers that work in the same communities as social workers. Similar to Regional
Social Workers, other Yukon Government departments rate job candidates in the three
areas of knowledge, abilities, and personal suitability. Related interview questions for
hiring nurses or teachers could be prepared based on the personal attributes that I have
identified and explored in my research.

I now turn to defining the key concepts that aided with the understanding of this
research.

Concepts

Regional Social Worker. The term “Regional Social Worker” is the position
title of social workers employed by the Yukon Government, Department of Health and
Social Services, that describes who provides social services in Yukon regional
communities. Regional communities are the small Yukon communities outside of
Whitehorse, the capital city of the Yukon Territory. The social services provided by
Regional Social Workers include statutory services, such as child welfare, youth
justice, and social assistance. Regional Social Workers are based in nine regional
communities outside of Whitehorse. The regional communities are smaller in terms of
population size than Whitehorse. Approximately one-third of the Yukon population
resides in regional communities outside of Whitehorse. In this research, regional communities outside of Whitehorse are referred to as small Yukon communities.

**Personal attributes.** The Canadian Oxford Dictionary (1998) defines “attribute” as “a quality ascribed to a person or thing; characteristic quality; an attributive adjective or noun” (p. 81). Attributes are individual traits and characteristics that describe who we are, and what we are like as people. Attributes serve to distinguish one person from another person, hence, the reason the word “personal” is used in front of the word “attributes” throughout this research. Attributes are also shared by numerous people, such as a sense of humour, which aids in our understanding of one another. Synonyms of “attributes” include: characteristics, features, qualities, traits, and virtues.

**Social work practice.** The Canadian Association of Social Workers defines practice as social workers engaged in activities that will improve social well-being structures and enhance individual, family, and community social functioning at local, national, and international levels (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2000, March). Social work practice is facilitated through the application of social work values, ethical principles, and practice skills in order to accomplish the core functions of social work, such as helping people obtain basic human need services, and counselling individuals, families, and groups (Canadian Association of Social Workers). In their book about transforming bureaucratic governance of social services, Bellefeuille, Garrioch, and Ricks (1997) contend that social work practice includes workers in an agency who share collective values and a vision, and who support community control over defining social problems.
There are difficulties in using the aforementioned definitions of social work practice. The Association's definition of social workers improving social well-being structures does not consider that the latter structures may be oppressive. Many conflict theorists argue that social workers are to change structures rather than just improve them. Bellefeuille et al. (1997) discuss the problems of hierarchical government social service systems. Currently, the hierarchically structured and centralized Yukon Department of Health and Social Services limits community control over defining social problems.

The dilemma of defining social work practice can be resolved by thinking of "practice" as a subjective term. Social work practice is defined differently for each social worker. In reviewing the work of Bellefeuille et al. (1997), social work practice is defined as community involvement and ownership of social problems, and solutions to these problems. It is important for social service systems to have shared values and visions, in addition to each social worker defining their own practice. The process of social workers defining their practice starts with each worker consciously thinking of their personal values and beliefs. Personal beliefs, values, and experiences are interwoven with theories to form each social worker's practice. A common definition of social work practice does not capture the unique features and norms of every small Yukon community.

Small rural and northern communities. Rural definitions differ between American and Canadian authors. In the United States, areas under 50,000 people are viewed as rural communities (Ginsberg, 1993). In Canada, numerous rural communities have populations under 20,000 people. Most of the American authors
discuss rural social work practice in agricultural areas in the mainland states (Farley, Griffiths, Skidmore, & Thackeray, 1982; Ginsberg; V. Kelley & P. Kelley, 1984; Martinez-Brawley, 1990).

The small size of Canadian rural and northern communities is particularly evident in the northern territories. This research centers on social work practice in the Yukon Territory. Therefore, the Yukon is frequently referred to when defining the concept of "north". Defining north requires one to grapple with geographical definitions. Zapf (2000) adapts the frameworks of modern geography to explain rural and northern communities in Canada. Modern geography links the social and physical sciences (Zapf). Geography is no longer only about the size and distances between communities. Modern geography is also concerned with the people living on the land. According to Zapf, this new human geography incorporates other categories: demographic geography, political geography, economic geography, and cultural geography. Schmidt (2000, 2002) outlines the definition of north from similar perspectives, including geographic, historical, cultural, economic, and political definitions. For this research, demographic, cultural, historical and geographic definitions are discussed.

In terms of demographics in the Yukon, seven of the nine small communities outside of Whitehorse where a Regional Social Worker is based have a population under 1,000, ranging in number from approximately 300 to 800 people (Yukon Facts, 2002, December). The remaining two small communities average 1,700 people (Yukon Facts). I am aware from my current employment with the Yukon Government, Department of Health and Social Services that the employer of Regional Social
Workers considers small communities outside of Whitehorse to be small, rural communities. It is for this reason that I chose to define small, rural, and northern communities rather than small, remote, and northern communities. Although Zapf (2000) and other Canadian authors, including Collier (1984, 1993) and Wharf (1985), distinguish differences between rural social work and practice in remote, northern communities, it is beyond the scope of this research to explore these differences.

To briefly describe the current cultural context in the Yukon, 12 out of 14 First Nations are based in smaller communities outside of Whitehorse. As of January 2006, 10 of the 14 First Nations have ratified land claim and self-governing agreements with the federal and territorial governments. These agreements are monumental as most Yukon First Nation governments currently have the authority and responsibility to create their own legislation, policies, and programs in relation to domains such as health, education, and social services.

Coates (1985) provides a brief historical definition of the territories. The northern regions in the provinces share similar historical experiences with the territories, such as being underserved by government and experiencing a lack of investment by private enterprise (Coates). One distinction is the historical constitutional and political developments in the territories being different than in the northern parts of the provinces (Coates). For this reason, Coates' definition of north is the Yukon and the Northwest Territories.¹

In this research, the foremost definition of "north" is a geographic definition. Hamelin (1988), a respected Canadian geographer, argued that geography would allow

¹ The Northwest Territories' boundaries changed when a new Canadian territory, Nunavut, was formed in 1999.
acceptable borders for the north to be identified. Hamelin developed an index, combining 10 natural and human factors, to measure the nordicity of a region. Hamelin called the nordicity scores “valeurs polaires” or VAPO. The index factors ranged from latitude and temperatures to air service and economic activity (Hamelin). Hamelin defined “nordicity” as the state or level of northerness (sic), real or perceived. Once a region’s nordicity was calculated, the total number corresponded to one of three northern zones – Extreme North, Far North, or Middle North (Hamelin).

Zapf (1985) accepts the three northern zones defined by Hamelin, and postulates that the Yukon falls within the Middle North zone. Zapf notes that the northern regions in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Labrador also fall within the Middle North. Zapf concludes that social work practice issues experienced in the territories may be encountered in the northern areas of several provinces. Throughout this research, northern communities include the territories and the northern areas in several provinces.

Yukon researcher, Graham (1990), contends that Hamelin’s index methodology to measure nordicity has been widely adopted as the most useful to define the north. Schmidt (2002) supports Graham’s conclusion, and adds Hamelin has made the greatest contribution to defining “north” from an empirical perspective. Hamelin’s method of defining north allows for nordicity scores to change over time as economic, political, and cultural variables change in northern communities (Schmidt). Global and technological changes have improved access to resources in the southern parts of Canada. For example, competition in the air service industry in the Yukon has increased daily flights and lowered airfares. The “rest of the world” is no longer as far
away as before when there was no airline competition. A multitude of distance education opportunities are also available to people in the Yukon. Students do not have to leave the Yukon to receive credit for on-line computer courses offered by universities located in southern cities. The Yukon does not seem to be as remote as it was 30 years ago.

From reviewing the Government of Yukon’s website (2003, 2004) and selecting “Tour Yukon”, the Yukon is described as Canada’s true north. The 2003 website advised tourists that the Yukon is north of Canada’s 60th parallel, and 80% of the land mass in the Yukon is wild. The Government of Yukon emphasizes the rugged beauty of the Yukon to attract tourists to Canada’s true north.

Organization of this Research

This research is organized into five chapters. The first chapter explains the purpose of this study and the research question. The first chapter also defines important concepts used throughout this research. The second chapter provides an overview of the relevant literature. The literature review chapter covers four areas: a brief outline of how personal attributes are linked to career choice, the personal attributes of social workers around the world, social work practice in small, rural, and northern communities in North America, and social work practice and the personal attributes of social workers in small, rural, and northern communities in North America. The third chapter examines the methodology used to guide my research, specifically, descriptive phenomenology. The fourth chapter discusses my research findings, featuring the descriptions of the four personal attributes identified by former and current Regional
Social Workers. Finally, the fifth chapter summarizes my research and discusses policy and practice implications.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature examining the personal attributes of social workers is sparse. Most of the literature focuses on social work practice skills as opposed to examining why social workers choose to enter the profession. The purpose of exploring the personal attributes of Regional Social Workers is to identify common or similar attributes that help or support Regional Social Workers to practice in small Yukon communities. The literature relevant to my research topic covers four areas. First, there is a brief outline of how personal attributes are linked to career choice. Second, the personal attributes shared by social workers worldwide are discussed. Third, social work practice in small, rural, and northern communities in North America is examined. And fourth, social work practice and the personal attributes of social workers in small, rural, and northern communities in North America are explored. For the purpose of this research, North America is limited to Canada and the United States.

How Personal Attributes are Linked to Career Choice

A meta-analysis study about theories on career choice divides the vast numbers of theories on choosing a career into psychological and sociological perspectives (Brown & Brooks, 1996). It is beyond the scope of this research to examine the plethora of theories on career choice and development. The reason for reviewing the literature on career choice is to briefly understand how personal attributes are linked to the decision of a specific career. According to Hotchkiss and Borow, as cited in Brown and Brooks, psychologists and career counselors are interested in how the constellation of personal attributes shape subsequent job performance and satisfaction. Sociologists,
in contrast, generally are more interested in how institutional factors, such as formal rules, and supply-and-demand forces shape the settings in which people work (Brown & Brooks). The psychological perspective focuses on individual characteristics, whereas the sociological perspective focuses on the characteristics and behaviours of people in groups.

Harris and Brannick (1999) argue that successful employers know the qualities and characteristics of their ideal applicant. These employers invest significant resources to know and understand their ideal applicant, and to design unique and highly effective staffing programs (Harris & Brannick). By clearly defining and articulating the desired characteristics of an ideal applicant prior to recruitment, Harris and Brannick conclude that employers improve their prospects of retaining valued employees.

The ideas of Harris and Brannick (1999) raise the question of how the employers of social workers design staffing programs based on the qualities, characteristics, or personal attributes of their ideal applicants. Before the question of what makes for an ideal social work applicant can be answered in future studies, the personal attributes of social workers need to be identified first. The next section identifies many of the personal attributes of social workers worldwide.

**Worldwide Personal Attributes of Social Workers**

Social workers in all societies are committed to universal human rights, and to the development of policies and programs that ensure these rights (Hokenstad et al., 1992). This commitment to ensuring human rights relates to social workers wanting to be helpful to people. In her extensive review concerning international perspectives of
social work education and global social problems, Lyons (1999) concludes there are fundamental commonalities in skills and values among social workers worldwide. Generally, social workers across the world have been involved in the protection or promotion of the rights of individuals or groups in given societies (Lyons).

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (n.d.) adopted a new definition of social work in July 2000 as follows:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments.

Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

(Definition section)

Once again, the issue of human rights is reflected in the international literature about social work. In her discussion about the IFSW’s revised definition, Hare (2004) states the core concept is located in social workers’ holistic view regarding the transactions between people and their environments. She contends that people are affected by their environments, and that people also have the capacity to change their environments – indeed empowering others to do so is part of social work (Hare).

The question remains, what is it about social workers worldwide that compel them to help and empower people, and to ensure the protection of human rights? That is, what personal attributes help or support social workers to practice in their respective communities?
Carniol (1995) states that most students who enter social work have a strong desire to help others. Carniol adds that the desire to help other people is also common to other human service professions, such as nursing and teaching.

Tsang (2001) explains that social workers need to care about other people before they can help others. Tsang elaborates that caring comes with existential concern and is an expression of human bonding; as such it is emotionally laden and a moral activity that cannot be reduced to the technical level. Carniol (1995) and Tsang comment on many social workers believing that good social workers are born with natural traits. Caring about other people comes from within, and is not acquired through education and training.

O’Sullivan, Ross, and Young (1997) found that in addition to social work’s generic skills, many of the same attributes and characteristics are common to social workers everywhere. Common attributes among social workers include: an ability to form a support network, a capacity to explore alternative solutions and resources, and a sound knowledge of the local social setting (O’Sullivan et al.).

To further examine the personal attributes shared by social workers worldwide, the next sections will outline the attributes of social workers in five regions. The IFSW (n.d.) identifies the five regions as Africa, Asia and the Pacific (includes Australia and New Zealand), Europe, Latin America, and North America. Canada is a member nation of the IFSW. For the examination of attributes of social workers in the five IFSW regions, the primary reference is a collection of articles about social work in different countries (Hokenstad et al., 1992). The selected articles discuss social work in each of
the five IFSW regions. This collection of book articles is augmented by several journal articles, primarily from *International Social Work*.

The following sections provide a brief overview of social work in the five IFSW regions. The process of selecting specific countries in each IFSW region was based on finding literature relevant for a discussion of social workers’ personal attributes worldwide. The personal attributes of social workers are essentially extrapolated from the literature about the broader social work systems in the selected countries. These sections are not intended to be a comprehensive literature review about international social work.

**Africa.** Critics of remedial social work in Africa propose that the social work profession shift in the direction of developmental social work (Gray, 1998; Mupedziswa, 2001). Gray and Mupedziswa argue that developmental social work will better serve the continent in terms of fostering preventative and rehabilitative actions, which identify with African culture and socioeconomic policies in Africa. Developmental social work focuses on developing the capacities of communities in order for communities to be more self-reliant, and proficient at caring for community members. In contrast, remedial social work focuses on peoples’ problems without considering the context or environmental factors that contribute to those problems. Mupedziswa contends that remedial social work is too costly, and that there are not enough social workers to provide services to the masses of people in need.

Gray (1998) argues that social work needs to develop social planning policies that will help rural and urban communities. Gray further argues that emphasis should be placed on rural communities where the poorest people reside. Mupedziswa (2001)
notes that the attitude of new social work graduates needs to change before they will accept rural postings in Africa. He explains that many social work students shun placements in rural areas (Mupedziswa). Apparently, for the transition from remedial to developmental social work to be successful, the majority of new social workers require personal attributes suited for working and living in impoverished and under-resourced rural communities.

In East African countries, social workers in Tanzania and Uganda often lack adequate resources and support services (Burke & Ngonyani, 2004; Hokenstad et al., 1992). Burke and Ngonyani describe examples of a medical social worker using informal support networks, such as seeking donations from the church to purchase syringes, and requesting the police to transport patients to their homes when they are discharged from the hospital. These examples illustrate the importance of social workers in Tanzania to be creative and resourceful to solve problems or overcome obstacles.

Similarly, in Uganda where the majority of people reside in rural areas, an essential function of social work is the mobilization of resources (Hokenstad et al., 1992). Hokenstad et al. state, “advocacy for resources is particularly important for children who have been orphaned by war and AIDS, widows, disabled people, and rural poor people” (p. 151). To successfully advocate for resources, social workers in Uganda may need to be persistent, in conjunction with the personal attributes of creativity and resourcefulness, referred to in the preceding paragraph. The addition of “persistent” to the list of some of the personal attributes of social workers in Africa reflects their work with massive populations suffering from poverty, AIDS, illiteracy,
and political instability. In African countries, such as South Africa and Uganda, the people continue to develop and change their economic, social, and political policies after years of oppressive and autocratic governments.

*Asia and the Pacific.* The People’s Republic of China is the most populated country in the world. According to Smith’s (2003) research, voluntary and family-based networks are China’s social services of first resort. One reason for reliance on family is that minority people residing in the remote rural areas near China’s borders trust family and kinship ties more than state-sponsored social programs (Smith). These minority people are culturally, religiously, and ethnically different than the dominant Han (Smith). Given the reliance on family-based networks for social services, Smith notes that formal system social work positions are likely to be limited. For employed social workers, one clinical strategy is to empower people to reframe and make meaning of their lives (Smith). Another clinical strategy is to highlight reflective, empathic, and culturally competent practice (Smith). The personal attributes deduced from the latter statement are for social workers in China to be reflective or thoughtful, empathic, and culturally respectful. Culturally respectful refers to social workers understanding and respecting China’s unique history, and entrenched values, beliefs, and political system that differ from western societies.

In Japan, social services are essentially based on the United States’ model of social work, stemming from the Allied occupation during World War II (Hokenstad et al., 1992). Since the Allied occupation, efforts have been made to establish an indigenous system based on Japan’s cultural and social practices (Hokenstad et al.). Social workers in Japan need to be aware of social practices, such as the tendency for...
Japanese people to resist counselling services, due to experiencing lower self-esteem and loss of prestige if they accept counselling services (Hokenstad et al.). This dynamic corresponds to the importance of social workers in China being culturally respectful. Likewise, as Japan develops an indigenous social service system, one crucial personal attribute is that social workers be culturally respectful.

