THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SINGLE MOTHERS

TRANSITIONING FROM HOMELESSNESS

TO INDEPENDENT LIVING

By

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CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The word "homeless" evokes a variety of thoughts and images for individuals diverse by gender, age, race, income and polity (Tompsett, Toro, Guzicki, Manrique, & Zatakia, 2006). Some view homelessness as a situation most commonly afflicting adult men, individuals addicted to alcohol or other substances, and individuals suffering from mental illness (Rossi, Wright, Fisher, & Willis, 1987). Others view homelessness as a sign of failure at life or personal flaws (Tompsett et al., 2006). Individuals high in compassion or with social service inclinations perhaps see homelessness as an opportunity to help someone overcome barriers to live a healthy, functional life. As diverse as individuals' perceptions of homelessness are, the reality of homelessness can be equally varied.

In the United States, more than 750,000 individuals may find themselves homeless on any given day based on a 2007 report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). A disproportionate number of these homeless individuals are racial or ethnic minorities (Burt, Aron, Douglas, Valente, Lee, & Iwen, 1999) and women (Gelberg, Browner, Lejano, & Arangua, 2004). HUD defines "homeless" in the literal sense meaning individuals who live in shelters, transitional residences, public places, or other unconventional and non-residential dwellings (i.e.,

abandoned buildings). Obtaining a true count of homeless individuals is impossible and estimates are typically based on individuals who utilize social services geared toward the homeless and are usually captured within a specific time frame (e.g., any given one-day period during a specific span of months; Burt, 2001).

With so many individuals living precarious existences, one might think the scientific field is saturated with studies about homeless populations – and there are many empirical publications related to various facets of extreme poverty. These studies include both quantitative and qualitative approaches to the phenomenon; however, variables often assessed are those presumed to be associated with homelessness such as mental illness, substance abuse, violence and crime, and of course poverty (Dennis, Buckner, Lipton, & Levine, 1991; Fischer & Breakey, 1991; Levin, McKean, & Raphael, 2004; Reif & Krisher, 2000; Stein & Gelberg, 1995). While these variables are associated with homelessness, some researchers argue they are but symptoms of deeper, more phenomenological issues (Burt, 2001). This is a particularly salient approach when considering the family unit that has experienced homelessness, specifically a family headed by a single mother, as they often encompass a variety of pathological behaviors and outcomes of which the origins are generally unknown.

Definitions

The following definitions are intended to provide an introductory understanding of the concepts discussed throughout this study. Further elaboration is provided elsewhere.

- *Homelessness:* The definition of homelessness employed in this study reflects the description developed by HUD as any person living in non-permanent, unconventional, unstable, or non-residential dwellings (2007)

- *Homeless Family:* The homeless family unit meets the above description of homelessness with the included specification of a man, woman, or couple with at least one child under 18 years of age for whom they are responsible (Burt, 2001)

- *Maternal Homelessness:* The term used to describe the circumstances of homeless single mothers with children

- *Transience:* A term suggesting impermanence, temporary circumstances, or short-lived experiences (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2007)

- *Transitional Housing (within the context of homelessness):* "A supervised living situation that allows [homeless individuals or families] to make the transition from [homelessness] to fully independent living" (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2007, p. 954). In other words, homeless families may move into transitional housing for a brief period of time during which they participate in a structured transitional program aimed at providing skills necessary for economically stable independent living.

- *Transitional Families:* Throughout this paper the terms "transitional families" and "recently-homeless families" were used in regards to families who have experienced homelessness (of varying severity and duration) and are now participating in a residential transitional living program.

Problem Statement

From a resiliency perspective, homeless families can be equipped and empowered to envision and achieve a life beyond homelessness becoming active and meaningful contributors in society. However, research regarding the personal issues transitioning parents must address and overcome to achieve self-sufficiency is lacking. In fact, little is known about the homeless experience beyond demographic details (Partis, 2003) and information regarding resiliency and transitions to self-sufficiency is generally limited to quantitative surveys and program evaluations. Through candid, intimate disclosures from an understudied population, a deep and phenomenological understanding can be gained to guide and energize future programs targeting family homelessness and resilience. We can take the time and care to ask the individuals we are investigating, "What is it like to be you?" (Burt, 2001; Giorgi, 2005; Laverty, 2003).

A major problem in empirical research of phenomenological experiences is the dichotomization of objective versus subjective, rational versus emotional, abstract versus concrete, and quantitative versus qualitative (Chafetz, 2004; Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993) where, depending on the reader, one approach is viewed as credible and the other inappropriate or insufficient. In addressing the problem of maternal homelessness, the qualitative approach used in this study will attempt to approach women's subjective experiences from an objective research perspective, to rationally interpret the emotional content provided by participants within the context of their past experiences and present circumstances, and to identify concrete issues that systematically recur among abstract conversation themes and observations.

Purpose and Importance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to inductively learn more about the lives of recently-homeless, transitioning parents, specifically mothers, and their children through a philosophical investigation of the women's subjective experiences. Through a phenomenological analysis of transitioning mothers' life experiences and perceptions, even the simplest details become "sociologically relevant [sic]" (Sprey, 2000). This relevance comes from weaving together women's stories to gain insight into factors associated with rising out of homelessness and transitioning to independent living. The goal was to identify dynamic themes recurrent within each woman's story and common among all of their stories. In addition, theoretical foundations were applied to research findings to better understand and explain how each woman's perceptions of her past life experiences relates to her current situation providing important insight into the unique needs of homeless women and their children.

Transitioning mothers already have demonstrated resilience in the face of homelessness by seeking out and participating in transitional services. Thus researchers have a unique opportunity to learn from these women about what strengths they already possess, what challenges their families still face, and how supportive resources can best assist them in achieving long-term stability. The perceptions, beliefs, and meanings transitional mothers apply to themselves and their experiences translate to behavior and action (Bandura, 1993) and a deeper understanding of the women's lived realities can greatly inform homeless support and intervention efforts as well as garner public awareness. Based on the research findings, implications are discussed suggesting direction for researchers and practitioners to more specifically and effectively address

issues associated with maternal homelessness. It is expected that through qualitative analysis of women's subjective experiences, observations of nuances and thematic highlights within their stories will create opportunities for additional research on latent factors associated with homelessness or transient living.

Research Questions

The research questions posed in this study address what life is like for homeless mothers, specifically:

- What is life like for recently-homeless mothers living in a transitional residence?
- What family and personal experiences contribute to maternal homelessness?
- What factors or experiences do transitioning mothers identify as making them resilient in seeking out transitional services and being successful in transitional programs?

The goal is to gain a deeper understanding of transitioning mothers' thoughts, feelings, and life experiences. To answer these questions and develop a unique and phenomenological knowledge base related to maternal homelessness, Herbert Blumer's (1969, pp. 24-26) elements of scientific inquiry were used as a guide to:

a) Obtain a comprehensive and historical understanding of the "reality" of homelessness

b) Examine this understanding of "reality" for unanswered questions or problems

c) Identify what information will best answer those questions and how it can be obtained

d) Determine how this information, once collected, is associated with the questions or problems, and more importantly the "reality" of homelessness

e) Understand and interpret any associations from scientific theory outside of the specific questions, problems, and phenomena of homelessness

f) Apply results to the understanding of the "reality" of homelessness and explain how they fit with the history of transience and how they promote new understanding of the phenomenon.

As an integral part of research that seeks to understand the meanings people apply to their daily life and historical experiences, this scientific process ideally suits research involving diverse experiences and perspectives associated with extreme poverty and homelessness. Consistent with a phenomenological approach, it is critical that researchers not form preconceived, *a priori*, hypotheses (Moustakas, 1994; see also Osborne, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1983; Valle, King, & Halling, 1989) instead interpreting data as it develops, framed by the women from their individual and collective standpoints (Smith, 1987).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Homelessness

To be shelterless and alone in the open country, hearing the wind moan and

watching for day through the whole long weary night; to listen to the falling rain,

and crouch for warmth beneath the lee of some old barn or rick, or in the hollow

of a tree; are dismal things--but not so dismal as the wandering up and down

where shelter is, and beds and sleepers are by thousands; a houseless rejected

creature (Dickens, 1841, p. 131).

The phenomena of homelessness is timeless and perceptions of individuals living

unconventional, non-residential existences have varied from decade to decade ranging

between curious amusement, disgust or fear, indifference, public concern, and altruistic

compassion (Fischer & Breakey, 1991). However, in the United States, homelessness did

not become a major focus of policy makers until the early 1980s. The first federal task

force addressing homelessness, created in 1983, did not begin to approach the issue from

a policy or community-development standpoint until local community advocates

pressured lawmakers into developing programs at the national level directly focused on

providing relief services to the homeless. After more than a decade of revisions,

removals, and renaming, these programs were solidified under the McKinney-Vento Act

in 1987 and finalized as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act under President

Clinton in 2000. (For a summary see National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008; see also Federal Violence Against Women Act, National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2006). During this time it also became more common to see families seeking shelter in facilities originally designed for single adults (Rog & Buckner, 2007) which was a motivating factor for federal funding allocations toward emergency shelters and supportive housing (i.e., transitional housing; Shinn, Rog, & Culhane, 2005). It was not until 1987 that the scientific community began publishing research related to the homeless experiences of families with children (Rog & Buckner, 2007).

Today, homelessness is everywhere and has many different faces. Social efforts addressing homelessness range from relief to rehabilitation with organizations aiming to provide support services to enhance the quality of life of homeless persons, provide services that alter the course of homelessness resulting in self-sufficiency and long-term independent living, or are intent on ending homelessness altogether (See U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2008). Some programs offer temporary, transitional housing – more stable and long-term than emergency shelters, but by no means permanent – to help retrain people so that they may become healthy, functioning members of society (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999; Wong & Mason, 2001). Recently, a leading researcher on American homelessness said the most important thing to know about the issue is that we do not yet know enough and the lack of current information is "pretty disgraceful" (Urban Institute, 2008, ¶6).

Who is Homeless?

If close to one million people are living in temporary housing, shelters, or exposed to the elements on any given day (HUD, 2007), the next logical question is, who

are they? It is very difficult to develop generalizable statistical information regarding the prevalence and demographic characteristics of homelessness. Essentially, the only way to estimate the number of homeless individuals is to make a cross-sectional assessment in a specific location during a specific period of time. Thus information about who is homeless varies depending on the month of assessment, the geographic location assessed, and participant recruitment and data collection methodologies (Burt, 2001). However, despite these challenges, much has been learned over the years about different typologies of homelessness as well as diverse populations within homeless communities.

The Chronically Homeless Individual

"In this country of ours, the best fed nation on earth, these are the forgotten people, the under-protected, the under-educated, the under-clothed, the under-fed…" (Friendly, Lowe, & Murrow, 1960). The federal government defines chronic homelessness as "an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has either been continuously homeless for a year or more, or has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years" (Caton, Wilkins, & Anderson, 2007, p. 4-3). As this definition states, individuals who are chronically homeless typically suffer from some form of disabling condition be it physical, mental, or social (Goering, Tolomiczenko, Sheldon, Boydell, & Wasylenki, 2002). In addition, chronically homeless populations are overwhelmingly male (80%; Goering et al., 2002; Rossi et al., 1987). Interestingly (and unfortunately) there is almost no information about the population of chronically homeless individuals living without any form of disability (Burt, 2001). While chronic homelessness generally receives the most attention, particularly the most government attention (See Federal Interagency Council on Homelessness, usich.gov; see

also Leginski, 2007), roughly only 20-27 percent of the homeless population experiences long-term transience (Burt, Aron, & Lee, 2001; Caton Dominguez, Schanzer, Hasin, Shrout, Felix et al., 2005; Caton, et al., 2007; Kertesz, Larson, Horton, Winter, Saitz, Samet, 2005). A recent study conducted in a major urban city found that 75 percent of the homeless population actually was quite resilient in that individual experiences with homelessness were limited in frequency and short in duration, typically lasting no more than two months (Kuhn & Culhane, 1998; see also Shinn, 1998). The profiles of individuals experiencing short-term periods of residential transience are considerably more heterogeneous than those of the chronically transient and, of particular concern, is the homeless family unit which is the focus of the present study.

The Homeless Family Unit

Families are a dominant social group found among the temporarily homeless. Close to half a million families are estimated to be homeless each year making up approximately one-third of the homeless population (Burt, 2001; HUD, 2007). The vast majority of these families are African American or other minority group (Lowin et al., 2001; Rossi et al., 1987; Whaley, 2002). In 1991, Fischer and Breakey urged researchers to focus on homeless families as their experiences of extreme poverty will likely "impair gravely the healthy growth of a generation of children" (p. 1125, see also Rafferty & Shinn, 1991). Of this "generation of children," roughly 200,000 are homeless on any given day with recent reports indicating close to 1.5 million in a given year – a number that is expected to increase based on current economic conditions (Burt et al., 1999; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Rog & Buckner, 2007).

Intact family units who experience homelessness face unique challenges in that there are more people to feed, clothe, and otherwise care for as well as fewer emergency residential resources (e.g., female-only shelters, male-dominated shelters, etc., Rog & Buckner, 2007; Shinn et al., 2005; see also National Center on Family Homelessness). Thus homeless families often are quite nomadic in that they move from location to location staying with anyone who will house them (i.e., "doubling up," Rog & Buckner, 2007, p. 5-1; see also Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2007). In addition, homeless families with school-age children face increased demands on their time and money as they try to provide their children with required and necessary educational materials, transportation, tutoring, and general support. While less than 10 percent of low-income families experience homelessness each year, those families who lose their housing statuses are then at prolonged risk for future residential and social instability compared to their socio-economic peer families who remain housed (Vostanis, Grattan, & Cumella, 1998). Thus the cycle of poverty and instability for each member of the family begins or endures (Rog & Buckner, 2007).

