Chapter IV

New Strategies to Study Organizations Working with People Experiencing Homelessness: The Service Providers' Study

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Abstract

Working with people experiencing homelessness represents a challenge for social providers, who work in very emotionally consuming settings. Providers' well-being and their working conditions are critical for the success of the services and can strongly influence clients' outcomes. Moreover, the organizations working with marginalized groups do not have any specific instruments to analyze the working context from the providers' experiences.

Based on these assumptions, the aims of this research were a) to investigate social providers' prospective and factors affecting their work; b) to develop a questionnaire aimed at identifying profiles of organizations working with marginalized groups, basing on the factors identified. This chapter presents and discuss the quali-quantitative methodology to achieve the objectives of the study, evidencing the challenges and difficulties faced.

1. Overview of the Providers' Study

Starting from the first experiences in North America, the Housing First (HF) approach has been spreading all over the world and is being implemented alongside Traditional Staircase model (TS), also in Europe (Lancione, Stefanizzi and Gaboardi, 2017). That is changing the way service providers work with people experiencing homelessness (Gaboardi et al., 2019).

Working with homeless people represents a challenge for social providers, who work in very emotionally consuming settings where they are often exposed to traumatic life events, emotional suffering and mental health problems (Mullen & Leginski, 2010). Besides, services for people experiencing homelessness are often characterize by financial strain, high turnover, a vague definition of roles and a general lack of professional training. Thus, providers' well-being and their working conditions are critical for the success

of the services to people experiencing homelessness and can strongly influence clients' outcomes (Henwood et al., 2013; Manning & Greenwood, 2018).

What still needs to be learned are the specific organizations' features that could be influencing the providers' work. Thus, it is critical to identify the features of homeless services that enhance the providers' job and how they may vary according to the approach adopted (HF vs TS).

Nevertheless, in literature few studies are focused on social providers' perspective and factors affecting their work and there are not standardized instruments to analyze the working context of the service providers working with people experiencing homelessness. Moreover, the organizations working with marginalized groups do not have any tools to catch the providers' point of view about their services. Then, the analysis of the providers' working conditions starting from their perspective is part of the European project HOME-EU, with a Providers' Study using a mixed-method protocol.

The HOME-EU project had different challenges: the need of using a universal language due to the multi-languages team (8 different languages) with different backgrounds and professional skills; the presence of countries with different socio-political contexts; the need to use the results to promote social change. For these reason, The Providers' Study, coordinated by University of Padua (UNIPD), focuses on experiences of homeless services' social providers using an explorative mixed-method protocol in order to examine which service characteristics influence their work experience (in term of stress and work engagement), by comparing Housing First (HF) services with Traditional Services (TS) across 8 European countries of the HOME-EU project.

2. Overall design and aims to attain

The main goal of the Providers' Study was to understand service providers' perspectives on how their organizations work and influence their well-being and stress.

We started with a study aimed at understanding how social providers, working in HF or TS, describe and conceptualize their services. Then, we conducted a Study to know which are the services' characteristics affecting the providers working with this target exploring the professionals' points of view using. Finally, created an instrument for measuring these characteristics in order to analyze the services' profiles.

Particularly, specific aims were:

- to evaluate which service features contribute/obstacle providers' work;
- to identify different profiles of organizations working with homeless people;
- to investigate the association between the features of the services for people experiencing homelessness and the providers' levels of burn-out and work engagement;
- to investigate the relationship between services' features and the promotion of service users' capabilities.

To achieve the aforementioned aims, both qualitative and quantitative methods have been implemented, following a bottom-up process.

Qualitative and quantitative methods have the potential to be complementary, producing both comprehensive and complete results. During the first year of the project, the qualitative study was conducted using the following methodologies:

- Semi-structured interviews with program leaders;
- Focus Groups with service providers working in HF programs and in TS;
- Photovoice projects with service providers working in HF programs and in TS.

Program leaders and service providers working in 3 HF programs and 3 TS in each country were involved. More specifically, providers from 2 HF and 2 TS participated in the FGs, and program leaders in the same organizations responded to a semi-structured interview. Moreover, 1 HF and 1 TS (different from the previous ones) were involved in Photovoice projects, while the program leaders in the same organizations responded to a semi-structured interview. In the following second and third years, a quantitative methodology was adopted. A questionnaire aimed at creating a profile of organizations working with people experiencing homelessness was developed, using the quantitative data (pictures and captions) from cross-national Photovoice projects. The questionnaire (SErvice PROviders Questionnaire) was administered to providers' in all the 8 countries involved in the HOME_EU project. Finally, a version of the SE PRO questionnaire was developed, with 24 items, in 6 dimensions (SE PRO Q 24).