The theme of cultural respect continues with social workers practicing in aboriginal communities in Australia. Based on their research, Bennett and Zubrzycki (2003) recommend that both aboriginal and non-aboriginal social workers strive to be culturally respectful when practicing in indigenous communities. One practice method for social workers is to demonstrate they are culturally respectful by using self-disclosure in order to enhance working relationships and establish credibility (Bennett & Zubrzycki). The main purpose of self-disclosure is for social workers to convey to community members how they resolved their own problems. As well, self-disclosure contributes to community members perceiving social workers as normal human beings who have problems like everyone else in the community. The process of self-disclosure may also convince community members that the social worker is realistic in terms of problem-solving solutions. That is, the social worker presents as being approachable, instead of as a cold, objective, and patronizing service provider.

Related to the personal attribute of cultural respectfulness, social workers in Australian aboriginal communities need to be sensitive when working with Elders (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003). It is noteworthy that the personal attributes of cultural respect and sensitivity to Elders for social work practice in indigenous communities in Australia parallels social work practice in aboriginal communities in North America.
The final country in the Asian-Pacific region is India. The Institute for Career Studies (n.d.) in India lists several personality traits that people should have prior to applying to study social work. Some of the traits are: adaptability, desire to help people by setting aside personal bias, patience and a sense of empathy, and a sense of humour (Institute for Career Studies in India). Hokenstad et al. (1992) discuss the paradox of social work students. Few of them are sure of employment prospects upon graduation, although India has over 800 million people, and widespread problems of poverty and deprivation (Hokenstad et al.). Hokenstad et al. comment that India has invested considerably in economic and social development, along with policy and program shifts for the benefit of poor people, but few social workers are delivering social services.

*Europe.* Starting with Eastern Europe, it is remarkable that the first formal training program for social workers in Russia was established in October 1991 (Templeman, 2004). With the demise of communism, social problems are openly acknowledged in Russia. The new millennium in Russia began with 39% of the population living in poverty (Templeman). Templeman states social work is one of the fastest growing professions in Russia due to the prevailing social problems. However, ten years after the official beginning of the profession, essentially anyone employed in a social service type of position is recognized as a social worker (Templeman). For example, a former police officer directs social services in one of the Russian cities, and a formally trained engineer directs a family and children's centre (Templeman). In terms of identifying personal attributes, Templeman states that one of the social work educators she interviewed was a linguist. This educator explained to Templeman that
she was selected to teach in the social work program because her colleagues perceived her as having a caring heart. The personal attribute of caring relates to Tsang’s (2001) finding that social workers need to care about other people before they can help others.

Templeman (2004) concludes that social work students, practitioners, and educators in Russia were fervent about developing their skills, resources, and research capabilities. Templeman also notes there are high unemployment rates in Russia, and many people have entered the social work profession as a result of economic, governmental, and social changes. Further research is required to determine the personal attributes of social workers in Russia. In particular, it would be interesting to research the personal attributes of social workers who remain in the profession over time, despite the enormous social challenges and problems in Russia.

Moving to the Scandinavian countries in Western Europe, Hokenstad et al. (1992) discuss that the Swedish welfare system is almost entirely public, and benefits and services are provided on a universal basis. Public social services are to promote economic and social security, and equality of living conditions for the people (Hokenstad et al.). Hokenstad et al. note there is growing concern about unemployment in Sweden, and question what will take place in the last decade of the 20th century.

One later study found that Sweden experienced the most severe economic crisis since the 1930s (Palme et al., 2002). The employment crisis had a powerful impact on public finances, as the decline in employment led to a huge increase in public expenditures (Palme et al.). Nevertheless, universal social services and benefits, and earnings-related social insurance, still comprise the Swedish welfare system (Palme et
al.). Palme et al. further argue that Sweden continues to have less inequality in terms of economic and social gains for the majority of its citizens in comparison to other countries. The personal attributes of many social workers in Sweden likely reflect the personal attributes of the general population, regardless of their profession. For example, the personal attribute of being unbiased underlies the practice of electing a government that strives to promote the equality of all people, irrespective of traits such as gender and age. The personal attribute of being anti-racist may also help social workers in Sweden to deal with the growing resentment of some Swedish people towards new immigrants.

The last European region is the United Kingdom. The focus of the discussion is the country of Scotland. In 1999, several areas were devolved to the Scottish Parliament from Britain, including social work, health, and education (Mooney & Poole, 2004). Mooney and Poole argue that although Scotland currently has full responsibility for the administration of social work, social polices in Scotland remain similar to those in Britain. Mooney and Poole speculate that one reason for the convergence of social policies in both countries is due to Britain retaining control over the budgets for all government departments in Scotland. One area that Scotland had complete control over prior to devolution was criminal justice. Mooney and Poole state that the implementation of criminal justice policies is different in Scotland than in Britain. There is no centralized direction in Scotland, thereby, local agencies have more opportunity to advance their own initiatives, and local control fosters better cooperation among agencies (Mooney & Poole).
Social workers practicing in the area of criminal justice in Scotland may demonstrate personal attributes geared for local control of criminal justice initiatives, and interagency cooperation. For example, social workers may be resourceful and creative in contributing to the development of initiatives for the delivery of criminal justice services in their communities. As well, social workers who prefer collaboration with other colleagues and different service providers may be quite satisfied with their jobs. With the decentralization of criminal justice services, social workers may experience considerable autonomy and independence to forge new program initiatives, in conjunction with other local service providers.

**Latin America.** Chilean social work was profoundly influenced by the reconceptualization of social work throughout Latin America beginning in 1965 (Hokenstad et al., 1992). Chile's poor and working classes were claiming their rights as citizens (Finn, 2002). Many university students, including social work and law students, worked side by side with community members to address basic health, housing, sanitation, and educational needs (Finn). During this time, social work in Chile also benefited from the work of Paulo Freire, an exiled Brazilian educator living in Chile (Hokenstad et al.). Freire espoused the importance of dialogue and consciousness-raising for oppressed and illiterate people talked, and recognized the harm of oppressive acts, especially those committed by the dominant class against the poor (Hokenstad et al.).

In 1973, a military coup ousted the Allende government and General Pinochet ruled for the next 17 years, which significantly limited the professional practice of social workers (Hokenstad et al., 1992). As a result of forced restrictions on their
practice, many social workers became involved in the area of human rights (Hokenstad et al.). In a climate of dictatorial rule, social workers undertook tremendous risks to pursue human rights issues. Finn (2002) contends that social workers were among those people who were detained, “disappeared”, and assassinated by the brutal forces of the Chilean military regime. The personal attributes of social workers who continue to practice, despite considerable risks to themselves and their families, are difficult to articulate. From the perspective of a caucasian social worker, who was born and raised in a democratic welfare state, it is challenging for me to understand social work in a dictatorial state. Certainly, courageous, steadfast, and self-less are a few personal attributes that may characterize the social workers practicing in Chile under military rule. Hokenstad et al. declare the actions of social workers during military rule can be considered heroic.

According to Finn (2002), the formation of a democratic government in 1990 has not alleviated Chile’s social problems, particularly for the poor and working-class. Chile’s economy continues to be based on a neoliberal model that resulted in the dismantling of the Chilean welfare state at the start of military rule in 1973 (Finn). Given this political and social environment, social workers committed to human rights for all people encounter numerous obstacles, such as a tendency for new social polices to be advantageous for middle and upper class people. The personal attributes necessary for social workers to pursue human rights for all people in Chile appear to be perseverance, combined with substantial emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual strength.
The discussion of personal attributes in Latin America ends with the country of Cuba. Bertera (2003) explains how social workers, health educators, physicians, and other caregiving professionals work in teams in order to deliver social services in Cuba. Social workers also rely heavily on volunteers to assist in the delivery of social services (Bertera). In Cuba, Bertera states that volunteer work is considered a citizen's obligation, and goes a long way to help in the allocation of prized commodities, such as housing and cars. The main complaint of Cuban social workers was the isolation from their peers abroad (Bertera).

This brief information on social work in Cuba suggests that the personal attributes of social workers in Cuba include being cooperative in order to work in a team setting with other service providers and volunteers. As well, some social work volunteers may feel compelled or even coerced to "volunteer" their services, rather than choosing to volunteer on their own accord. Therefore, social workers may need to be inspirational to encourage volunteers to help provide social services, and to be patient with volunteers that feel forced to volunteer in order to obtain desired goods and services. The absence of contact with other social workers, or limited access to resources, such as research studies and conferences in other countries, may also require that social workers in Cuba be resourceful, and develop their own research and practice strategies.

North America. Canada and the United States are briefly discussed in the last IFSW region. An extensive discussion of social workers' personal attributes in small, rural, and northern communities in North America is discussed in the final section of this literature review.
Hokenstad et al. (1992) advise that with the substantial increase in the number of identified minorities and immigrants in the United States, multicultural education is a priority for social work training. The personal attributes essential for social workers to develop their competence in cross-cultural practice are tolerance and open-mindedness. Hokenstad et al. add it is vital that social workers are comfortable and clear about one’s cultural identity. To be consciously aware of our cultural backgrounds as social workers allows us to recognize when our own cultural beliefs and values influence how we practice with people from different cultures.

Hokenstad et al. (1992) conclude, “social workers have a professional obligation to care effectively” (p. 177). The principal personal attribute related to “a professional obligation to care effectively” is conscientiousness. The latter necessitates social workers being dependable and thorough as they perform their work duties. The phrase “professional obligation” connotes our responsibilities to our profession as social workers. The final phrase, “caring effectively”, translates to our personal convictions about being compassionate and concerned about people, and being aware of how our culture affects how we perceive who people are and what they do.

The preceding paragraphs about social work in the United States also apply to social work in Canada. Over the past decade, social workers in Canada, particularly in large cities, have increasingly worked with immigrants from various countries. Social workers in northern Canada also work with identified minorities as service recipients, especially with First Nations people who are over-represented as recipients in the Canadian social work field.
In her book about social work careers in the United States and Canada, Wittenberg (1997) lists several personal qualifications. The latter term is synonymous to the preferred term, attributes, used throughout this research. Before listing the personal qualifications, Wittenberg poses a few questions, asking readers if they know what it takes to be a social worker, and to think about who they are and how they are professionally developing as social workers. The personal qualifications listed by Wittenberg are as follows:

- emotional maturity,
- objectivity,
- sensitivity,
- concern for people and their problems,
- sincere respect for all human beings,
- capacity to handle responsibility,
- ability to work independently, and
- ability to interact with people.

Several of the aforementioned personal qualifications are discussed in the later section on the personal attributes of social workers in small, rural, and northern communities in North America.

**Social Work Practice in Small Rural and Northern Communities in North America**

A review of the literature on rural and northern communities magnifies the diverse views on what “rural” and “northern” mean to different authors. In the United States, areas with a population under 50,000 people are considered rural communities (Ginsberg, 1993). This threshold number is difficult to apply in Canada, particularly in the northern regions of the provinces and the territories. Even communities large enough to be considered cities in the northern provincial regions have populations under 20,000 people! For example, the City of Kenora in Northwestern Ontario, and the city of Fort St. John in British Columbia both have populations of approximately
16,000 people (Statistics Canada, 2001). In the Yukon Territory, Dawson City has a mere population of 1,818 people, and the capital city of Whitehorse has 22,131 people (Yukon Facts, 2002, December).

Another difficulty found in the United States literature on rural social work is research concluding there are no substantial differences in rural and urban social work practice. V. Kelley and P. Kelley’s (1984) joint study found the differences in actual practice experiences between rural and urban social workers were not as significant as the perceived differences of the two groups. Their findings are surprising since one factor they studied concerned whether rural social workers experienced more community visibility than urban social workers. Upon further review, the authors surveyed social workers in rural communities with a minimum of 50,000 inhabitants. As previously indicated, several Canadian cities have populations ranging from 20,000 to 50,000 people. If V. Kelley and P. Kelley’s study was set in a Canadian context, communities with 50,000 people would be considered urban areas.

A second study in the United States that compared rural and urban differences also concluded there are no significant differences to justify a rural social work specialization (Mermelstein & Sundet, 1995). Mermelstein and Sundet compared five community functions: production-distribution-consumption, socialization, social control, social participation, and mutual support. Under the first function, Mermelstein and Sundet note that rural consumers purchase goods in the same shopping malls as urban dwellers, even if this requires a 75 to 100 mile drive. Under the mutual support function, Mermelstein and Sundet claim that natural helping systems have disappeared in rural communities. Although readers could argue with the authors’ findings
concerning daily living differences between rural and urban areas, the authors do not discuss the implications of their findings in relation to social work practice in either rural or urban settings. Nevertheless, Mermelstein and Sundet suggest future research needs to focus on the specificities of rural social work, including policy, program, and practice issues.

According to Zapf (1991, 2000), in the mid 1980s, several Canadian authors began to identify major differences between rural social work and practice in remote, northern communities. Canadian author, Collier (1984, 1993), presents an expansive definition of rural that includes agricultural, fishing, and hunting areas. Collier refers to northern regions as remote areas. Collier’s main premise is for urban trained social workers to be aware of how urban regions exploit both rural and remote areas for raw resources at the expense of people residing in rural and remote communities. He does not clearly distinguish the differences between rural and northern regions. A third Canadian author, Wharf (1991b), uses the terms, rural or north/northern interchangeably to refer to social work practice in northern communities in Canada. Similar to Collier, Wharf does not readily distinguish between rural and northern. This suggests that Zapf was referring to the major differences between the American literature on rural social work and the Canadian literature on rural and northern social work, as opposed to the major differences between rural and northern social work. Indeed, Zapf clarifies that American rural social work theory is not sufficient to guide practice in northern Canada.

Interestingly, renowned American authors, Ginsberg (1993, 1998) and Martinez-Brawley (1990) do not discuss social work practice in remote or northern
places in the United States, such as Alaska. The sole reference to Alaska is Martinez-Brawley’s notation that Alaska has a 35.5% rural population. Likewise, American authors, Farley et al. (1982) do not discuss social work practice in remote or northern locations in their book on rural social work practice. The aforementioned American authors’ research centers on farming communities in the mainland states.

Returning to Canadian authors, Zapf (2000) indicates that the 1990s witnessed a proliferation of Canadian literature related to social work practice in the North. As discussed above, Collier (1984, 1993) and Wharf (1991b) contribute to this literature about social work practice in the north, in addition to several articles by Zapf (1984, 1985, 1991, 1993). A significant contribution is from Lakehead University’s Centre for Northern Studies. The Centre has published four books, featuring articles by Canadian authors about social work practice in northern communities (Delaney & Brownlee, 1995; Delaney, Brownlee, & Zapf, 1996; Brownlee, Delaney, & Graham, 1997; Brownlee, Delaney, & McKee, 2002). The Centre expects to release a fifth book soon.

For the remainder of the literature review, Canadian authors are primarily featured since their work closely relates to the research topic of this research, more so than the American literature on rural social work. The works of American authors are referenced when their discussion of social workers’ personal attributes are applicable to this research. Furthermore, the literature on northern social work practice is most relevant to the research topic of examining the personal attributes of Regional Social Workers in the Yukon. As per the definition of “north” used in this research, northern communities include the territories and the northern areas in several provinces.
Social Work Practice and Personal Attributes of Social Workers in Small Rural and Northern Communities in North America

The final section of the literature review discusses three key social work practice areas relevant for social work in small, rural, and northern communities. The three areas are often discussed in the literature on rural and northern social work practice. The first practice area is relationships. The themes of visibility and natural helpers are included in the discussion of relationships. The second practice area is dual/multiple relationships, and the third area is generalist/ecological practice. The theme of autonomy is added to the discussion of generalist/ecological practice.

To facilitate this discussion, the three social work practice areas are discussed separately. In practice, however, the areas overlap, as the process of practicing social work is fluid, and dependent upon the practice situations, which vary and change over time. For example, social workers who practice with considerable autonomy, in the absence of an on-site supervisor, may rely on the input of other formal service providers (e.g. school counselor) and natural helpers (e.g. Elders) to guide them to make practice decisions.

The personal attributes of social workers in rural and northern communities are discussed in each of the above social work practice areas. Similar to the discussion of the personal attributes of social workers worldwide, the personal attributes of social workers in small, rural, and northern communities are extrapolated from the literature.

Relationships. Martinez-Brawley (1990) cites Tonnie’s terms of community attributes – Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft. In Gemeinschaft, community human relationships are intimate, enduring, and based on a clear understanding of where each
person stands in society (Martinez-Brawley). Gesellschaft is essentially the opposite, where human relationships are impersonal and based on contractual ties, such as business agreements (Martinez-Brawley). In terms of social work practice in rural communities, several authors state rural communities foster closer relationships due to shared cultures, values, and shorter distances to travel to regularly interact with other community members, such as daily trips to the post office and restaurant (Carlton-LaNey, Edwards, & Reid, 1999; Farley et al., 1982; Ginsberg, 1993; Martinez-Brawley; O’Looney, 1993).