Maternal Homelessness. The vast majority of homeless families include a 20-something single mother with children typically younger than six years of age (Burt et al., 1999; HUD, 2007; Shinn et al., 2005; Weinreb, Buckner, Williams, & Nicholson, 2006). Barrow & Zimmer (1999) refer to this as the "feminization of poverty" (p. 51) which is reflective of gendered disparities in employment, education, and family responsibilities. The women who find themselves homeless often have depleted their last lifeline, be it a family member, a friend, or a financial resource (Liebow, 1993; Rog & Buckner, 2007). Often these residential resources are precariously housed themselves and face potential
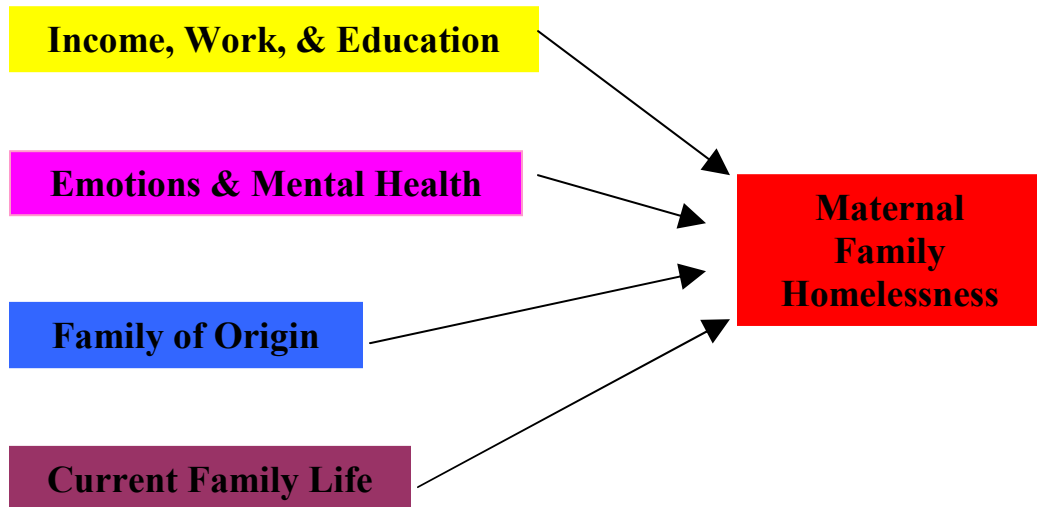
repercussions from their own landlords for housing multiple families in one dwelling (Glasser, 1991). This means that for every homeless woman, there are likely many more on the brink of destitution for tomorrow morning they may be told "you can not stay here any longer." For women with children, this brink is especially perilous as once they are out on the street they are vulnerable to "crime, street hazards, and the elements" (Merves, 1992, p. 230).

Focusing on homeless mothers is not a dismissal of the plight of homeless single fathers; however, the percentage of fathers raising children in shelters, transitional facilities, on the street, or other nonconventional housing situation is strikingly lower than that of homeless mothers (16% father-headed homeless families vs. 84% mother-headed; HUD, 2007; Schindler & Coley, 2007). Often, though not always the case, fathers become the sole caregivers for their children when the mother is unavailable or unable to provide proper care (McArthur, Zubrzycki, Rochester, & Thomson, 2006) due to mental illness, an abusive partner or her own perpetration of violence, unwillingness to raise her children, or some other barrier to parenting. While the experiences and needs of homeless fathers are important, the vast majority of families experiencing homelessness are headed by a single mother. Therefore, her background and experiences are of critical concern and are the focus of the present research. While potentially benefiting mothers experiencing current or recent homelessness, the understanding gained from this study also may enhance research on homeless fathers by providing insight into how homeless mothers perceive their lives and how that perception could influence her ability to appropriately parent her children.

Why are Mothers Homeless?

Risk factors for extreme poverty and maternal homelessness are essentially related to personal characteristics, available resources, and number of responsibilities (Rog & Buckner, 2007). However, these factors do not occur or interact in isolation from the rest of the world. Burt (2001) perhaps described it best: "The underlying causes of homelessness…do not lie within individuals…" (p. 737). Instead determinants of lost housing often are products of the complex macro-social economic climate. Community, state, and national economic factors can dictate the financial health of families, particularly when corporate layoffs are widespread and small businesses are floundering (Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, & Silva, 1998). However, the most extreme cases of family poverty that result in homelessness are generally more complex than just a struggling economy. In contrast to previous views of family homelessness, that the situation was a short-term financial crisis, it is now generally accepted as a multi-faceted social issue involving intra-familial problems as well as broader, more systemic problems (Weinreb & Buckner, 1993) including issues of work and education, psychosocial well being, and transgenerational family functioning. Following is a review of contributors consistently linked to family homelessness which are summarized as a conceptual model in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Conceptual model of contributors to maternal family homelessness.*

Income, work, and education. Without stable employment that provides a sufficient income, families are at extreme disadvantage when trying to obtain and maintain independent housing (Wright et al., 1998). One-fifth of all jobs available in the U.S. do not pay a wage sufficient for keeping a family of four above the poverty line (Waldron, Roberts, Reamer, Rab, & Ressler, 2004). In fact, using the federal poverty indicator may not even be sufficient in assessing family poverty as a family would need to earn twice the amount indicated by the poverty level to meet basic needs ($21,200 for a family of four; $17,600 for a family of three; $14,000 for a family of two; Cauthen, 2006; U.S. Federal Register, 2008). Looking beyond basic needs, one person's income for 40 hours of work per week would need to be close to $20 per hour to afford a two-bedroom apartment (minimum wage currently is $5.85 per hour; U.S. Department of Labor, 2008). This mismatch between employee compensation and housing costs creates

a precarious financial situation for families that approaches crisis level when one considers the substantial drop in public housing support observed over the past 20 years (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2007) as well as other financial hurdles that could arise.

In fall of 2008, the U.S. unemployment rate was above six percent and rising (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). Homelessness has always been associated with high levels of unemployment and, of homeless adults who are employed, low levels of moderate to high-paying stable jobs (Wright et al., 1998). Mothers experiencing homelessness often have an employment history; however, when they resort to visiting an emergency shelter, they almost always are unemployed (Bassuk, Weinreb, Buckner, Browne, Salomon, & Bassuk, 1996; Brooks & Buckner, 1996; Lowin et al., 200; Rog & Buckner, 2007; Rog, McCombs-Thornton, Gilbert-Mongelli, Brito, & Holupka, 1995). But this does not mean that adults in homeless families always are unemployed. Burt et al. (1999) found that close to 30 percent of homeless families had at least one parent working.

Maintaining stable employment is especially challenging for female victims of intimate partner violence as they are less likely than non-abused women to work for at least 30 hours per week over the course of a six-month period (Browne, Salomon, & Bassuk, 1999). With some exception, mothers in homeless families typically have completed less education than the average American adult, but have attained a similar level of education when compared to other low-income families (Bassuk et al., 1996; Burt et al., 1999; Rog & Buckner, 2007; Shinn & Weitzman, 1996; for exception see Bassuk & Rosenberg, 1988). The combination of macro-economic hardships, low levels of education and employment attainment, as well as other family life struggles, paints a

bleak picture for mothers and their children at the bottom tier of the socioeconomic ladder.

Emotions and mental health. Mental illness at all levels of severity is found among homeless populations. Because of the presence of psychosocial disorder, homeless individuals are at increased disadvantage as they are less likely to utilize public support resources, are estranged from family and other support networks, have increased rates of imprisonment, and experience disproportionate health problems (Fischer & Breakey, 1991). Aside from severe psychological disorder, homeless individuals may experience a range of emotional dysfunctions: anger, self-blame, depression, anxiety, and desperation – all are emotions disproportionately experienced by mothers in homeless families (Bassuk, Buckner, Perloff, & Bassuk, 1998; Bassuk et al., 1996). These mothers have increased rates of major depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (three times higher than the general public; Rog & Buckner, 2007), and substance abuse (Bassuk et al., 1996; Weinreb et al., 2006) in addition to other psychiatric disorders and family breakdowns (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1998; Connelly & Crown, 1994; Vostanis, 2002; Vostanis et al., 1998; Zima, Wells, Benjamin, & Duan, 1996). It is not uncommon for these mental and emotional health issues to be antecedents of maternal homelessness, particularly when combined with low levels of education, unemployment, and poor health (Bassuk et al., 1998; Rog & Buckner, 2007; Rog et al., 1995). However, the adverse mental and emotional experiences of homeless women often go undiagnosed and untreated (Bassuk, 2007).

Homeless mothers, when compared to low-income residential mothers, experience elevated stress and depression attributed to more severe financial pressures as

well as traumatic interpersonal events (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1998; Choi & Snyder, 1999; Menke & Wagner, 1997). From a family stress perspective (Walsh, 2002; 1996), homelessness is just another layer to an already complex pileup of stressors and traumatic experiences. A poignant indicator of stress pileup is the finding that homeless mothers develop ulcers at four times the rate of residentially-stable mothers (Weinreb, Goldberg, & Perloff, 1998) as this type of physical ailment is consistently associated with heightened levels of stress (Levenstein, Ackerman, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Dubois, 1999). Most children in these families also experience elevated stress as they constantly worry about where they will sleep, where they will live, and when something bad is going to happen (National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999).

Family of origin. While homelessness is an extreme outcome from financial instability and poverty, actual experiences and durations of homelessness are due to a combination of issues. Traumas associated with maternal homelessness include past family of origin or intimate partner abuse, mental illness, chronic health disparities, and childhood foster care placement (Bassuk, Buckner, Weinreb, Browne, Bassuk, Dawson, & Perloff, 1997; Bassuk et al., 1996; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Weinreb et al., 1998, 2006). The majority of homeless mothers, compared to low-income housed mothers, did not have positive childhood experiences as their families were more likely to abuse substances, engage in criminal activities, and be highly disorganized (Tyler, 2006; Wood, Valdez, Hayashi, & Shen, 1990). Consequently, these women were more likely to be placed in foster care at some point during their childhood (Wood et al., 1990).

Women placed in foster care settings as children are then at heightened risk of homelessness as an adolescent or young adult, their children also are more likely to be

placed in foster care, and are less likely to be returned to their mother as long as she is

without a stable residence (Bassuk et al., 1996; Cowal, Shinn, Weitzman, Stojanovic, &

Labay, 2002; Doerre et al., 1996; Petit & Curtis, 1997; Susser, Lin, & Conover, 1991;

Zlotnick, Kronstadt, & Klee, 1998). When a young girl is placed in foster care, her

likelihood of beginning a cycle of poverty with the power to influence future generations

already has increased (Bassuk et al., 1996; Cowal et al., 2002; Doerre et al., 1996; Nunez,

1993; Petit & Curtis, 1997; Susser et al., 1991; Zlotnick et al., 1998). Especially

considering that when she reaches the age of 18 and ages out of the foster care system,

the odds of her transitioning to shelter life are high (Courtney & Piliavin, 1998). These

odds increase with multiple care placements during childhood – even if they are not

formal foster placements (i.e., homes of family and friends; Roman & Wolfe, 1995). This

predicament is another precursor to a transgenerational cycle of risk as foster-care

children are in danger of future homelessness and separation from their own offspring

(Nunez, 1993; Roman & Wolfe, 1995; Shinn et al., 2005).

Bassuk and Browne (1996) said that single mothers live impossible lives and

found that more than 90 percent of homeless single mothers experienced severe physical

or sexual assault at some point in their lives (see also Vostanis, 2002). These violent

assaults typically occurred during childhood or adolescence in their family of origin or

foster care settings or, when occurring in adulthood, came by the hand of a romantic

partner (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999; Bassuk et al., 1996). Often intimate partner violence

was experienced recently or is ongoing (Browne & Bassuk, 1997) and is a major

motivator for women to seek shelter (Steinbock, 1995). As a result of this violence or

other family life stressors, homeless women often have no connection (or no positive

connection) with their families of origin (Bassuk & Rosenberg, 1988). Half of all homeless mothers report fewer than three people they could count on for support and close to 15 percent of these mothers indicated their children served as their only support network (Letiecq, Anderson, & Koblinsky, 2001; Zima et al., 1996). Tyler (2006) describes the diversity of past experiences of homeless individuals and acknowledges the dynamic of equifinality (Bertalanffy, 1968) in that, despite a range of variation in family backgrounds, some common thread has brought them all to the most extreme level of destitution.

Current Family Life

The daily life of a family experiencing homelessness is a mixture of the same routines and hassles experienced by all families with children as the majority of homeless youth still attend school on a regular basis (Anderson, Janger, & Panton, 1995). While homeless families navigate normative family tasks and experiences, their lives also are characterized by high levels of stress. These families are frequently faced with challenges and devastation unique to the transient lifestyle that can catalyze a multi-generational cycle of dysfunction and poverty.

The stress of homelessness can create a volatile atmosphere within families. One fourth of all homeless children have watched a parent or sibling be violently assaulted by another member of their family (often the father or the mother's male partner; Bassuk et al., 1997, 1996; Buckner, Beardslee, & Bassuk, 2004; National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999). As family stress is absorbed by children, they become more aggressive, prone to violence, and experience increased mental and emotional turmoil (Osofsky, 1997). This behavioral and emotional turmoil is experienced by homeless

youth at three times the rate of children not experiencing homelessness (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2005). Homeless children as young as three may require professional treatment for severe emotional problems including anger and aggression (National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999). In addition, they often are developmentally delayed, have learning disabilities, and struggle with academic material (Rafferty, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004; National Center for Homeless Education, 2007; National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999).

These social, emotional, and developmental outcomes likely result from a combination of factors including the mothers' past family experiences, traumas associated with homelessness, and current parent-child interactions. In fact, Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, and McLoyd (2003) found that parenting mediated the impact of economic adversity on children as parents were more distressed, less effective, and less affectionate with their children. Other studies have found that impoverished parents use erratic and harsh disciplinary tactics and maintain weak attachments with their children (McLoyd, 1998). Homeless women with children may not feel a strong sense of their maternal roles as they are reliant upon and subjected to processes and requirements of social service organizations (e.g., shelters) and may feel a lack of autonomy and competence as a parent (Schindler & Coley, 2007; Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995). Aside from the stress of poverty, social isolation, which has a significant influence on maternal homelessness (Zima et al., 1996), also hinders the development of positive, responsive parenting practices (Hashima & Amato, 1994) and increases the risk for child abuse (Corse, Schmid, & Trickett, 1990).

While the challenges homeless mothers face are significant, they also have potential wells of strength including determination, independence, and empathy (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1995; Hodnicki & Horner, 1993; Menke & Wagner, 1997; Tischler & Vostanis, 2007). Often social service programs have the opportunity to empower women to tap into these resources as they focus on their current situations, their role as mother, cope with feelings of stress and depression, and develop strategies for resilience (Meadows-Oliver, 2002). However, recent discussions regarding maternal homelessness lament the fact that there still is no conceptual model explaining the relationship between risk and protective factors that influences the likelihood a woman and her children will experience homelessness (Rog & Buckner, 2007). Results from this study will add more information to collective efforts to delineate the homeless phenomenon (Bassuk, 2007) – particularly that of homeless women, mothers, and their children.

<center>Homeless Mothers' Transition to Independent Living</center>

"Very seldom do you come upon a space, a time like this, between act and act, when you may stop and simply be. Or wonder who, after all, you are" (Le Guin, 1975, p. 31-34). Just as antecedents and experiences of family homelessness are complex, so then is the path to independence. Family economic self-sufficiency is believed to rely on the following three things: life-sustaining resources, human capital (i.e., supportive social networks), and economic opportunity (Shlay, 1993). Of all homeless families, the focus of this study is the recently-homeless single-mother family living in a transitional housing as such facilities address each of these tasks associated with economic independence (Washington, 2002). Thus by the simple fact of joining a transitional program, mothers already are demonstrating some level of strength and resilience.

The concept of transitional living programs can be traced back to halfway houses for emancipated prisoners, addicts, and the mentally ill (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999), but began development as a standard resource for homeless families in the late 1980s during the same period when the McKinney-Vento Act and HUD legislations were being formed and reformed to provide direct homeless relief services (See Burt, 2006 or Shinn et al., 2005 for detailed historical accounts). There have been isolated efforts to develop "transition-in-place" housing (e.g., Sound Families Program) where homeless families are placed in homes with intensive support services that taper off as families' levels of functioning improves – the residence then becomes their permanent home (Shinn et al., 2005). However, the focus of the present study is the more traditional temporary facilities where families may reside for a brief period before moving into independent housing situations, although there still is no clear, systematic definition of these programs.

