



Experiences of homelessness: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

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Abstract

Previous research into homelessness has tended to focus on the demographics, survival needs and presumed disabilities of the homeless population, almost exclusively adopting quantitative methods. The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the subjective experience of homelessness from the perspective of six participants (5 males and 1 female), who were or had been homeless within the last year. Participants were asked to give their accounts during semi-structured interviews. The subsequent transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, where 3 superordinate themes were identified; The Impact of Homelessness, Coping with Homelessness and Positive Growth. Overall, the findings illustrate that homelessness is a complex process of severe and multiple losses, impacting self-esteem, identity, relationships and psychological well-being. Participants also revealed homelessness to be an arduous journey of personal transformation, achieving positive growth through enduring hardship and overcoming adversity. The findings are compared to previous research and future directions are suggested.

KEY WORDS:	HOMELESSNESS	INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS	IDENTITY	POSITIVE POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH	SELF-ESTEEM
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Introduction

Homelessness continues to be a serious cause for health and social concern in the UK despite considerable efforts to reduce street counts over recent years (DCLG, 2010). The latest Government statistics show that the number of individuals made homeless has increased substantially since the economic downturn in 2007 with increases of up to 30% (DCLG, 2011). It is well documented that the homeless population represent the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people in society, having the poorest mental and physical health prognosis (Liu *et al.*, 2006); greater exposure to physical and sexual abuse (Gelberg *et al.*, 2000); significantly higher rates of suicide behaviours (Shaw *et al.*, 1999); histories of substance misuse (Goering *et al.*, 2002) and an increased sense of insecurity, fear, and both physical and psychological isolation (Dordick, 1997). If homeless services are to provide adequate provisions for not only the spatial, relational and material aspects of homelessness but also the psychological, it is imperative that the subjective experience of homelessness and its impact at the individual level are understood and informed by psychological research. The following review provides a contextual framework for the current study whilst evaluating the existing body of relevant literature.

Background

Homelessness is most commonly equated with people 'sleeping rough', which although represents the most visible of the homeless population, they are in fact the minority. The vast majority of homeless people exist out of sight in hostels, squats or in temporary and insecure conditions (ODPM, 2002), with statistics estimating that there are around 400,000 homeless people in the UK at any point in time (Crisis & New Policy Institute, 2003). In the broader sense, homelessness literally refers to anyone without a home (Farrington & Robinson, 1999). However, Hodgetts *et al.* (2007) state that homelessness is more than a 'bricks and mortar' issue of material deprivation, it is also about the relationships between the homeless and the domiciled, the economically privileged and the marginalized (p.711). Warnes *et al.*, (2003) further emphasise that homelessness is more than simple rooflessness, 'home is not just a physical space, it also has a legal and social dimension. A home provides roots, identity, sense of belonging and a place of emotional wellbeing. Homelessness is about the loss of these.' (p.2)

A facilitative step in understanding the experience of homelessness and its psychological impact has come from the recent acknowledgement that conceptually, homelessness is 'process' rather than 'situation' (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2007; Martijn & Sharpe, 2006). This shift provoked a wealth of psychological and sociological research exploring pathways into homelessness, which has highlighted its multidimensional nature (Clapham, 2003; Hodgetts *et al.*, 2007). A comprehensive multi-method study by Morrell-Bellai *et al.*, (2000) found that homelessness is most commonly precipitated by the interaction of macro (structural) and micro (individual) factors. Macro factors include vulnerability to poverty, unemployment and lack of affordable housing. Micro factors include traumatic life events, job loss, relationship breakdown, mental illness, leaving institutional settings and substance abuse. This interplay of macro and micro factors as antecedents of homelessness has been supported throughout the homeless literature (Stein & Gelberg, 1995; Tessler *et al.*, 2001; Toohey *et al.*, 2004). This illustrates that the homeless population is markedly

heterogeneous, people become homeless for often complex and multiple reasons, which means that the solutions and support required are complex and thus the subjective experience of homelessness is likely to vary considerably between individuals (Anderson & Tulloch, 2000).

Given the subjectivity of lived experiences, it is perhaps surprising that the majority of research into homelessness either employs quantitative methods or is sociologically rather than psychologically motivated. Farrington and Robinson (1999) note how academic attention has usually taken the form of questionnaire surveys fixated with the survival needs (Cohen *et al.*, 1988) demographics (Rossi *et al.*, 1987) and presumed disease aspects of the homeless (Fischer & Breakey, 1991). Such quantitative research is undoubtedly valuable in highlighting which factors may be important in becoming, enduring and exiting homelessness; however, they limit the content of what participants can disclose as the factors of interest have been predetermined by the researcher. Furthermore, quantitative methods do not reveal insight into the personal experience of homelessness and thus lack the depth of meaning that may be ascribed by individual perspectives. The current paucity of psychological attention to homelessness provoked the American Psychological Association (APA) to commission a Presidential Task Force on '*Psychology's Contribution to End Homelessness*' (APA, 2010), which called for psychologists worldwide to use their breadth of understanding and research skills to substantiate the existing body of literature. If homelessness is to be addressed and understood in its entirety, then psychological endeavours and in particular qualitative approaches are thus warranted.

Homelessness has been described as an isolating, traumatic and destructive experience that negatively impacts individuals psychologically through the experience of stress, stigma, abandonment, low self-esteem and poor quality social relations (Renedo & Jovchelovitch, 2007). Positioned as inferior in day to day life, homeless individuals are aware of their low status (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2006), and are reminded of this by the frequent denigration in face-to-face interactions with the domiciled (Lee & Farrell, 2003; Snow & Anderson, 1987). A qualitative sociological study by Farrugia (2010) describes how popular opinion and media representations construct a discourse of the homeless as morally suspect, irresponsible, dangerous, dirty and obscene. Consequently, homeless people become objects of avoidance, leading to isolation and thus withdrawal from society, with the individual left feeling ontologically worthless and ashamed with the embodied feelings of powerlessness and suffering (Farrugia, 2010; Kidd, 2007).

The impact that stigmatization and social exclusion has on the psychological well-being of the homeless has been further reported by Goodman *et al.* (1991), where an individual's sense of self-worth and existential meaning are depleted due to their lack of secure relationships with other people and growth-promoting social networks. This corresponds with the findings of Tosi (2005) which highlighted the premium that homeless people place on meaningful relationships as a resource for both material and emotional support, reintegration and for re-establishing balance and meaning in their lives.

One of the most consistently salient issues arising from social marginalization and exclusion is the impact it has on an individual's identity, which has been documented

extensively across the qualitative literature. Williams and Stickley (2010) conducted a narrative study using thematic analysis of interviews from eight homeless individuals in the English Midlands, focusing on identity claims and mental health. Their results suggested that the experience, trauma and indignity of homelessness caused participant identities to be renegotiated, both on a personal and social level. At the social level, identities become 'spoiled' due to discrimination by society, which in turn impacts negatively on their self-esteem and psychological well-being.

Similarly, Riggs and Coyle's (2002) case study accounts of four homeless young adults from the English Midlands found homelessness to induce a loss of personhood and identity; referring directly to Breakwell's (1986, 1996) Identity Process Theory (IPT) to explain how homelessness causes a threat to identity and how this translates into the observed coping strategies used by homeless individuals. IPT usefully combines Tajfel's (1982) theory of group relations with a theory of identity as a dynamic cognitive process, based on accommodation and assimilation in regards to four distinct principles that define desirable end-states; self-esteem, self-efficacy, distinctiveness and continuity (Breakwell, 1986). Identity threat is conceptualised as being when at least one of the principles of identity are challenged by new material which is incongruent with existing structures (such as 'being homeless'). This model is useful for exploring identity threat in the experience of homelessness as it takes into account social group membership, however it is only referenced here as a framework for understanding, as suggested by Riggs and Coyle (2002).

A further qualitative study of homelessness comes from Boydell *et al.* (2000), where in-depth interviews with Canadian homeless adults indicated that the self is a process that is continually developing and that homelessness serves to discredit previous identities through the loss of "...the accoutrements (meaningful work, relationships, and a place to call one's own) that are critical to helping individuals define themselves" (p.35). Participant narratives referred to their identities from three perspectives, the past, present and future. The 'Past' self reflected how participants preserved their identities by holding pride in their former occupations, a self-concept now lost to them. The 'Present' became the 'Devalued' self for the longer-term homeless, which focused on stigma, loss of self-esteem and social discomfort. Boydell *et al.* concluded that participants resisted their 'Present' homeless self-concept to facilitate the transformation of a 'Future' self, based on the desire for a non-homeless situation, a valued identity and future well-being.