The SE PRO Q 24 has the potential to create a profile of the services, to make comparisons between services, among providers' perspective and across countries. Then, it is possible to correlate the service' profile to providers' well-being and stress.

3. Selected measures and outlines of instructions for data collection procedures

We started with two qualitative studies. The decision to use a qualitative method in the initial stage of the research has been made with the intention to have a deep understanding of the organizations' features that deal with marginality and the social providers' work, due to the lack of literature analyzing this topic. The main purpose was to explore opinions, experiences, difficulties faced and strengths of those who, every day, tackle the challenging task of working with people experiencing homelessness. This information would then be used as a guide to direct the construction of the questionnaire in the quantitative research phase, during the second and third years of the project.

Semi-structured interviews, Focus Groups and Photovoice (Wang, 2000) were the instruments selected in order to catch the providers' experiences. Focus groups are group discussions on a specific topic, based on the freedom of expression of group members, so they are useful to facilitate the emerging of aspects not previously considered on a specified theme (Powell and Single, 1996). Photovoice is a participatory action research methodology that, through pictures, directly involves the subjects, inducing them to reflect on specific themes and ways to produce change (Wang, 2000). It was chosen to use this methodology mainly to overcome the language boundaries since images can be understood regardless of language and culture. Also, images can provide a clear portrayal of what exists in a particular moment and could have a strong emotional impact.

Then, we conducted a quantitative study to develop a questionnaire (the SErvice PROviders' Questionnaire – SE-PRO Q) aimed at creating a profile of organizations working with people experiencing homelessness, i.e., identifying the principals' strengths and weaknesses of homeless services in different domains. The questionnaire was created basing on the qualitative results of Photovoice projects and it was combined

with providers' well-being and stress dimensions.

3.1 Qualitative Studies

3.1.1 Focus Group and Semi-Structured Interviews

Focus group is a qualitative research method where a group interview is conducted by a researcher on a specific topic. It is particularly useful to explore in-depth the opinions, attitudes or behaviors of a certain community or group (Powell and Single, 1996). In this research, Focus Groups have been implemented in order to investigate which service features contribute/obstacle the effectiveness of the program, basing on the empowering community settings model (Maton, 2008). Maton identifies six organizational characteristics that influence providers' job: belief system, core activities, relational environment, roles, leadership, and mechanisms for setting maintenance and change. Each organizational characteristic is associated with psychological mediators that, in turn, are associated with higher levels of empowerment for setting members (Gaboardi et al., 2019).

The data were collected through Focus Group (FGs) discussions during May–June 2017. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling within HF and TS programs. We used a selection criteria to involve providers of having at least six months of experience in the service. At minimum, four service providers were recruited per FG. Participation in the study was voluntary, without financial compensation.

Local researchers in each country conducted all Focus Groups, which were audio-recorded and lasted approximately 60–90 min. First, researchers asking participants to describe the main aims of their program. Afterward, specific questions explored the six organizational characteristics of empowering community settings model (Maton, 2008).

In total, 29 focus groups (15 HF, 14 TS) were conducted with 121 participants, 70 female, and 59 male. Two HF and two TS FGs were conducted in each country, except for Poland (2 TS FGs) because there were no HF programs there at the time. Data were analyzed following two steps and using the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first step, all the focus groups were transcribed verbatim in the local language and two independent coders conducted the coding in each country. They created a first set of codes based on the empowering community settings model (Maton, 2008). The second step involved coding the data through a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two independent researchers of the Italian team developed codes and compared them to create a final coding framework discussing discrepancies until they reached agreement. In this study, we started by analyzing the responses regarding goals and principles (belief system) and considered them as bases of the other organizational characteristics. The results were discussed in Gaboardi et al., 2019.