Once families move into transitional residences, their identity becomes ambiguous. Before the term homeless meant living in non-permanent, unconventional, unstable, or non-residential dwellings (HUD, 2007). Though transitional families are securely housed, the residence still is non-permanent and unconventional and residents still are typically considered homeless. Various terms are used throughout the literature attempting to describe the status of families who do not posses a home (i.e. buying or leasing), but are not technically homeless. These terms include housing-assisted families, publicly-housed families, and Section 8 families (Anthony, 2005); other service organizations still refer to families in transition as homeless or migrant (Catholic Charities, 2008; Hartman & Leff, 2002).

Individuals develop within the context of their family's past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). While family adversity can be detrimental to children's outcomes (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Sobolewski & Amato, 2005), families also are systems capable of profound resiliency in the face of stress, trauma, and adversity when provided with necessary encouragement, support, and connectedness from their community (Landau, 2007). Transitional housing is often the first step in resilience for families who have diverse transient experiences ranging from short-term stays with family, friends, or emergency shelters, to long-term, chronic shelter or street living.

While families residing in temporary housing still are considered homeless (Vostanis, 2002) as the residence is not a conventional family dwelling (HUD, 2007) nor do they consider it their permanent "home" (Wright et al., 1998), such housing programs do provide several months of stability for thousands of families rebounding from extreme poverty. For example, in the U.S. last year, close to 20,000 individuals used transitional housing services through 171 local Catholic Charities agencies (Catholic Charities, 2008) – and this is just one example of many social service organizations across the country offering transitional housing. Transitional programs are an effective link between homelessness and independent living through comprehensive services targeting areas transient families are often deficient in such as life skills training, individual/family/group counseling, and community resource connections (Washington, 2002) – while also providing several months of stable, secure housing.

Mothers who have entered into transitional housing programs are in a critical period as they are a step beyond homelessness, but must overcome many personal,

family, and social issues in order to transition to healthy independent living. Transitioning mothers are typically focused on securing and maintaining stable employment, becoming financially solvent and prepared for future responsibilities, and dealing with past trauma, family dysfunction, and psychosocial pathology (D. Mancini, personal communication, March 4, 2008). Thus mothers who make it into these programs have reached a level of functioning where they are committed to addressing these issues to change their life course. This makes transitioning families an ideal research community as they essentially have one foot in the homeless world and the other foot on the path toward resiliency.

As the majority of vulnerable and impoverished families consist of single-mothers, exploring their experiences in transitional housing will add a unique perspective to research on extreme poverty – that of the transitioning mother doing everything she can to raise her family in a stable environment with hope for the future. Current research is limited regarding homeless families (and mothers) in transitional housing programs; however, what research has been conducted on the transitioning family unit demonstrates progress and optimism for families working toward long-term independent living (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999). Bassuk (2007) said that in order to develop an accurate understanding of the phenomenon of the homeless family, researchers must first appreciate and investigate the past experiences that characterize their lives and seek richer and broader data sources to inform methodology and policy – specifically understudied Midwestern families experiencing homelessness (Rog & Buckner, 2007; see also Fogel, 1997).

Summary

Over the past few decades, much has been learned about the homeless experience – particularly as it relates to poverty, substance abuse, and mental illness among adult populations (Goering et al., 2002; Rossi et al., 1987). Research is growing in the area of family homelessness, much of which centers around the homeless mother raising young children (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999; Burt et al., 1999; Burt, 2001). In particular we know that homeless mothers often have issues in the realms of work and education, mental health and substance use, dysfunctional processes in families of origin or childhood foster care settings, and problems functioning in current family life. However, we know little about what life is like for homeless mothers, how they perceive themselves in their individual and family roles, and how their past experiences contributed to experiences of homelessness as well as resiliency into transitional living programs.

This study seeks to fill this gap by listening to and observing recently-homeless mothers tell their stories, interact with one another, and evaluate their life experiences as they participate in a transitional living program. By reviewing existing literature related to family homelessness, a structural understanding has been gained regarding issues often associated with family homelessness (See Figure 1); however, this study should shed substantial light on how these issues actually function in women's lives. In addition, other issues that are to-date unknown and unexplored may emerge creating a new discussion about the phenomenon of maternal homelessness and what can be done to help mothers rebound from the most extreme depths of poverty.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Qualitative methodologies range from highly systematic and rigorous to highly

subjective and interpretive. They also range between theory-driven to theory-generating.

Thus, individual researchers must determine which approach best suits both their research

purpose and the data they intend to collect (Daly, 2007). The research questions posed in

the present study revolve around how recently-homeless mothers experience, understand,

and interpret objects, events, and conditions in their life based on their past experiences,

current circumstances, and future expectations.`

A Phenomenological Approach to Maternal Homelessness

The underlying theoretical framework that both lead to the development of the

present study and was employed to interpret findings is the phenomenological approach

to understanding families. Instead of a removed analytic perspectives, phenomenology

brings researchers "in more direct contact with the world" being explored (van Manen,

1990, p. 9). There is a precedent for investigating the phenomenological experiences of

understudied populations to inform social service and policy reform (Bogdan & Bilken,

2007; Gilgun, 1999b). Phenomenology, in its simplest form, is the appreciation that any

social reality is subject to the "reality" of the individual in the social setting. Thus a

situation such as maternal homelessness, while having inherently similar traits across

homeless families, is going to be experientially unique for each family (i.e., equifinality;

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Bertalanffy, 1968), and each member of the family, based on individual differences, family characteristics, as well as past experiences, current perceptions, and future expectations. These individual and group details provide valuable information for research on homelessness and resilience that can help direct future intervention development and delivery as well as future scientific study (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999). Therefore, a phenomenological approach will not only enable identification of themes important across mothers and homeless families, but it also will identify unique individual experiences (and participants' perceptions of those experiences) that impact life course outcomes. Finally, interpretive phenomenology allows the researcher the opportunity to frame and interpret observations within participants' current context (i.e., transitional housing) while accounting for the background information they provide as each woman discloses her life story.

Phenomenology

A phenomenon is simply an observable reality (van Manen, 1997) – in the case of the present research the phenomenon under investigation is maternal homelessness and transition to self-sufficiency. The discipline of phenomenology is the study of life as experienced by the individual (Valle et al., 1989) through their mind's eye (i.e., their "life world;" Gregova, 1996; Husserl, 1970; Schutz, 1966). So a phenomenological approach to homelessness allows researchers the opportunity to observe the experience as told by the individual transitioning from homelessness to independent living (Partis, 2003). While related to other perspectives such as ontology ("what is"), epistemology ("what we know"), logic ("what is valid"), and ethics ("what is right;" Smith, 2008), phenomenology is a philosophical position, a theoretical way of understanding, and a

research methodology. Through study design, data collection, and analysis, the researcher's phenomenological approach has taken on each of these functions.

Historical background. The movement of phenomenology as a science (Speigelberg, 1960) currently has an eclectic following of scholars, but can be traced back to the origins of Buddhism and Hinduism as well as major 20th century philosophers Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Edmund Gustav Albrecht Husserl, and Jean-Paul Sartre (Smith, 2008). Husserl, known as the father of phenomenology (Cohen, 1987; Koch, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1983; Scruton, 1995), believed that empirical research devoted to measurement and predictive abilities created artificial findings that were removed from and interpreted without regard for the context in which the phenomena under study occurred – that context being individual perception (Jones, 1975; Laverty, 2003). Husserl chided that individuals do not conduct their own studies to analyze and categorize their life events, but react to them based on all the knowledge, experiences, and assumptions they have accumulated up to the point in question (Husserl, 1970). Husserl deviated from the positivist paradigm that there exists a truth for every phenomenon and the role of the scientist was to uncover this truth through study of individuals (Jones, 1975; Koch, 1995). Constructivists see phenomena as a product of interpersonal interaction between people, or the co-constructing of multiple meanings to reach a single truth or reality (von Glasersfeld, 1987). Husserl also subscribed to constructivism, but saw people as intentionally co-constructing experiences with the world around them pulling information and experiences they perceived as real and relevant to understand reality as they saw it (Edie, 1987; Koch, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1989; Valle et al., 1989).

Bracketing. Husserl pushed phenomenology from a philosophy to a research methodology when he proposed the concept of bracketing (Jones, 1975; Klein & Westcott, 1994; Osborne, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1983) or separating what we "know" from what we have "experienced" (Paley, 1998, pp. 817-824). Bracketing could be described as the precursor to Blumer's (1969) elements of scientific inquiry when the investigator ponders what they think they already "know" about the phenomenon under study, isolate those assumptions, and then proceed to collect concrete information to help define the actual experience of the phenomenon by the individuals who are living it or have lived through it (Klein & Westcott, 1994; Osborne, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1983). Several specific methods of bracketing are used, some more detailed than others; yet all involve first cognitively imagining phenomena (i.e., imaginative participation trying to think and feel like the participants, Young 1928; 1932), exploring one's own presumptions about it, and then setting those presumptions aside to identify the structural elements of the phenomena that are required in order for it to exist (i.e., in order for there to be a phenomena of family homelessness, there must be a family lacking a stable residence; Klein & Westcott, 1994; Osborne, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1983).

Through the process of bracketing one discovers that a family without a home may indeed be the structure of homelessness, but that individual experiences of these structures are what construct the phenomena of homelessness as it is perceived by society (i.e., as a negative outcome of extreme poverty). Otherwise, for example, a military family that moved constantly and had no permanent residence might be labeled homeless, when their perception of their lifestyle does not include the concept of homelessness. What elucidates this perception of reality is the systematic collection of personal stories

and details that often may go unnoticed or undervalued in an attempt to gain an insider view of the phenomenon (Laverty, 2003; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991).

Co-constructed phenomenological understandings. One of many variations of Husserlian phenomenology was proposed by Husserl's colleague and predecessor Martin Heidegger who believed, rather than a reality co-constructed between individuals and the world, that reality was a tautological product from transactions between individuals and the world around them (Heidegger, 1927/1962; Koch, 1995). He believed human perception did not just color experience, but interpreted it to define meaning and value (i.e., hermeneutics; Annells, 1996; Kvale, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1983). Thus, to gain a phenomenological understanding of families' experiences of homelessness, researchers must do more than collect, analyze, and restate information. The information and the individual providing it must be probed for deeper understanding, not just of the phenomenon, but of their experiences with and interpretations of it and how they believe it fits into the larger scope of their lives (Gadamer, 1960/1998; Laverty, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1983).

This idea of individuals within socio-historical context is the foundation of modern standpoint theory where our standpoint is the place from which we view and construct the world around us and unique individual perspectives can inform generalized accounts of reality (Smith, 1987). Where phenomenology and hermeneutics intersect is at the heart of the present study as, following dialectic logic (Hegel, 1807/1998; Sartre, 1976), it is believed that scientific inquiry must include the researcher's observation of a phenomenon, an individual's experience of a phenomenon, and the new, deeper understanding a synthesis of the two creates.

Understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else's meaning. Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one's own thinking on the subject… To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were (Gadamer, 1960/1998, p. 375).

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

There is a fine line between theory and methodology, and as in the case of

phenomenology, that line is necessarily blurred. The theoretical position guiding a

research study directs or dictates the type of methodology appropriate to answer the

research questions. This is the case for all theory-based research, but is particularly

relevant for qualitative approaches to social phenomena. Researchers designing

"existential-phenomenological" studies, while often diverse in the details of their

methodologies, follow a basic set of guidelines: obtain concrete descriptions, transform

descriptions into phenomenological concepts (i.e., meaning-making), and review

meanings for general understanding of the social issue under investigation (Dowling,

2007, p. 135). Because the research questions in the present study pertain to women's

perceptions, meanings, and experiences, and because the researcher desires richness and

depth of understanding versus simple descriptive information, a qualitative,

phenomenological design is most appropriate. However, there are many theoretical

variations of qualitative research and before explaining the approach taken in the present

study, other common methodologies must first be mentioned in terms of why they were

not an ideal fit for the project based on both the researcher's theoretical philosophy about

what scientific knowledge is lacking regarding maternal homelessness, and the type of

sample and data to be examined.

Grounded theory

Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology often requiring data collection and analysis to take place concurrently with each step building upon previously collected content (Glaser & Holton, 2004; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The purpose of the grounded theory technique is to generate theory from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) by inductively forming theory as data accumulates. Because of the diverse nature of homelessness, particularly the experiences of homeless mothers, grounded theory is not an ideal approach for the present study. A constant comparative analysis, or even theoretical sampling, would limit findings and skew results to make the maternal homeless population appear more homogeneous than it may actually be. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of homeless mothers *as they see them*, gathering and exploring every experience whether it only occurred in a single case or was a common theme among all homeless mothers. A grounded theory approach might mask qualitative differences that are not dominant, or recurrent among all participants. In addition, the rigorous procedure would be too cumbersome and invasive for participants who are in a vulnerable position with limited and short-term availability. Finally, Willig (2001) points out that grounded theory researchers do not account for the role they play in data collection and interpretation and how they are not just observers of phenomena, but in conducting research, actually create a data-driven dynamic that did not previously exist. While the purpose of grounded theory is to generate theory that can then be tested further, some qualitative researchers have dissimilar intentions and thus approach social issues from an empirically different standpoint.

Thematic or content analysis

Similar to the argument against using grounded theory as a qualitative approach to maternal homelessness, thematic or content analyses also focus on dominant thematic elements that recur among the majority of the sample. While this would provide information about issues common among mothers transitioning from family homelessness, a thematic approach does not account for or appreciate the unique differences in past histories and current circumstances, nor does it interpret how the mothers perceive their life experiences. Even if the same concept recurs among the entire sample, they way each woman perceives the concept may be quite different and, consequentially, it may exert a unique influence in each family situation. In addition, such types of analyses sometimes require researchers to form preliminary hypotheses in the form of pre-selected content areas to be searched for (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dimond, Misch, & Goldberg, 2001). This requires investigators to infer the importance of certain concepts based on existing knowledge prior to actually collecting any information from the mothers' experiences being studied. The preference of the researcher in the present study is to let participants identify and describe what issues *they* feel are most important and that have played significant roles in their personal and family lives.

Narrative analysis

A narrative analysis is just as the name implies – an analysis of peoples' individual life stories as they choose to relay them (See Lysaker, Lancaster, & Lysaker, 2003; Salvatore, Dimaggio, & Semerari, 2004). The focus is on rhetoric and text, as well as the context in which people frame their lives. Such an analysis requires extensive chronological data from participants as they relay their personal stories. From this data,

researchers attempt to understand how people structure their lives (i.e., understand how people frame their life experiences), but typically do not interpret the stories to determine a) how people perceive their experiences, b) how people feel their experiences have impacted other life events, and c) how the story plays into the bigger context of participants' past experiences, present circumstances, and future goals or fears – all of which are goals of the present study.