Psychological studies into homelessness have also outlined various strategies of coping employed by participants. Folkman and Lazarus' (1980, 1985) coping model of distress states that there are two types of coping strategy, 'approach' or problem-focused, which refer to the efforts to change the problem or situation causing the distress (e.g. information-seeking, searching for housing or employment) and also 'avoidant' or emotion-focused, which serve to reduce emotional distress (e.g. using alcohol or drugs, withdrawing from the situation and denial). In Williams and Stickley's (2010) study, the use of illicit substances was used by participants as a way of suppressing their mental and emotional pain, an emotion-focused strategy, which has been demonstrated by quantitative research as a maladaptive coping mechanism within the homeless population (Goering *et al.*, 2002; Fischer & Breakey, 1991).

A further concept that may be considered a coping strategy is how exclusion from mainstream society led to the formation of social bonds and a community ethos between many individuals and homeless others (Williams & Stickley, 2010). Despite being based on shared rejection, these bonds were purported as being the only respite and sense of belonging participants could now access, which has been found in relation to the chronically homeless by several researchers (Snow & Anderson, 1993; Stickley *et al.* 2005). However, findings from Boydell *et al.* (2000) provide evidence of contrasting group relations, where participants negatively appraised other homeless people and distinguished themselves from them with phrases such as “I’m not like them” (p.32). In this way, a hierarchy within homelessness was constructed with participants positioning themselves in superior strata to others, as a means of coping and maintaining a positive sense of self. Interestingly, Bentley (1997) found both the above strategies in a grounded theory analysis of interviews with homeless men. Some researchers have postulated that it is the longevity of homelessness that influences the strategy employed. Both Snow and Anderson (1987) and Farrington and Robinson (1999) found that generally, people who had been homeless for less than two years dissociated from the homeless label and homeless others, whereas long-term homeless individuals identified with others within the homeless group. This research indicates that the social bonds between homeless individuals and the way they define and see themselves may be connected, whilst highlighting the exclusionary nature of homelessness which serves to marginalize those involved. Exploring these experiences may help us better understand how homelessness impacts the self and how this threat is perceived and dealt with by different individuals.

Another prominent concept to be identified in the literature was how the lack of safe physical space had psychological repercussions. In Bentley *et al.*'s (1997) study, participants described how theft of possessions and being attacked by fellow homeless individuals was not an unfamiliar occurrence. It is interesting how participants then related psychological possessions (such as thoughts and feelings) as being vulnerable like their physical selves. When participants were asked whether they share their personal problems with others, responses were extremely negative, with individuals ‘bottling up’ their psychological possessions for safety in emotional withdrawal, which has also been found by Riggs and Coyle (2002). Bentley *et al.* (1997) suggested that this lack of safe physical and emotional space in the world then necessitates that homeless people must maintain their physical and psychological existence within themselves in isolation. This relates back to the previously cited findings of Goodman *et al.* (1991) where lack of secure relationships and social bonds leads to isolation and withdrawal. The effect of withdrawal, Bentley *et al.* (1997) suppose, is that the individual is then denied the opportunity to be seen by society as having any human uniqueness, overlooking their personality, needs and distinctiveness, which Bentley *et al.* call ‘a reduction of being’. These consequences directly relate back to Breakwell’s IPT (1986), which says that identity threat is experienced when the identity principles are challenged by new, disruptive information such as ‘being homeless’.

A small fraction of qualitative research has also shown that new skills and clarity of introspection are positive by-products of the homeless experience (Cohen & Wagner, 1992; Hutson & Liddiard, 1994). Matousek’s (1991) study documented how homelessness, in causing such profound loss of self, presents a spiritual challenge and opportunity to define and create new meanings for one’s own existence. Survivors

of homelessness often contribute their experiences to the creation of a new, improved self, which suggests that there may be a more positive dimension and interpretation to homelessness that is frequently overlooked by researchers (Montgomery, 1994). The findings of Boydell *et al.* (2000) directly relate to this, where the 'Future' self reflected how some participants felt that their homelessness had given them a deeper understanding of the meaning of life, using their homeless experience to establish a new sense of purpose, often centred around the pursuit of employment, which was also noted by Williams and Stickley (2010). Boydell *et al.*'s (2000) findings suggest that although many homeless individuals have lost much of their self-esteem and self-efficacy, they persistently engage in self-reflection which may actually be therapeutic in the face of identity threat and profound loss.

To summarise, research suggests it is the interaction of social, emotional, spatial, relational and material dimensions that collectively contribute to the pervasive effects of homelessness on the health and psychological well-being of individuals. On a psychological level, feelings of rejection, isolation and shame are embedded in the experience of homelessness, as is a threat to identity by undermining the individual's past achievements, identity, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Strategies of coping have been outlined and the possibility of homelessness as an experience for finding inner strength has also been noted.

However, as with all research it is important to consider the limitations of such studies. As previously discussed, quantitative research has demonstrated that it is the interaction of many factors and variables that are important in understanding the impact and experience of homelessness. Essentially, no single factor in isolation can account for or portray the effect that homelessness has on an individual. Yet a number of the aforementioned qualitative studies have focused their analyses on specific factors such as identity, social roles, coping strategies, mental health and as such, may have omitted to explore homelessness holistically. For example, in Williams and Stickley's (2010) narrative study, although participants 'told their story' without being asked specific questions, the primary analysis searched the transcripts for factors specifically relating to mental health or identity, the focus of the research paper. These themes did not naturally 'emerge' from the data, and so it is hard to know whether these concepts were actually important to the participants when compared to other aspects of their experience. However, Williams and Stickley acknowledge that their study is 'not a comprehensive analysis of meaning,' and is aimed at informing nursing practice (p.4). If similar findings transpire when more interpretative phenomenological approaches are used (where the focus is specifically on *subjective* meaning-making), then its significance may be better established; however, few, if any studies have taken this approach (with the exception of Riggs & Coyle, 2002).

Other previously discussed qualitative studies, whilst not focusing on one factor alone, have often researched specific sub-populations, for example, youth homelessness (Riggs & Coyle, 2002), alcoholic homeless women (Burlingham *et al.*, 2010), homelessness with a history of childhood abuse (Willoughby, 2010), rural homelessness (Hilton & DeJong, 2010) or have been based elsewhere in the world such as Canada (Boydell *et al.*, 2000; Morell-Bellai *et al.*, 2000) where cultural diversities and discourses may mean homelessness is experienced differently from in the UK.

Overall, previous research has employed a number of analytic strategies including narrative analysis (Williams & Stickley, 2010) and grounded theory analysis (Bentley, 1997) which have created foundations for future insight, however there are still relatively few qualitative studies into homelessness and given the heterogeneity of this population, they are unlikely to encompass the full breadth of the lived experience. Importantly, no studies have yet focused on adults in London with the scope of interest left entirely open, especially for the purpose of understanding subjective meanings in the experience of homelessness. Thus, the present study aims to provide a contemporary qualitative account of the experience of homelessness. Given the idiosyncrasies underpinning each lived experience, the research emphasis deliberately remains broad so that individuals are given the opportunity to relay what is important to them and as such, qualitative methods using semi-structured interviews will be utilized. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a suitable analytic strategy given that the aim of this study is to better understand how *individuals* make sense of their homeless experience (Smith *et al.*, 1999).

To conclude, the following study aims to contribute to and extend the current research by exploring the different perceptions and interpretations of individuals who have experienced homelessness. The use of inductive, data-driven methods may indicate whether the salient issues previously discussed are maintained when the focus is at the individual level and as such, the body of literature can be enhanced and scope for similarities and differences may be evaluated, with the hope that prevention and support for this socially marginalized population may be better informed.

Methodology

Design

This study employed an explorative design using a qualitative approach, involving one-on-one, semi-structured interviews as a means of data collection and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the analytic strategy of choice.

Participants

In keeping with the theoretical underpinnings and recommended sample selection of IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), a purposive, homogenous sample of six participants (five male and one female) were recruited from several homelessness services in London. It was a prerequisite for inclusion that all participants were, or had experienced 'street' homelessness within the last year, (in this instance ranging from durations of one year to intermittently for eight years), to ensure that all participants had experienced similar extremities in their homelessness. At the time of interview, two had secured long-term tenancies, two lived in long-term YMCA housing and two were still seeking stable accommodation and using emergency shelters. All participants were white British with a mean age of 43 years (range spanning 29-57 years). Education level ranged from no qualifications to a Bachelor's degree. All relevant demographics are listed in Table 1 (below).