With respect to social workers practicing in rural and northern communities, Ginsberg (1993) states, “people in rural communities often want to know and to work with others in the community – especially those who provide services – on a personal basis” (p. 7). This is an usual phenomenon for social workers in rural and northern communities. As social workers casually talk with people about their families and interests, and share their personal experiences, people gradually trust them, which helps social workers to perform their jobs. Ginsberg states that “effective rural professionals in all disciplines find that they must spend time learning about the community and its people and allowing the community to come to know them before they can be effective in carrying out their responsibilities” (p. 7).

Collier (1993) and Ingebritson (1992) agree that social workers practicing in rural or northern settings need to be accepted by the community before they can effectively provide social services to residents. Ingebritson notes, “if the worker gets involved in long-term projects, stays in the community on weekends or buys a home in the area, residents see that the worker has made a greater commitment to the area and
its residents, and therefore are more accepting” (p. 11). Collier adds, “the social worker must become familiar with the life of the people, thereby building respect for the traditions of that society and acting with integrity as an outsider” (p. 49). Similarly, Boone, Minore, Katt, and Kinch (1997) state that for service providers, including social workers, to be accepted in northern First Nation communities, they must realize that they are part of the community while they reside and work in communities. Here is where particular social workers’ personal attributes are essential for them to become accepted members of their communities.

It is important for social workers practicing in small, northern communities to be friendly and sociable. Residents prefer to engage with social workers who are approachable and non-threatening. Social workers who maintain distances, and who do not work collaboratively with other service providers or local helper networks, compromise their practice effectiveness. In the latter case, residents may refuse to accept essential social services, such as social assistance or child welfare. Subsequently, residents may remain in risky or harmful situations. Collier (1993) recommends social workers must become familiar with the life of the people, thereby building respect for the traditions of the community. Collier surmises the most useful attribute for social workers is the willingness to listen.

Establishing relationships with other formal service providers and natural helpers is vital for social workers in rural and northern communities. Whittington (1985) remarks that the opportunity to form close inter-professional relationships is an advantage of rural social work. Whittington explains that the informality of non-urban settings allows increased information sharing and case consultation, which might be
the envy of social workers in large cities. Furthermore, as social workers develop their personal support networks, colleagues residing in the same small community frequently become friends. Urban-trained social workers who move to small communities often leave friends and extended family members behind. New personal relationships are formed to help social workers maintain a healthy and balanced lifestyle. It is common for colleagues in small communities to naturally enter into personal relationships for social activities, such as attending a movie or hosting a dinner party.

The challenge of maintaining close relationships is analogous to “living in a fishbowl”. Where the social worker lives, what the social worker and family do on weekends, and when the social worker arrives and leaves work is information that becomes known to many community members. The social worker’s lifestyle is on public display and evaluated against community norms. Schmidt (2004) states that social workers may encounter verbal attacks and questions regarding their personal credibility and suitability if issues exist in the social workers’ life that are problematic. Saltman, Gumpert, Allen-Kelly, and Zubrzycki (2004) conclude the attribute of being able to cope personally with constant visibility is an area for further research.

The last theme about forming close relationships in small, rural, and northern communities is the social workers’ ability to work cooperatively with natural helpers. In many small, rural, and northern communities there is a paucity of formal social services. Often, social workers are the sole formal service provider. Other social service providers may live in distant communities and offer specialized social services on a monthly or quarterly basis, such as treatment services for abused children. Given
the complexity of most social issues requiring the daily attention of social workers, they frequently require help from other resources in their own communities. One resource is natural helpers. Weening, Arges, and Delaney (1997) define natural helpers as individuals who possess innate attributes, complemented by skills that make them both effective and attractive to others in their helping role. Natural helpers are not paid for their services, and are not affiliated with specific agencies or institutions (Ginsberg, 1993). Natural helpers are also referred to as informal support networks.

Fuchs (1997) states the rural or northern context, while somewhat problematic for social workers because of the dearth of specialized resources, generates unique opportunities to mesh formal and helping resources in innovative ways to prevent health and mental health problems. Fuchs’ view reveals the kind of personal attributes needed by social workers in order to work with natural helpers in rural and northern communities. These essential personal attributes include the capacity to mobilize local resources, as well as the ability to be open about new ideas for resolving community concerns. O’Gorman and Delaney (1996) also found from reviewing the stories of five natural helpers in Northwestern Ontario that the north has a strong commitment to natural helping networks. Wharf (1985) concludes that building on natural helping networks is where rural social workers should focus their efforts.

Dual/multiple relationships. The terms, “dual” and “multiple” are both used to reflect the reality that social workers living and working in small communities assume many roles. For example, a social worker may also be a mother who has children that play with clients’ children, a church member who serves food to clients in the community hall every Sunday, and a politician who lobbies for an environmentally
sound garbage removal system on behalf of all community members. Dual or multiple relationships in rural settings are hard to avoid since options for services are limited, and often social workers are very involved in their communities (Miller, 1994; Peterson, 1996). If a social worker needs to purchase gasoline and there is only one gas station in the community, which is owned by a client, then the social worker enters into a dual relationship to be able to operate his or her vehicle.

The distinction between social, individual, and professional boundaries quickly becomes blurry to social workers who practice in rural communities (Miller, 1994). Given this scenario of social work practice in small communities, the personal attributes necessary to maintain professional boundaries are incumbent upon each social worker. Unfortunately, there is minimal guidance from the Canadian Association of Social Workers' (CASW) Code of Ethics. The Social Work Code of Ethics (2005) essentially states that social workers shall not enter into dual relationships with clients. As cited by Delaney, Brownlee, Sellick, and Tranter (1997), in 1995, Brownlee and Taylor recommended a debate be initiated regarding non-sexual dual relationships. Their request for articles resulted in three responses, in which all agreed non-sexual dual relationships are a reality in northern communities (Delaney et al.). It is interesting that one of the three articles was written by an employee of the Yukon Government, Health and Social Services - Mr. Gerry Drechsler, former Regional Services Manager. Delaney et al. add that in the north, not participating in multiple roles and relationships with community members creates a problem, it shows a lack of understanding and respect for the people being served. The latter reflects the importance of social
workers maintaining close relationships in small, rural, and northern communities, as discussed in the first practice area.

Schmidt (2002) correctly points out that the discussion of dual/multiple relationships in relation to following the CASW's Code of Ethics misses an important point. Social workers have a degree of power over their clients (Schmidt), particularly when delivering statutory services such as child welfare. To refer to the previous example of a social worker purchasing gasoline at the only gas station in town owned by a client, it is incumbent upon the social worker in this situation to consciously consider how he or she interacts with the client. If the client is involuntary and resistant to services, such as statutory child protection services, the social worker needs to consider the client's actions and feelings. A client who is working towards the return of his or her children may feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, and vulnerable when interacting with the social worker outside of the office. A hostile client may also pose a threat to the social worker. Instead of becoming involved in a possible conflict, the social worker can consider other options, such as asking a friend to purchase gasoline or borrowing a vehicle until the client is less resistant to social services. The personal attributes critical for maintaining boundaries, even in difficult situations, are a capacity for self-reflection and self-awareness. Social workers in small communities, who understand they cannot change clients' feelings or control clients' behaviour, recognize they can take responsibility for their own feelings and actions.

*Generalist/ecological practice.* The generalist practice approach is often discussed in the literature on rural and northern social work. Two main points construct the definition of the generalist approach. The first point lists the variety of social
services provided by generalist social workers, and the second point identifies the client systems (Collier, 1984, 1993; Delaney, 1995). The types of social services include, for example, child welfare, youth justice, social assistance, homecare, and alcohol and drug counselling. The traditional client systems vary from individual casework, to working with family units, and to involvement in community development projects. Client systems also include social workers in administration and research.

The ecological perspective serves as a framework for the generalist approach. The ecological perspective is basically about how people interact with their environment and how the environment affects people. Similar to the generalist approach, the ecological perspective is concerned with systems ranging from the micro level (individuals) to the mezzo level (community groups) to the macro level (whole community). As well, the ecological perspective seeks to improve how people interact with the environment and to improve the environment.

Delaney (1995) and Collier (1984, 1993) support the generalist approach and ecological perspective for rural and northern social work practice. Delaney argues one major advantage of the ecological perspective is the emphasis on the interdependence of a wide range of political, social, and economic factors in its examination of the environmental context. Social work practice is determined by contextual factors. A social worker practicing in a small, northern community is more greatly impacted by the local political, social, and economic structures than a social worker practicing in a large metropolitan centre. For example, a social worker in a small community is requested by the local leadership, and not by his or her employer, to coordinate a
treatment camp for substance abuse. The social worker acknowledges substance abuse is a social problem due to several tragic alcohol related deaths, and agrees to work with several natural helpers to plan a treatment camp.

Zapf (1991) and Wharf (1991a) articulate concerns about the ecological perspective. Zapf indicates that the ecological perspective is an urban-based model, and expands on his argument by emphasizing that a new social work practice approach is required for northern social work. Wharf expresses that the ecological perspective ignores the imbalance of power across different systems, and how the political, economic, and social structures are advantageous for some people and harmful to others.

Campbell and Shepard (1990) counter the above concerns about the ecological perspective by proposing advanced generalist training for graduate social work students. They advise such training aims to develop competence in problem-solving skills, and that an ecological perspective will allow social workers to intervene across system levels, depending upon the nature of the problem they are addressing (Campbell & Shepard). Campbell and Shepard argue that advanced training will teach social workers to intervene at the macro level in order to create social change that may alleviate power imbalances. Collier (1984, 1993) concludes that the generalist practitioner needs to consider problem-solving on many levels, across a spectrum of approaches, and by pursuing any avenue that may be productive. In the absence of a separate social work practice approach for small, northern communities, the generalist approach continues to be widely used by most social workers in small, rural, and northern communities. The generalist approach is versatile and conducive to social
work practice whereby social workers are the sole social service provider and responsible for the delivery of a number of social services.

As previously mentioned, social workers in small, rural, and northern communities work in isolation from their supervisors and colleagues. Therefore, it is crucial for social workers in these communities to be self-motivated and self-directed (Ginsberg, 1993; Ingebrigtson, 1992). Schmidt (2002) found that northern social work practice is less dependent on rules and measures of bureaucratic accountability, for northern workers are farther removed from centralized management structures. Ingebrigtson further comments, “personal attributes can be important in rural and remote northern social work practice. A worker who can be creative and is comfortable with less traditional … interventions will be more effective” (p. 12). According to Campbell, as cited in Ingebrigtson, self-confidence, persistence, flexibility, patience, and a sense of humour are valuable personal attributes.

Related to being comfortable with less traditional interventions and being flexible, social workers that develop practice methods outside of their agency policies to meet the needs of the community, instead of the bureaucratic needs of the organization, are viewed by community residents to be effective and helpful service providers (Barter, 1996; Collier, 1993; Ingebrigtson, 1992; Martinez-Brawley, 1990; Zapf, 1984, 1991). Campbell, as cited in Ingebrigtson, suggests that “attributes of rural and remote workers should include a sense of adventure, willingness to take risks and the ability to make judgments under pressure and live with the result” (p. 12). Following bureaucratic policies and procedures was considered less important than
social workers adapting their practice within the context of small, northern communities.

In her study of social workers who stay to practice in northern British Columbia, Peterson (1996) found that the “northern character promoted a community-based generalist social work approach achieved by being flexible, informal, adaptable, self-sufficient, self-motivated, self-directed, innovative, mature, creative, resourceful, optimistic, genuine, honest, and straight-forward” (p. 92). In other words, Peterson asserts that a match is required between the community and the attributes of social workers practicing in northern communities.

Schmidt (2002) concludes that the generalist framework was associated with more autonomy, and that it fits well with the need to be innovative, flexible, and creative in the work. Creativity is viewed as both a strength and opportunity in northern practice (Schmidt). Furthermore, Schmidt notes that independence means social workers practicing in northern communities are able to take initiative, and able to do so on their own with limited supervision or oversight. Working independently in the north is reflected in management being centralized and geographically far away from practicing social workers. As well, other professional resources, such as psychologists who complete specialized assessments, are lacking in small, northern communities. Northern social workers are compelled to be creative and resourceful if they are to find solutions to difficulties in their communities.

Summary

The literature on social work skills, abilities, and practice approaches is extensive. The literature about social work as a career is also quite extensive. In
general, the literature discusses the humanistic features about social work practice, such as the need to care about people and to work for social change in order to improve peoples’ lives. These features are common throughout the literature on social work worldwide.

Remarkably, the literature recognizes the humanistic features of social workers, yet minimally explores how the humanistic features of social workers contribute to them deciding to choose a social work career, and to remain in the social work field. By questioning what helps or supports social workers to practice, the pertinent question becomes, what are the people like who are suited to practice as social workers? One way to attempt to answer this question is to explore the personal attributes that help or support social workers to practice in their communities. Since my social work experience has been primarily in northern communities, with the last ten years in the Yukon, I was most interested in understanding the personal attributes of social workers in small, northern communities in the Yukon.

The personal attributes of social workers were extrapolated from the literature on international social work, on social work in the United States and Canada, and on social work in rural and northern communities. From this literature review, many personal attributes of social workers were found to be common in most countries. This does not suggest that social workers are similar throughout the world, rather, the personal attributes of social workers need to be discussed within the context of each country. The cultural, economic, political, and social structures greatly influence the development of social work in each country, including the reasons for people deciding to become social workers in their respective countries.
Several Canadian authors have successfully argued that social work practice in small, rural, and northern communities is distinct from urban social work practice (Collier, 1993; Delaney, 1995; Fuchs, 1997; Ingebritson, 1992; Schmidt, 2002; Wharf, 1985; Zapf, 1984, 1985, 1991, 1993, 2000). These authors also discuss the challenges and benefits of practicing in rural and northern communities. It is recognized that employers encounter difficulties recruiting and retaining social workers for small, rural, and northern communities. In the Yukon, social workers applying for Regional Social Worker positions in small communities outside of Whitehorse are rated according to three areas – knowledge, skills and abilities, and personal suitability.

The purpose of this research was to explore the personal attributes that help or support Regional Social Workers to practice in small Yukon communities. By identifying personal attributes, the employer of Regional Social Workers may be able to develop pertinent interview questions in order to determine if candidates are suited to practice social work in small Yukon communities. This is important, as retaining Regional Social Workers requires the employer to ensure candidates can integrate living and working as the “token” social worker, combined with delivering a variety of social services to diverse populations in small Yukon communities.

To research the personal attributes of Regional Social Workers, I used a descriptive phenomenological method. Descriptive phenomenology is a qualitative research method to study the lived experiences of people, and to describe people’s descriptions of their unique lived experiences. The next chapter discusses descriptive phenomenology.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Methodology

A descriptive phenomenological method was employed to research the personal attributes of Regional Social Workers. Before descriptive phenomenology is discussed, the origins of phenomenology are briefly outlined. One preamble to the origins section is best captured by van Manen (1997) explaining that several researchers, such as Silverman, make a distinction between descriptive phenomenology, and hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology. Other researchers insist that phenomenological research is pure description, and that hermeneutics/interpretive falls outside the bounds of phenomenological research (van Manen). In the Method section of this chapter, I discuss my reasons for choosing descriptive phenomenology instead of hermeneutic/interpretive phenomenology.

Origins of phenomenology. Phenomenology emerged at the end of the 19th century to respond to the questions asked by philosophers about the nature of human beings (Benner, 1994; Sadala & Adorno, 2002). Benner explains that 19th century philosophers espoused that research questions based on epistemology (how we know what we know) needed to change to research questions based on ontology (what it means to be a person and how we know the world). Edmund Husserl is credited with developing the phenomenological method of investigating and describing the presence of any phenomenon given to consciousness, precisely as it is given or experienced (Benner; Giorgi et al., 1983, 1985, 1997; Kleiman, 2004; Sadala & Adorno; van Manen, 1997; Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). Husserl’s development of phenomenology
appears to have responded to the development of research methods based on ontology. Husserl explained that phenomenology enables human beings to describe their unique lived experiences (what it means to be a person), and what human beings think about their lived experiences (how we know the world).

Husserl claimed that empirical natural sciences, such as chemistry and even psychology that separated from philosophy in the 19th century, were responsible for the problems of modern philosophy (Benner, 1994; Husserl, 1954/1970). Husserl referred to natural sciences as “objectivism” (Benner; Husserl). Natural sciences are grounded in empirical principles. Empirical principles or empiricism postulate that objects, including human beings, can be studied in controlled environments where scientists are detached from the subjects to learn more about human behaviour. Specific behaviours are measured and quantified in an attempt to yield the same results with repeated experiments.

Husserl (1954/1970) lamented that natural sciences were not able to answer questions about the meaning or meaningless of human existence. That is, what do individuals think about a particular phenomenon? What each individual thinks reflects their subjective experiences. My view of a particular phenomenon may differ or be similar to another person’s viewpoint. In a sense, Fjelland and Gjengedal, as cited in Benner (1994), surmise that phenomenology describes the subjective world. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Husserl did not accept the traditional dualism between subjective and objective (Benner; Husserl). Husserl argued that the foundation of the natural sciences is based upon the “life world”. Before natural scientists can study various objects or things, each natural scientist consciously thinks about what is
important to study in the world. They make subjective choices about what to study. For me, what is important to study is what Regional Social Workers think are important personal attributes to help or support them to practice in small Yukon communities.