Phenomenology-Based Methodological Examples

Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006) advised scientists to orient their studies toward explaining how a phenomenon has been understood by each participant, what the phenomenon means for each participant considering the context in which they currently live and their socio-historical background, and how participants' understandings and meanings can add insight into overall research on the phenomenon. In the present study both across-sample commonalities were highlighted and unique case stories were provided to create a systematic yet qualitative understanding of the phenomenology of single mothers transitioning from homelessness to independent living. Employing a phenomenological methodology allows researchers to collect and interpret data relevant to transitioning mothers' subjective life experiences, current perceptions of their world, how they symbolize and communicate those perceptions, and how they frame their future based on their life experiences thus far. Each of these goals is consistent with key concepts of phenomenology.

If the purpose of systematic, scientific research is to learn more about the world around us, phenomenologists would contend we learn nothing without understanding how the data we collect fits into and is perceived by the lives being investigated. Thus

phenomenological research explores the lived experiences of people experiencing a certain observable truth (Byrne, 2001). Presented here are several empirical examples of how researchers can employ phenomenological methods of empirical analyses to systematically and scientifically uncover these lived experiences and develop a richer, deeper understanding of various social problems.

The Experience of Caring for a Family Member with Alzheimer's

Butcher, Holkup, and Buckwalter (2001) employed a four-stage, 12-step methodology developed by van Kaam (1966) to assess the meaning-making experiences of family members caring for an elderly relative suffering from Alzheimer's disease. To do this they conducted interviews with family members that were then transferred into 156 verbatim transcripts. The process they used to analyze the extensive data collected was described as follows (pp. 40-42; see also Anderson & Eppard, 1998):

Stage 1, Analysis. The analysis stage is where each transcript is read and reread when descriptive and revealing information provided by participants is highlighted and grouped based on commonality. Non-essential information is removed from analysis at this point. This first stage is the most intensive requiring the most detailed review of the data which often is enhanced and streamlined through the use of qualitative statistical software (Butcher et al., 2001). The steps of this stage as described by Butcher and colleagues are:

1. Careful reading of each description in each transcript

2. Rereading each description to identify expressions in the informants' words

3. Highlighting the identified expressions

4. Grouping highlighted expressions into common themes

5. Relating elements in a meaningful way across participants

6. Synthesizing groups into essential structural elements

7. Comparing and review by external judge trained in phenomenological methods

8. The final step of the Analysis stage is to reread each transcript to make sure the essential elements selected accurately represent the lived experience of the participants

Stage 2. Translation. The second stage in the process includes Step 9 which involves translating the essential elements from participants' language to discipline-specific terminology.

Stage 3. Transposition. The third stage is when resulting, discipline-appropriate thematic structures are externally reviewed. In Butcher et al.'s study, the 10th step was completed by two independent judges reviewing translated elements for reliability.

Stage 4. Phenomenological reflection. This last stage is based on transposition feedback.

11. Judges' suggestions are integrated into a final synthetic description

12. Findings are submitted to applied experts and participants themselves for review

Results from this study are presented in both table form to illustrate the saturation of each structural element as well as in paragraph form organized by element (or theme).

Divorce and Middle and Later Life Families

Radina, Hennon, and Gibbons (2008) assessed the diverse experiences of divorce for individuals in mid- and later life based on their marital history, family structure, and

individual perspectives with the goal of better informing professionals who work with divorced and divorcing families. As with the previous study, interviews were conducted with participants with the addition of field notes to inform the process. Researchers address the issue of generalizability by clearly stating that broad applicability of findings is not their intention. Rather, they are focusing on the "trivial aspects" (Laverty, 2003, p. 7; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991) of individual experience to tell the story of divorce as it occurs in unique (i.e., later life) circumstances (Radina et al., 2008).

The methodological process used in this study involved providing a brief summary of each interview and then a phenomenological assessment of the story. Instead of highlighting descriptive experiences across participants as Butcher et al. (2001) did, authors in this study identified elements within each case that they felt elucidated the lived experience of that unique individual. In their assessments, Radina et al. (2008) detailed what they learned from each participant including both direct information the participants spoke in the interview and the observations and inferences researchers made via field notes as each interview was taking place. Unique from the previous study, this adds the researchers' perspectives (or antithesis) to what the participant is saying (thesis) providing a dialectical synthesis of understandings. Results are presented in paragraph form on a case-by-case basis. The strength of this approach is the depth and opulence of experience provided; however, it lacks systemic rigor present in the previous study. Whether or not lack of rigor is deemed a weakness really depends on the intended audience and as the authors' stated purpose was to provide specific experiential information to educators, the less rigorous but more detailed descriptions of late-life divorce may be more appropriate and valuable.

Current Study Methodology

Similar to the approach used by Hill (1991) to explore the lives of shelter-dwelling women, the present study uses data from casual interviews and observations of mothers residing in a transitional living facility for homeless families. The qualitative nature of this investigation gave researchers access to diverse, intimate personal histories with one common thread – all mothers had experienced homelessness and were actively working toward self-sufficiency. The role of the researcher in this study was not only to collect data from transitioning mothers, but also to interpret the data within the context of each woman's personal history and her current circumstances (Gilgun, 1999b). As stated by Smith and Osborne (2003, p. 51), "The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world." This approach is important to understanding mothers' experiences of and pathways in and out of homelessness because, as is the case in this study, regardless of their diverse histories, all the women have arrived at the same place (i.e., transitional living facility). Each woman's path may be unique or they may share some common characteristics or background experiences – either finding will add understanding and insight to what we know about the resilience of recently-homeless mothers. Interpretive phenomenological analysis views participants as the best informants to describe how they perceive and feel about their lived experiences (Montague, 2007), so those are the informants sought to participate in this study.

This study uses interviews and observations of single mothers conducted by the researcher in 2006 while the women resided in a transitional facility for homeless families. The data collection was part of a separate project, but the information was not

processed or analyzed at that time. As such, the data currently has been approved by the university's Institutional Review Board as non-human subject research exempt from ongoing review. The transitional residence where observations and interviews took place is located in an urban neighborhood of a Midwestern U.S. city. The facility could house up to 13 families in individual apartments and all tenants residing in the transitional facility.

Sample

Seven single, recently-homeless mothers with children were in residence and recruited from a transitional facility through the facility's director. On average, families reside in the transitional facility for approximately four months. Each woman agreed to be interviewed or observed over the course of a 12-week period. All group observations took place in a private meeting room at the facility and individual interviews took place in a private room within the director's office space.

The women ranged in age from 27 to 40 (mean = 34 years); three were African American, three were Caucasian, and one was Native American. The group of women had an average of three biological children living with them (children's mean age = 8.39 years). Four of the women were divorced and three had never been married. All of the women were employed in one of the following career fields: clerical/office staff, skilled labor, medical/nursing, early childhood education, or custodial work. All women had at least a high school diploma, two had some college work completed, and three had completed a vocation certification program. The living arrangements of the families prior to moving into the transitional residence were diverse. Two families arrived directly from a homeless shelter; three were evicted from their mothers' homes; one family had been

living with members of their church; and one woman had been living in her car with her

child. The women had spent an average of 13 years in the city where the transitional

facility was located prior to moving in to the residence (range = 2-29 years). All but one

family had a vehicle. Two of the women had been imprisoned at some point during their

life. Table 1 lists participant descriptive information about the sample.

Table 1. *Descriptive information about the sample.*

Participant Number	Ethnicity	Age	Number of Children (Ages[a])	Marital Status	Weeks of Observations
1	Caucasian	34	3 (10,9,3)	Divorced	5
2	African American	38	2 (18,17)	Divorced	4
3	American Indian	40	5 (18,15,12,11,10)	Divorced	2
4	African American	32	4 (10,6,1,2 months)	Never Married	8
5	Caucasian	27	5 (8,7,5,3,1)	Divorced	2
6	Caucasian	32	1 (5)	Never Married	8
7	African American	35	1 (7)	Never Married	8

[a] Children's ages in years unless otherwise noted

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In addition to the women living at the transitional residence, the program director also was interviewed as a part of the original data collection. Her feedback was used to verify information provided by the residents, obtain an alternative perspective to their family situations, and clarify details pertaining to the transitional process. The director is a licensed social worker and responsible for facility management and resident counseling. She had served as director of the program for six years at the time data was collected.

Procedure

The data used in this study was collected from eight weekly individual and group meetings with the women that occurred during the 12-week period of January through March, 2006. Individual meetings lasted approximately 30 minutes and group meetings lasted two to three hours. Not all women were present for each meeting. During the majority of these sessions, the researcher simply listened to the women discuss a range of experiences and details about their lives as well as interact with each other. On occasion, the researcher would pose leading questions based on information the women had disclosed previously to elicit additional details.

Data was collected via field notes taken by the researcher during these observations and interviews similar to the method used by Roschelle and Kaufman (2004) during their study of homeless youth where researchers went to great lengths to make participants feel comfortable and not as if they were being "studied." In the current study, field notes were the preferred method of data collection (vs. audio/video recording) from a phenomenological viewpoint as they allowed for recording of participant data in tandem with notation and preservation of real-time researcher observations and perceptions (Gilgun, 2008; Radina et al., 2008). In addition, due to the rare opportunity

for the researcher to be a part of group counseling sessions and because the women expressed such a high level of comfort disclosing their experiences to the researcher, more technologically advanced forms of recording seemed intrusive and inappropriate. The researcher became a recurrent fixture of sorts at the transitional residence and participants become increasingly open in their disclosures.

Because the researcher transferred field notes into organized transcripts immediately after every encounter with participants, it was possible to observe themes developing and use those thematic guidelines when forming questions for sessions with the participants. However, directive, leading questions were minimized as the purpose of this study was not to generate theory, but to gain a phenomenological understanding of the lived experience of recently homeless mothers and their families.

Data Analysis

Following van Kaam's (1966, 1987) 12-step methodology for interpretive phenomenological analysis, the researcher read and reread each field note transcript highlighting commonalities. Then more systematic coding processes began as recurrent themes as well as unique phenomena were identified, defined, and refined. In addition, researcher observations recorded via field notes were reviewed as they relate to observations putting thematic developments into context with what took place during data collection. Each participant's transcript and notes were examined and categorized and resulting themes clustered to produce dominant elements that characterize her past and current perceptions of her family and homeless experiences. At this time, her story was set aside and other participants' transcripts were thoroughly analyzed in the same manner, versus using the first case as a master guide for analysis of future cases. When

all participant data had been reviewed and categorized by two independent coders (93% agreement), the researcher consolidated the information to identify major themes characterizing the lives of the mothers as a group as well as unique experiences exerting significant influence on maternal homelessness. At that time, using Nvivo 8 qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, 2008), transcripts and field notes from observation and interview sessions were systematically organized into computerized thematic categories. These concepts were then further explored for more specific themes and phenomenological meaning as participant cases, group commonalities, and researcher interpretations were consolidated and compared. Nvivo also was used to generate inter-rater reliability statistics from multiple users/coders. The researcher attended Nvivo training in October, 2008 hosted by the university's Institute for Teaching and Learning Excellence and facilitated by a QSR training specialist and other qualitative research faculty.

Each woman's perception of reality is expected to grant insight into the filter through which she experienced life and how her past experiences have lead to her present circumstances and perceptions of future success. To aid in this process of understanding and meaning-making, existing family theory, specifically a phenomenological framework, was applied to information learned throughout the course of this study. The purpose is not to generate theory, but to develop an interpretive understanding of the unique background of homeless mothers and how that background filters how they see the world and how that filter has contributed to their current circumstances. The reason this analysis is not a thematic or content analysis, or even grounded theory methodology, is because the women's experiences are being understood beyond recurrent thematic

content – the mothers' stories are being interpreted through the lenses of their past and present experiences as well as the existing empirical knowledge base regarding family homelessness. The detailed understanding gained from the small sample explored in this study, while limited in broad application, will provide rare insight into what experiences are associated with maternal homelessness, what elements promote resiliency, and what factors are associated with successful transitions to independent living versus a return to transience.

Reflexivity and Rigor

Before results from interactions with participants can be presented, the role of the researcher must be discussed regarding any underlying assumptions or biases. As written by Elliot Liebow in *Tell Them Who I Am* (1993), "The researcher is the research instrument… Everything reported about the women in this study has been selected by me and filtered through me, so it is important that I tell you something about myself..." As a volunteer and long-time supporter of the transitional program that facilitated this study, the researcher began the study believing the program to be efficient and successful in assisting homeless families achieve independent living. However, this experience and positive regard for the program enabled the researcher to interact with residents in a manner such that each woman appeared comfortable disclosing very candid and intimate details of her current and past life experiences.

At the close of the data collection period, the participants thanked the researcher and encouraged her to use their stories to better the lives of other mothers who, with their children, are just beginning their transient journey. This is consistent with attitudes from other studies as participants enjoyed the "rare chance to reflect upon their lives" (Partis,

2003) and, as in the case with the present study, felt as if their experiences contribute to the bettering of other women's lives. While the information obtained in this study is inherently filtered through the researcher collecting the data, processes were in place to ensure objectivity and integrity (See Patton, 1999) such as debriefing with other members of the research team, transcribing of field notes outside of the research setting, and post analysis coding and review by the research team. Ideally, results also would be reviewed by the participants for clarity and confirmation of research findings (i.e., member checks; Colaizzi, 1978). However, this was an impossible protocol in this study for several reasons. First, because of the temporary nature of the transitional facility where data was originally collected, the participants in this study no longer reside there and, due to the need for anonymity, there is no way to locate and contact any of the women in this study. Second, as a key component of phenomenological research, findings include researcher observations and interpretations of the women's disclosures and interactions, so their review of the researcher's interpretations would not necessarily be objective and might actually detriment the research process through individual bias

CHAPTER 5

MANUSCRIPT: THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SINGLE MOTHERS

TRANSITIONING FROM HOMELESSNESS TO INDEPENDENT LIVING

Abstract

Research is growing in the area of family homelessness, much of which centers around the homeless mother; yet we know little about her phenomenological "life world" experiences. The present study addressed this gap using interviews and observations of mothers living in a transitional residence for homeless families. The phenomenological nature of this investigation gave the researcher access to diverse, intimate personal histories with one common thread – all mothers had experienced homelessness and were actively working toward self-sufficiency. Participants' family relationships, particularly with their maternal figures and often colored by abuse, affected their current family situations and continue to influence each woman's sense of identity, ability to create and maintain healthy boundaries, and parenting perspectives and behaviors.

The phenomenology of single mothers transitioning from homelessness to

independent living

The word "homeless" evokes a variety of thoughts and images. Some view

homelessness as a situation most commonly afflicting adult men, individuals addicted to

alcohol or other substances, and individuals suffering from mental illness (Rossi et al.,

1989). Others view homelessness as a sign of failure at life or personal flaws (Tompsett

et al., 2006). Individuals high in compassion or with social service inclinations perhaps

see homelessness as an opportunity to help someone overcome barriers to live a healthy,

functional life. As diverse as individuals' perceptions of homelessness are, the reality of

homelessness can be equally varied.