Table 1

Table showing relevant demographics of participants

Participant Pseudonyms	Age	Education	Length of homelessness	Current Accommodation Status	Former Occupation
Will	32	Secondary	1 year	Emergency Shelter	Film/Media assistant
Steve	55	None	8 years*	Emergency Shelter	Soldier
Jake	30	None	6 years*	Long-term / YMCA	n/a
Carol	29	None	6 years*	Long-term / YMCA	n/a
Pete	55	Secondary	2 years	Long-term tenancy	Business
Michael	57	University	1 year	Long-term tenancy	Business

* Refers to “intermittent” homelessness, periods of alternating accommodation and street homelessness

Procedure

Prior to interviews, ethical approval was granted from Brunel University Ethics Committee and permission was granted accordingly from the management in the homeless services (appendix A). The service staff informed the homeless service users of the study, acting as ‘gatekeepers’, which enabled staff to refer individuals that they thought suitable. Service staff displayed posters and distributed flyers giving basic details (appendix B). Those interested were instructed to make contact to arrange an interview.

Participants were asked to sign a consent form (appendix C) before their interview, which explained their right to withdraw from the interview at any time without negative consequence, the right to decline discussing any topics they felt uncomfortable with, the understanding that all data would be kept securely and confidentially and consenting for the audio recording and use of anonymised quotes to be used by the researcher. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this study to protect participant identities.

The interviews took place inside the premises of each given homeless service, in quiet briefing rooms that would prevent disturbance. No support workers were

present during interviews, which ranged in duration from 45 minutes to 120 minutes and were digitally audio recorded for transcription at a later date.

Following the interview, participants were debriefed, asked if they had any queries and handed a written de-brief which signposted some on-line resources that they may find useful or interesting (appendix D). Participants were then offered a £5 Supermarket gift card as thank-you for their time and co-operation.

Data Collection

With consideration to the researcher's chosen analytic strategy, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were elected as the exemplary means of data collection (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The advantages of in-depth semi-structured interviews over other methods (such as diaries and focus groups) include the ability to facilitate rapport, empathy, the elicitation of stories, a greater flexibility of coverage and the tendency to produce comparatively richer data (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Such qualities are essential when the research aim is to get an "insider's perspective" of a phenomenon, in this case the subjective experience of homelessness. Structured interviews, for instance, deliberately constrain participant responses by utilizing rigid schedules, composed of the researcher's pre-determined idea of what constitutes the required and relevant data. In contrast, semi-structured interviews remain non-directive and for the most part, the participant talks and the interviewer listens (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This dynamic affords the participant sufficient scope to give an account in their own words and in their own time, with minimal influence from the researcher's previous knowledge or preconceived ideas.

Materials

On the premise that participants themselves are the 'experiential experts' on the topic at hand (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.58), interview questions were phrased in an open-ended manner that encouraged engagement, guiding the participant to fully disclose personal stories, feelings and interpretations of their own homeless experiences (interview schedule, appendix E). As the interviews progressed, participants generally spoke of more personal experiences and as such, any important or interesting areas that arose were pursued using probes such as, "Could you tell me a little more about that... How did that make you feel?"

Before conducting the interviews, a preliminary semi-structured pilot interview lasting 50 minutes was carried out on one participant in order to refine the question schedule and assess its suitability. No changes were made to the original questions per se, although the ordering of some questions was modified to prevent jumping back and forth to different time frames or topics. As no changes were made to the questions, the data from the pilot interview has been included in the study (Holloway, 1997). The pilot interview also enabled the researcher to revise the necessary interview skills, whereby silences are not "filled" as in usual conversational dynamics, succinctly described by Smith and Osborn (2008, p.58) as a "one-sided conversation with a purpose", where minimal prompts are given and sufficient time is allowed for the participant to formulate their answers or to elaborate on previous responses.

Data Analysis

As the aim of this study was to understand and explore in detail the lived experiences, meanings and perspectives of how an *individual* experiences homelessness, IPA was considered the most suitable analytic strategy. IPA is strongly idiographic, focusing on the subjective and indulging in what an experience is like for a *particular* individual in a *particular* situation, their “lifeworld,” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.3). IPA thus provides a framework for which the researcher may indirectly gain access to the lived experiences of the participant, following the engagement of active dialogue and the interpretation of first-hand accounts.

The central tenets of IPA are characterized by the philosophies of phenomenology and Interpretation Theory. The origins of phenomenology are embedded in the works of Edmund Husserl, where he maintained that, it is only by disengaging with the activity or experience at hand, to realise and self-consciously *reflect* on it, that we can be phenomenological (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Husserl’s ideas were later developed by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, who went further to emphasize the focus on the “lifeworld”, maintaining that when investigating lived experience, we should analyse directly from the individual’s first-person perspective (Ashworth, 2008). The subjective experience of homelessness can thus only be accessed by the researcher in the second order, necessitating a certain degree of interpretative activity, or “double hermeneutic”, whereby “the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them,” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.3). The researcher must therefore play a double role in the process, employing an empathizing hermeneutic of trying to understand the participant’s experience from their perspective, combined with a questioning hermeneutic of critically evaluating the underlying intent.

The first stage of analysis involved the researcher actively engaging with the data in a process of reading and re-reading the transcripts, familiarising the researcher to the contents. Interesting or significant points in the text (initial coding) were outlined and noted in the *right* hand margin, including key phrases, summaries of content and primary interpretations. Subsequent readings and annotation continued until no further points of significance could be identified (see appendix G for example of annotated transcript). The initial notes were then considered together to develop emergent themes, recorded in the *left* hand margin. The emergent themes were then listed chronologically before similar concepts were grouped into clusters and others emerged as ‘superordinate’ themes (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Each transcript was analysed in turn before the emergent and superordinate themes of each participant were compared across cases, noting connections, conflicts and relevance between them. This integration generated a consolidated table of ‘master’ themes (appendix F). Theme titles included phrases used by the participants to ensure that the themes remain grounded in the data.

Results

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the transcribed data yielded three superordinate themes and eight subthemes illustrating participants’ experience of

homelessness (as presented in Table 2 below). All accounts made strong reference to the initial impact of homelessness, the reaction to this impact, followed by accounts of resilience and positive growth. As the themes are discussed it will become apparent that collectively, this temporal path reflects an arduous journey of self-change through enduring hardship and adversity. The superordinate concepts that emerged were: The Impact of Homelessness, Coping with Homelessness and Positive Growth.

Table 2

Table displaying superordinate and sub-themes from the analysis

Superordinate Themes	Sub-themes
1. The Impact of Homelessness	1.1 Feelings of Desperation: “A Treadmill of Insurmountable Struggles”
	1.2 Loss of Identity & Self-esteem: “A Broken Life”
	1.3 Feeling Rejected by Everyone: “I Can See Them Squirming to Get Away...”
	1.4 Psychological Homelessness: “No Place To Be”
2. Coping with Homelessness	2.1 Denial & Pretence: “Telling Myself I Wasn’t Homeless”
	2.2 Distancing Themselves: “I’m lucky...”
3. Positive Growth	3.1 Resilience & Positive Growth: “Surviving the Unthinkable”
	3.2 Re-housing & Finding a New Self: “I am Safe, I am Free, I can Live”

The impact of homelessness

This superordinate theme exemplifies the far-reaching destructive impact of homelessness on the lives of participants, affecting not only their physical, material worlds, but also the emotional and psychological. Participants recurrently referred to the pervasive effects of homelessness, which were coded and grouped into four subthemes: Feelings of Desperation “A Treadmill of Insurmountable Struggles”; Loss of Identity & Self-esteem “A Broken Life”; Feeling Rejected by Everyone “I Can See Them Squirming to Get Away...” and Psychological Homelessness “No Place to Be”. Collectively, these subthemes elucidate the impact of homelessness on the lives of participants, portraying a process of multiple losses, rejection and isolation engendering profound feelings of despair and depression.

N.B: Three dots (...) denotes where speech has been omitted.

Feelings of Desperation: “A Treadmill of Insurmountable Struggles”

Participants consistently made reference to the negative emotions they experienced as a result of the initial transition into homelessness. These feelings were grouped and as such, this subtheme encapsulates the overwhelming sense of loss, shock, dissociation, depression and inability to cope as reflected by all six participant accounts.