As the creator of phenomenology, Husserl is credited with developing the phenomenological method of investigating and describing the presence of any phenomenon given to consciousness, precisely as it is given or experienced (Benner, 1994; Giorgi et al., 1983; Giorgi, 1985, 1997; Kleiman, 2004; Sadala & Adorno, 2002; van Manen, 1997; Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). With the death of Husserl in 1938, his work was carried on by Martin Heidegger (Benner). In recent literature on phenomenology, Husserl’s work is referred to as the descriptive phenomenological method, and Heidegger’s work is referred to as hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology (Benner; Giorgi, 1997; Kleiman; Priest, 2004; van Manen). Essentially, descriptive phenomenology seeks to further one’s understanding of a particular phenomenon by describing exactly what the researcher sees or hears without preconceived ideas or views about the phenomenon. Hermeneutic/interpretive phenomenology seeks underlying meanings about a particular phenomenon by accessing other sources external to the given data, such as established theories on human behaviour (Maggs-Rapport, 2000).

Another distinction between Husserl and Heidegger is how they conduct phenomenological research and analyze data. Husserl stated that phenomenological research should not be influenced by the researchers’ pre-conceptions of the phenomenon (Benner, 1994; Giorgi et al., 1983; Giorgi, 1985, 1997; van Manen, 1997; Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). Husserl (1905/1964, 1954/1970) contended that researchers
could suspend their beliefs in order to uncover the essential meaning of a particular phenomenon. The suspension of researchers’ beliefs is known as “bracketing” (Giorgi, 1985, 1997; Kleiman, 2004; van Manen; Wall, Glenn, Mitchinson, & Poole, 2004). The “essential” meaning of a phenomenon is defined by Husserl as how the phenomenon or object actually appears prior to the researcher describing what the object is or what it means to the researcher (Giorgi, 1985, 1997; Husserl, 1954/1970).

Heidegger’s divergent view is that it is impossible for researchers to not have pre-conceptions of the phenomenon being studied (Benner, 1994; van Manen, 1997; Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). Heidegger explained that before researchers start studying phenomenon, their perceptions of the world are shaped by their beliefs, values, and cultures, which cannot be suspended prior to researching a particular phenomenon (Benner). A caveat to the latter is noted by Kleiman (2004), stating that some researchers claiming affinity to the interpretive method use devices generic to the descriptive method, such as bracketing.

Since I chose to use a descriptive phenomenological method, the remaining sections of this chapter are limited to descriptive phenomenology. According to Kleiman (2004), Giorgi provides the most astute articulation of Husserl’s descriptive phenomenological method. Giorgi has over 125 scholarly publications on the subject of descriptive phenomenology, and he has advised on 110 PhD dissertations using the Husserlian phenomenological method (Kleiman). Giorgi (1985, 1997) contends that he follows the descriptive phenomenological method. From a review of some of Giorgi’s publications, he usually adds the term “psychology” to phenomenological research (Giorgi et al., 1983; Giorgi, 1985, 1997). Giorgi (et al., 1983; 1985, 1997) defines
phenomenological psychology as the effort to clarify fundamental concepts of the science of mind that are universal, necessary, and systematic. However, Giorgi (1997) in a recent article about the descriptive phenomenological method as a qualitative research procedure does not use the term “phenomenological psychology” to discuss specific steps of the descriptive phenomenological method. For this thesis, I use the general term “descriptive phenomenology”. It is beyond the scope of this research to discuss other versions of phenomenology, such as transcendental phenomenology, or phenomenological psychology.

The next section discusses how descriptive phenomenology is a qualitative method for scientific research.

**Qualitative method.** According to Husserl, as cited in van Manen (1997), descriptive phenomenology is a discipline that endeavours to describe how the world is constituted and experienced through conscious acts. Describing how people experience the world falls under the broader category of qualitative research. In terms of my own research, the advantage of designing a qualitative research project focused on identifying former and current Regional Social Workers’ specific personal attributes, as well as descriptions of how their personal attributes helped or supported them to practice in small Yukon communities. Their descriptions provided deep, rich information, essential for descriptive phenomenological research.

Giorgi (et al., 1983; 1985, 1997) and Husserl (1954/1970) assert that descriptive phenomenology is scientific in terms of human sciences. Giorgi (1997) states that human sciences are dedicated to gaining the most valid possible knowledge of the phenomena of the world. Briefly defined, human sciences focus on human beings and
what human beings think about their world. Giorgi (1997) elaborates that for knowledge to meet the criteria of human sciences, knowledge must be systematic, methodical, general, and critical. To be systematic, segments of knowledge must be related to each other, to be regulated by concepts or meanings (Giorgi, 1997). Husserl developed the first descriptive phenomenological concepts that later researchers expanded upon in their respective publications. To be methodical, knowledge is gained through a method that is accessible to scholars (Giorgi, 1997). Academic researchers throughout the world use descriptive phenomenological methods. For results to be general, findings have applications beyond the situation in which it was obtained (Giorgi, 1997). My research findings may assist the employer of Regional Social Workers to expand their recruitment strategies to attract social workers who are personally suited to work in small Yukon communities. Finally, qualified members of the research community can critically scrutinize published knowledge (Giorgi, 1997). Fellow students, work colleagues, and professors can also critically evaluate unpublished research findings.

Given my former experience as a Regional Social Worker in the small, northern community of Ross River, Yukon, and my keen interest in other Regional Social Workers’ lived experiences, I conducted my research from an emic (insider) perspective. An emic approach seeks to understand and learn about a particular topic from people that have knowledge of the topic from their personal experiences (Rew, Bechtel, & Sapp, 1993). An emic approach is compatible with descriptive phenomenology as it focuses on furthering one’s understanding and learning about a
particular topic (phenomenon) from people that have knowledge of the topic from their personal experiences (lived experiences).

A researcher who has no social work practice experience or no social work practice experience in small, northern communities may be at a disadvantage to explore the personal attributes of Regional Social Workers. An outsider perspective may limit the researcher's ability to discern subtle nuances or varied manifestations of each personal attribute described by the participants.

To organize and structure the remainder of my methodology chapter, the publications of Giorgi are primarily referenced to outline how I conducted my research using descriptive phenomenology. Giorgi (1997) explains that all qualitative methods entail a minimum of five basic steps:

1) collection of verbal data,

2) reading of the data,

3) breaking of the data into some kind of parts,

4) organization and expression of the data from a disciplinary perspective, and

5) synthesis or summary of the data for purposes of communication to the scholarly community. (p. 245)

Giorgi interprets how to apply each of the aforementioned steps in a descriptive phenomenological research study. Giorgi qualifies that each of the steps from a descriptive phenomenological method allows for procedural variations, therefore, the way of interpreting each step is neither exclusive nor exhaustive. The above five steps are discussed next to explain how I followed the steps to structure my methodology, analysis, and policy/practice implications chapters.
According to Giorgi (1997), verbal data may be collected by interview, whereby the interview questions are generally broad and open-ended for the participants to have sufficient opportunities to express their viewpoints extensively about a phenomenon. I collected my verbal data by conducting individual interviews with former and current Regional Social Workers. My interview questions about the personal attributes of Regional Social Workers were generally broad and open-ended to provoke each participant to fully describe their unique viewpoints about what they thought were important or essential personal attributes for Regional Social Workers (see Appendix A). My open-ended questions were supplemented by fixed questions in order to elicit specific information, such as the amount of time that a Regional Social Worker practiced in his or her community. Further information about my collection of verbal data is in the Method section of this chapter.

Giorgi (1997) notes that interviews are recorded and the audio tapes are transcribed. For the second step, the reading of the verbal data is a process. The descriptive phenomenological method is holistic, requiring researchers to read all the data before beginning their analysis of the verbal data (Giorgi). The third step, the breaking of the data into parts, refers to the deciphering of meanings from the verbal data. Giorgi states that the parts are known as “meaning units” or “common themes” in the descriptive phenomenological method. For the sake of simplicity and continuity, hereon, I will use the terms “common themes” or “themes”.

Giorgi (1997) clarifies that before descriptive phenomenological researchers determine the common themes, a presumption of a disciplinary perspective, for example, a social work perspective for a social work analysis, exists prior to
commencing the analysis. In the Data Analysis section of this chapter, further information is provided about analyzing the verbal data from a social work perspective.

Operationally, the relevant themes are formed by a slower rereading of the verbal data, and each time the researcher experiences a transition in meaning in the data, he or she marks the place and continues to read until the next theme is determined (Giorgi, 1997). While I reread the transcriptions of my interviews with former and current Regional Social Workers, I used a highlighter pen to mark each theme. The end result of this step was a series of themes expressed in the participants’ everyday language (Giorgi). To expand on Giorgi’s point, given all the participants were practicing social work, their everyday language to describe their views about personal attributes was from a social work perspective. Similarly, as a social worker, I was attuned to determining the relevant themes from a social work perspective. Giorgi surmises descriptive phenomenological researchers adopt an “attitude” that is sensitive to the discipline of the researcher. Giorgi adds that the descriptive phenomenological method is “discovery-oriented”, and in order to discover common themes in the verbal data, researchers need attitudes open enough to let unexpected themes emerge. This is where the step of bracketing (suspending beliefs, knowledge, and views) assists descriptive phenomenological researchers to stay open to unexpected themes.

The fourth step, the organization and expression of the verbal data from a disciplinary perspective, occurs once the common themes are established (Giorgi, 1997). Once the themes are established, the researcher examines, probes, and re-describes in order that the disciplinary value of each meaning unit becomes more
explicit (Giorgi). In the analysis chapter, I examine and describe each theme (i.e. personal attribute) drawn from my own practice in the discipline of social work.

The final step, the synthesis or summary of the verbal data for purposes of communication to the scholarly community, is outlined at the end of the analysis chapter. Furthermore, in the last chapter, I apply my findings from my analysis to a discussion of the policy and practice implications of how personal attributes help or support Regional Social Workers to practice in small Yukon communities. Two scholarly communities that I am communicating with are the academic institutions responsible for the Master of Social Work and Master of Science in Community Health cohort program - the University of Northern British Columbia and Yukon College.

Given the numerous concepts defined by Husserl to explain descriptive phenomenology, combined with the various works of different descriptive phenomenological researchers, I do not purport to use a "pure" Husserlian descriptive phenomenology. Instead, the methodology concepts relevant for my research are discussed in this section and in the next section.

Method

Descriptive phenomenology is the phenomenological method I chose over hermeneutic/interpretive phenomenology. The main reason for choosing descriptive phenomenology was to inform readers what Regional Social Workers think about personal attributes without adding external theories or explanations to the information they provided. The thoughts, views, and stories about personal attributes told to me by Regional Social Workers came from within themselves, known as Husserl’s internal consciousness. My intention for choosing descriptive phenomenology in order to
research the personal attributes of Regional Social Workers was to give them a “voice”, as opposed to interpreting what they shared with me. The “voice” of Regional Social Workers provided me with rich and descriptive information for my research. I did not have to rely on external sources to complete my research, as the participants’ data was more than sufficient to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of Regional Social Workers in small Yukon communities. As Giorgi (1985, 1997) surmises, a descriptive phenomenological method limits itself to what is given, and the argument is that a sufficiently rich description would include an intrinsic account of the phenomenon. An “intrinsic” account refers to participants talking naturally, and relying on what they already know (existing knowledge) about a particular phenomenon.

In the analysis chapter, I add my own lived experiences from my former practice as a Regional Social Worker to contribute to the understanding of social work practice in small Yukon communities. My personal lived experiences are an addition, and are not to be construed as an attempt to interpret the descriptions of the lived experiences of other Regional Social Workers. Likewise, my comments and views expressed in the data analysis section are to complement the deep and insightful data already given by the participants.

To thoroughly explore the personal attributes of Regional Social Workers, individual interviews were conducted with both former and current Regional Social Workers. The interviews captured the individual descriptions and unique lived experiences of Regional Social Workers practicing in diverse, small Yukon communities. Prior to interviewing Regional Social Workers, I prepared interview
questions based on my research question. The interviews with the participants ranged from 30 minutes to 60 minutes.

My collection of verbal data began in November 2001 when I completed the requirements for a MSW course on qualitative research. At that time, my research question was about examining factors related to effective social work practice within a time frame. During my first interview with a former Regional Social Worker, this participant helped me to realize I was more interested in examining the personal attributes of Regional Social Workers. My subsequent interviews with Regional Social Workers were focused on my current research question about how personal attributes help or support Regional Social Workers to practice in small Yukon communities.

Prior to and during my interviews with former and current Regional Social Workers, I followed the basic process of bracketing. The next section defines the bracketing process in more detail, and discusses how I conducted bracketing during my research.

**Bracketing.** The process of researchers’ suspending their beliefs, preconceptions, and knowledge to conduct descriptive phenomenological research is known as bracketing (Giorgi, 1985, 1997; Kleiman, 2004; van Manen, 1997; Wall et al., 2004). Giorgi refers to bracketing as descriptive phenomenological reduction. Although I certainly had prior views and knowledge about the personal attributes of Regional Social Workers, it was important to suspend my thoughts about the phenomenon of personal attributes as my research was centered on gathering other Regional Social Workers’ lived experiences.
Wall et al. (2004) found from their review of the descriptive phenomenological literature that there was no set method for undertaking bracketing, and that it was more of a psychological orientation towards oneself rather than an observable set of procedures to be adopted by the researcher. Without concrete procedures to follow bracketing, I prepared for my interviews with the participants by repeatedly reminding myself that the purpose of my research was to explore and describe the lived experiences of Regional Social Workers as an addition to my own lived experiences as a former Regional Social Worker. With this purpose in mind, prior to and during interviews, I reminded myself to stay open to new ideas and lived experiences about Regional Social Work practice, and to limit my comments about my former lived experiences as a Regional Social Worker during the interviews.

During the interviews, I focused on my interview questions, and concentrated on what the participants were sharing with me. Furthermore, this focus on my interview questions precluded me from gathering superfluous information that may be interesting to readers, but does not give them a full understanding of the personal attributes that help or support Regional Social Workers to practice in small Yukon communities.

I found that I did not have time for reflective thinking about my own views during the interviews, as I was preoccupied with ensuring the participants answered all the interview questions, and that I understood their responses. It was important that the interviews were more of a conversation between two people, rather than the participants sequentially answering each question in numerical order. The conversational interview fosters a casual environment where the participants feel free
to talk candidly and wholly, rather than in a rigid question and answer style format. Giorgi (1997) comments that the collection of verbal data during interviews must allow the participants sufficient opportunities to express their viewpoints extensively. It was also important for the participants to talk about each question as long as required since descriptive phenomenological research is about seeking rich and detailed information about a particular phenomenon. When there were pauses during the interviews, I used this time to think about further questions to pose to the participants to clarify and expand on the information they had already shared with me.

By carefully listening to the participants during the interviews, I found I was able to achieve the basic descriptive phenomenological reduction or bracketing. Giorgi (1997) states the basic reduction requirement for descriptive phenomenological research is to break from one’s natural attitude. Breaking from one’s natural attitude is defined by Giorgi as researchers bracketing or suspending their knowledge about a phenomenon. For this research, my natural attitude pertains to my knowledge, views, and lived experiences from my former practice as a Regional Social Worker. I believe I suspended my knowledge and viewpoints about social work practice in small Yukon communities during my interviews with Regional Social Workers. As possible evidence that I achieved bracketing, I found that although the participants described similar or synonymous personal attributes, their descriptions of how personal attributes were important for their practice and for Regional Social Workers in general, varied with each participant. If I had not achieved basic bracketing, I may not have been attuned to listen to the different nuances from each participant. Giorgi concludes the ultimate outcome of descriptive phenomenological scientific analyses is not just the
essential structure or phenomenon, but rather the phenomenon in relation to the varied manifestations. The varied manifestations in my research refer to the diverse views of each participant when they discussed the same personal attribute from their own experiences.

The purpose of interviewing both former and current Regional Social Workers was to augment the data about personal attributes, and provide diversified information. Since there is a limited number of current Regional Social Workers, the material imparted by both groups provided richer data for me to discuss in the analysis chapter.

*Rigour of Method*

When utilizing the descriptive phenomenological method, Giorgi (1997) believes that researchers must be descriptive, use bracketing or descriptive phenomenological reduction, and seek individuated meanings. The latter three steps provide a framework for ensuring rigour during the research process. The first step was to describe the lived experiences of other Regional Social Workers, exactly as former and current Regional Social Workers described them.