Research is growing in the area of family homelessness, much of which centers

around the homeless single mother raising young children (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999;

Burt et al., 1999; Burt, 2001); yet we still know little about what life is like for her, how

she perceives herself, and how her past experiences contributes to her experiences of

transience as well as resilience. The present study seeks to fill this gap through a

phenomenological analysis of recently-homeless mothers' life experiences. By reviewing

existing literature related to family homelessness, a structural understanding can be

gained regarding issues often associated with family homelessness; however, this study

will shed substantial light on how these issues actually function in women's lives. In

addition, other issues that are to-date unknown and unexplored may emerge creating a

new discussion about the phenomenon of maternal homelessness and what can be done to

help mothers rebound from the most extreme depths of poverty.

A Phenomenological Approach to Maternal Homelessness

The underlying theoretical framework that both lead to the development of the present study and is employed to interpret findings is the phenomenological approach to understanding families. Instead of a removed analytic perspective, phenomenology brings researchers "in more direct contact with the world" being explored (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). There is a precedent for investigating the phenomenological experiences of understudied populations to inform social service and policy reform (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007; Gilgun, 1999b). Phenomenology, in its simplest form, is the appreciation that any social reality is subject to the "reality" of the individual in the social setting. Thus a situation such as maternal homelessness, while having inherently similar traits across homeless families, is going to be experientially unique for each family (i.e., equifinality; Bertalanffy, 1968), and each member of the family, based on individual differences, family characteristics, as well as past experiences, current perceptions, and future expectations. These individual and group details provide valuable information for research on homelessness and resilience that can help direct future intervention development and delivery as well as future scientific study (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999). Therefore, a phenomenological approach not only enables identification of themes important across mothers and homeless families, but allows identifies unique individual experiences and perceptions that impact life course outcomes. Finally, interpretive phenomenology allows the researcher the opportunity to frame and interpret observations within participants' current context (i.e., transitional housing) while accounting for the background information they provide as each woman discloses her life story.

Maternal Family Homelessness

Close to half a million families are estimated to be homeless each year making up

approximately one-third of the homeless population and the vast majority of these

families are headed by a 20-something single mother with children under six (Burt, 2001;

HUD, 2007; Shinn, Rog, & Culhane, 2005; Weinreb, Buckner, Williams, & Nicholson,

2006). Barrow & Zimmer (1999) refer to this as the "feminization of poverty" (p. 51)

which is reflective of gendered disparities in employment, education, and family

responsibilities. The women who find themselves homeless often have depleted their last

lifeline, be it a family member, a friend, or a financial resource (Liebow, 1993; Rog &

Buckner, 2007). Often these residential resources are precariously housed themselves and

face potential repercussions from their own landlords for housing multiple families in one

dwelling (Glasser, 1991). This means that for every homeless woman, there are likely

many more on the brink of destitution for tomorrow morning they may be told "you can

not stay here any longer." For women with children, this brink is especially perilous as

once they are out on the street they are vulnerable to "crime, street hazards, and the

elements" (Merves, 1992, p. 230).

Why are Mothers Homeless?

Risk factors for extreme poverty and maternal homelessness are essentially

related to personal characteristics, available resources, and number of responsibilities

(Rog & Buckner, 2007). However, these factors do not occur or interact in isolation from

the rest of the world. Burt (2001) perhaps described it best: "The underlying causes of

homelessness…do not lie within individuals…" (p. 737). Instead determinants of lost

housing often are products of the complex macro-social economic climate. Community,

state, and national economic factors can dictate the financial health of families, particularly when corporate layoffs are widespread and small businesses are floundering (Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, & Silva, 1998). However, the most extreme cases of family poverty that result in homelessness are generally more complex than just a struggling economy. In contrast to previous views of family homelessness, that the situation was a short-term financial crisis, it is now generally accepted as a multi-faceted social issue involving intra-familial problems as well as broader, more systemic problems (Weinreb & Buckner, 1993) including issues of work and education, psychosocial well being, and transgenerational family functioning. Following is a review of contributors consistently linked to family homelessness which are summarized as a conceptual model in Figure 1.

Income, work, and education

Without stable employment that provides a sufficient income, families are at extreme disadvantage when trying to obtain and maintain independent housing (Wright et al., 1998). One-fifth of all jobs available in the U.S. do not pay a wage sufficient for keeping a family of four above the poverty line (Waldron, Roberts, Reamer, Rab, & Ressler, 2004). In fact, using the federal poverty indicator may not even be sufficient in assessing family poverty as a family would need to earn twice the amount indicated by the poverty level to meet basic needs ($21,200 for a family of four; $17,600 for a family of three; $14,000 for a family of two; Cauthen, 2006; U.S. Federal Register, 2008). Looking beyond basic needs, one person's income for 40 hours of work per week would need to be close to $20 per hour to afford a two-bedroom apartment (minimum wage currently is $5.85 per hour; U.S. Department of Labor, 2008). This mismatch between employee compensation and housing costs creates a precarious financial situation for

families that approaches crisis level when one considers the substantial drop in public housing support observed over the past 20 years (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2007) as well as other financial hurdles that could arise.

In fall of 2008, the U.S. unemployment rate was above six percent and rising (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). Homelessness has always been associated with high levels of unemployment and, of homeless adults who are employed, low levels of moderate to high-paying stable jobs (Wright et al., 1998). Mothers experiencing homelessness often have an employment history; however, when they resort to visiting an emergency shelter, they almost always are unemployed (Bassuk et al., 1996; Brooks & Buckner, 1996; Lowin et al., 200; Rog & Buckner, 2007; Rog, McCombs-Thornton, Gilbert-Mongelli, Brito, & Holupka, 1995). But this does not mean that adults in homeless families always are unemployed. Burt and colleagues (1999) found that close to 30 percent of homeless families had at least one parent working. Maintaining stable employment is especially challenging for female victims of intimate partner violence as they are less likely than non-abused women to work for at least 30 hours per week over the course of a six-month period (Browne, Salomon, & Bassuk, 1999). With some exception, mothers in homeless families typically have completed less education than the average American adult, but have attained a similar level of education when compared to other low-income families (Bassuk et al., 1996; Burt et al., 1999; Rog & Buckner, 2007; Shinn & Weitzman, 1996; for exception see Bassuk & Rosenberg, 1988). The combination of macro-economic hardships, low levels of education and employment attainment, as well as other family life struggles, paints a bleak picture for mothers and their children at the bottom tier of the socioeconomic ladder.

Emotions and mental health

Mental illness at all levels of severity is found among homeless populations. Because of the presence of psychosocial disorder, homeless individuals are at increased disadvantage as they are less likely to utilize public support resources, are estranged from family and other support networks, have increased rates of imprisonment, and experience disproportionate health problems (Fischer & Breakey, 1991). Aside from severe psychological disorder, homeless individuals may experience a range of emotional dysfunctions. Anger, self-blame, depression, anxiety, and desperation – all are emotions disproportionately experienced by mothers in homeless families (Bassuk et al., 1998, 1996; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2008). These mothers have increased rates of major depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (three times higher than the general public; Rog & Buckner, 2007), and substance abuse (Bassuk et al., 1996; Weinreb et al., 2006) in addition to other psychiatric disorders and family breakdowns (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1998; Connelly & Crown, 1994; Vostanis, 2002; Vostanis et al., 1998; Zima, Wells, Benjamin, & Duan, 1996). It is not uncommon for these mental and emotional health issues to be antecedents of maternal homelessness, particularly when combined with low levels of education, unemployment, and poor health (Bassuk et al., 1998; Rog & Buckner, 2007; Rog et al., 1995). However, the adverse mental and emotional experiences of homeless women often go undiagnosed and untreated (Bassuk, 2007).

Homeless mothers, when compared to low-income residential mothers, experience elevated stress and depression attributed to more severe financial pressures as well as traumatic interpersonal events (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1998; Choi &

Snyder, 1999; Menke & Wagner, 1997). From a family stress perspective (Walsh, 2002; 1996), homelessness is just another layer to an already complex pileup of stressors and traumatic experiences. A poignant indicator of stress pileup is the finding that homeless mothers develop ulcers at four times the rate of residentially-stable mothers (Weinreb et al., 1998) as this type of physical ailment is consistently associated with heightened levels of stress (Levenstein, Ackerman, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Dubois, 1999). Most children in these families also experience elevated stress as they constantly worry about where they will sleep, where they will live, and when something bad is going to happen (National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999).

Family of origin

While homelessness is an extreme outcome from financial instability and poverty, actual experiences and durations of homelessness are due to a combination of issues. Traumas associated with maternal homelessness include past family of origin or intimate partner abuse, mental illness, chronic health disparities, and childhood foster care placement (Bassuk et al., 1996, 1997; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Weinreb et al., 1998, 2006). The majority of homeless mothers, compared to low-income housed mothers, did not have positive childhood experiences as their families were more likely to abuse substances, engage in criminal activities, and be highly disorganized (Tyler, 2006; Wood, Valdez, Hayashi, & Shen, 1990). Consequently, these women were more likely to be placed in foster care at some point during their childhood (Wood et al., 1990).

Women placed in foster care settings as children are then at heightened risk of homelessness as an adolescent or young adult, their children also are more likely to be placed in foster care, and are less likely to be returned to their mother as long as she is

without a stable residence (Bassuk et al., 1996; Cowal, Shinn, Weitzman, Stojanovic, & Labay, 2002; Doerre et al., 1996; Petit & Curtis, 1997; Susser, Lin, & Conover, 1991; Zlotnick, Kronstadt, & Klee, 1998). When a young girl is placed in foster care, her likelihood of beginning a cycle of poverty with the power to influence future generations already has increased (Bassuk et al., 1996; Cowal et al., 2002; Doerre et al., 1996; Nunez, 1993; Petit & Curtis, 1997; Susser et al., 1991; Zlotnick et al., 1998). Especially considering that when she reaches the age of 18 and ages out of the foster care system, the odds of her transitioning to shelter life are high (Courtney & Piliavin, 1998). These odds increase with multiple care placements during childhood – even if they are not formal foster placements (i.e., homes of family and friends; Roman & Wolfe, 1995). This predicament is another precursor to a transgenerational cycle of risk as foster-care children are in danger of future homelessness and separation from their own offspring (Nunez, 1993; Roman & Wolfe, 1995; Shinn et al., 2005).

Bassuk and Browne (1996) said that single mothers live impossible lives and found that more than 90 percent of homeless single mothers experienced severe physical or sexual assault at some point in their lives (see also Bassuk & Browne, 1996; Vostanis, 2002). These violent assaults typically occurred during childhood or adolescence in their family of origin or foster care settings or, when occurring in adulthood, came by the hand of a romantic partner (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999; Bassuk et al., 1996). Often intimate partner violence was experienced recently or is ongoing (Browne & Bassuk, 1997) and is a major motivator for women to seek shelter (Steinbock, 1995). As a result of this violence or other family life stressors, homeless women often have no connection (or no positive connection) with their families of origin (Bassuk & Rosenberg, 1988). Half of all

homeless mothers report fewer than three people they could count on for support and close to 15 percent of these mothers indicated their children served as their only support network (Letiecq, Anderson, & Koblinsky, 2001; Zima et al., 1996). Tyler (2006) describes the diversity of past experiences of homeless individuals and acknowledges the dynamic of equifinality (Bertalanffy, 1968) in that, despite a range of variation in family backgrounds, some common thread has brought them all to the most extreme level of destitution.

Current Family Life

The daily life of a family experiencing homelessness is a mixture of the same routines and hassles experienced by all families with children as the majority of homeless youth still attend school on a regular basis (Anderson, Janger, & Panton, 1995). While homeless families navigate normative family tasks and experiences, their lives also are characterized by high levels of stress. These families are frequently faced with challenges and devastation unique to the transient lifestyle that can catalyze a multi-generational cycle of dysfunction and poverty.

The stress of homelessness can create a volatile atmosphere within families. One fourth of all homeless children have watched a parent or sibling be violently assaulted by another member of their family (often the father or the mother's male partner; Bassuk et al., 1997, 1996; Buckner, Beardslee, & Bassuk, 2004; National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999). As family stress is absorbed by children, they become more aggressive, prone to violence, and experience increased mental and emotional turmoil (Osofsky, 1997). This behavioral and emotional turmoil is experienced by homeless youth at three times the rate of children not experiencing homelessness (National Child

Traumatic Stress Network, 2005). Homeless children as young as three may require professional treatment for severe emotional problems including anger and aggression (National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999). In addition, they often are developmentally delayed, have learning disabilities, and struggle with academic material (Rafferty, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004; National Center for Homeless Education, 2007; National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999).

These social, emotional, and developmental outcomes likely result from a combination of factors including the mothers' past family experiences, traumas associated with homelessness, and current parent-child interactions. In fact, Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, and McLoyd (2003) found that parenting mediated the impact of economic adversity on children as parents were more distressed, less effective, and less affectionate with their children. Other studies have found that impoverished parents use erratic and harsh disciplinary tactics and maintain weak attachments with their children (McLoyd, 1998). Homeless women with children may not feel a strong sense of their maternal roles as they are reliant upon and subjected to processes and requirements of social service organizations (e.g., shelters) and may feel a lack of autonomy and competence as a parent (Schindler & Coley, 2007; Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995) Aside from the stress of poverty, social isolation, which has a significant influence on maternal homelessness (Zima et al., 1996), also hinders the development of positive, responsive parenting practices (Hashima & Amato, 1994) and increases the risk for child abuse (Corse, Schmid, & Trickett, 1990).

While the challenges homeless mothers face are significant, they also have potential wells of strength including determination, independence, and empathy (Banyard

& Graham-Bermann, 1995; Hodnicki & Horner, 1993; Menke & Wagner, 1997; Tischler & Vostanis, 2007). Often social service programs have the opportunity to empower women to tap into these resources as they focus on their current situations, their role as mother, cope with feelings of stress and depression, and develop strategies for resilience (Meadows-Oliver, 2002). However, recent discussions regarding maternal homelessness lament the fact that there still is no conceptual model explaining the relationship between risk and protective factors that influences the likelihood a woman and her children will experience homelessness (Rog & Buckner, 2007). Results from this study will add more information to collective efforts to delineate the homeless phenomenon (Bassuk, 2007) – particularly that of homeless women, mothers, and their children.

Transition to Independence

Individuals develop within the context of their family's past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). While family adversity can be detrimental to children's outcomes (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Sobolewski & Amato, 2005), families also are systems capable of profound resiliency in the face of stress, trauma, and adversity when provided with necessary encouragement, support, and connectedness from their community (Landau, 2007). Transitional housing is often the first step in resilience for families who have diverse transient experiences ranging from short-term stays with family, friends, or emergency shelters, to long-term, chronic shelter or street living. While families residing in temporary housing still are considered homeless (Vostanis, 2002) as the residence is not a conventional family dwelling (HUD, 2007) nor do they consider it their permanent "home" (Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, & Silva, 1998), such housing programs do provide several months of stability

while families rebound from extreme poverty. Transitional programs are an effective link between homelessness and independent living through comprehensive services targeting areas transient families are often deficient in such as life skills training, individual/family/group counseling, and community resource connections (Washington, 2002) – while also providing several months of stable, secure housing.