3.1.2 Photovoice projects

Photovoice can be defined as a participatory action research methodology that uses a universal language (the photography) to promote social change through the involvement of the participants (Wang, 1999). Adopting photographic language has contributed to overcome some of the difficulties due to the participation of providers coming from different cultures, languages and socio-political contexts, besides different professional skills. Also, Photovoice captures the positive and negative aspects of

a situation from the points of view of people involved (Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000), in this case, the homeless services. People can identify, represent, and then improve the contexts in which they are inserted using the photographic language (Wang, & Burris, 1997), becoming active participants in the processes of analysis.

The HOME_EU partners in each country used convenience sampling to assemble groups of at least four workers who each had at least six months of experience in the service. Separate groups were formed for providers working in HF and TS programs. Each Photovoice project was divided into 4 weekly or biweekly sessions, each lasting about 2 hours. The projects were composed of 4 sessions: introduction and review of the project and training; photographic training and assignment; sharing/discussing photos; creation of a report shared with participants. In particular, participants were instructed to take pictures that responded to the following questions: What are the aspects of the program that help your work? What are the main obstacles? [insert Fig.1]

The discussions around the photographs were guided by the Photovoice technique called SHOWeD (Wang, 1999). Then, they summarized what emerged from the photographs and the discussions in main themes.

The data were collected during May-June 2017. Overall, 17 Photovoice projects (HF=8; TS=9) were conducted in 8 Countries and 81 participants (providers and volunteers) were involved. In particular, in each country, 1 HF and 1 TS Photovoice projects were realized.

Data were analyzed following two steps. First one, a draft summary report was created in collaboration with the Photovoice participants in each project, incorporating the most salient themes that emerged during the discussion of the pictures. Facilitators translated the reports into English for cross-national analysis. Three researchers from the Italian team independently coded the themes that emerged in the reports of each country into categories, with disagreements resolved in discussion among the team. In total, 195 photos (HF=97, TS= 98) were analyzed. Finally, themes were divided into three levels: systemic, organizational, and individual (Macnaughton et al., 2015).

Also, the potential impact of the Photovoice method at the community or organizational level has been considered as result of the research. The Photovoice projects' results (in Italy, Poland and France) were presented to the community and local politicians through exhibitions in strategic places of the city, organized by participants and researchers. Moreover, some selected photos of all the projects were presented for the first time in Padua, Italy, in an exhibition (Santinello et al., 2018) hosted at the Municipality Center on June 2018, as part of the 3rd International Housing First Conference. The success and the impact that the exhibition had on social workers and citizens made other countries involved in the HOME_EU project to host it in their local contexts and promote it as an instrument of awareness and empowerment of local communities. [Insert Fig. 3 & 4]

3.2 Quantitative Study: SE PRO Questionnaire

In literature, there are not standardized instruments to analyze the working context of the service providers working with people experiencing homelessness. Moreover, the organizations working with marginalized groups do not have any tools to catch the providers' point of view about their services.

This is the main reason why the second phase of the research was focused on the development of a questionnaire for providers working in services for people experiencing homelessness.

The results collected from cross-national Photovoice projects were used to generate the new tool. The domains included in the questionnaire were identified starting from the pictures and captions of the Photovoice projects of the 8 countries involved.

The developmental process of the questionnaire lasted from January to September 2018 and followed the different steps: item processing; item selection; pre-test; translation into HOME-EU consortium partners' languages (Dutch, English, French, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish).

Together with SE-PRO Q, other measures related to providers' well being (work engagement) and stress (burnout) were combined.

The questionnaire was digitalized and uploaded on an online platform managed by the Italian team from July to September 2018. A link of the questionnaire was sent to all HOME-EU consortium partners in order to reach a sample of providers in each Country. Overall, 715 providers (65% women) working with people experiencing homelessness with at least 6 months of experience participated at the survey. We conducted a correlation between items-subjects and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the instrument.

Based on this analysis, a final version of the questionnaire was developed: a 24 items version, divided into 6 dimensions. This version of the SE PRO Q 24 showed good psychometric properties, i.e. fit indices for the factorial structure. Nevertheless, these are a preliminary analysis of a new instrument that will be validated with a new data collection to confirm the structure. Additionally, further analyses were performed to verify the correlation between organizational features and providers' well-being and the providers' belief in the potential of the service to promote users' capabilities.