Giorgi’s (1997) second step for method rigour involved bracketing. By suspending my beliefs, knowledge and views about the personal attributes of Regional Social Workers, I learned more about what other Regional Social Workers thought were important personal attributes, including their various manifestations or differences about the same or synonymous personal attributes. I perceived bracketing as a useful and important tool to assist me to carefully listen to each participant, limiting the possibility for my own biases and views to hinder me accepting each participant’s unique thoughts and views.
The third step involved identifying common themes from my transcribed data of each participant’s descriptions of the personal attributes that help or support Regional Social Workers’ practice. To ensure the accuracy of my identification of common themes, I prepared summaries of each transcribed interview, and sent them to participants. The summaries outlined the initial themes that I gleaned from reviewing the transcriptions. The themes refer to the personal attributes described by most or several participants. The summaries were sent three to 14 months after my interviews with the participants. The participants were invited to review the summaries for accuracy, and to add new descriptions about how their personal attributes helped and supported them to practice social work in small Yukon communities.

The process of preparing summaries from the transcribed data of each participant aided me to isolate the common or re-occurring themes. The summaries reduced the voluminous data into brief outlines of the personal attributes significant to each participant. Most importantly, sending the summaries to the participants helped to ensure I not only accurately identified each personal attribute, but that I also understood their descriptions of how specific personal attributes helped or supported their practice.

The variations of the descriptive phenomenological method combined with the diverse interpretations of Husserl’s concepts amongst descriptive phenomenological researchers, contributed to the challenge of ensuring rigour throughout my research. Nevertheless, Giorgi’s (1997) steps assisted me to establish rigour while using a descriptive phenomenological method.
To further ensure the rigour of identifying themes, all four themes (personal attributes) discussed in the analysis chapter correspond to the personal attributes examined in the final literature review section on social work practice, and the personal attributes of social workers in small, rural, and northern communities. This literature review section discusses three key social work practice areas applicable to social work in small, rural, and northern communities. The first theme, willingness to establish relationships, is discussed in the literature under the first practice area, relationships. The latter is the predominant theme discussed by all the participants. The theme of willingness to work with natural helpers is included in the discussion of relationships.

The second theme, willingness to maintain boundaries and be visible, is discussed in the literature under the second practice area, dual/multiple relationships. The third theme, relishing flexibility and creativity, and the fourth theme, thriving on a sense of independence, are both discussed under the third practice area, generalist/ecological practice.

Data Analysis of Method

The process for a descriptive phenomenological method is to gather data about people's descriptions of their lived experiences as posed by the research question, to analyze the data, and for the researcher to write about the data. Descriptive phenomenological methods seek to explore the meanings of someone's lived experiences.

To commence my data analysis, I first listened to the audio tapes from my interviews. Listening to the tapes provided me with the verbal tones and inflections of the participants' lived experiences as they enthusiastically described how personal
attributes helped and supported them to practice in small Yukon communities. Careful and methodical listening enabled me to recognize lived experiences that were particularly important and relevant to the participants.

Next, I carefully read the transcribed interviews to start the process of capturing the lived experiences of Regional Social Workers. As I reread the transcribed verbal data, I started to isolate themes (Giorgi, 1997). Each time I discovered a change or transition in the verbal data, I highlighted the theme. The audio tapes were transcribed verbatim.

To analyze the data, I was sensitive to my discipline – social work. Giorgi (1997) states the descriptive phenomenological researcher has to analyze the description (verbal data) with a special sensitivity to his or her discipline. I believe my sensitivity to social work was readily accomplished as I incorporated my previous practice experiences as a Regional Social Worker into my research with former and current Regional Social Workers. As well, all the participants are practicing social workers, and they responded to my research questions based on their former or current practice as Regional Social Workers. For this research, I was interested in the experiences of Regional Social Workers only, and not the experiences of other professionals who practice in small Yukon communities, such as nurses and teachers. During the research processes of gathering and analyzing data, it seemed like I was entrenched in the discipline of social work.

Participants

The participants are former and current Regional Social Workers. Five interviews were completed with former Regional Social Workers. Current Regional
Social Workers are based in nine small communities. A significant number of current Regional Social Workers agreed to be interviewed – seven out of nine workers.

Regional Social Workers require a Bachelor of Social Work to fulfill the education qualifications for the position. Most of the participants have a Bachelor of Social Work degree. All except two of the Regional Social Workers moved from southern Canada to practice in the Yukon. Regional Social Workers are responsible to deliver a variety of social service programs, including statutory services such as child welfare.

As previously stated, in November 2001, I interviewed one former and one current Regional Social Worker to fulfill the requirements for a MSW qualitative research course. Prior to their individual interviews with me, both participants signed a consent form stating that the transcribed data from their interviews would be used in my thesis. After receiving approval in May 2003 from the UNBC Research Ethics Board to proceed with my research (see Appendix A), individual interviews were conducted with four former and six current Regional Social Workers. A total of 12 individual interviews were completed. I asked both former and current Regional Social Workers the same set of interview questions (see Appendix B). Both genders were about equally represented.

The reasons for selecting the five former Regional Social Workers were twofold. First, I knew the five former Regional Social Workers, and I thought they would be interested in my research about the personal attributes of Regional Social Workers. Second, the five former Regional Social Workers resided in the Yukon. Due to budget limitations, I did not contact former Regional Social Workers residing
outside of the Yukon. I note that I am acquainted with most of the former Regional Social Workers residing in the Yukon through our employment as social workers. There are a small number of social workers practicing in the Yukon, therefore, we tend to have contact with one another through our work with mutual clients.

After completing one interview with a current Regional Social Worker, I sought other current Regional Social Workers interested in my research study. On June 4, 2003, I e-mailed every current Regional Social Worker a brief explanation of my research, and indicated my interest to meet with them. I also attached a copy of the Research Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix C) in my e-mail to current Regional Social Workers. I followed up my e-mail message by telephone to inquire about their interest to participate in my research, and to respond to their questions or concerns.

I distributed the interview questions, the information sheet, and the Interview Consent Form (see Appendix D) to both former and current Regional Social Workers prior to their individual interviews. By e-mailing information before the interviews, the participants were able to prepare for their interviews. Many of the participants prepared for their interviews by writing their first thoughts and descriptions of their lived experiences in small Yukon communities. The interviews with current Regional Social Workers were conducted in June, July, and August 2003, and in February 2004. The final interviews with former Regional Social Workers were completed in March, June, July, and November 2004.

The five former Regional Social Workers practiced for approximately one to three years, with one participant having practiced for about 10 years. The seven current
Regional Social Workers practiced between eight months to 22 years. I interviewed both former and current Regional Social Workers to capture their descriptions on personal attributes across time. The latter fits with the purpose of descriptive phenomenological research, which provides deeper and richer meaning of the lived experiences of people.

With respect to the participants’ length of practice, Zapf’s (1993) study of social workers practicing in the Yukon found that social workers from southern parts of Canada starting to practice in northern regions initially experience feelings of optimism and challenge. Within a year, these feelings change to frustration and confusion, and then to feelings of renewed confidence and integration (Zapf). This process is known as the U-curve hypothesis in the literature (Zapf). I decided to interview former and current Regional Social Workers interested in my research, regardless of their length of practice as a Regional Social Worker, in order to gather as much data as possible. The data I collected through individual interviews enabled me to isolate common personal attributes. One noteworthy point about length of practice is that all of the participants enjoyed their practice as either former or current Regional Social Workers. Zapf undertook a quantitative study to research the U-curve hypothesis about how social workers from southern parts of Canada change how they feel about practicing in remote, northern communities within their first year of practice.

Setting

The individual interviews with former Regional Social Workers took place in Whitehorse, Yukon at their workplaces, or at a location away from their workplace, such as at a hotel conference room. I interviewed five former Regional Social Workers.
The interviews with current Regional Social Workers were conducted in small Yukon communities outside of Whitehorse. According to the Yukon Government, Department of Health and Social Services, a Regional Social Worker is based in each of the nine small communities. Current Regional Social Workers live in the communities in which they practice. Mr. Gerry Drechsler, former Regional Services Manager, granted me permission to conduct research with current Regional Social Workers (personal communication, January 21, 2003). I conducted individual interviews with seven of the then nine current Regional Social Workers in their respective communities. The purpose of travelling from my home in Whitehorse to seven different communities was to interview current Regional Social Workers in their usual, daily settings. Husserl (1905/1964, 1911/1965, 1954/1970) explains descriptive phenomenology is interested in the human world as we find it.

There is minimal research about the lived experiences of Regional Social Workers in the Yukon. In 1989, Zapf (1993) completed his doctoral dissertation on culture shock experienced by social workers that practice in isolated northern regions. Zapf utilized quantitative research methods, and he included social workers practicing in Whitehorse. More recently, University of Northern British Columbia Professor, Glen Schmidt (2002) completed his doctoral dissertation on the attrition and retention of social workers engaged in northern remote practice. Schmidt studied the experiences of social workers in the Yukon and other northern regions in Canada. I had considerable interest in gaining a better understanding from the perspectives of former and current Regional Social Workers about what they think are important personal attributes to help or support them to practice in small Yukon communities. As I previously
mentioned, I relied on my personal attributes to help me practice as a Regional Social Worker for three years in Ross River.

Ethical Considerations

Participants received the interview questions, the information sheet, and the consent form prior to their interviews with me in order to be informed as to the purpose of my research. The information sheet informed the participants that I planned to tape the interviews, and that the tapes would be transcribed by a transcription service outside of the Yukon. Accurate Data Services in Edmonton, Alberta transcribed all taped interviews, and the transcribers signed a confidentiality agreement. The information sheet also advised the participants the tapes and records (e.g. transcriptions) would be stored in a locked cabinet in my residence. Finally, the participants reviewed and signed a consent form before their interview with me.

Maintaining confidentiality throughout the research process was critical for me. There are a limited number of former and current Regional Social Workers residing in the Yukon. Therefore, to ensure the confidentiality of the participants, no information about their identity or where they practiced as Regional Social Workers was revealed in this research.

Summary

The descriptive phenomenological method assisted me to gain a better understanding of how personal attributes help or support former and current Regional Social Workers to practice in small Yukon communities. As a former Regional Social Worker, I had thought about my personal attributes, or what it was about me that helped me to stay to practice for three years in Ross River, Yukon. The descriptive
phenomenological method provided me with the structure to explore what other Regional Social Workers thought about practicing in small Yukon communities. I gained a deeper understanding of social work in small communities in a northern Canadian territory. van Manen (1997) concludes that descriptive phenomenological research does not serve to solve problems, but does serve to give more meaning to our lived experiences.

The next chapter highlights the descriptions of the lived experiences of former and current Regional Social Workers. The specific lived experiences are how their personal attributes help or support them to practice in small Yukon communities. The following chapter also discusses my thematic analysis of former and current Regional Social Workers’ personal attributes.
CHAPTER 4
ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In this research, Regional Social Workers described their understanding of personal attributes that help or support them to practice social work in small Yukon communities. The richness of the data reflects the unique lived experiences of each Regional Social Worker practicing in their respective community. The participants described their meanings and descriptions of the common personal attributes based on their own experiences. Giorgi (1997) elucidates the ultimate outcome of descriptive phenomenological scientific analysis is not just the phenomenon, but also the phenomenon in relation to the varied manifestations. The different meanings and descriptions of the common personal attributes described by each Regional Social Worker are analogous to the varied manifestations. Examples of Regional Social Workers’ descriptions of personal attributes are quoted under each theme to ensure readers get a sense of the actual lived experiences of former and current Regional Social Workers.

Through thematic analysis, four personal attributes were identified in the transcribed interviews with former and current Regional Social Workers. After the personal attributes are discussed, four additional findings are examined from my review of the transcribed interviews.

The four personal attribute themes are willingness to establish relationships, willingness to maintain boundaries and be visible, relishing flexibility and creativity, and thriving on a sense of independence.
Main Findings

Willingness to establish relationships. The personal attribute shared by all 12 participants is the importance of being able and willing to establish relationships with community members in small Yukon communities. Most participants demarcated their relationships in terms of their role as a social worker interacting with clients, local politicians, and so forth. The consistent factor among all the participants is their willingness to engage with as many community members as possible while at work and when not at work. They said that participation in community events allowed them to be perceived as an approachable person who cares about his or her community. Many of the participants expressed their intention for community members to get to know them as people apart from their role as social workers. One participant astutely noted that developing relationships with people who had lived in the community for an extended period of time affected other community members' perceptions of their commitment to the community. This participant explained that community members were more accepting of her as she made the effort to establish relationships.

Several participants said the additional benefit of participating in community activities and events was to learn and understand the social issues affecting the community and how these issues impacted particular families.

There was probably four or five families...where it was well known to the community at large that there were serious concerns about family violence. These families participated in other functions in the community so I would informally go up and talk to them in a fashion that wasn’t punitive, wasn’t
judgmental, but just to engage and develop a relationship...knowing that at some way down the road I was going to be sitting and engaging in a conversation with them about the things that I’m hearing. I did that…it was effective in highlighting the issues within those family constellations, and I believe effective in getting those issues addressed. I have spoken with two of the families I worked with and both reflected to me…it was the couple in one instance that they were very thankful for my involvement and assistance.

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If you have the ability to establish a relationship and a really strong rapport, then we don’t really have a need for child protection in a sense because people have been coming to you before it gets to that crisis point.

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The referral process certainly wasn’t formalized in that you opened a file the day you got a call from somebody. There was a much more broader general awareness of families, which families were in trouble, and how they were functioning, and what was happening with them.

The three examples above illustrate a positive aspect of practicing social work in small communities. By establishing relationships with community members, Regional Social Workers can intervene with families experiencing difficulties to alleviate crises in family homes. Intervening before crises occur aids Regional Social Workers to be proactive rather than reactive. The opportunity to be proactive helps Regional Social Workers to work cooperatively with families in a more planned and placid way. As one
participant pointed out, intervening in families before child protection concerns escalate allows Regional Social Workers to prevent children entering the care of the government.

Another participant discussed the negative aspect of establishing relationships with community members. This participant felt some clients may think the Regional Social Worker is constantly scrutinizing them, and it is unsettling to know this as a social worker who inadvertently sees clients on a regular basis in public places, such as at the post office, store, potlatches, and so on.

Caring about clients and the willingness to establish relationships with clients to effectively engage with them are universal personal attributes for social workers worldwide in both urban and non-urban settings. To further explain the importance of establishing relationships in small Yukon communities, it is useful to contrast some of the differences between relationships in urban settings with relationships in small Yukon communities. The major difference in establishing relationships with clients between urban and small Yukon communities is that relationships in large cities are more one-dimensional, whereas the relationships in small Yukon communities are multi-dimensional. In cities, the role of social workers to clients is one of professional service providers delivering social services to clients. In small Yukon communities, the roles of the social workers in relation to clients are diverse, varying from professional service providers, to parents feeding clients’ children when their children invite them to dinner, to volunteer hockey coach for all minor league hockey players in the community. The literature considers multi-dimensional relationships to be dual or multiple relationships.
Another difference in establishing relationships between urban and non-urban settings is the natural tendency to develop relationships with numerous people in small Yukon communities due to demographic factors. In the Yukon, the population size in small communities ranges from 54 people to 1,800 people (Yukon Facts, 2002, December). Since the population size is quite low in small Yukon communities, various services are usually limited to one place. For example, there is one store, one restaurant, and one post office. Community members attend the same public places on a daily basis to conduct their affairs. As they complete their daily errands, they frequently interact with one another to talk about the weather, local news, and so forth. Even when the daily contact among community members is a quick greeting, this familiarity contributes to people feeling comfortable with one another. As community members see the Regional Social Worker out in the community on a regular basis in various locations, they may view the Regional Social Worker as a member of the community rather than as a stranger they may meet should they require social services at some point. One participant succinctly described the difference between social work practice in urban and non-urban settings.

When you practice in an urban environment, you don’t have that luxury to engage in the community because it’s a much larger community. I think the strength of doing this job is about individuals seeing us as supportive members of the community, not just as individuals who are here to be punitive, authoritative, and intrusive.
Some of the participants discussed the importance of establishing relationships in small Yukon communities in terms of being culturally aware and open to First Nation cultures. In many of the small communities, Regional Social Workers work closely with social service staff employed by the First Nation governments. Establishing and maintaining effective relationships with First Nations is especially significant since most social services are provided to First Nations community members. Twelve of the 14 First Nations in the Yukon are based in small communities outside of Whitehorse. In several of these small communities, First Nations people are the predominant ethnic group. Furthermore, as of January 2006, 10 of the 14 First Nations have self-governing agreements, conferring them with the authority to enact laws and regulations in the areas of education, health, and social services. As one participant noted, if Regional Social Workers are not aware of pertinent cultural and political issues in the communities they practice in, they may experience difficulties developing relationships with community members.

The first impressions are really, really important in a small community and if you come in not knowing, you know, a lot of different cultural issues – people pick up on that real quick and that first impression could be pretty negative…and then that could really affect the rest of your service and your relationship with the community.

A few participants discussed relationships on an existential level. The participants described their relationships from consciously thinking about who they
were as human beings, and recognizing how they were responsible for the development of their beliefs and values.

I think you have to have a general understanding of our relationships as human beings, and it makes it a lot easier for me knowing who I am, where I came from, where I’m going, what my purpose in life is, what’s the meaning of life – I’ve been able to develop those to my satisfaction, maybe not in others, but it helps me to be able to relate to people on a personal and professional level.