Mothers who have entered into transitional housing programs are in a critical period as they are a step beyond homelessness, but must overcome many personal, family, and social issues in order to transition to healthy independent living. Transitioning mothers are typically focused on securing and maintaining stable employment, becoming financially solvent and prepared for future responsibilities, and dealing with past trauma, family dysfunction, and psychosocial pathology (D. Mancini, personal communication, March 4, 2008). Thus mothers who make it into these programs have reached a level of functioning where they are committed to addressing these issues to change their life course. This makes transitioning families an ideal research community as they essentially have one foot in the homeless world and the other foot on the path toward resiliency.

As the majority of vulnerable and impoverished families consist of single-mothers, exploring their experiences in transitional housing will add a unique perspective to research on extreme poverty – that of the transitioning mother doing everything she can to raise her family in a stable environment with optimism and hope for the future. Current research is limited regarding homeless families in transitional housing programs; however, what research has been conducted on the transitioning family unit demonstrates progress and hope for families working toward long-term independent living (Barrow &

Zimmer, 1999). Bassuk (2007) said that in order to develop an accurate understanding of the phenomenon of the homeless family, researchers must first appreciate and investigate the past experiences that characterize their lives and seek richer and broader data sources to inform methodology and policy – specifically understudied Midwestern families experiencing homelessness (Rog & Buckner, 2007; see also Fogel, 1997).

<p style="text-align:center">Method</p>

Sample

Seven single, recently-homeless mothers with children were in residence and recruited from a transitional facility through the facility's director. On average, families reside in the transitional facility for approximately four months. Each woman agreed to be interviewed or observed over the course of a 12-week period. All group observations took place in a private meeting room at the facility and individual interviews took place in a private room within the director's office space.

The mean age of participants was 34 years and the women had an average of three biological children living with them (children's mean age = 8.4 years). Additional descriptive information is provided in Table 1. Each woman was employed in one of the following career fields: clerical/office staff, skilled labor, medical/nursing, early childhood education, or custodial work. All women had at least a high school diploma, two had some college work completed, and three had completed a vocational certification program. The living arrangements of the families prior to moving into the transitional residence were diverse. Two families arrived directly from a homeless shelter; three were evicted from their mothers' homes; one family had been living with members of their church; and one woman had been living in her car with her child. The women had spent

an average of 13 years in the city where the transitional facility was located prior to moving in to the residence (range = 2-29 years). All but one family had a vehicle. Two of the women had been imprisoned at some point during their life.

Procedure

The data used in this study was collected from eight weekly individual and group meetings with the women that occurred during the 12-week period of January through March, 2006. Individual meetings lasted approximately 30 minutes and group meetings lasted two to three hours. Not all women were present for each meeting. During the majority of these sessions, the researcher simply listened to the women discuss a range of experiences and details about their lives as well as interact with each other. On occasion, the researcher would pose leading questions based on information the women had disclosed previously to elicit additional details.

Data was collected via field notes taken by the researcher during these observations and interviews similar to the method used by Roschelle and Kaufman (2004) during their study of homeless youth where researchers went to great lengths to make participants feel comfortable and not as if they were being "studied." In the current study, field notes were the preferred method of data collection (vs. audio/video recording) from a phenomenological viewpoint as they allowed for recording of participant data in tandem with notation and preservation of real-time researcher observations and perceptions (Gilgun, 2008; Radina et al., 2008). In addition, due to the rare opportunity for the researcher to be a part of group counseling sessions and because the women expressed such a high level of comfort disclosing their experiences to the researcher, more technologically advanced forms of recording seemed intrusive and inappropriate.

The researcher became a recurrent fixture of sorts at the transitional residence and participants become increasingly open in their disclosures; however, the researcher was not immersed in the transitional experience and did not consider observations as insider perceptions. Detachment from the women's transitional experience was important to objectively listen to and contextualize their subjective storytelling.

Because the researcher transferred field notes into organized transcripts immediately after every encounter with participants, it was possible to observe themes developing and use those thematic guidelines when forming questions for sessions with the participants. However, directive, leading questions were minimized as the purpose of this study was not to generate theory, but to gain a phenomenological understanding of the lived experience of recently homeless mothers and their families.

Data Analysis

Following van Kaam's (1966, 1987) 12-step methodology for interpretive phenomenological analysis, the researcher read and reread each field note transcript highlighting commonalities. Then more systematic coding processes began as recurrent themes as well as unique phenomena were identified, defined, and refined. In addition, researcher observations recorded via field notes were reviewed as they related to observations putting thematic developments into context with what took place during data collection. Each participant's transcript and notes were examined and categorized and resulting themes clustered to produce dominant elements that characterize past and current perceptions of her family and homeless experiences. At that time, her story was set aside and other participants' transcripts were thoroughly analyzed in the same manner, versus using the first case as a master guide for analysis of future cases. When

all participant data had been reviewed and categorized by two independent coders (93% agreement), the researcher consolidated the information to identify major themes characterizing the lives of the mothers as a group as well as identify any unique experiences pertinent to maternal homelessness. Using Nvivo 8 qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, 2008), transcripts and field notes were systematically organized into computerized thematic categories. These concepts were then further explored for more specific themes and phenomenological meaning as participant cases, group commonalities, and researcher interpretations were consolidated and compared.

Results

Resulting themes included issues related to the women's biological family, the homeless experience, their sense of self, non-family relationships, experiences of abuse, goals, work, finances, religious faith, and criminal activities or imprisonment. In the spirit of phenomenology, the emphasis of this study is how each woman contextualized her experiences and linked them together to create her "life world" (Gregova, 1996; Husserl, 1970; Schutz, 1966). Rather than present each thematic topic followed by a supportive quote or two, the women's stories are weaved together to describe shared experiences as well as highlight phenomenologically unique experiences, perceptions, and meanings. This process transforms mechanical data presentation into a rich and authentic story of mothers' transitional processes – a story told using their own words.

Family of Origin and Maternal Relationships

In general, the women characterized their families as "unsafe" and "dysfunctional." Within the context of family of origin, the vast majority of conversations involved the women's mothers or maternal figures. All the maternal relationships

discussed were intensely negative, "dysfunctional, agitated," often abusive, and perceived by the women to have created long-term psychosocial and functional difficulties in their lives.

One woman said her mother was "greedy and "doesn't love her." Another woman countered that she has no current interaction with her mother and no longer "wants or needs her love." For a 32 year-old mother of four, her poor maternal relationship began at birth. "My mom left the hospital when I was born and refused to take me home." She said her aunt had to come get her and take her to her grandmother's home where she was severely abused for more than a decade. As a child her grandmother often told her if it "weren't for your grandfather, you'd be gone." When she was 11 her grandfather died and she had no idea what would happen to her. As an adult, the woman said she maintains negative relationships with others because she doesn't want to be alone; however, the emotional cost of a relationship with her mother is too high and outweighs any support the relationship might offer. Growing up, she was "taught not to kill someone, but was never taught how to be a woman."

One woman did not talk at all about her family of origin until the later weeks of the study. At that time she revealed that her mother had been very abusive giving her "bruises, broken ribs, and black eyes." Throughout her childhood her mother told her she was a "punishment from God." She now says that while she doesn't ever see or talk to her mother, she would like her respect. An interesting event took place during a counseling session when the counselor encouraged a woman to take the perspective of her abusive mother. When the woman was asked about her mother's childhood, she said that her mother's parents (her grandparents) were very abusive. While sharing the story

with the group, the woman said she realized how "horrible" her mother's childhood must have been and that it must have been similar to her own. She acknowledged how it probably "shaped the kind of person her mother became." After coming to the conclusion that she and her mother were very similar, she began to cry – an unusual behavior from a participant who had, to date, exhibited extreme emotional control. She later said that the relationship with her mother, and her entire family of origin, significantly influenced her subsequent relationships and her experience of homelessness.

Current Family Life and Relationships

In addition to their relationships with their mothers, the effects of childhood abuse also endured into the women's adult lives affecting their "emotions, behaviors, and choices." They each spoke of abusive ex-husbands and seeking attention from "unhealthy men" who "treat them badly" whether it was physical abuse, neglect, or obsessive stalking and intimidation. One week the topic of sexual activity was brought up and women's attitudes about sex ranged from "I don't need it" to "I can't go without it."

One woman attributed her homeless experience to a series of adverse events stemming from her troubled childhood. She said she had "no boundaries as a child" and felt no one cared about what she did or what happened to her. This left her with a "longing to fit in" and attempting to "fill the void inside her with all the wrong things." She defined this void as an "empty space where love, boundaries, and happiness would be." She blames her "bad choices" on this void, including marrying an abusive man (now her ex-husband). She said he forced her to help him illegally transport immigrants into the country – an activity that resulted in their arrest and separation from their children.

When she was released from prison and reunited with her three children, she had nowhere to go and wound up in a shelter. "Shelter is like prison for kids."

Now that the women are mothers themselves, it is apparent their adverse childhood experiences influenced their parenting practices as well. One woman brought her infant son to a session and exhibited warm, responsive parenting behaviors. However, when discussing discipline, she said she "slaps" her children to discipline them, but that it's "not abuse." In response, another mother said she avoids disciplining her son because she has "violent tendencies" and is "afraid I'll go too far." A woman with older children has coped with her maternal role by disengaging from her children's lives. While she often talked about their problems (e.g. arrests, academic failures), when her teenage daughter experienced a major accomplishment at school, the mother felt she "didn't play a part" in her daughter's success. Because "life is so chaotic," one mother puts her five year old son in the front seat of her car without a child's seat because "there isn't room in the back because of stuff from when we lived in the car." She also said she lets him stay awake until she goes to work at 11 p.m. because he goes to an overnight daycare, though he also attends all-day preschool five days a week. At one weekly session, the mother said she had not slept in more than 48 hours.

Issues Surrounding "Self"

Just as the women linked their current life experiences to their family background, they also identified their sense of "self" as a mediator between their adverse childhood experiences and current feelings, behaviors, and life circumstances. Sometimes the women would speak directly about how they felt about themselves, other instances it was

researcher observation of how the women portrayed themselves or demonstrated their personalities or emotional states.

Participants often characterized themselves as having "no boundaries" and no "self-control." A recurrent theme was having an "unknown identity" and constantly searching for "who I am" and "where I belong." This lack of identity often resulted in the women being "a different person in every situation" and the group agreed that these feelings stemmed from their childhood abuse.

As part of a group activity one week, the women were asked to describe what they saw when looking in a mirror. This exercise elicited a variety of responses – none positive. Several mothers described themselves as a "disappointing failure" that is "haunted by past bad choices." Other women couldn't describe what they saw because they "didn't know." One participant said she was recently asked what her favorite color was and she could not answer because she didn't know. While crying she said the "idea of learning about herself and taking time for herself is overwhelming." One mother's way to feel a sense of self was by cutting herself, mainly on her legs so no one would see. "I wanted to make sure I was still alive."

The women all had distinct personalities that seemed to pronounce how they viewed themselves. Some women seemed very unsure of themselves and seeking constant attention through humor, speaking very loudly, and discussing overly-personal and extremely traumatic experiences. One woman said she often "imposes" herself into "other people's business." Other women exuded low self-esteem. However, a few of the women acknowledged their tendencies to put themselves down, wear themselves out, and blur the boundaries between their lives and others'. One woman made a conscious effort

to have quiet time to herself to reflect on her life (i.e. "me time"). Another woman said she can be a "responsible, loyal, and good friend" if she can control her need to "dominate relationships." While the women said they were learning how to say "no," they also said they felt alone and that they were losing friends because they were "getting healthy." While often contributing to the dysfunction in the women's lives, these "toxic" friends also were the people who housed the women in their most dire of circumstances. The women said they struggled with defining themselves separate from their abusive families and "unhealthy" relationships, while not severing ties that had recently been a lifeline for them and their children.

Faith- and Goal-Related Issues

Two issues were brought up by only a few women, but for them, they were very powerful. Because of the phenomenological approach taken, issues deemed important by any participants are important to the present study. First, one mother brought up issues related to goals, work, finances and decision-making week after week. She had a new job providing a new sense of success and stability, yet frequently complained of interpersonal issues with coworkers and "unfair" treatment by her employer. At one point she wanted to seek legal advice; however, after deliberating with her case worker, she decided it was best not to risk her new job if she wanted to move into independent housing.

Regarding the move to her own home, she expressed eagerness and impatience to do so and brought up new home-buying propositions with her case worker each week – some homes exceeding $100,000 which was not very realistic based on her current circumstances. She wanted so badly to provide for her son that she often had to be "brought back to reality" and redirected to focus on small steps versus big dreams. One

week she was given $35 by someone from her church and she used that money to take her son out to a nice restaurant. Her caseworker told her that since she is so eager to pay down her debt and move out, she should have put that money toward her expenses instead of spending it on a "fancy restaurant." However, the mother valued the "joy" she saw "on her son's face" more than putting a small amount of money toward her debt. Goals was a concept brought up during group meetings where residents expressed frustration at "not meeting goals soon enough," but for this particular mother, her motivation to meet her goals did not exceed her desire to share a happy experience with her child.

The second topic discussed by two participants was the issue of faith and religious beliefs. The two women began interacting when one said she didn't like "Christians" because they didn't embrace her at church the way she expected them to. "I sit next to them in church and nobody ever talks to me." She said she felt like they were looking down on her because she was homeless. The other women spoke at great length about her relationship with "Jesus" as his "princess" and how "he loves them." The woman countered saying she doesn't feel like "God is on my side."

Discussion

A major finding from this phenomenological analysis is that the "life world" of recently-homeless mothers transitioning to independent living is complex and affected by their past experiences, current situation, and future goals. An important link was identified between women's relationships with their families (particularly their mothers/maternal figures), their sense of self, their relationships with others, and their goals and decision-making processes. It seems their homelessness is more a product of

harmful relationship habits and lack of self-value than any specific event such as job loss or illness. Abuse was a major theme coloring all of the women's experiences as the abuse they endured as children shaped the women they became and how they related to others.

Input from participants about their current and past life experiences indicated their sense of self may be the path by which other events and perceptions occur. The "self" is a key element of personal as well as family development and most other issues are secondary to an individual's fundamental sense of identity and purpose which originates and develops within the family context. In order for recently-homeless women to transition from transience to self-sufficiency, they first must address their personal history and accept themselves while differentiating themselves from their experiences. A tenet of phenomenology is that individuals live in subjective, taken-for-granted realities that are separate from themselves (Daly, 2007; Gregova, 1996; Husserl, 1970; Lagenbach, 1995; Schutz, 1966). However, the mothers in this study have *become* their realities as they see themselves enmeshed with their adverse experiences versus a person who overcame them. By continuing to describe their current situations, relationships, and identities from the context of their adverse childhood and family relationships, they perpetuate those relationships and traumatic experiences and give them meaning and relevance for their current life. Keith (1993) encouraged clinicians to explore their clients' perceptions of reality in an effort to share their constructed view of the world and their role within it. Based on the past experiences shared by the women in this study, this is a critical part of their healing process and resilience to independent living.