“When it very first happened I was in a state of shock so to speak, I didn’t feel anything at all, like I was disconnected from what was going on, it didn’t feel real and I hoped that I’d just wake up and everything would be back to normal.” (117-120 - Michael)

The above extract reflects how shocked and stunned participants felt in becoming homeless, as Michael describes his ‘state of shock’, giving a sense of startled disbelief at what is happening. From Michael’s terminology, he describes his embodied feelings with words such as ‘disconnected’ and ‘I didn’t feel anything at all’, which appear to describe feelings of numbness and dissociation. Participants directly attributed their negative and often depressive feelings to the profound loss and change of their former lives, elucidated by the follow excerpts:

“The depression, I mean, it’s inevitable, you can’t imagine what it’s like to lose such large aspects, whole dimensions of your former life.” (294 – Michael)

“Probably think some daft things sometimes when you can’t find a way out of a certain situation... Homelessness can get extremely depressing, the gravity of the loss you suffer is insurmountable.” (429 – Steve)

The extracts above illustrate the severity of the loss as felt by participants as ‘whole dimensions’ and ‘the gravity of the loss’ appeal to our sense that the loss and its effects are catastrophic, holding significant weight, they are ‘insurmountable’. Steve’s quote also reflects a sense of disempowerment over not being able to ‘find a way out’, which was a recurring theme throughout participant accounts and highlights how trapped and helpless they feel. Pete provides an example of how the transition affected participants:

“...you start shutting down as an individual, because increasingly large parts of you say, ‘I can’t cope, I’m overwhelmed, just close the curtains, go away world’. Umm, and, that can be a very harsh time, because it was a very isolating time.” (172-177 - Pete)

Here, Pete describes how overwhelmed he feels and wants to withdraw from what is happening in saying ‘close the curtains, go away world’, however this disconnection leaves him feeling isolated. Feeling unable to cope and isolated from the rest of the world was referenced by all participants, their accounts suffused with overwhelming despair and powerlessness. This illustrates that the experience of becoming homeless had many deleterious effects on the emotional well-being of participants, which often gravitated around the losses that had been suffered.

Loss of Identity & Self-esteem: “A Broken Life”

Despite the fact that participants' former lifestyles and reasons for becoming homeless were inarguably individualistic, all six accounts featured both explicit and indirect references to how, in becoming homeless, they questioned who they were. Participants recounted how their former identities, that is, how they previously defined and perceived themselves, were challenged by becoming homeless, which had a discernable impact on their self-esteem.

Steve's account provides an example of how participants struggled with what homelessness meant in terms of who they now were, as early in his narrative he explains how his former military career had equipped him with pride, independence and a wealth of skills, however homelessness now leads him to question and lose sight of who he is:

“My self-esteem has been shot to bits on occasion you know. You go from having this comfortable, linear positive life where you think you know who you are and where you're going and you think nothing of it. It's only when you lose it all you realise how vulnerable you as a person can be and in your head you're tryna work out who you are now. I mean [pause], when you start sleeping in shelters the fact you're homeless really hits you hard and you struggle to make sense of it all. My military career means I'm used to being proud of who I am and what I'm part of, but being in here, I don't wanna be part of this, it's not living is it, it's existing.” (273-285 -Steve)

Steve explicitly states that his self-esteem has been 'shot to bits', indicative of how self-worth was intrinsically challenged by homelessness for all participants. Steve continues to describe a previously 'comfortable, linear positive life' where you 'know who you are', and continues in saying how in being homeless 'you're tryna work out who you are *now*', implying that who he *is* changes in light of *being* homeless. From Steve's broader account in the interview, he positions himself as a proud, capable and self-sufficient ex-soldier, however the above quote exposes his feelings of vulnerability, lack of pride and his struggle to make sense of what is happening, which may suppose he is not living up to his own expectations of himself.

This concept reoccurred thematically throughout participant narratives, particularly in those four that had previously held pride in or defined themselves by their former occupations, where homelessness had caused deviation from their expectation of what their lives *should* be like. Pete's account provides an example of how these participants felt as he identifies himself as an 'achiever', talking extensively about his past entrepreneurial ventures and how he 'reached the top levels of society like in a computer game'. For Pete, his identity and self-worth are quantifiable by his business success and achievements. However, his 'achiever' identity becomes a source of conflict when his business collapsed, reducing Pete to bankruptcy and the period of homelessness that ensued.

“One of the things that made my homelessness or failings in mid-life more painful, is that I'm not used to failing. I'm an achiever and I achieve things.” (297-300 – Pete)

“My thinking of homeless people was, these are people that have never achieved anything in their lives, these are people who have no value to add, addicts or alcoholics or whatever or, they've just, they're not capable of anything else, and then when I ended up in that position I was suddenly realising it was like, 'well this is me

now.’ And yet, to everyone on the outside I was just the same as any other homeless man, tramp who hasn’t washed in six months, sort of, non-shaved what have you scavenging around the place, so, well, I was sort of, technically homeless as I had lost my home and I hated myself for having failed in terms of business and achievements... Here is a life with everything that is required has fallen apart, it was a broken life, where everything around this person has broken down.” (50-70 - Pete)

Here Pete is confronted by how he himself perceived the homeless (as commonly articulated by public opinion), ‘people who have never achieved anything in their lives... addicts or alcoholics whatever’, the assumption that all homeless people fit into a neatly defined negative stereotype as non-achievers. On the realisation that ‘this is me now’, he hates himself as by his own standards, he has failed and his achievements are void, he realises that he is not who he previously thought himself to be, he is now a non-achiever. Following this discrepancy Pete struggles to negotiate his self-concept as ‘an achiever’ in saying that, although he *seems* like ‘any other homeless man’ to outsiders, and given that he states he has lost his home, he then says he is only ‘*technically* homeless’. In doing this, it seems he is attempting to salvage his sense of credibility to set him apart from the homeless that have ‘never achieved anything in their lives’, an attempt to re-assert his achiever identity.

Pete’s account provides an example of how all participants, to varying degrees, experienced homelessness as a threat to their identity by jeopardising their life achievements. The negative stereotype surrounding homelessness challenged who participants had previously thought themselves to be, which consequently undermined and negated the achievement or maintenance of self-esteem.

Feeling Rejected by Everyone: “I Can See Them Squirming To Get Away...”

Across all accounts family was rarely, if at all, mentioned spontaneously and when prompted it was discovered that most had few, if any, relatives or close friends, which meant that many participants had few social bonds with others to begin with. For the few that had relatives and friends, numerous accounts reported feelings of rejection, alienation and consequent isolation following their homelessness. The following excerpt illustrates how overt rejection from friends had a deleterious effect on Jake’s sense of self-worth:

“But yeah, when I started living on the streets, I’d ring people up or if I’d see ‘em in the street that were supposed to be friends and you can see ‘em, even though I’m only saying ‘alright mate’ I can see them squirming to get away... You get angry but inside you feel physically like someone’s stabbed you, it’s horrible, it’s proper bad rejection and it’s in front of your face and that feeling is fuckin horrible. It makes you feel so so fucking low, it makes you feel so small, like you’re not a person just a rat, ‘cause someone that used to be your mate can’t now even give you the time of day.” (174-188 - Jake)

Jake’s quote describes how, for all participants, rejection from others reinforced feelings of worthlessness and shame in saying ‘it makes you feel so so fucking low’, and notably, how they were perceived and treated by others shaped and defined how they viewed themselves, in this instance serving only to compound feelings like

'you're not a person, just a rat'. This concurs with words found in other accounts such as 'like dirt', 'sub-human', 'vermin' and 'the shit on someone's boots', which illustrates how participants felt, or were made to feel, inferior in relation to the domiciled public. Additionally, participants spoke of how they not only felt rejected by people they knew, but also by broader society. Michael, who formerly owned his own home and business in the borough he went on to become homeless in, provides an example of this:

"Society as a whole would like this problem swept under the carpet, pretend it isn't there, (64-66) ...and there are various efforts to sort of, drive us out into poorer areas, like vermin. (55-60) ...not many people bother with you at all. People mainly just look right through you like a ghost, they ignore you and they go, you know, they 'cluck', and think 'how disgusting, we've got a tramp on our doorstep, vile.'" (87-90 -Michael)

Michael's description of how people 'look right through you like a ghost' shows how he feels invisible and overlooked, which was a particularly common experience reported by participants and only increased their feelings of worthlessness. Michael's description of how people 'cluck' and perceive the homeless as 'disgusting' and 'vile' is also an example of how participants across cases felt that they were stigmatized by society, whilst highlighting that participants were aware of this stigma, which often led to feelings of shame:

"...people were biking past and that and they'd shout abuse at ya calling you a fucking tramp you'd feel horrible like dirt." (199-201 – Carol)

In addition to verbal abuse, one participant had been the victim of direct physical abuse from members of the public recalling how he had been 'pissed on and beaten up'. These accounts suggest that in being homeless, participants felt rejected by friends, family and society, which were often reiterated in the abusive interactions that occurred with members of the public. Carol's following quote describes how she, like other participants, felt in relation to society:

"...they make you feel like you shouldn't be there like this is their space, the town centre or the park I mean, so no matter where you go you just keep getting moved on and on and there's no place you're actually allowed to go, so you're stuck. It's weird, 'cause when you've not got a home, and you ain't allowed on the streets, and you're out there permanently, what you gonna do? It's like they're deliberately taking everything away like you're not allowed to exist in their perfect little world." (20-28 Carol)

What is interesting is that Carol recurrently refers to society as 'they' and 'their space' and 'their perfect little world', which may indicate that she does not feel like one of 'them' or part of society, and she states how she feels like she 'shouldn't be there'. This relates back to how Michael (above), and indeed other participants talk about 'society' in a way that indicates that they feel excluded from, or not part of it. This rejection and exclusion is received by Carol as if society is 'deliberately taking everything away' as the homeless are 'not allowed to exist in their perfect little world' which illustrates how participants feel degraded and denied a place within society, echoed by descriptions of being treated like a 'non-citizen' and 'sub-human scum' within other accounts.