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I think you need to be grounded. I’ve seen, over the years, a lot of young social workers coming out of university without a lot of life experience and, often times, they get caught up into the trap of relating to people according to the lowest common denominator of human relationships, which is usually power and control and money issues, and so I think…if you can’t get beyond that you shouldn’t be serving people.

The participants in the above examples articulated that having a deep understanding of human relationships was fundamental to serving the needs of their respective communities. They equated their relationships to sincerely respecting and caring for the people they serve in their communities.

I concur with the participants that establishing relationships with many community members helped them to practice social work in their communities. For me, the relationships I established in Ross River were often mutually beneficial. For
example, I remain very thankful to a Ross River community member who spent over one hour removing factory-tightened bolts to change a flat tire on my car. He then suggested the proper tires to install on my car to drive on the Robert Campbell Highway. Likewise, some community members approached me to help them with sensitive and difficult issues. They shared with me that they trusted me, and felt I would not judge them.

From pondering the experiences of the participants’ willingness to establish relationships with community members, my general interpretation is that the participants did not feel threatened to face the realities of their job as Collier (1993) contends when social workers practice in remote communities. Instead, I gleaned that the participants had a good sense of what to expect when they started practicing social work in their communities. One plausible explanation is that all the participants had prior social work experience, primarily in small, rural, and northern communities.

The participants’ descriptions of their views and knowledge about relationships in small Yukon communities echo the literature on the personal attributes of social workers in small, rural, and northern communities. Several authors state rural communities foster closer relationships due to shared cultures, values, and shorter distances to travel to regularly interact with other community members, such as daily trips to the post office and local restaurant (Carlton-LaNey et al., 1999; Farley et al., 1982; Ginsberg, 1993; Martinez-Brawley, 1990; O’Looney, 1993). All the participants agreed with several of the authors’ findings that social workers practicing in rural or northern settings need to be accepted by the community before they can effectively
provide social services to residents (Boone et al., 1997; Collier, 1993; Ingebrigtsen, 1992).

The willingness of Regional Social Workers to establish relationships with community members often involves them working with natural helpers. In many small Yukon communities, Regional Social Workers work alongside natural helpers to assist community members.

Three of the 12 participants discussed the benefits of working with natural helpers. In the small Yukon communities the participants worked in, the natural helpers usually were not paid for their work. The natural helpers are respected community members that many people go to for advice or services, such as how to complete government forms and child care services. In small Yukon communities that have a limited number of paid service providers, natural helpers are invaluable to community members. Natural helpers also reduce the need for community members to travel outside their communities for various services.

In a small community some people have a certain amount of integrity or respect not gained by the position or the job that they hold, and those are the kind of people that you could include and draw from. It’s those kind of people that have personal credibility, I guess, that I would think of almost more than I would think of people that I have to work with in an official capacity.

The participant in the above example greatly appreciated that she could depend on natural helpers to assist her at any time day or night. This participant relied on the
natural helpers’ extensive knowledge of safe homes in the community for children in need of protection, and to teach her about community standards, such as the expectations for community members attending potlatches.

Establishing relationships also compels Regional Social Workers to consider how they maintain boundaries with community members. For several Regional Social Workers, they viewed maintaining boundaries as a challenge, given their visibility in small Yukon communities during work hours and after-work hours.

*Willingness to maintain boundaries and be visible.* The second personal attribute described by 10 of the 12 participants concerns what they think about maintaining boundaries in small Yukon communities. A few of the participants discussed maintaining boundaries in terms of separating their work from their personal lives for periods of time.

We need to actually leave the community more on weekends just so that I can stop thinking about work, because I don’t stop thinking about all the things that I need to do. It’s bad enough that social workers generally stay long hours anyways, I’ll just stay quite long or I won’t even think anything of it working all weekend.

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When I’m here after work and on weekends and I see kids that I’m working with, it doesn’t stop those wheels from turning and then you’re constantly thinking about work and it’s not always happy things that you’re thinking about so that’s one of the things I find the most difficult is that it doesn’t shut off so,
in order to do the job, you need to be able to recognize that and set good boundaries.

The participants in the preceding examples discussed the importance of maintaining boundaries for self-care. There is no question that social work is physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually demanding. All people require rest, and leaving work to go home to rest and recuperate is usually what people do after work. This is not to say that people are not busy after work, however, their focus is on other tasks besides their jobs. In large cities, sizeable geographic distances separate most people’s workplaces from their homes. In small Yukon communities, workplaces are normally within walking distance. Occasionally, workplaces and living quarters are in the same building. As the participants described above, to “get away from work” they not only need to leave their homes, they also need to leave their communities. One of the participants described this as leaving to rejuvenate, and to enjoy leisure and recreational activities.

Another participant stated boundaries are not an issue, and having personal associations with the clientele was advantageous. This participant explained boundaries were established to the extent that clients did not discuss their cases with the participant when in public places. This participant added boundaries are difficult to maintain in small communities, and each Regional Social Worker considers boundaries in relation to their personal growth, and their attitudes about their jobs and the people they serve. This participant surmised it is incumbent upon each Regional Social Worker to establish their own boundaries in their respective communities.
One other participant described the advantage of maintaining informal boundaries when interacting with clients in small Yukon communities.

I don’t have to wear a suit to work, I can wear blue jeans and go sit on someone’s step to do an investigation or...a home visit, and I can...watch them tan a hide or go fishing with them, and at the same time I could be talking seriously about something that is happening.

The above participant described this informal approach as being non-threatening and less intrusive. This participant found being gentle, and having an informal, casual approach aided her ability to complete child protection investigations, and to seek the assistance of the child’s relatives to resolve the protection concerns.

A few participants described the importance of consistently maintaining boundaries while they delivered social services to different community members. If people perceived Regional Social Workers were dealing with people unfairly or showing favouritism, they risked losing their credibility as service providers.

A couple of participants identified that maintaining boundaries affects their own families. They realized their children interact with clients’ children, and maintaining boundaries compels them to think about possible outcomes. For example, if a Regional Social Worker is involved in a contentious child protection case, the worker needs to consider the possible consequences if their child invited a client’s child for a “sleep-over”. Similarly, if a worker is providing counselling services to a
client, and the client attends the worker’s home unannounced during Sunday dinner, the worker needs to think about how to deal with this situation.

I think having my own family would just mean they’re more people to consider in that privacy issue, and more opportunities probably for boundaries to be explained as well. Kids are playing with other kids at school and what if that’s the client family, all of those things I think would make it more challenging to deal with.

The personal attributes associated with how Regional Social Workers maintain boundaries overlap with being visible in small Yukon communities. Maintaining boundaries entails the extent to which Regional Social Workers separate their work from their personal lives. In small Yukon communities, Regional Social Workers have daily contact with clients during regular work hours and after-work hours. They see each other at the one restaurant in town at lunchtime or in the evening at the ballpark. Maintaining boundaries with clients is similar to the ethical issue of dual/multiple relationships, whereby social workers have contact with clients outside of work when they assume their other roles such as parents, baseball players, and so on. Many Regional Social Workers think about maintaining boundaries with clients on a daily basis. In contrast, social workers in large cities likely do not think about maintaining boundaries after work, as they probably will not encounter clients.
In small Yukon communities, Regional Social Workers are clearly visible in their respective communities. All of the participants were aware that their professional and personal lives were viewed and judged by numerous community members.

In a larger city you can get kind of lost in the city...you can have a personal life so to speak that isn’t magnified by the community. But in a smaller community, you’re under pretty strict controls and that could be good or bad. Everybody knows what you do and so you’ve got to, generally speaking, lead a pretty decent life.

Many participants described the implications of being the only social worker in their community. They explained that community members perceive them in their role as a social worker at all times and in all settings.

You’ve got to have a pretty thick skin. If you’re going to put yourself out there in the smaller community, then you’re going to have to be cognizant of the fact that not everybody’s going to be supportive of you, of your role certainly, and I think that’s the distinction that you have to make. You’re identified by your role, not who you are as a human being, and I think...one of the strengths I have is that I separate the two, I recognize that the role I have is an important one and, at times, it can be very intrusive to individuals and to the community at large so I try to keep that balance.
To be perceived in the role of a social worker foremost is attributed to the statutory child welfare services Regional Social Workers provide to their communities. Regional Social Workers have extensive powers under territorial legislation to protect children, which includes the power to remove children from their parents’ care due to protection concerns. Regional Social Workers respond to child protection reports at any time on any day of the week. For many clients, particularly clients receiving child welfare services, they perceive the Regional Social Worker in one role, that of the “welfare worker”, as they are aware that the “welfare worker” is never off duty.

Since Regional Social Workers respond to child protection reports after-hours, most think about their conduct, and how community members perceive what they do at work and after work.

You’re a social worker 24/7, and even though I don’t believe that you should be and that you need to take that time, you’re perceived as a social worker 24/7 so you have to make some decisions about that in your life when you’re in a small community. About how are you going to act and what things you’re going to do, but also recognizing that...I don’t think I’ve had to change much of the way I do things from being here because I’m living the life in the way I think that I should.

The participant in the preceding example and several other participants described that they had minimum struggles with how they led their lives. The participants did not
think they compromised their personal ethics, values, and beliefs in how they conducted themselves at work and after work.

A few participants pointed out that if Regional Social Workers chose to isolate themselves due to the demands of their profession, they predicted these social workers would not stay too long in their communities. In their book about creating healthy communities, Ricks, Charlesworth, Bellefeuille, and Field (1999) discuss that identification with community and other members, prompts shared visions and goals. They conclude that identification with community fosters a desire to stay in the community rather than move on (Ricks et al.). These participants appear to agree with Ricks et al. conclusion that if Regional Social Workers isolate themselves, they likely will not connect to the community, and will leave after a short period of time.

Regional Social Workers provide a range of social services to individuals and families in small Yukon communities. All the participants described their preference to be generalist practitioners. The personal attributes described by the participants as essential for Regional Social Workers to be generalist practitioners are flexibility and creativity.

*Relishing flexibility and creativity.* Ten of the 12 participants discussed the benefits of generalist practice. The key personal attributes used by the participants to describe generalist practice are flexibility and creativity.

All 10 participants described how they preferred the diversity and challenges offered by generalist practice. They relished providing a variety of social services to community members in small Yukon communities.
I think its mostly variety certainly. The challenges of trying to learn a whole bunch of program areas. I think flexibility so being able to jump from one program area to the other was another attribute I would think. Being creative because when you’re in a community, well when you’re doing social work there’s never usually a set answer to each of their areas or problems that you’re dealing with, with people. It’s often coming up with a solution that’s going to work for that particular family in that particular community.

The participant in the above example echoed the views of a few other participants whereby they valued learning, and were appreciative of learning new social service programs. Many participants described the importance of coordinating multiple social service programs to deliver to clients. They described how critical it is to be flexible to effectively integrate pertinent policies and procedures of diverse social services to try to meet the needs of clients. The benefit of being the sole social worker to coordinate the different services is that the participants did not have to rely on other service providers to deliver specific social services. As generalist practitioners, Regional Social Workers can be flexible and creative to try to ensure program policies and procedures meet the needs of clients. One participant described this as being adaptable, a personal attribute related to flexibility and creativity.

I appreciated the diversity of generalist practice while practicing in Ross River. My job was never mundane, and I gained considerable experience as I learned how to deliver an array of statutory and non-statutory social services. I further appreciated the opportunity to provide a range of services under particular program areas. For example,
under alcohol and drug services, I counseled individual clients, and worked with many community members on a two-year project to plan and implement a residential alcohol and drug healing camp.

Several participants described how generalist practice is less rigid than specialist practice, which involves social workers gaining knowledge and skills to provide one social service. These participants said that the policies and procedures for each social service area they are responsible for should be interpreted to meet the needs of clients.

I just think there’s a lot to be said for the generalist practice. I certainly have enjoyed it and continue to enjoy it. It’s farther removed from bureaucracy which is, in my mind, not a bad thing, and it’s more grassroots in nature. You feel like you’re building something versus in a system that is so rigid and so inflexible, and I think it takes a certain skill to be able to function without that insulation of the bureaucracy.

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I think flexibility in understanding and interpreting the policies, procedures, and saying, you know, trying to fit that to community standards, that’s what I mean. So a policy and practice standard in Whitehorse would mean one outcome based on the community’s expectations and standards, but in this community or in another community, it may form different outcomes where it’s not ever going to, you know, you’re not compromising ethics.
The above examples suggest that the participants welcome the opportunity to coordinate a variety of social services. Even if they coordinate social services with other service providers in their communities, it is often easier to contact other people to organize meetings. Sometimes, coordination entails contacting other service providers in one building. For example, the Regional Social Worker may arrange a child protection meeting with the First Nation social program staff by simply walking across the street, and talking to the Social Director, Family Support Worker, Community Education Liaison Coordinator, and NNADAP (addictions) Worker to confirm the date, time, and location for the meeting. In larger cities, arranging meetings tends to be more time consuming as the service providers work in different areas of the city, and represent several different agencies, each with its own mandate and program priorities. Occasionally, the program priorities conflict, and considerable meeting time is consumed to resolve interagency disputes.

Several participants described the importance of being flexible to support their community. If a particular task was required to fulfill a community need or request, the participants willingly complied with the request. For example, one participant described the honour he felt for being asked to sit with the body of a deceased person while waiting for the funeral home personnel to arrive from Whitehorse. I recall contributing food to potlatches, along with many other community members who cooked and served food.

The lack of specialized social services in small Yukon communities compels Regional Social Workers to be resourceful, and to “think outside the box”. Several participants described the value of being creative to find solutions to social problems.
We have the ability here to be creative. To create that resource or to help set up that resource. It's a lot more laid back environment and you have the ability to be more creative. If that resource is not here, we'll make it or we'll work around it or, you know, we'll do something with it.

One participant described the importance of both flexibility and creativity to meet the individual needs of clients. This participant explained the ineffectiveness of cutting and pasting social problems into models to be used for all clients. She argued simple and generic social service programs do not address complex social problems that individuals experience differently.

A few participants described the importance of being flexible to adjust their social service priorities to those of the broader community.

In terms of the personal attributes, I think the other thing is that, having grown up in a smaller community, is recognizing that the community itself has to build their own capacity to resolve or address issues specific to the community.

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The other thing is, as I practiced social work, I learned, often the hard way, but the idea is to take the community’s priorities and to work my stuff into that. So just changing my framework and supporting the community’s initiatives made kind of a, I think it would be presumptuous to call it a partnership, but certainly increased the amount of cooperation people displayed towards me because of
the kind of support I was showing for the community’s priorities. And for the right of the community to set their own priorities.

The participants in the preceding examples realize community members are aware of the social problems in their communities, and have ideas about how to address many of these problems. In small Yukon communities, the social problems are often visible, and the entire community is impacted when there are tragedies, such as alcohol related deaths. Most of the participants conveyed it was essential to work with people, rather than working apart from people with the omnipotent view that social workers know what the problems are and can “fix” them. One participant summarized the inclusive practice approach of working with community members.

I think that brings me to another point is the idea of the “expert” versus the “generalist”, and that the “expert” mentality doesn’t work in a small community. The kind of thing I believe that worked for me in my small community was being receptive to learning, being receptive to taking advice and guidance from others. The whole idea of empowering clients is no different than the idea of empowering the community as a whole as far as figuring out what’s going to work, and how are we going to address this situation.

One participant noted the difficulty of generalist practice is balancing the demands of the social control functions of the job, such as child protection, with the support aspects of the job, like family counselling. This participant added it is
challenging to recruit Regional Social Workers who can manage both statutory and non-statutory social services.

The personal attributes of flexibility and creativity are analogous to the personal attribute of independence. The ability to think of new solutions, or to modify current practice approaches without direct supervision or minimal guidance requires Regional Social Workers to practice with considerable independence.

*Thriving on a sense of independence.* Regional Social Workers practicing in small Yukon communities are geographically distant from their supervisors who are based in Whitehorse. The closest community to Whitehorse is about a one hour drive, and the farthest community to drive to is about six hours from Whitehorse. The lack of an on-site supervisor contributes to Regional Social Workers making decisions on their own, or with minimal consultation with a supervisor.

Ten of the 12 participants discussed independence in terms of autonomy. They equated autonomy to having the authority to work with families across a number of program areas. For example, Regional Social Workers provide multiple social services to families, in such areas as social assistance, home care, and youth justice. In these cases, they do not have to rely on other service providers to make decisions, and to take action about what services they will or will not provide to families.

It’s very difficult to experience the kind of autonomy and freedom to practice in a large centre than what you can do in a small community. There’s really nothing like it, and for people who are self-motivated and self-monitored, that kind of autonomy is very appealing.
The participants essentially do not depend on other people to make decisions. If the participants require advice or guidance, it is incumbent upon them to decide when and who to approach to help them make a decision. The implication to practicing independently in small Yukon communities is that many important decisions are made by Regional Social Workers instead of coming from top management down to the front-line level of Regional Social Workers. The hierarchical system appears to be less evident in small Yukon communities.