Self-differentiation is a Bowenian family systems concept describing an individual's identity-separateness from those close to them – first their family of origin

and later their spouse or significant other (Bowen, 1978). The ability to differentiate one's identity from that of the family system or other family members is positively related to psychological well-being (Miller, Anderson, & Keala, 2004). However, a person is not born differentiated; it is an acquired state of being. Differentiation begins in childhood and is a function of families' patterns of interaction resulting in child identity development, autonomy, and adjustment (Buboltz, Johnson, & Woller, 2003; Dmitrieva et al., 2004; Johnson, Thorgren, & Smith, 2001; Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003). The women in the present study reflected a lack of differentiation as they saw their identities still tied to their past family experiences and how they were raised.

Consistent with antecedents to homelessness found in other studies, the women discussed personal issues with their families of origin, personal boundaries, and "unhealthy" social relationships (Bassuk et al., 1998, 1997, 1996; Burt et al., 1999). Though they did not specifically address the impact of these issues on their work, income, resources, and responsibilities – one can assume they would play an influential role. The concept underlying each of these issues was the women's personal development or restructuring of "self." The women spoke of their childhood experiences "haunting" them throughout their lives and into adulthood causing problems with peers, romantic relationships, parenting, and sense of value and worth – all issues that created, aggravated, or prolonged their experiences of homelessness. The ability for a woman to overcome negativity in her past, while developing a sense of worth, relevance, and meaning, is a milestone on the path toward resiliency. The ability to maintain her individuality and personal priorities in the face of adversity is a significant tool in defining her boundaries, as well as the boundaries of her family. Her capacity for self-

differentiation, as well as sense of self, is a reflection of what she has witnessed and experienced from influential "others" in her history. Through dysfunctional and chaotic open family systems (Constantine, 1983), the women allowed their histories with their families to influence their subsequent relationships and direct their decision-making. This is a key discovery because the women were able to pinpoint the problem areas of their lives; however, without a strong sense of self- worth, validation, or esteem, they were unable to do anything positive or constructive about them.

Through their experiences with their families of origin, the women in this study were taught that they were not valuable and, for some, that they were a plague on those around them. They were deprived education on how to love themselves and how to rationally weigh their personal importance when faced with life's challenges and obstacles. This learned avoidance, disregard, or disdain for themselves had been reinforced by the negative people and events that they had allowed to influence their life course. Negative homeostatic patterns within a family develop from repeated abuse, neglect, and self-loathe (Minuchin, 1985). A woman who does not know herself has nothing to form a boundary around. The women in this study indicated they were constantly seeking themselves in other people and shaped their experiences based on others – and they spoke of preferring to maintain negative cycles and relationships rather than being alone. One tragedy of this situation is that the mothers are passing these life philosophies on to their children. The purpose of the transitional program in which they were participating is to retrain them to love and value themselves at which time everything else in their life would begin to "get healthy."

The director taught the women to replace the "old tapes" they had been hearing from their families (either directly or repeated in their mind) and allowed to dictate their lives with "new tapes" that evolved from self-differentiation and intensive self-analysis. Through investigation, comprehension, and acceptance of their personal histories, the primary concepts of self-differentiation, the women could begin to identify themselves as capable mothers and move forward to achieve self-sufficiency. This process is illustrated in Figure 2 which demonstrates the role of self-differentiation in the transitional process (Bowen, 1978). It also shows the transient cycle created when an individual is unable to separate themselves from their emotional past and negative experiences. Rather than maintain the cycle of self-denial or mistreatment, self-differentiation breaks the cycle of self-deprivation and dysfunction that can infect family experiences and keep members cycling in transience – potentially for generations. The mothers in this study were learning to appreciate themselves and function in the social world in a way that reinforced their newly-developed sense of self. It may be that it is not poverty, abuse, addiction, or depression that keeps families stuck in multi-generational homeless or transient patterns, but a vicious cycle of denying or losing the self and teaching these patterns to children.

Figure 2. *Empirical model illustrating the role of "self" in the transitional experience.*
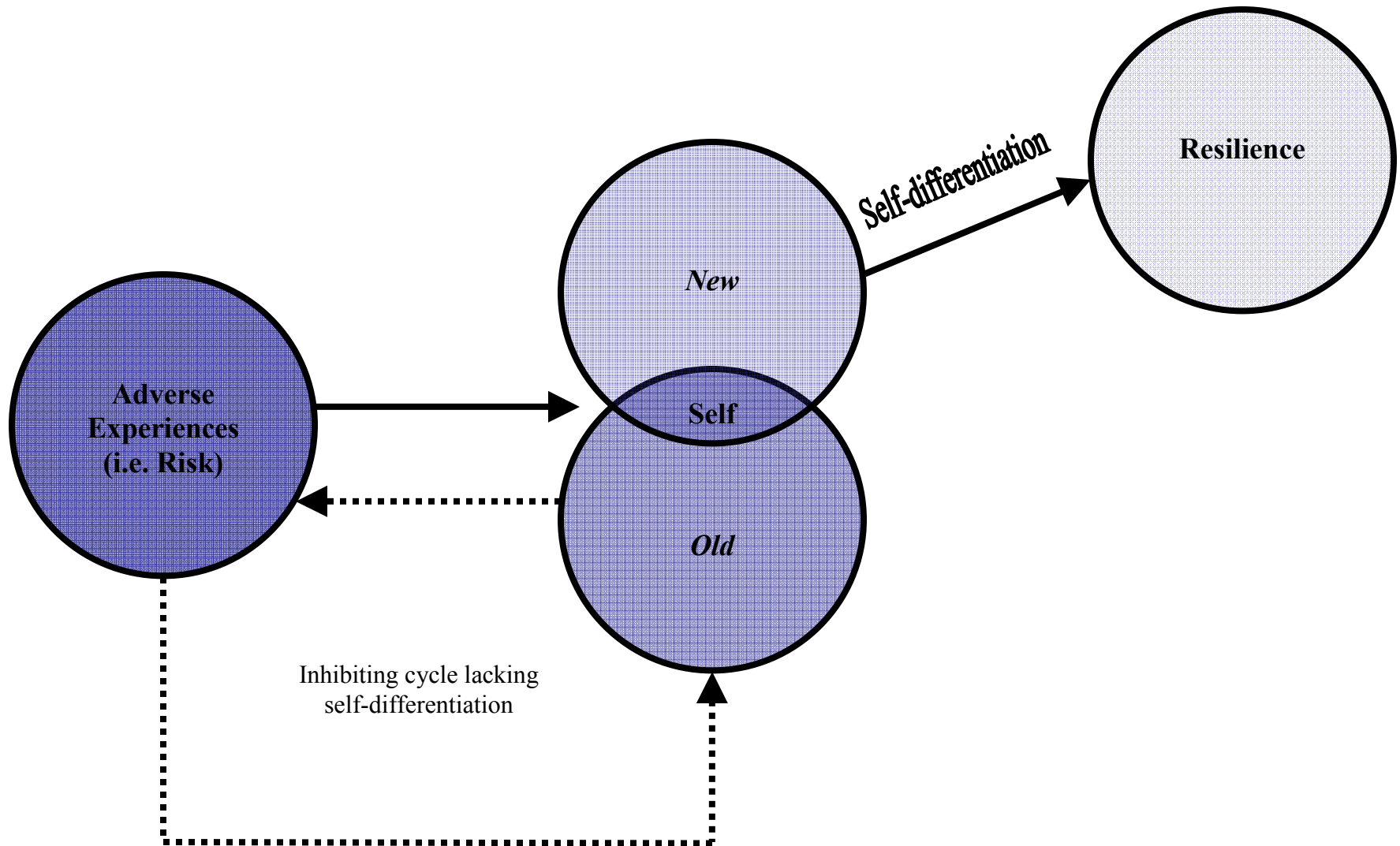
Limitations

A limitation to this study that warrants consideration is the small sample size. Data is only presented from seven recently-homeless women. This limitation is a function of the convenience of the sample, the small size of the transitional facility, and the relatively short time frame during which data was collected. However, findings still are powerful and indicate a need for future studies with more women to elaborate on their experiences and reinforce thematic observations. A second limitation involves data interpretation. Many qualitative studies have participants review research conclusions for accuracy (i.e. member checks, Colaizzi, 1978); however that was not an option in the present study as most participants had or were preparing to move out by its conclusions. To enhance thematic findings, multiple coders were used and external reviewers were consulted to verify accuracy of content development and interpretation. As a part of the interpretive process, final conclusions were compared to original data to ensure findings were rooted in the actual data.

Implications

The more we know about homeless and recently-homeless mothers' experiences, the more we can do to prevent the outcome for future generations of women (Gilgun, 2008). Mothers transitioning from homelessness to independent living provide researchers with an active and ongoing resilience process to explore and understand. Homelessness often is studied from a structural or resource-driven model of functioning when in fact the phenomenon may be much more complex and dynamic (Hill, 1991). Results from this study shed insight into a world of homelessness rarely explored by the research community – the life world of the resilient homeless mother. Findings suggest a

new dialectic perspective (Porter, 1995) is needed about the way homeless mothers are viewed as well new approaches to studying marginalized families integrating theory, research methodology, best practices, and social service policy.

Research

Advising future research to take a qualitative approach to maternal homelessness is not enough as qualitative methodology is a large umbrella encompassing many approaches and variations. Phenomenology, the theoretical method used in the present study, is essentially casting the research net out to see what is captured – any and all experiences are collected and interpreted for meaning and importance. Additional phenomenological studies are needed to support findings and elaborate on issues uncovered in this study, namely how the role of self and mothers' internal processes are associated with poverty, homelessness, and resilience.

Porter (1995) recommends researchers do more than just meet with participants and ask questions, but actually become immersed in the context in which participants live. Researchers do not necessarily need to become homeless (though that would be an interesting approach), but having a more constant presence over a longer amount of time would greatly enhance data collection and interpretation. Particular insight could be gained if research on maternal homeless began when mothers' first experienced homeless and continued throughout their transitional process and beyond.

Practice

Empirical knowledge of the subjective experiences of transitioning mothers can be easily translated into practice. Themes identified in this study and those that will come from additional research provide clinicians and social service workers with specific

issues to address when working with homeless or recently-homeless mothers who are working to achieve independent housing and self-sufficiency. Practitioners can begin a dialogue with clients to gain insight into their lived "realities" (Keith, 1993). Programs that offer educational and supplemental resources to help homeless families rebound from poverty can add a new layer of service to their programs. Beyond structural resource provisions, practitioners can help mothers explore their past experiences and how they have influenced their life course. This exploration changes the perspective from which mothers receive resources; in other words, a mother is in a phenomenologically different place after she copes with her past experiences and makes the conscious decision not to let those experiences influence her current thoughts and actions. Even workers on the front lines of social services, those performing intake processes or handing out food and clothing can become more perceptive to the emotional place of homeless mothers by engaging in conversation and appreciating the woman as a person full of life experiences – many of them likely traumatic with painful memories still close to the surface.

Policy

How does a homeless mother's childhood experiences and self-perception fit in with larger social policy? How does qualitative, phenomenological research inform policymakers who seek outcome statistics and best practices that social reform can be built upon? These are questions often posed by stakeholders at both ends of the research/policy spectrum (Friese & Bogenschneider, 2009). The answer may not lie in what issues policymakers discuss, but in *how* they discuss them. Policymakers should have the opportunity to look through the eyes of the homeless mother - to see the world

from her perspective and make decisions based on insight instead of stereotype (Friese &
Bogenschneider, 2009). Phenomenological research on mothers' homeless experiences,
even when considering the novel information gained in this study, alters the questions
that are asked and how answers are perceived. For example, extensive research associates
childhood abuse with adult homelessness; however, not all abused daughters become
homeless mothers. Perhaps the question should be how do homeless mothers *perceive*
their childhood experiences and how do *they feel* it affected their current circumstances.
There may be phenomenologically unique differences between abuse survivors who
become self-sufficient mothers raising families in a healthy environment and those who
fall into homelessness. Policies providing specific resources to abused children are
valuable, but may not have the desired long-term impact if the individuals receiving them
grow up feeling worthless, incompetent, and like a "punishment from God" to the world
around them. This is an issue that should be understandable across the spectrum of
family-focused institutions.

The role of individuals' internal processes often is overlooked in current efforts to
help families. Services are focused on the interaction and function among family
members and not on individual perceptions (National Conference of State Legislatures,
2006). It is unfortunate that with all the benefits gained from systemic approaches to
family issues, individual experiences can be lost. Hill (1991) also encouraged policy to
increase focus on individual needs – which in the case of the present study would
generalize to the majority of homeless mothers studied. Taking steps as simple as asking
clients (of all ages) how they perceive their experiences, how they feel about themselves,
or even requiring brief self-esteem inventories on intake forms could significantly inform

the helping process. Basic, structural resource provisions for a complex and multi-layered processes may not create the kind of long-term, life-altering change that is hoped for (See also Hill, 1991). Thus, as in the case of the present study, daughters with early and persistent adverse experiences build their lives upon foundations full of "voids" that prohibit them from forming healthy relationship, making positive life decisions, and serving as functional role models to their children.

Conclusion

What researchers and practitioners can gain from this study is rare insight into the life of homeless women to identify specific targets for intervention and rehabilitation – namely the role of self in personal and family functioning. This is especially valuable because these were not just any homeless women. The women in this study had been to the darkest corners of human experience and survived. Not only did they live through their own personal horrors, but they were fighting for resilience by joining a transitional living residence focused not just on tangible resource provisions, but on past experiences and internal processes to try and reconfigure the way residents' pasts influence their futures. As the director of the transitional program said:

> In this transitional environment, it is necessary to evaluate for comparison's purpose where we've been, where we are, and where we're going. We must address the 'old tapes' from our past that follow us into new situations and prohibit us from becoming truly healthy and independent. It is important to learn from our histories, but not dwell in them or allow them to dwell within us. We must replace those 'old tapes' with new tapes that highlight our strengths, abilities, and dreams. It is also essential to identify personal goals, and keep them

in focus, while we learn to evaluate the big picture and where we fit in. Self-validation, self-worth, and self-knowledge are the tools for rational thought processing which is foundational in the pursuit of self-sufficiency (D. Mancini, personal communication, March, 2006).

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY

A major element of phenomenological research is to avoid *a prior* assumptions,

hypotheses, or reflections prior to developing a description of what is taking place (i.e.

epoche; Moustakas, 1994; see also bracketing; Osborne, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1983; Valle

et al., 1989) Thus to take a phenomenological approach to a social issue in order to

understand how individuals interpret and assign meaning to the issue, researchers must

see individuals within the context of their past experiences, their present circumstances,

and their future expectations, as well as their unique view of these contexts and the

relative influence these contexts have on their meaningful behaviors. Through the course

of this study, the researcher developed a comprehensive understanding of the literature

regarding the homeless experience, particularly as it relates to homeless women and

mothers. Based on that understanding, the concept of resilience, or in the case of

homelessness, transition, was explored. The purpose was to understand what life is like

for recently-homeless mothers who were attempting to transition to independent living.

Without any expectations or theoretical assumptions, the researcher listened and watched

as the women shared their stories. To summarize the experience and how the women

contextualized their lives, Blumer's (1969, pp. 24-26) elements of scientific inquiry are

revisited.