Psychological Homelessness: “No Place To Be”

The subtheme ‘No Place To Be’ exemplifies the way participants expressed a home as more than a place to store possessions, it also carried psychological implications. This theme was constructed by grouping any passages that inferred qualities of a home that exceeded the basic provisions that accommodation provides. Although it was only identified as a salient concept across half of participant accounts, it is included here due to the importance with which it was communicated. In the following passage, Pete recalls how his situation may have been different if someone had let him stay for a few months at the beginning of his homelessness:

“...at least I would have had that one rock, a place where this rebuilding can begin and I can then process the chaos going on in my head and my personal issues. How on earth was I going to battle those when I’m out there? People need homes, simple necessity, and the dilemma of having them removed, of mentally having nowhere to be is something people just can’t comprehend.” (287-294 - Pete)

Here, Pete describes a home as a ‘rock’ which implies stability, the lack of which means he must ‘battle’ the ‘chaos’ in his head without it. However, Pete explicitly states that he cannot resolve these issues in his head when he’s ‘out there’, which implies that the physical provision of a home has psychological or emotional implications. This is reiterated as Pete describes his dilemma as, not of (for example) ‘nowhere to go’, but as ‘*mentally* having nowhere to *be*’. Pete’s excerpt thus suggests that having lack of space for psychological possessions such as thoughts or feelings, or perhaps the time and energy afforded by the stability of a home, required for ‘re-building’ and processing his ‘personal issues’ could be provided only by having a home, which was something that he was missing. Jake provides a similar account:

“...and that’s it isn’t it, it’s somewhere to be your home, not someone else’s, it’s mine, it’s private, I’ve got an address, I’ve got me headspace, everything’s in order, I can close the door and the outside world is out there, gone. And not having that wrecks havoc, drives you crazy, you can’t live out of a bag, well you can, but it wears you down like never feeling relaxed or safe like you’re in a good place.” (123-130 - Jake)

Interestingly, in Jake’s list of what a home provides he includes ‘headspace’ and ‘everything’s in order’ which reiterates the psychological stability or security associated with having a home, which for him is a place that is distinctly *his*, marked by its ability to shut out the outside world. Jake also describes what it feels like to be without this security, ‘never feeling relaxed or safe like you’re in a good place’ which highlights that a home provides more than its most obvious, basic property. In the same way, four participants expressed how emergency shelters are emotionally cold places which, although providing the provision of shelter, do not accommodate for the need to feel a sense of belonging, a connection or emotional capacity, described by Carol in the following extract:

“...yeah they’re giving you a bed and some food, but they don’t talk to you. Nobody talks to you. You don’t feel any support or encouragement, didn’t have any girl

friends back then either, so you know, chatting and sharing your problems with anyone wasn't really an option, you had to keep it all up here [in your head]". (224-229 – Carol)

Here Carol explains how, with no outlets for sharing her problems with others she must keep it all 'in her head', which echoes the two previous excerpts of 'headspace' and 'no place to be', where lack of a stable environment for processing personal issues means that they cannot be resolved. Carol also says that she feels unsupported, she states that although shelters provide food and shelter, 'nobody talks to you', which suggests that interaction and being able to discuss feelings or issues constitutes a pertinent aspect of social support for participants, a view shared across accounts.

Coping with homelessness

This superordinate theme describes how participants struggled to cope with being homeless, highlighting some of the behaviours employed by participants in an attempt to combat the duress imposed by their situation. Two salient subthemes were grouped to construct this concept: Denial & Pretence "Telling Myself I Wasn't Homeless" and Distancing Themselves "I'm lucky..."

Denial & Pretence: "Telling Myself I Wasn't Homeless"

The first sub-theme 'Denial & Pretence' illustrates how temporary denial, avoidance and pretence or 'masquerading' tactics were employed by participants during their early homeless experiences. Most participants recalled (in varying degrees) denying or trying to convince themselves that they weren't homeless.

Attempting to cope with the feeling of being overwhelmed often led to participants avoiding situations that made individual's face the reality of their homelessness. Pete's account provides a clear demonstration of this, where after becoming homeless he used his small amount of savings to occasionally stay in a hotel to sleep and recuperate, which he alternated with sleeping rough. From the following extract it becomes clear that Pete not only uses his time in the hotel for recharging, but it enables him to pretend and temporarily convince himself that he was perhaps, still not *actually* homeless:

"I was on the edge type thing of homeless-not-homeless type thing, there was this element of still being surrounded by shops and people and the 'normal' life which gave me a feeling of my old life in a way, it kind of let me masquerade for those hours that I wasn't a street-pottering homeless man and that I still was in charge and doing things with myself, even though in reality I was just booking a room to get some shut-eye." (671-679 - Pete)

Earlier in Pete's account he explicitly states that he has become 'decrepit and typically pottering around,' (508 - Pete) however in the above extract this is contradictory as he is still negotiating his circumstance 'on the edge, homeless-not-homeless'. However Pete's use of the terms 'it let me masquerade for those hours' and 'in reality I was just...' indicate that he was, in fact, aware that he was homeless, yet he still welcomed the opportunity to perform in this way. This may have been for

himself by avoiding and denying his situation with a knowing attempt at self-deceit, or perhaps as a performance for himself *and others*, to escape the rejection and shame he experienced on a day-to-day basis with an attempt to identify with his former self as he says it 'gave me a feeling of my old life' where he could maintain a positive sense of self. In this way, denial and pretence may serve to ameliorate the negative impact of homelessness for participants.

Pete also refers to the illusion of being 'still in charge and doing things with myself,' which suggests that feelings of control and a sense of purpose are therapeutic aids against the disempowerment experienced by participants (as previously discussed). This is echoed by Will in the following excerpt who talks about having 'tasks on in the day'. Denial and pretence are potentially the most salient themes spanning Will's subjective experience of homelessness. Will has not disclosed his homelessness to anyone other than a handful of people. Like most participants, homelessness for Will is deeply shameful and he struggles to come to terms with accepting himself as homeless. To maintain his past life and sense of self, Will knowingly hides behind a facade on a daily basis:

"I'm still somehow managing to meet up with normal people, wear normal clothes, have a shave on trains, all that sort of stuff, it's makeshift, but it's my way of processing stuff and it helped me in telling myself that I wasn't homeless, cos a lot of the days I was in denial, then I'd get to that time in the day when it's time to find a place to sleep, and that's when it became real. But next day, pack up the sleeping bag and my homeless life would be packed away with it and normal life could start again, when I wasn't feeling too unclean or whatever and I've got a few tasks on in the day." (219-229 – Will)

Will symbolically equates his sleeping bag with his homeless, hidden, shameful self. When his sleeping bag is 'out of sight', then homelessness is 'out of mind', and his 'normal' life can begin again. By upholding his 'normal' facade and denying his homelessness, Will maintained a sense of still being 'normal' by disguising his homelessness, which was his way of 'processing stuff'. It is also worth noting that Will's reference to cleanliness as a prerequisite for his 'normal' facade and an aid to his denial was a comment which although subtle in nature, appeared across all six accounts. Participants avoided being reminded of their homelessness by any means possible, and being unclean 'like a beggar' was negatively appraised directly by participants and was also referred to as a way to go undetected to avoid public denigration.

Distancing Themselves "I'm lucky..."