One possible exception to independent decision-making is in the area of child welfare. Several First Nations in small communities have protocol agreements with the Yukon Department of Health and Social Services whereby Regional Social Workers must notify and consult with First Nations when they are addressing child protection concerns with families. However, even in communities with protocols, Regional Social Workers ultimately decide whether to bring a child into the Director’s care under territorial legislation. Likewise, Regional Social Workers are expected to consult with supervisors, yet, the decision to bring a child into care is often made after-hours when the supervisors may not be available.

A few participants said how consultation with supervisors in the area of child protection is paramount due to the complexity of child welfare matters.

I don’t think child welfare is something that you should do independently because the seriousness of the decisions you have to make, regardless if I was working here or in a city, that supervisor in terms of child welfare is vital for me to do the job in a way that I feel comfortable with, and knowing that a
decision was the right one, or if it’s not, getting that feedback and knowing what I need to do to change it.

These participants concluded that Regional Social Workers need to regularly seek supervision, and to consult with co-workers when delivering child welfare services.

Although Regional Social Workers are solely responsible to provide statutory social services in their respective communities according to the Yukon Department of Health and Social Services’ policies and procedures, Regional Social Workers frequently work with other service providers in their communities, and natural helpers.

A few participants equated independence to being able to live in isolation, and to devise their own forms of entertainment or leisure activities. Most Regional Social Workers practice in small communities consisting of small populations and limited indoor places to go for leisure or recreational activities.

A sense of independence in that because you are away from a lot of, well, big city centres and you’re out here and it’s pretty, not as remote as it could be but it’s still remote, so being able to spend time on your own, and forge a life for yourself in a small setting.

I recall trying new leisure activities in Ross River, including radio bingo and stick-gambling. It was important to participate in activities and events that were available in Ross River in order to have a social outlet separate from work.
**Additional Findings**

The four additional findings are from my review of the transcribed data. The first finding is that the personal attribute themes are interconnected. For example, relishing flexibility and creativity is interconnected to thriving on a sense of independence, whereby Regional Social Workers routinely think of creative solutions to solve problems without the help of other people.

The second finding is the convergence of the personal attributes for both former and current Regional Social Workers. In general, the personal attributes deemed significant by former Regional Social Workers did not appear to change once former Regional Social Workers left their positions. Only one former Regional Social Worker described a divergent point from the latter finding. This former Regional Social Worker concluded that she thought it would be difficult to return to a small Yukon community, and not experience as much privacy, or separation between her professional and personal lives that she experiences in her current job. The third finding is that the personal attributes the participants discussed about themselves are also the attributes they would consider important if they were in a position to hire Regional Social Workers.

The last finding is that all four personal attribute themes are discussed in the final section of the literature review on social work practice, and the personal attributes of social workers in small, rural, and northern communities. This literature review section discusses three key social work practice areas applicable to social work in small, rural, and northern communities.
The first personal attribute theme, willingness to establish relationships, is discussed in the literature under the first practice area, relationships. Collier (1993), Ginsberg (1993), and Ingebrigston (1992) agree that social workers practicing in rural or northern communities need to be accepted by the community before they can effectively provide social services to residents.

The second personal attribute theme, willingness to maintain boundaries and be visible, is discussed in the literature under the second practice area, dual/multiple relationships. Social workers purchase local goods and services, and participate in community events to be accepted by the wider community. In doing so, social workers naturally form dual or multiple relationships. Miller (1994) and Peterson (1996) explain dual or multiple relationships in rural settings are hard to avoid since options for services are limited and often social workers are very involved in their communities.

The third personal attribute theme, relishing flexibility and creativity, is discussed in the literature under the third practice area, generalist/ ecological practice. Several authors surmise social workers that develop practice methods outside of their agency policies to meet the needs of the community, instead of the bureaucratic needs of the organization, are viewed by community residents to be effective and helpful service providers (Barter, 1996; Collier, 1993; Ingebrigston, 1992; Martinez-Brawley, 1990; Zapf, 1984, 1991). The needs of the community are met by social workers creatively thinking how to deliver a variety of social services, without rigidly adhering to agency policies.
The fourth personal attribute theme, thriving on a sense of independence, is discussed in the literature under the third practice area, generalist/ecological practice. Schmidt (2002) found that northern social work practice is less dependent on rules and measures of bureaucratic accountability, for northern workers are farther removed from centralized management structures. The impact of being away from centralized management structures is social workers in small, rural, and northern communities work in isolation from their supervisors and colleagues. Therefore, it is crucial for social workers in these communities to be self-motivated and self-directed (Ginsberg, 1993; Ingebrigtsen, 1992).

For ease of reference, Table 1 illustrates the four personal attribute themes discussed by the participants, and the applicable social work practice areas from the literature.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Attribute Themes</th>
<th>Social Work Practice Areas</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to establish relationships</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Willingness to maintain boundaries and be visible</td>
<td>Dual/Multiple Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility and creativity</td>
<td>Generalist/Ecological Practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>Generalist/Ecological Practice</td>
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Summary

Both former and current Regional Social Workers discussed the primary importance of establishing relationships in small Yukon communities. In small Yukon communities, many people tend to want to know if the Regional Social Worker is personable and approachable, before finding out the worker’s credentials. As Regional Social Workers form relationships with community members, a parallel process of
maintaining boundaries is also transpiring to ensure Regional Social Workers do not enter into possible conflicts of interest given the considerable power and authority they have as social workers.

Regional Social Workers provide an array of social services to community members. As generalist practitioners and in lieu of referring clients to other resources that are not readily available, Regional Social Workers strive to be flexible and creative to think of possible solutions or interventions to various problems. Often, Regional Social Workers need to make quick decisions on their own. On occasion, Regional Social Workers rely on natural helpers to assist them in their work with individuals and families.

The four personal attribute themes of former and current Regional Social Workers outlined above are the willingness to establish relationships, willingness to maintain boundaries and be visible, relishing flexibility and creativity, and thriving on a sense of independence.

The common personal attributes of former and current Regional Social Workers in small Yukon communities accentuate the unique aspects of practicing social work in small, northern communities. Further research may find if there are distinct differences in the personal attributes of social workers practicing in small, northern communities compared to social workers practicing in urban settings.

The participants described how their personal attributes helped them to practice social work in small Yukon communities. The four common personal attributes discussed above may help the employer of Regional Social Workers to recruit social workers who have the same or similar personal attributes. The challenge of the
employer is to complete a comprehensive assessment on a job applicant to have relevant information to make a decision about whether to hire the applicant.

The final chapter discusses a few suggestions on how the employer of Regional Social Workers may be able to enhance their current recruitment methods for hiring competent social workers. The addition of new hiring methods may effectively identify social workers with the personal attributes suitable to practice in small Yukon communities.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

Social workers throughout the world practice in diverse regions, and provide various social services to people, or work in related areas, such as in education or policy development. Before starting this research, I reflected on the reasons that individuals choose to become social workers. After further thinking about my practice experiences as a social worker in northern parts of Canada, I speculated what it is about who I am as a person that led me to practice social work in a small Yukon community. My interest in the Yukon stems from my former practice experience in Ross River, Yukon, and my continued residency in the Yukon. Speculation about who decides to become a social worker was converted into a concrete plan to research what it is about other social workers that led them to practice in small Yukon communities. Specifically, the purpose of this research was to explore the personal attributes that help or support Regional Social Workers to practice in small Yukon communities.

To conduct my research for this thesis, I completed individual interviews with former and current Regional Social Workers. A descriptive phenomenological method used for my research enabled the participants to not only list the personal attributes important to them, but allowed the participants to describe how each personal attribute helped or supported their practice. Their descriptions about personal attributes also yielded information about what it is like to live and practice as a social worker in a small Yukon community. For example, the participants’ discussion about the personal attribute, willingness to be visible, revealed that Regional Social Workers have
unplanned or unscheduled contact with clients on their days off from work. The participants’ discussion of the personal attribute, flexibility, illustrated that Regional Social Workers try to ensure that program policies and procedures fit the needs of the community. For example, a Regional Social Worker may adapt the policies and procedures for alcohol and drug services to be offered in wall tents in a wilderness setting, rather than in a traditional office setting. The participants provided rich data about social work practice in small Yukon communities.

Through thematic analysis, four personal attributes were identified in the transcribed interviews with former and current Regional Social Workers. Four additional findings are extracted from the data. First, the personal attribute themes are interconnected. The second finding is the convergence of the personal attributes for both former and current Regional Social Workers. Thirdly, the personal attributes the participants described about themselves are also the attributes they would consider important if they were in a position to hire Regional Social Workers. The fourth finding is the personal attribute themes are discussed in the literature on social work practice, and the personal attributes of social workers in small, rural, or northern communities.

The four personal attribute themes are willingness to establish relationships, willingness to maintain boundaries and be visible, relishing flexibility and creativity, and thriving on a sense of independence. A summary of the main points follows each personal attribute theme.

Willingness to Establish Relationships:

- Personal attribute shared by all 12 Regional Social Workers.
• Important to meet as many community members as possible to be perceived as a personable and approachable person.

• Relationships forged with different community members helped the Regional Social Workers to engage clients, and to work with natural helpers.

• Better knowledge of families to intervene before crises occur – proactive rather than reactive.

*Willingness to Maintain Boundaries and Be Visible*

• Maintaining boundaries for self-care to reduce burn-out.

• Incumbent upon each Regional Social Worker to establish his or her own boundaries.

• Regional Social Workers aware that their professional and personal lives were viewed and judged by community members.

• In their role as a social worker at all times and in all places.

• If participants isolated themselves, they would not be able to stay long in their communities.

*Relishing Flexibility and Creativity*

• Critical to be flexible to ensure program policies and procedures meet the needs of clients, and community standards.

• Reflects generalist practice to creatively deliver a variety of social services.

• Opportunity to learn about several social service programs, rather than one program.

*Thriving on a Sense of Independence*

• Able to make decisions with minimal consultation with a supervisor.
• Synonymous with autonomy – when providing multiple services, Regional Social Workers do not have to rely on other service providers to make decisions about how to help clients.

• Able to live in isolation, and to devise own forms of leisure activities.

Policy/Practice Implications

This section discusses two policy/practice implications of the four personal attributes that help or support Regional Social Workers to practice in small Yukon communities. I combine the terms “policy” and “practice” because they are intertwined. First, policies are created, and are then implemented or followed in daily practice. The first policy/practice area describes the potential benefits of my research to the employer in recruitment of Regional Social Workers. The second policy/practice area describes the potential benefits of generalist practice in retention of Regional Social Workers.

The first social work policy/practice area potentially impacted by my research is how the four personal attributes are linked to recruitment strategies for the employer to hire Regional Social Workers. The importance of identifying and understanding the personal attributes of Regional Social Workers is echoed by Harris and Brannick (1999) and Harvey and Stalker (2003). As briefly discussed in the literature review, Harris and Brannick found that successful employers know the qualities and characteristics of their ideal applicant. Similarly, Harvey and Stalker conclude that management must devote time to understanding the attributes of people who flourish in the position being filled. The question provoked by knowing the attributes of the ideal
applicant is generating recruitment strategies to select applicants with the preferred attributes.

The next section examines the current recruitment processes to hire Regional Social Workers, and offers suggestions to augment the current recruitment strategies in order to find applicants with the preferred personal attributes.

Regional Social Workers are employed by the Yukon Government, Department of Health and Social Services. The current process used by the Yukon Government to hire Regional Social Workers is the structured interview with questions divided into three areas: knowledge, abilities, and personal suitability. Generally, the abilities and personal suitability interview questions are designed to explore the applicants’ previous work experiences through examples of behaviours relevant to the position. This type of question is based on the notion that the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour. The applicants may be asked to give examples of how they dealt with various scenarios in their current or past jobs. All of the applicants are asked the same questions, and the applicants provide both oral and written responses to the interview questions. The responses are assigned points, and the applicants with the highest points are offered Regional Social Worker positions, pending reference checks. Previous or current supervisors are contacted to complete reference checks on the applicants. Although it is beyond the scope of this research to determine the effectiveness of structured interviews and reference checks to hire Regional Social Workers, it is useful to consider other recruitment strategies to assess applicants.

One other recruitment strategy to assess applicants is psychological testing. Psychological tests can be used to assess the personality traits of the applicants.
(Brown, Brooks, & Associates, 1996; Lin & Kleiner, 2004). The term “personality traits” is synonymous to the term “personal attributes” used in this research to describe the characteristics of former and current Regional Social Workers. From personal experience with hiring employees, it is difficult to formulate interview questions that adequately assess the personal attributes of applicants. The inclusion of psychological testing combined with structured interviews to assess applicants may generate sufficient information for the employer to decide which applicants to hire for Regional Social Worker positions.

The literature on psychological testing is extensive from both psychological (focus on individuals) and sociological (focus on how individuals behave with other people) approaches. The literature is also controversial in terms of the effectiveness of personality testing to measure if a person is suitable for a particular job. Further research is warranted to study the effectiveness of personality testing to assess the personal attributes of applicants.

A second recruitment strategy is work-samples. The purpose is to simulate as closely as possible the actual conditions of a job (Lin & Kleiner, 2004; Ryan & Tippins, 2004). Specific job skills are measured using the actual performance of tasks that are similar to those performed on the job. Ryan and Tippins state work-samples use several trained raters, and detailed rating guides to classify and evaluate behaviours.

Work-samples may yield interesting results, but pose challenges for the employer to create simulated scenarios to evaluate behaviours. Behavioural simulations could be used to evaluate the personal attributes of Regional Social Workers. The
personal attributes for Regional Social Workers usually require them to work with community members in dual or multiple roles. As was found in my research, working with community members involves the willingness of Regional Social Workers to establish relationships with many community members. These relationships are complex, requiring Regional Social Workers to interact with people, such as at work, at the post office, and at a potlatch.

It may be possible to devise work-samples that measure how applicants establish relationships with a variety of community members in different situations and locations. For example, a work-sample could evaluate how an applicant establishes relationships with influential community leaders, such as Chief and Council in a predominantly First Nation community. Raters could evaluate if the applicant is respectful, and also whether the applicant is willing to ask questions to become more familiar with First Nations culture.

Given that it takes time to connect to people, and to establish relationships, work-samples could be evaluated over time, and in various locations in small Yukon communities. The evaluation of applicants over time definitely protracts the hiring process and the costs, however, may help the employer to recruit suitable and competent social workers to practice in small Yukon communities.

Another work-sample is to evaluate the flexibility and creativity of an applicant as he or she interprets various program policies and procedures to meet the needs of community members. For example, a simulation could depict how an applicant working in a small Yukon community with limited resources mobilizes natural helpers
to teach parenting skills to a group of at-risk mothers. The evaluators could assess the applicant’s effectiveness to enlist the support of natural helpers.

A final recruitment strategy is an assessment centre. An assessment centre combines interviews, psychological tests, and work-samples into an integrated evaluation package (Lin & Kleiner, 2004). An assessment centre may be a useful option when hiring a large number of applicants. The combination of three recruitment strategies may help the employer of Regional Social Workers to select applicants with the preferred personal attributes to practice in small Yukon communities.

The four personal attributes described by the participants as helpful and supportive to their practice may be considered by the employer of Regional Social Workers to be the preferred personal attributes to practice in small Yukon communities. A limitation of this research is the need for further study with the employer before determining if those four personal attributes are the preferred characteristics of the employer’s ideal applicant.

Incorporating the four personal attributes into recruitment strategies, and evaluating the effectiveness of these personal attributes to recruit and retain suitable Regional Social Workers may produce long-term benefits. By the employer clearly knowing what personal attributes they prefer when hiring Regional Social Workers, and how to evaluate if an applicant has the preferred personal attributes, may decrease the time and money the employer invests in recruitment.

The second policy/practice area pertains to how two of the four personal attributes help or support the retention of Regional Social Workers. My research found that all of the Regional Social Workers described the benefits of generalist practice.
They believed that generalist practice enabled them to be flexible and creative. They preferred the diversity and challenges offered by generalist practice. What distinguishes Regional Social Workers from other social workers in the Yukon is that they are generalists.

Regional Social Workers are responsible to deliver a variety of social services in their communities, including statutory services, such as child welfare and youth justice. In Whitehorse, social services are delivered by specialized offices or offices that provide one social service to clients. The offices are located in different buildings. Each separate social service is delivered by a different group of social workers. The policies and procedures manuals for each social service are not connected to one another. These differences are experienced daily by Regional Social Workers as they deliver a variety of social services to the same families. That is, they may provide child welfare and social assistance services to one family from two different and distinct manuals.

The above information of how social services are delivered in small communities outside of Whitehorse, and how social services are delivered in Whitehorse is relevant in terms of practice. Social workers in small communities or in Whitehorse follow the same standards, and program manuals. However, there is a difference in social work practice in small communities compared to social work practice in Whitehorse. For example, a Whitehorse social worker delivering child welfare services may assess that a family’s low income poses a considerable risk factor, and adds constant stress to the family. In this case, the Whitehorse social worker may decide to refer the family to the social assistance office located in a different area.
of the city. In a small community, the Regional Social Worker providing child welfare services to a family assesses the same risk factor, but he or she does not have to refer the family to another social worker. Instead, the Regional Social Worker is in a position to interpret social assistance policies and procedures to best meet the needs of this family as determined by the Regional Social Worker's family assessment. For example, the Regional Social Worker may have assessed that the parents' stress to try to finance the enrollment and equipment fees for their children to participate in organized sports may be ameliorated by the Regional Social Worker advising the parents that they were eligible for supplementary social assistance funds for their children to participate in leisure activities. The Whitehorse social worker delivering social assistance in Whitehorse may not have known that the parents' low income was a child protection risk factor, and that the parents were under considerable stress. As well, in small communities, the family does not have to repeat the same or similar information to two different social workers, nor does the family have to travel to two separate social service offices.