Blumer's Elements of Scientific Inquiry - Revisited

Obtain a comprehensive and historical understanding of the "reality" of homelessness.

After an extensive review of research regarding homelessness ranging from chronically homeless individuals to homeless families and mothers, the "reality" of homelessness generally encompasses the following issues: income, work and education; emotions and mental health; family of origin, and current family life. If a family lacks sufficient income, or parents lack the skills and education necessary to earn a sufficient income, their housing situations were unstable and transient (Wright et al., 1998). As more and more families face job loss and poverty, the issue of family transience is becoming increasingly relevant (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008).

When low income and high stress is confounded by emotional or mental health issues, the outcome may be particularly bleak. Homeless populations are disproportionately affected by mental illness at all levels of severity (Fischer & Breakey, 1991). In addition, homeless individuals, especially women and mothers, experience a gamut of intense emotions including anger, self-blame, depression, anxiety, and desperation (Bassuk et al., 1998, 1996). Many of these psychosocial problems can be traced back to their childhood and relational problems with their family of origin. (Bassuk et al., 1996, 1997; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Weinreb et al., 1998, 2006). When financial strain is combined with psychological challenges and poor family support, current family life is likely to be highly stressful and unstable (Walsh, 2002; 1996). This stress not only affects parents, but also their children who often experience their own mental and emotional turmoil (Osofsky, 1997).

Examine this understanding of "reality" for unanswered questions or problems.

Precursors to homelessness are well documented and range from economics to family relationships; however, the subjective reality of homelessness is less understood. This study focuses on a population working toward resilience who has reached an ideal place to reflect on their current and past adverse experiences contributing to persistent transience. What is it like to be a homeless mother? What past experiences does she associate with her circumstances? How did she get to transitional housing and what does she believe makes her resilient? These experiential questions are still unanswered despite the wealth of knowledge of structural factors associated with being homeless.

Identify what information will best answer those questions and how it can be obtained and determine how this information, once collected, is associated with the questions or problems, and more importantly the "reality" of homelessness.

Qualitative research is founded upon rich, descriptive information about individuals' life stories. However, some qualitative methods still maintain that there is some objective "truth" that can be discovered if enough details are collected to theoretically frame the issue. Phenomenology is a philosophical way of approaching life, a scientific theory for understanding life, and a method for gaining knowledge about individuals' "life world" (Gregova, 1996; Husserl, 1970; Schutz, 1966). Thus, the present study takes the approach that the only way to appropriately answer the research questions and understand the life experiences of transitioning mothers is to listen to their stories and accept them as they are subjectively presented. As the women related their past experiences and discussed their present circumstances, including their subjective view of

how the two are related, the researcher was able to weave together their stories to develop a relatively objective understanding of their lived realities.

Understand and interpret any associations from scientific theory outside of the specific questions, problems, and phenomena of homelessness.

Husserl referred to phenomenology as the "mother of all philosophical research methods [sic]" (Husserl, 1952/1980, p. 69) as other theoretical perspective on family life can be approached from a phenomenological standpoint. For example, transitioning mothers may demonstrate issues with goals and decision-making that can be explained by social exchange theory. Their relationship patterns with their biological and constructed families may illustrate how unhealthy relationships and interpersonal behaviors are interconnected, reinforced, and prolonged through continued dysfunctional patterns of interaction (i.e. a systemic approach). Or, perhaps the transitioning mothers in this study experienced such extreme adversity because they are women and had to face unique challenges because their social role as "female" had been dismissed, ignored, or degraded by family members, peer relationships, and the larger social community around them. The point is that women's subjective realities of their lived experiences have more heuristic power than specific, functional knowledge of how they became homeless. Thus a phenomenological approach that simply opens the mind to mothers' homeless and transitional experiences may provide more valuable insight that leads to resilient action. Most social and clinical work is about exploring reality as each presenting individual perceives it (Keith, 1993). This reality is made known through language and discourse between the helper and presenting individual or family as well as other family members and significant individuals (Keith, 1989). It would seem that a philosophical standpoint of

wanting to understand the richness of individuals' unique experiences would substantially

compliment and benefit social service intervention or clinical treatment.

Apply results to the understanding of the "reality" of homelessness and explain how they

fit with the history of transience and how they promote new understanding.

Results from this study do not just fit in with a knowledge base about

homelessness like a missing piece of the puzzle. More appropriately, findings from a

phenomenological analysis of mothers' homeless and resilience experiences add a new

dimension to the issue of transience. When openly discussing the issue of homelessness,

the specific reasons the women were without housing warranted only a brief notation

from the women. Instead, they focused on their relationships with their families of origin

and subsequent social and romantic connections. The core of their adverse experiences

seemed to revolve around how they viewed themselves – a complex perception

developed from childhood experiences, adult relationships, social experiences, and

internal processes. Traumatic childhood family experiences are consistently associated

with poor adult outcomes (Bassuk et al., 1997, 1996; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Cowal et

al., 2002; Doerre et al., 1996; Petit & Curtis, 1997; Susser et al., 1991; Tyler, 2006;

Weinreb et al., 1998, 2006; Wood et al., 1990; Zlotnick et al., 1998). But what exactly

does that mean? Learning about recently-homeless mothers' past family experiences,

how they perceived them and how they feel they have impacted their life course provides

a deeper understanding of the association between adverse childhood and adult

experiences and enables researchers and practitioners to pinpoint specific areas of need.

While this study involved only a few women, they discussed intimate details of their lives

and consistently shared similar experiences, perceptions, and struggles that can guide

further scientific inquiry and social action. Specifically, the issue of "self" among homeless women and mothers is of primary interests – how it develops, how past and present experiences shape it, and how it has and continues to contribute to transient family cycles.

Limitations

First, there are several limitations to using a phenomenological framework to explore social issues. It may seem that since phenomenologists focus on individuals' perceptions of their lived experiences, they are unable to account for the larger context in which such experiences take place (Gubrium & Holstein, 1993). However, Gubrium and Holstein explain how it may not be the actual macro event or climate that matters, but how people perceive it (i.e. a failing economy may mean more to someone who has lost their job than to someone who remains securely employed).

An additional limitation is associated with consistency and rigor in research methodology. Of primary concern is the fact that phenomenological data is collected, filtered, and interpreted by the researcher (and often only one researcher). However, processes were in place to enhance objectivity and integrity (See Patton, 1999) including debriefing with other members of the research team, transcribing of field notes outside of the research setting, employing multiple coders, and post analysis review by the research team. Ideally, results also would have been reviewed by the participants for clarity and confirmation of research findings as advocated by Colaizzi (1978), but considering the transitional nature of the sample and the subjectivity with which they conveyed their stories this was not a realistic option. A final step in the interpretive process was

comparing results and conclusions to the original data to ensure findings were rooted in the actual data.

A final limitation is the small number of women included in this study. The size of the sample is a direct reflection of the recruitment methodology as well as the transitional nature of the residence where they lived. However, findings still are meaningful and suggest future research is needed with more transitioning mothers Despite these limitations, the depth of understanding possible through phenomenological research has major implications for practice and future research. Through a phenomenological approach, researchers may explain how a phenomenon has been understood by individuals, what the phenomenon means for each individual considering the context in which they currently live and their socio-historical background, and how individuals' understandings and meanings can add insight into overall research on the phenomenon.

Implications

In contemporary social science, the issue of fatherhood and fathers' experiences on a multitude of family issues are hot topics. However, regarding the homeless experience, the reality is most homeless families are single mothers with young children (Amato, Myers, & Emery, 2009). Thus, when addressing homelessness, transition, and resilience, mothers' voices must be heard. The more we know about homeless and recently-homeless mothers' experiences, the more we can do to prevent the outcome for future generations of women (Gilgun, 2008). Mothers transitioning from homelessness to independent living provide researchers with an active and ongoing resilience process to explore and understand. Homelessness often is studied from a structural or resource-

driven model of functioning when in fact the phenomenon may be much more complex and dynamic (Hill, 1991). Results from this study shed insight into a world rarely explored by the research community – the life world of the resilient homeless mother. Findings suggest a new dialectic perspective (Porter, 1995) is needed about the way homeless mothers are viewed as well new approaches to studying marginalized families integrating theory, research methodology, best practices, and social service policy.

Research

Advising future research to take a qualitative approach to maternal homelessness is not enough as qualitative methodology is a large umbrella encompassing many approaches and variations. Phenomenology, the theoretical method used in the present study, is essentially casting the research net out to see what is captured – any and all experiences are collected and interpreted for meaning and importance. Additional phenomenological studies are needed to support findings and elaborate on issues uncovered in this study, namely how the role of self and mothers' internal processes are associated with poverty, homelessness, and resilience.

Porter (1995) recommends researchers do more than just meet with participants and ask questions, but actually become immersed in the context in which participants live. Researchers do not necessarily need to become homeless (though that would be an interesting approach), but having a more constant presence over a longer amount of time would greatly enhance data collection and interpretation. Particular insight could be gained if research on maternal homeless began when mothers' first experienced homeless and continued throughout their transitional process and beyond.

Practice

Empirical knowledge of the subjective experiences of transitioning mothers can be easily translated into practice. Themes identified in this study and those that will come from additional research provide clinicians and social service workers with specific issues to address when working with homeless or recently-homeless mothers who are working to achieve independent housing and self-sufficiency. Practitioners can begin a dialogue with clients to gain insight into their lived "realities" (Keith, 1993). Programs that offer educational and supplemental resources to help homeless families rebound from poverty can add a new layer of service to their programs. Beyond structural resource provisions, practitioners can help mothers explore their past experiences and how they have influenced their life course. This exploration changes the perspective from which mothers receive resources; in other words, a mother is in a phenomenologically different place after she copes with her past experiences and makes the conscious decision not to let those experiences influence her current thoughts and actions. Even workers on the front lines of social services, those performing intake processes or handing out food and clothing can become more perceptive to the emotional place of the homeless mother by engaging in conversation and appreciating the woman as a person full of life experiences – many of them likely traumatic with painful memories still close to the surface.

Policy

How does a homeless mother's childhood experiences and self-perception fit in with larger social policy? How does qualitative, phenomenological research inform policymakers who seek outcome statistics and best practices that social reform can be

built upon? These are questions often posed by stakeholders at both ends of the

research/policy spectrum (Friese & Bogenschneider, 2009). The answer may not lie in

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valuable, but may not have the desired long-term impact if the individuals receiving them

grow up feeling worthless, incompetent, and like a "punishment from God" to the world

around them. This is an issue that should be understandable across the spectrum of

family-focused institutions.

    A recent policy case involves a congressional review of caseworker visits with

abused children and their families (in-home or foster). Almost every state has

government standards regarding frequency and quality of visits; quality being defined by

child safety and caseworker's ability to communicate with child and family regarding

transition to placement (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2006). However, the

role of individual internal processes still is overlooked. Services are focused on the interaction and function among family members and not on individual perceptions. It is unfortunate that with all the benefits gained from systemic approaches to family issues, individual experiences are lost. Hill (1991) also encouraged policy to increase focus on individual needs – which in the case of the present study would generalize to the majority of homeless mothers studied. Taking steps as simple as asking clients (of all ages) how they perceive their experiences, how they feel about themselves, or even requiring a brief self-esteem inventory on an intake form could significantly inform the helping process. Basic, structural resource provisions for a complex and multi-layered processes may not create the kind of long-term, life-altering change that is hoped for (See also Hill, 1991). Thus, as in the case of the present study, daughters with early and persistent adverse experiences build their lives upon foundations full of "voids" that prohibit them from forming healthy relationship, making positive life decisions, and serving as functional role models to their children.

Conclusion

An exciting strength of phenomenological methodology is its usefulness with vulnerable populations or politically-charged social issues. Phenomenology, in its simplest form, is the appreciation that any social reality is subject to the "reality" of the individual in the social setting (i.e. observable truth; van Manen, 1990). Thus extreme family experiences such as homelessness, while potentially sharing characteristics across families, are going to be experientially unique for each family (i.e. equifinality; Bertalanffy, 1968), as well as each family member based on all the past, present, and future individual, family, social, and cultural characteristics that make them who they are.

These perceptually-unique details provide valuable information for research with unique family situations that can help direct future intervention development and delivery as well as future scientific study (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999). Therefore, a phenomenological approach not only enables identification of themes important across vulnerable families, but also may identify unique individual experiences (and participants' perceptions of those experiences) that impact life course outcomes. Finally, interpretive phenomenology allows the researcher the opportunity to frame and interpret observations within participants' current context while accounting for the background information they provide as each family member discloses their life story.

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APPENDIX

Amanda L. Williams

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Thesis: PHENOMENOLOGY OF SINGLE MOTHERS TRANSITIONING FROM
          HOMELESSNESS TO INDEPENDENT LIVING

Major Field: Human Development and Family Science

Education:

       M.S. Oklahoma State University, May, 2009 (anticipated)

       B.S. Oklahoma State University, July, 2007, Cum Laude with HDFS Honors

       A.A. Tulsa Community College, July, 2005

Experience:

       Graduate Research/Teaching Assistant, Oklahoma State University, 2007-2009

       Refereed Publications in the Journal of Youth and Adolescence, Journal of
          Adolescent Research, Adolescence, College Student Journal, and
          Journal of the American Dietetic Association

Professional Memberships:

       National Council on Family Relations, Society for Research on Adolescence,
       Society for Research on Child Development, Oklahoma Council on Family
       Relations, Tulsa Young Professionals, Oklahoma Partnership for Public
       Deliberation

ABSTRACT

Name: Amanda L. Williams   Date of Degree: May, 2009

Institution: Oklahoma State University   Location: Tulsa, Oklahoma

Title of Study: PHENOMENOLOGY OF SINGLE MOTHERS TRANSITIONING
                        FROM HOMELESSNESS TO INDEPENDENT LIVING

Pages in Study: 117   Candidate for the Degree of Master of Science

Major Field: Human Development and Family Science

Scope and Method of Study:

Research is growing in the area of family homelessness, much of which centers around the homeless mother; yet we know little about her phenomenological "life world" experiences. The present study addressed this gap using interviews and observations of mothers living in a transitional residence for homeless families. The phenomenological nature of this investigation gave the researcher access to diverse, intimate personal histories with one common thread – all mothers had experienced homelessness and were actively working toward self-sufficiency.

Findings and Conclusions:

Overall, the women perceived their childhood experiences, which were colored by abuse and poor relationships, to influence how they viewed themselves and functioned as adults. Resulting themes indicate participants' past family relationships, particularly with their maternal figure, systemically affect their current family situations and continue to influence each woman's sense of identity, ability to create and maintain healthy boundaries, and parenting perspectives and behaviors. The transitional program director also identified these issues as barriers to families' success in the program. To make the transition to independent living, each woman must first address past family relationships while differentiating her personal identity from those experiences. If self-differentiation and acceptance is not achieved, each mother will continue cycling her family between transience and transition, without ever reaching self-sufficiency. Results from this study create a new discussion about what can be done to help homeless mothers rebound from their own personal horrors and extreme depths of poverty to become healthy and self-sufficient parents.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Dr. Michael J. Merten