This subtheme was developed from the references participants made as to how they saw themselves in relation to homeless others and specifically, how these social comparisons facilitated a sense of coping. Steve explicitly describes the two different 'types' of homeless people:

"...there's two types really, the drunken deserving or useless junkies, [pause] and then the sober that have been unfortunate in some way or another." (547-550 – Steve)

Here, Steve describes a dichotomy within the homeless population, two discrete 'types' and from his account as a whole it is very clear that Steve distinguishes himself from this negatively associated sub-group of the 'drunken' and 'junkies'. Three participants used downward positive comparisons to homeless others, meaning that they assessed themselves favourably in comparison with a sense of 'things could be worse', which may have alleviated the impact of the devalued sense of self engendered by homelessness (as previously described). Similarly, in the following excerpts Will describes several social comparisons to homeless others when visiting a homeless day-centre to use their facilities:

"Being around people like that, the homeless that have got all these dependencies and have been out there on the pavements for years, it's really depressing and you know, I just didn't wanna go anywhere near that same path, not for my life. (139-143) ...I'm lucky I'm not in that state really. (203) ...I learned that this is just one place I do not want to be. It makes you feel dirty like the acceptance that this is what you are you know what I mean? You're here with them, so this must be what you are. Like the people that I'm stood there not wanting to be like, I'm there, almost in the same shoes." (160-165 – Will)

In the first two quotes, Will makes downward positive comparisons as he identifies and separates himself from 'people like that' with 'all these dependencies' that have 'been out there' for years, showing that he feels inherently different to them, he feels 'lucky' that he's not like them. However, the third quote highlights a different dynamic, as Will's statement 'you're here with them, so this must be what you are' suggests that, although he feels different to the people at the day centre, the fact he's there *with them* supposes that he is *one of them*. His comparisons thus become downward *negative* as he feels anxious and fears that the very people he has negatively appraised, the homeless that have 'been out there on the pavements for years', may actually be a reflection of what he will become in the future as he says 'I'm there, almost in the same shoes.'

Positive growth

The final superordinate theme to be identified was 'positive growth'. The themes identified thus far have been testament to the negative experience of, and reaction to, the various losses that homeless people experience and their strategies of coping. However, towards the latter stages of the interviews, (for the four participants that exited homelessness), stories of resilience, striving for change, recovery, growth and re-adjustment marked the beginning of a new life full of hope and opportunity. Two salient subthemes were identified: Resilience & Positive Growth 'Surviving the Unthinkable' and Re-housing & Finding a New Self 'I am Safe, I am Free, I can Live'.

Resilience & Positive Growth: "Surviving the Unthinkable"

Although two participants were still seeking long-term accommodation at the time of interview and each participant's representation of their journey through homelessness undoubtedly individualistic, resilience, endurance and a retrospective reinterpretation of the experience of homelessness as 'character building' and a 'learning curve' emerged in varying degrees from all six accounts. Michael's extract

provides an example of how participant accounts inferred positive growth and resilience:

“I think one of the positive things that I sort of, well, how I approached it was thinking, if I can do this and get through this, then I can look back on it from a future point of time and almost give myself a tick in the box for surviving it and sticking through it. I think that’s the same for anything enduring in life, keep at it keep at it keep at it, then you finally get to the other end then collapse on the sofa, break open a bottle of wine. A sense of, inner strength, surviving the unthinkable, of achievement, that something wiser and better will come out the other end for the sheer reason that I’m not giving up.” (324-335 – Michael)

It is evident that Michael anticipates a positive future outcome from his experience, whilst highlighting a change in his perception of the homeless problem, where homelessness is seen as a test of endurance, of ‘survival’ and ‘inner strength’ which can be attributed to his resilience. Positive growth can be deduced as Michael believes he will become ‘wiser and better’ due to his homelessness, which is echoed strongly throughout other participants’ narratives with words such as ‘mentally strong’, regardless of whether they exited homelessness. For four participants, recovery and re-housing were initiated by accessing homeless services, however it was the motivation and energy to strive for a better life that provided the impetus. Pete’s extract below illustrates how the turning point of his homeless experience begins with a significant change in his coping behaviours, from denial and pretence to acceptance, motivation and the initiation of self-help:

“...what’s your project, Pete? Homelessness? And why? ‘Because I am homeless.’ (357-359) ...it’s amazing because, I then went into a phase when I just used to sit in internet cafes and read and read all the stuff about people who have been through similar experiences and I visited these self-help pages, so how I sort of pulled myself out of it was almost becoming my own expert in homelessness, overcoming disaster, adversity this that and the other.” (346-353 -Pete)

This sense of acceptance signifies a shift towards pro-active coping and help-seeking behaviour which resulted in Pete being re-housed by a homeless charity. A conceptual shift in Pete’s thinking is also evident as early in his transcript, he recalled at length the impact of the losses to every dimension of his life which left him psychologically unstable. However, in light of accepting his circumstance and the pursuit of change, he began to reconsider what his experience meant:

“...but, in losing quite a lot, I sort of realised it maybe wasn’t all that important, I suddenly realised that, this catastrophe is about me, and not about stuff that I’ve lost, as in, wait a minute Pete, yes they’re taking your sofa, but you’re still here. And I had a long, hard look at myself in terms of well, what’s really important in life, is it things, or is it you. Because if it’s things, you’re then lining yourself up for a fall when you lose them, but if it’s you, then, well things can come and go. So as part of this whole reinvention of myself, I said wait a minute, and this is probably what pulled me through it, just take this as a rebuild, a transformation so to speak, I’ve broken down all my bits of Lego, all separate, and now put it all back again differently.” (363-376 – Pete)

Here, Pete detaches himself from his lost possessions, creating a new sense of self free from the constraints of his past which equated material possessions with achievement and self-worth, allowing him to move forward with positivity. The fact that the above quotes include statements such as ‘positive things’, ‘achievement’, ‘inner strength’ and ‘reinvention’ implies resilience among the participants, as they are both enduring and finding positive meaning from their trauma, interpreting their homeless experience as a challenge for growth that makes them fundamentally stronger. For Pete, adapting to new circumstances where he *has* nothing ‘in losing quote a lot...’ led him to re-evaluate his former thinking about himself and the world. It is his reconstruction of homelessness that ‘pulled him through it’, from being a state of crisis and despair to a more comforting, self-reflective ‘re-build, a transformation’, which again highlights the positive underpinnings of his re-evaluated interpretations. Interestingly, the phrase ‘...I’ve broken down all by bits of Lego...’ gives a sense that Pete feels he’s deconstructed all the different aspects that make up his life, followed by putting them ‘all back again differently’, which again illustrates that what has come *out* of the homeless experience is qualitatively different, superior even, from what went *in*, i.e. ‘a *transformation*.’

This was thematically salient for the four participants who had been re-housed and occurred in their narratives when a sense of recovery and hindsight had been reached, which may explain why it is less recounted by the other two participants, however, resilience and positive growth were still evident in these participants’ transcripts albeit to a lesser degree.

Re-housing & Finding a New Self: “I am Safe, I am Free, I can Live”

The final subtheme explores how, for more than half of participants, re-housing carried not only the obvious provision of a home, but the symbolic weight of a new life of opportunity. Jake has lived without a permanent home since his early teenage years, and provides an example of how being re-housed made an impact to participants’ lives:

“To be honest, I’ve woke up a little bit and thought, I’ve seen the world for what it can be, seen the lowest of the low, and come right back. Some people might look at this place the YMCA and think I’m in poverty, they’ll say ‘oh you’re in the YMCA what a shithole’ but this is my home, in here I am safe, I am free, I can live, do you know what I mean. I’m in the YMCA, I’m at home, this is a new me now with an opportunity to make something of myself.” (382-391 – Jake)

In the extract above Jake says he has ‘seen the lowest of the low, and come right back’ which illustrates the sense of achievement he felt after exiting homelessness. It is also interesting to note how Jake refers to what ‘some people’ might think about his new long-term residency in the YMCA as ‘poverty’ and a ‘shithole’, however he continues to express the real scope of recovery and meaning it has had for his life, regardless of what anyone might say, ‘this is my home, in here I am safe, I am free, I can live’. For Jake, being re-housed marks a sense of resolve, a new found independence and freedom that having a home and a fresh start would provide. Indeed across the four re-housed cases, having a home provided participants with

an opportunity to re-establish areas of their life that had been neglected throughout their homelessness. Carol's excerpt below demonstrates the positive impact that being re-housed has and the changes it allows for participants:

"I've got a load of new friends here in the YMCA, it's like a community and everyone gets on really well. It helps to be around people that are accepting, it was our salvation it really was. Everyone here is supportive and they know what you're going through, I can't tell you how much it's turned my life around. Since I lived here I've started volunteering at a charity shop with the elderly, it feels good to have a purpose you know, and I've come out of my shell, got myself some nice friends, got ambition for the future, just everything!" (73-82 – Carol)

Carol here describes the acquisition of many things that had previously been absent in her life. The YMCA's 'supportive' environment facilitated Carol's sense of belonging, 'it's like a community... people are accepting', which shows that support and acceptance are important to her. Being re-housed by the YMCA thus provided the social support that Carol was previously lacking, which also appeared deficient in all participants' accounts who reported overwhelming feelings of rejection and stigmatization. This clearly has positive impact for Carol as she continues 'I've come out of my shell, got myself some nice friends' which also contrasts her earlier account of having nobody with which to share her personal problems and emotions. Early on in Carol's narrative she also described how her homeless life lacked direction and left her feeling worthless and without hope for the future, however Carol appears to be establishing a new sense of purpose in her life through volunteering at a charity shop where she states she now has 'ambition for the future, just everything! The use of 'just everything!' illustrates the all-encompassing totality of what a home symbolised for participants, reaching far beyond basic shelter, it has given them a whole new life.