The preceding example reflects my finding where the Regional Social Workers described how important it is to be flexible and creative to effectively integrate pertinent policies and procedures of diverse social services for the benefit of clients. They surmised the personal attributes, flexibility and creativity, are critical to generalist practice.

To conclude, my research about the personal attributes that help or support Regional Social Workers to practice in small Yukon communities may assist the employer to gage if the four personal attributes can be utilized in various recruitment
strategies to hire the preferred applicants. Furthermore, the personal attributes, flexibility and creativity, are important for generalist practice, in that they help Regional Social Workers to think about how to use the policies and procedures of the variety of social services they deliver for the benefit of clients. Most Regional Social Workers prefer to be generalist practitioners. Future research is warranted to determine if the preference for generalist practice is one of the factors to help retain Regional Social Workers.

So what is the meaning of my research to you, the reader? I trust that the Regional Social Workers’ descriptions of their unique lived experiences helps you to understand what it means to practice social work in small Yukon communities. Most importantly, I hope my research provides a “voice” for Regional Social Workers, and for them to know that I have and will continue to think about their lived experiences for me to better understand social work in small Yukon communities.
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MEMORANDUM

To: Laverne Mackenzie  
4 Ruby Lane, Whitehorse, Yukon, Y1A 6G6

Glenn Schmidt  
Social Work Program

From: Alex Michalos, Chair,  
Research Ethics Board

Date: May 15, 2003

Re: 2003.0506.045  
What Helps You to Stay

Thank you for submitting the above noted proposal to the UNBC Research Ethics Board. Your proposal has been approved and you may proceed with your project. Please retain a copy of this letter for your records as you may be requested to provide it prior to your defense.

Good luck in your research.

Alex Michalos, Chair  
Research Ethics Board
APPENDIX B

Interview Questions for Former and Current Regional Social Workers

* to guide discussions during individual interviews

1. Discuss some of the reasons or factors that contributed to your decision to move to the north to practice in a small community?

2. How long did/have you practiced as a Regional Social Worker?

3. Describe some of your personal attributes or traits that you feel were/are essential or beneficial to your practice as a Regional Social Worker?

4. Tell me about a time when you felt a strong sense of accomplishment and satisfaction (for a job well done) where you helped an individual, family, or larger community. That is, you felt that you made a positive contribution or difference.
   a. Did you receive positive feedback for this from your co-workers, your supervisor or community members?
   b. What personal attributes influenced or contributed to this positive accomplishment?

5. **Former Regional Social Workers:** Discuss some of the reasons you decided to leave your position as the Regional Social Worker, and what led you to leave the community you worked in (if you moved at the same time you left your position)?

   **Current Regional Social Workers:** Discuss what helps you to stay to practice as a Regional Social Worker?

6. Outline the personal attributes that you would consider important if you were hiring a Regional Social Worker?
APPENDIX C

Research Participant Information Sheet

Laverne MacKenzie
4 Ruby Lane
Whitehorse, Yukon Y1A 6G6

June 2, 2003

Dear Participant:

My name is Laverne MacKenzie. I am a Masters student at the University of Northern British Columbia. I am conducting research into the understanding of personal attributes that help or support Regional Social Workers to practice in Yukon regional communities. This research is being used as part of a Masters thesis in Social Work. I am writing to ask you to participate in this research given your practice experience as a Regional Social Worker.

As part of my research, I will be conducting individual and group interviews with former or current Regional Social Workers who practiced in a regional community for 2 years or more. I will ask you to respond and to discuss 6 questions with me. Your participation will help employers recruit Regional Social Workers, and possibly other service providers, who are personally suited to practice in Yukon regional communities.

Before you agree to participate, please review the following information:

1. Your participation is completely voluntary.
2. You may withdraw at any time, or refuse to answer particular questions as part of the research project.
3. Your identity will not be revealed in the report.
4. The information you provide will be recorded via transcript and audio tape cassette, and will be treated confidentially. Audio tapes will be transcribed by a bonded transcription service in Alberta to maintain confidentiality. The transcriber will sign a confidentiality agreement.
5. Records will be stored in a locked cabinet in my residence and kept for 5 years after completion of my thesis. Audio tapes and transcripts will be destroyed after 5 years.
6. Information you provide will be used toward my Masters thesis, as outlined above.

If you have questions or require further information about this research project, please contact Laverne MacKenzie (collect) at (867) 393-4865, or my Thesis Supervisor, Dr. Glen Schmidt at (250) 960-6519.

If you have concerns or complaints about this research project, please contact the UNBC Vice President of Research at (250) 960-5820.
Please complete the attached consent form and retain a copy for your records.

Thank you.
APPENDIX D

Interview Consent Form

Participant’s Name (Please print): ___________________

1. I understand that I have been asked to express my views regarding personal attributes that help or support Regional Social Workers to practice in Yukon regional communities. I also understand that the information I provide will help employers recruit Regional Social Workers, and possibly other service providers, who are personally suited to practice in Yukon regional communities.

2. I understand that if I agree to participate, I will be asked 6 questions during individual and/or group interviews. I further understand that Laverne MacKenzie will be interviewing several former and current Regional Social Workers.

3. I understand that I have reviewed and received a copy of the Research Participant Information Sheet.

4. I understand that my interview(s) will be recorded and transcribed.

5. I understand that my identity will not be revealed in any report. Privacy and confidentiality will be protected. I also understand that my information will be used toward Laverne MacKenzie’s Masters thesis.

6. I understand that I may withdraw at any time, or refuse to answer particular questions as part of the research project.

I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I HAVE READ THE STATEMENTS ABOVE.

__________________________  __________________________  __________________________
Signature of Participant      Date                            Signature of Witness

__________________________  __________________________
Printed Name                Printed Name

If you would like to receive a copy of the research results, please provide your mailing address below:

Name:
Mailing Address:

If you have questions or require further information about this research project, please contact Laverne MacKenzie (collect) at (867) 393-4865, or my Thesis Supervisor, Dr. Glen Schmidt at (250) 960-6519.

If you have concerns or complaints about this research project, please contact the UNBC Vice President of Research at (250) 960-5820.

Thank you.
APPENDIX E

Response Examples of the Four Personal Attribute Themes

Willingness to Establish Relationships

(12 responses) Friendships established in the community were with long-term people that were from that community or had been in the community a long time, so just developing relationships with people like that, I think, affected people’s perceptions of our commitment to the community.///They saw me in the basis of a social person with friendships and in establishing the friendship network among some of the First Nations people, and some of the people who had longevity in the community, I was able to draw advice from people and I honestly think that was appreciated, that there were certainly people who believed I would listen, and take advice and didn’t come in with expert kind of self-image.///I think it’s very important that you establish a good working relationship with who and whatever resources.///And I notice that in our community where somebody new comes and they’re welcomed but there is a period of time that will take place before people will really accept them///And then once you’re accepted, a dynamic changes.///First Nations want workers to live in the community and take part in community activities. This cannot happen without workers getting emotionally involved on some level.///I think that I like trying to get to a further connection.///The idea of actually being out and spending a lot of time in the community, I think is something that people who are interested in doing rural work have to be comfortable with.///I think you have to have a general understanding of our relationships as a human being, and it makes it a lot easier for me knowing who I am, where I came from, where I’m going, what my purpose in life is, what’s the meaning of life, I’ve been able to develop those to my satisfaction, it helps me to be able to relate to people on a personal and professional level and I feel good about it.///I’ve seen over the years, a lot of young social workers coming out of university without a lot of life experience and, often times, they get caught up into the trap of relating to people according to the lowest common denominator of human relationships, which is usually power and control and money issues, so I think, of you can’t get beyond that you shouldn’t be serving people.///The first impressions are like really, really important in a small community and if you come in not knowing a lot of different cultural issues, people pick up on that real quick and that first impression could be pretty negative, and then that could really affect the rest of your service and your relationship with the community.///Relationships with clients outside of the framework of working with them because that’s definitely something which happens here – you’re either dealing with them on a social basis or you’re dealing with their partner, their sister, cousin, auntie, uncle.///Here you have the ability to take the time to establish relationships, so it’s not like you’re making it “them” and “us”, you’re involved in the community functions, and you get to know the people.///The work we do is because it’s all about relationships, so if you have the ability to make a relationship, establish a relationship and a really strong rapport, then we don’t really even have to have need for child protection in a sense because people have been coming to you before it gets to that crisis point.///It takes time to earn that trust to build that relationship with different
people.///The biggest accomplishment or satisfaction is forming those relationships, especially since it can be so difficult.///I think that I've been able to establish connections with other support people in the community, and I think because you're here and there's so few of you, you develop a relationship much faster than you would otherwise.///I think I've been able to adapt to what's here, and by being adaptable, I know the help I can get here, I know who to reach out to and bring them into play, and I think I understand the community norms of acceptability, which may not be the same as Whitehorse.///Ability to be able to engage with the community, and be able to work with the community in identifying what the community wants to address.///I think in recognizing that there are a number of tertiary supports, I mean these are the aunt and uncle that community members seem to go to for whatever reason.///I would informally go up and talk to them and talk to them in a fashion that wasn't punitive, wasn't judgmental, but just to engage and develop a relationship so that knowing that at some way down the road I was going to be actually sitting and engaging in a conversation with them, and talk about some things that I'm hearing.///I think the strength of doing this job is about individuals seeing us as supportive members of the community, not just as individuals who are here to be punitive and be authoritative and intrusive.///I feel like relationships are really what's going to matter in the end and the changes that want or hope for a family are going to come maybe. To me, there not necessarily going to come without the relationship but they're more than likely to happen if you can establish that kind of relationship.///You got to be able to become part of a community.

Willingness to Maintain Boundaries and Be Visible

(10 responses) In a small community, you're basically, I wouldn't say watched, but whatever service you're providing, that be child welfare, adoption or social assistance, if you're not consistent with one, it soon surfaces that you can lose your credibility fairly quickly, because people do talk.///What I need to do is actually leave the community more on weekends just so I can stop thinking about work.///In a smaller community you're under pretty strict controls and that could be good or bad. Everybody knows what you do so you've got to lead a pretty descent life.///I know a lot of social workers like to draw boundaries between their personal and professional life, it's a lot more difficult to do that in a smaller community and I don't really go out of my way to try and do that.///You certainly have to have good boundaries as well because of the work you do, but I think you have to be involved with the community and the people here.///I establish good boundaries for myself, I recognize the benefit of self-care, and I know that if I want to stay out here, I need to do that.///When I'm here after work and on weekends and I see kids that I'm working with, it doesn't stop those wheels from turning, and then you're constantly thinking about work and it's not always happy things that you're thinking about, so that's one of the things I find the most difficult is that it doesn't shut off, so in order to do the job, you need to recognize that and set good boundaries.///You are going to be watched and everyone's going to know what you're doing so I think having awareness of that and making some choices in your life because of that.///I think I have the ability to disengage from my work as well, when I finish work, I can switch roles quite well.///In a smaller community you're also a lot more visible and I think that can be a challenge, and I've certainly found it to be a
challenge in the past, especially when you’re working with families where you have to be fairly intrusive, and you have to really assert what you believe are some of the things that are important for them to address in order to ensure their children are being protected and are safe, that you’re under that scrutiny as well as in the community at large.///I think even more conscious of how you’re perceived by the community as a parent.///Once you’re identified as the social worker in the community, it’s very hard to sort of bring in the other dimension of yourself because the community will see you first and foremost as the social worker, depending on the size of the community and what other supports are in there, but basically I’ve found that to be true in all the communities I’ve worked in.///You’ve got to have a pretty thick skin because if you’re going to get in a smaller community, and if you’re going to put yourself out there in the smaller community, then you’re going to have to be cognizant of the fact that not everybody’s going to be supportive of you.///If you’re focusing on child protection and neglect issues and stuff and you’re running into them in the grocery store all the time that would be difficult because then people would feel they were scrutinized all the time.///I think having my own family would just mean they’re more people to consider in that privacy issue, and more opportunities probably for boundaries to be explained – kids are playing with other kids at school and what if that’s the client family, all of those things I think would make it more challenging to deal with.

Relishing Flexibility and Creativity

(10 responses) The other thing is, as I practiced social work, I learned, often the hard way, but the idea is to take the community’s priorities and to work my stuff into that, particularly things like alcoholism, alcohol treatment for people, the idea of wilderness programs, that kind of thing, and that, if child protection was my priority and alcohol recovery was the community’s priority, then those two things really needed to intertwine instead of compete.///In a larger centre, you’re a specialist in child protection area, young offender area, whatever the area may be, whereas in a community, just by the nature of your job description, you do have a broader mandate, so that holds some appeal for some people and some fear for other people, and I think it takes somebody who is a holistic thinker and likes to look at things from a number of perspectives and fit the pieces together.///The idea of the “expert” versus the “generalist”, and that the “expert” mentality doesn’t work in a small community. The kind of thing I believe that worked for me in my small community was being receptive to learning, being receptive to taking advice, and guidance from others, and incorporating that.///You feel like you can make a difference by being flexible and responsive to the issues that face you instead of having the canned response, and when the response doesn’t need to be so standardized, I have a strong belief that you can be more effective.///If you’re innovative and creative, this is the position for you.///I think we have more flexibility which I think is really good.///I think flexibility in understanding and interpreting the policies, procedures, and trying to fit that to community standards, so in this community or in another community, it may form different outcomes.///Being able to access resources, and being a good problem-solver from an internal perspective.///Flexibility means listening to what the community needs are, taking policy and procedure into perspective but really looking at what’s viable.///I really
enjoy being a generalist, and having the opportunity to be able to learn different things, and to be able to work in 14 different job areas in each particular day.///It’s a lot more laid back environment and you have the ability to be more creative, or to have patience because change is very small.///The ability to be creative with that resource, if it’s not here, we’ll make it or we’ll work around it.///There are benefits to different cultures, and I love learning about it, and I think it makes me become a more flexible person, and a more understanding person.///Adaptability – must be able to use the tools at hand.///The mindset of people living in more of the northern or isolated communities is much different, there’s a stronger reliance on each other, and that can be utilized I think quite effectively in social work practice.///The regional worker generalist practice is something I think has lots of value in northern settings, and I think one of the things that would strengthen that is when we look at academic institutions, and their ability to promote those kinds of workers. I believe quite strongly that generalist practice will be an entity in northern communities for lots of reasons, both financially, and because it’s less intrusive to a community, it’s more palatable with communities. It’s farther removed from bureaucracy, and it’s more grassroots in nature. You feel like you’re building something versus in a system that is so rigid and so inflexible, and I think it takes a certain skill to be able to function without that insulation of the bureaucracy.///I think flexibility so being able to jump from one program area to the other.///Being creative because when you’re in a community doing social work there’s never usually a set answer to each of their areas or problems that you’re dealing with, with people.///The ability to define I guess what’s really the issues you need to attend to, and what issues you can let the community figure out for themselves – being flexible.///Be able to use the system to help people.

Thriving on a Sense of Independence

(10 responses) It’s very difficult to experience the kind of autonomy and freedom to practice in a large centre than what you can do in a small community. There’s really nothing like it, and for people who are self-motivated and self-monitored, that kind of autonomy is very appealing.///If you’re self-motivated, this is the position for you. If you need a lot of close supervision, and not to say that we don’t need supervision, I would be careful about extending oneself in a position like this outside an area where you’re getting structured supervision.///Being able to solve your own problems, make your decisions without requiring a lot of support.///Knowing when you need to check in with someone, knowing in child protection when you need to be consulting.///If you can’t work independently then this isn’t the job for you.///I like that independence, and if I screw up, then I’ll expect the consequences, but if I do a good job then it’s nice to be left alone.///Ability to work on their own with limited supervision, a very self-motivated individual.///You certainly have to be able to know yourself well, and to be able to spend time alone, have hobbies and different things like that, especially during the wintertime here.///A sense of independence in that because you are away from big city centres, and it’s pretty remote, to be able to spend time on your own and forge a life for yourself in a small setting.///Must be able to work independently for long periods of time.///You’ve got to have some level of comfort with some of that decision making, or that consultation at a distance versus somebody there to be right by your
My experience was you were very responsible for your decisions, and you were making a lot of them, most of them independently. Your access to your supervisor was very limited. Someone who can work independently, although, I would now want to encourage a Regional Social Worker to find that support network somehow, be it through internet conferencing, connecting with other regional workers as much as you can, consulting with other regional workers around certain cases. You learn how to be self-sufficient, self-reliable, and self-driven. You have to be able to work in isolation, and be able to make decisions on your own.