4. Critical Reflections on Project implementation and management

The main challenge that has been faced in these three years of research had to do with overcoming the difficulties deriving from the cross-national study. First, working with 8 different countries means dealing with 8 multi-languages teams, from different backgrounds, diversified professional skills, and different socio-political contexts. Also, these studies represented first experiences of using qualitative methods in cross-national research in the field of homelessness. Photovoice was used precisely to reduce the difficulties associated with the translation into various languages, through the adoption of the universal language of photography. Also during the Focus Groups discussions were used some strategies to overcome the two main limits of a cross-national comparison (Gaboardi et al., 2019).

A first methodological limitation derives from the translation of key findings into English for cross-national analysis. The translation may have affected the meaning and could have influenced the understanding of what should have been included among the key themes. To reduce translation problems all partners used standardized translation-back translation procedures (Beaton et al., 2000) and doubts/issues regarding translation have been discussed among the HOME-EU Consortium. Future research adopting the same methodology should dedicate a considerable part of their funds on translation and back translation process.

Second, the researchers were different for each country and individual researchers may have used different styles in conducting the groups discussions. To reduce this bias the Italian research team developed a detailed protocol about planning (aims, recruitment, setting, role of the moderators and assistant, ethics), discussions/Photovoice method (introduction, questions, conclusion, briefing) and content analysis. Moreover, the research protocol for analysis used several strategies to reduce potential bias and to enhance the trustworthiness of the interpretation (Padgett, 2011) including having two independent coders in each country, prolonged engagement with participants, and group discussions between the researchers involved in the research.

Another challenge was related to involving social providers in the survey, especially for the quantitative one. First, in the countries examined there were no registers dedicated to providers working in marginal contexts, so it was difficult to reach a sample with a significant number of participants in each country. Second, there was no financial compensation for participation in the survey. An economic reward would probably have strengthened the motivation to participate in research. For future studies, it might be useful to consider this aspect.

Nevertheless, the results of the present studies helped to increase knowledge about providers' work with people experiencing homelessness and to have an instrument useful to create a service' profile.

The SE PRO Q 24 can be used to create a profile of the organizations working with people experiencing homelessness with the potential to compare services, working models and providers' perspective. This tool has the potential to deal with the lack of standardized tools for organizational analysis in homelessness services. Not only, but it can also be a useful organizational tool for the organizational profiling of services. Leaders and coordinators can use SE PRO Q 24 to capture the point of view of their professionals, compare their perspectives and identify the strengths and weaknesses of the organization. Finally, identifying weak points allows to strengthen the service's weak aspects and therefore to prevent the providers' burnout. Attention to the working conditions of providers allows workers to do their job to the best of their capacities, with the potential to improve their well-being, the quality of care and therefore clients' outcomes.

Figure 1. Photovoice session in the shelter of Vicenza, Italy

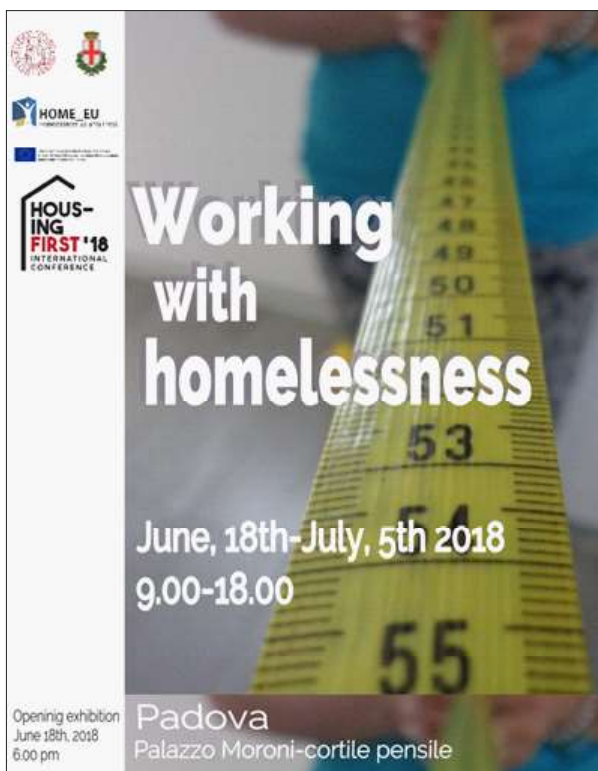*Figure 2. Photovoice exhibition in Vicenza, October 2nd 2017, Italy*

Figure 3. International Photovoice Exhibition Flyer, Padua,
June 18th-July, 5th 2018

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