Entering back into employment, volunteering or making plans for the future were held significant for all four participants exiting homelessness, where connections to, and acceptance from the domiciled world provided increasing self-worth, suggesting that societal influences can serve to marginalise and ostracize those in stigmatized positions, and how their acceptance, cooperation and interaction may facilitate rehabilitation for the homeless. To summarise, the final subtheme that appeared salient across all cases, both homeless and re-housed, was that from hardship and struggle, a whole sense of self can again be found by assimilating and accommodating the challenges that have been faced, driving the growth of a 'wiser, better' self.

Discussion

"The road to success is paved with failures." (Boydell et al., 2000, p.35)

This study focused on the experiences of five men and one woman who were or had been homeless, reflecting on their subjective perceptions, feelings and meanings attributed to becoming and enduring homelessness. The aim was to compare and contrast each individual account, which successfully captured the process of disconnectedness, multiple losses and intrapersonal conflict and adjustment engendered by the experience of homelessness. Each participant's account was

undoubtedly individualistic; however, the deleterious consequences of becoming homeless were suffered similarly by all participants. Various efforts to maintain a positive sense of self and psychological well-being were revealed through multiple coping strategies, with the arduous journey through homelessness summated by the sense of positive growth from enduring and overcoming adversity. Three superordinate themes emerged from the analysis which relate to various concepts documented by previous research, as per the following discussion.

The first superordinate theme encapsulated the far-reaching impact of becoming homeless on the lives of participants, and notably, how this material deprivation induced profound feelings of psychological isolation and despair. All six participants recounted how, in the first instance, the transition from an acceptable lifestyle to the unacceptable status of 'being homeless' had severe consequences for their self-esteem and well-being, their accounts suffused with profound despair and depression. This reflects the findings of Baldwin *et al.* (1997) and Riggs and Coyle (2002), where such negative emotions are suggested as being the natural response to severe loss and change to former lifestyle.

One of the most fundamental losses asserted by participants was the threat homelessness posed to their former identities through the loss of a home, meaningful work, interpersonal relationships and valued place in society, critical components of how individuals define themselves (Boydell *et al.*, 2000). This finding has been documented widely by previous research, such as Riggs and Coyle's (2002) study of homeless youths where, akin to the findings in the current study, homelessness impacted participant identities by undermining and negating the maintenance of self-esteem, distinctiveness, self-efficacy and continuity. In relation to Breakwell's IPT (1986) as discussed in the introduction, interfering with these desirable end-states will threaten an individual's identity. In addition, it has been established that when life changes are significant (i.e. becoming homeless) rather than minor, there is less continuity of identity and as such, it is harder for individuals to accept the transition, especially if the new role is negatively appraised (Jettern *et al.*, 2006, Breakwell, 1986). Given that homeless people in the UK are conceptualised (through the media and articulated in public opinion) as passive, lazy, immoral and obscene (Farrugia, 2010), and given that participants were explicitly aware of this, homelessness was perceived as incompatible with and thus conflicted with their known identities. Despite attempts to preserve a positive sense of self, it became apparent that all participants, to varying degrees, had internalized the shame and stigma associated with homelessness, with severe negative consequences for their self-esteem.

However, loss of identity and self-esteem was not simply an isolated intrapsychic phenomenon. Participants' sense of self was inextricably tied to how they were perceived and treated by others, which was encapsulated by the third subtheme 'feeling rejected by everyone'. The interaction between the social world and personal identity has been succinctly described by Boydell *et al.* (2000), as 'interactions with others serve as a milieu in which definitions of the self are constructed and sustained' (p.32). This is resonant from the current study, as the loss of personhood reported by participants was reinforced through interactions with other people, in which face-to-face denigration was a common occurrence. Most participants reported verbal abuse from the general public whilst two reported physical violence,

which has also been reported by Farrugia (2010) as cited in the introduction, whereby the integrity of an individual is violated, positioning them not as an active, feeling person, but as an object to be degraded for entertainment. Hodgetts *et al.* (2006) have reported that the stress and alienation resulting from social exclusion encourages escapist strategies such as substance misuse and produces increased susceptibility to illness. These findings highlight the destructive impact of the existing negative discourse surrounding homelessness, which not only impedes an individual's maintenance of self-worth, but results in abusive interactions between the domiciled and the homeless. This denigration when coupled with the profound loss of material possessions, identity and self-esteem, creates an overwhelming sense of rejection and worthlessness.

The final subtheme illustrating the impact of homelessness is concerned with how physical isolation provoked a sense of emotional and psychological isolation, marked by feelings of disconnectedness and lack of belonging, 'no place to be'. Here, participants conceptualise a home as more than a place to store possessions, it holds symbolic capital, providing emotional security, stability, 'headspace' and separates the private from the public. This accords with the definition of homelessness set out by Warnes *et al.* (2003) as per the introduction, and has been further documented by Riggs and Coyle (2002) who also found that lack of 'psychological space' for personal issues led to emotional withdrawal. Bentley (1997) further explains how withdrawal denies the individual to be seen by society as having any human uniqueness in a 'reduction of being' (p.201). It is interesting to note how, even when accommodated by an emergency hostel that met the basic need of shelter, participants described them as emotionally cold places that did not provide the need for belonging and support, they felt emotionally estranged and admitted that shelters lack any home-like quality. These findings suggest that homeless services may fulfil the needs of this population more effectively by not only catering for basic needs, but from providing home-like conditions which may cultivate a sense of security and place identity (Proshansky *et al.*, 1993). Interventions could also be tailored to meet the emotional needs of this population, providing respect for the individual as a distinctive person, whilst providing a secure, trusting outlet for exploring the individual's psychological 'possessions' such as thoughts and feelings.

The second superordinate theme to emerge from the data 'coping with homelessness' was concerned with the strategies of coping that participants employed to combat the duress of homelessness, reported in the forms of denial and pretence and the use of social comparisons. Participants avoided coming face-to-face with situations that may overtly remind them of their low-status by withholding disclosure of their situation, akin to how individuals in Boydell *et al.*'s (2000) study sought to control their 'Devalued' identities. In addition, all six participants in the current study used cleanliness and the appearance of being non-homeless as a tactic for remaining undetected by the general public, which has also been highlighted by Bentley (1997). This also relates back to the previously discussed themes of 'rejection' and 'no place to be', where to appear, look and 'be' homeless is negatively appraised and so the homeless, in essence, are denied the right to exist (as they are) as part of society, which impels individuals to disguise their homelessness. Bentley (1997) speculated that this pressure from not only society but from within the self, to deny oneself, will have severe consequences for self-worth.

Other more extreme forms of denial and pretence were demonstrated by two participants that not only hid their homelessness from others, but also attempted to deceive themselves by pretending that they were not homeless in their day to day activities, i.e. 'masquerading'. This phenomenon has not been recognised by previous homeless literature; however, it has been documented in various studies of unemployment (McFadyen, 1995; Warren, 1986; Winefield & Tiggemann, 1985), where some individuals enact their previous daily routines (such as getting up, putting on their suit and getting on a train), pretending to themselves and others that they are still employed. As discussed in the introduction, this represents emotion-focused (avoidance) coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978) where an individual seeks to regulate the negative emotions associated with their loss of identity and stigmatization, in this case by removing oneself mentally and physically from exposure to stressors. Awasthi and Mishra (2007) maintain that generally, emotion-avoidance coping is used by those who feel they have no control over their situation and who feel they lack the skills to change it, which suggests that the experience of homelessness may be characterized by feeling overwhelmed and disempowered. Additionally, emotion-avoidance coping *increases* rather than *decreases* emotional distress and is positively associated with the perceived severity of a stressor (Felton & Revenson, 1984; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The practical implications of this insight suppose that, if homeless individuals can be encouraged to apply more problem-focused coping strategies (which in their very nature aim to find solutions) they may benefit not only by alleviating emotional distress, but may increase their sense of self-efficacy, controllability of the situation and consequently, may lead to rehabilitation into housing and society.

Another salient concept within the current study was how participants distanced themselves from and compared themselves to other homeless individuals, with a sense of "I'm lucky I'm not like *that*." It became apparent that participants felt devalued and were asserting a rudimentary sense of self by making comparisons to people worse off than themselves, i.e. downward positive social comparisons. These findings are analogous to the identity hierarchy reported by Boydell *et al.* (2000) as per the introduction, where homeless individuals position themselves in superior strata to homeless others. As Festinger (1954) asserts, individuals often make social comparisons in times of uncertainty and threat (such as in becoming homeless and in chronic illness) as a way to self-evaluate and increase self-esteem. However, whether a positive or negative effect is achieved is mediated by whether an identification or contrast is made with the target comparison and in what direction (Dibb & Yardley, 2006). This has an important bearing on the current study, as not only were downward positive comparisons made by participants, but also downward *negative* comparisons, whereby, in coming into contact with homeless individuals they perceived as worse-off, (e.g. having substance misuse or mental health issues), some participants were anxious and fearful that this may be a reflection of their future selves, thus experiencing negative affect. This insight may be useful for professionals and support services working with the homeless, as perhaps by assisting and encouraging homeless individuals to make more constructive positive social comparisons, confidence and belief that an individual has the capacity to change their situation will be promoted.

The final superordinate concept to emerge from the analysis portrayed how participants reported finding inner strength through their hardship, reinterpreting their homeless experience as a personal transformation or 'positive growth'. Positive post-traumatic growth refers to positive psychological change as a consequence of the struggle with highly negative life circumstances (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), and has been documented widely in relation to those who have suffered bereavement (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-90), life-threatening illness (O'Leary, Alday & Ickovics, 1998) and political imprisonment (Maerker & Schutzwohl, 1997). Crossley (2000) maintains that when a person's central understanding of identity, relationships, life course and sense of self-worth are disrupted, a person may 'rewrite' their life narrative to re-establish these lost entities in light of their new circumstance. This process concurs with the findings of the current study and additionally, Matousek's (1991) and Boydell *et al.*'s (2000) research (as outlined in the introduction), where the profound loss of self actually provided an opportunity to define one's own existential meaning. Despite these findings, very little research to date, if any, has studied the strengths and positive by-products of the homeless experience (Montgomery, 1994) and as such may have overlooked the implications of this insight. For example, given the positivity and sense of hope for the future expressed by many homeless individuals, Boydell *et al.* (2000) suggest that professionals could use early intervention strategies to capture this motivation to escape homelessness.

Another concept to emerge in the analysis was how participants detached themselves from their former possessions as a way of coping with their losses. Although this manipulation of values has not appeared within the homeless literature previously, it accords with Pearlin and Schooler's classic (1978) paper *The Structure of Coping*. Whereas emotion-focused coping was evident in the second superordinate theme, the devaluation of money is a meaning-focused strategy that has been found in people facing chronic occupational and financial difficulties (Breakwell, 1986; Kaplan, 1996; Rosenberg *et al.*, 1995). Pearlin and Schooler (1978) maintain that people attach differential importance to different aspects of their lives and when strain is placed in any one area, an individual may avoid stress if they are able to keep the most painful experiences within the least valued domain. By coming to understand that money, wealth and property are not actually that important to them, participants are alleviating the perceived threat of homelessness, which would be identified as 'reconstrual' by Breakwell's IPT (1986).

Although devaluing the subjective importance of one part of life may reduce distress, it also has an undesirable side-effect of depriving the person of one of the previous foundations upon which their self-concept and self-esteem were built. Thoits (2003) has found that individuals compensate by finding new sources of identity and gratification by investing in new, rewarding roles that provide positive feedback of self and life satisfaction. This counterbalancing theory not only relates directly to the final subtheme in the current study, but also to the findings of Riggs and Coyle (2002) and Williams and Stickley (2010) as outlined in the introduction, where participants across studies spoke of becoming involved in meaningful work, such as volunteering with the elderly, helping out at substance misuse clinics, and working in homeless day-centres, which presented them with positive self-regard by having value in a new, helper role. These findings have implications for supporting the homeless as they suggest that, by changing the meaning of a stressor and by taking

on new, valued roles (such as volunteering), some of the harmful psychological effects of homelessness may be ameliorated.

Interestingly, when talking about their new lives in being re-housed, participants specifically attributed their sense of resolve and independence to the friendship, support, understanding and sense of community that they had found through homeless organizations. This again highlights how participants sought not only basic provisions of food and shelter, but equally meaningful to them was social support. A particularly suitable passage which reflects this insight comes from Biswas-Diener and Diener (2006) as cited in Hodgetts *et al.* (2006), 'physical, social, and psychological needs might interact in a more "horizontal" fashion than previously thought to create overall psychological well-being' (p.716). Each are necessary components of health, which again illustrates that homelessness is more than a 'bricks and mortar' issue, it is the multilayered interplay of material, spatial, relational and psychological dimensions.

Collectively, the findings from the current study contribute little in the way of uncharted new insight into the experience of homelessness. However, these findings have complemented those already found in the existing literature (Boydell *et al.*, 2000; Riggs & Coyle, 2002; Bentley, 1997; Hodgetts *et al.*, 2006) which asserts the importance of these concepts, given that they have transpired in this inductive, data-driven, contemporary study of adults who have experienced homelessness in London. Furthermore, this study has identified some issues as salient that have previously only been alluded to by homeless research. Specifically, detachment from possessions as a meaning-focused coping strategy (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978) has not been noted in the homelessness literature to date, however this method of reconstrual demonstrates one way in which homeless individuals reduce the psychological impact of the multiple losses incurred. Additionally, positive growth and the wellness of homeless people remains a neglected area of psychological research (Montgomery, 1994) however its existence has most certainly been demonstrated by the current study and future research may gain insight from exploring the assets of the homeless population in addition to the disease aspects.

Evaluation and Reflexivity

The ability to gather such subjectively rich data was afforded by the use of semi-structured interviews, allowing a great flexibility of coverage as participants could lead the interview into unprecedented yet personally significant topics. However, there exist limitations in this respect as the vast quantities of rich data necessitated time-consuming analyses and as such, the number of participants was limited to six given the time constraints.

IPA as the chosen analytic strategy proved beneficial in allowing the researcher a great depth of immersion in the data, particularly advantageous given that the aims of this study were to understand the *lived experience* of homelessness. Nevertheless, the active role of the researcher in IPA means that it is important to consider personal as well as epistemological reflexivity. In terms of personal values and assumptions of the researcher, there were no obviously competing interests, although the elicitation of emotionally-charged stories of stigma and marginalization may have resulted in an empathetic response to the data. However, this was

acknowledged and great consideration was taken to set aside any assumptions for the integrity of the study.

A further strength of the study was that a purposive, homogeneous sample of participants was drawn so that accounts could be analysed for commonalities and disparities. However, this also constitutes a limitation, as all participants were white British between the ages of 29-57, which is not representative of the broader homeless population (e.g. families, ethnic minorities, youths). However, as with the majority of qualitative endeavours, generalisable findings were not an aim of this study and as such, the analyses presented here offer detailed insight to the experience of homelessness from a *particular perspective*. However it is also worth noting that the participants who responded to the invitation to take part in the study (and so were happy to associate themselves as having once been homeless) may differ markedly in their experiences from those individuals who seek to dissociate from homelessness and were thus reluctant to take part.

A final limitation is the self-report method and retrospective recall of life events, which can be vulnerable to self-enhancing bias and may underemphasise past difficulties, which may actually be part of the positive post-traumatic growth process which involves a reconstrual of life experiences. However, the findings of this study have largely reflected concepts previously documented by both quantitative and qualitative homeless research, which suggests some level of consistency. Future longitudinal research following the journey of an individual's experiences may overcome this limitation; however, due to the transient nature of homeless individuals, this method may prove difficult to apply.

Conclusion & Future Directions

Overall, the findings in this study illustrate how homelessness is experienced as a process of multiple losses, impacting individuals on material, spatial, relational and psychological dimensions, whilst highlighting the capacity of individuals to overcome relentless adversity and use the experience to drive positive growth. Furthermore, considering the deleterious impact that homelessness has on identity, self-esteem and feelings of connectedness, it is imperative that support services are informed by psychological research so as to be sensitive and responsive to the often complex needs of this population.

To conclude, in addition to the aforementioned suggestions, future research could explore the impact that denigration and stigmatization have on individuals, given that it is a frequent interpersonal occurrence for the homeless. Other avenues of potential insight may come from the study of homeless women or other sub-populations, where similarities and differences in regard to identity conflict, coping mechanisms, social comparisons and resilience may vary considerably. Given the current paucity of psychological attention to homelessness, any future research that facilitates an understanding of the experience of homelessness and that gives voice to this vulnerable and frequently overlooked population is undeniably warranted.

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