

Summary of Paper for Research Exchange Proposal

Men Experiencing Homelessness: A Qualitative Investigation of Multiple Stigmas

Although difficult to measure with accuracy due to debates of definition and constraints of methodology, homelessness is a pervasive and long-standing societal problem (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007; Kusmer, 2002). National prevalence estimates indicate that 3.5 to 7 million individuals will experience homelessness in any given year (Hwang, Tolomiczenko, Kouyoumdjian, & Garner, 2005; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007). A variety of programs exist to prevent long-term homelessness and to help individuals who are homeless find respite, secure housing, obtain employment, reduce psychiatric symptoms, decrease or eliminate substance abuse, and ultimately become reintegrated into mainstream society (Crook, Mullis, Cornille, & Mullis, 2005; Glasser & Bridgman, 1999). Unfortunately, many of them have been ineffective in leading to the permanent re-housing of those who are homeless (Dennis, Buckner, Lipton, & Levine, 1991; Glasser & Bridgman, 1999; Leipersberger, 2007; Mitka, 2006). One possible reason for the relative ineffectiveness of homeless assistance programs may relate to their difficulty engaging and maintaining clientele (Bhui, Shanahan, & Harding, 2006; Ng & McQuiston, 2004; Padgett, Henwood, Abrams, & Davis, 2008). Some researchers have examined why individuals facing homelessness seem to underutilize the services that are available to them. Themes emerging from their studies appear to involve perceived stigmatization (related to mental illness, substance use, and/or homelessness itself; Bhui et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2007; Leipersberger, 2007; Padgett et al., 2008), negative perceptions of service staff (often due to power differentials; Bhui et al., 2006; Leipersberger, 2007; Padgett et al., 2008), and the all too often rigid and disempowering nature of shelterization (Bhui et al., 2006; Leipersberger, 2007; Padgett et al., 2008).

One of these variables, stigmatization, has received a considerable amount of attention in the psychological literature. Individuals facing homelessness, however, comprise a population that has been surprisingly underexamined as a unique stigmatized group (Kidd, 2007; Lee et al., 2004; Thompson et al., 2004). The studies that have examined stigmatization of those who are homeless, either directly or indirectly (Bentley, 1997; Boydell, Goering, & Morrell-Bellai, 2000; Kidd, 2007; Lankenau, 1999; Miller & Keys, 2001; Osborne, 2002), point to the idea that at least some individuals are well aware of their devalued social status, experience identity transformations and negative outcomes as a result of homeless stigmatization, and attempt to manage both stigmatization and its undesirable outcomes. None of these studies, however, have offered a specific, comprehensive theory as to how individuals facing homelessness experience and respond to stigmatization.

As such, the purpose of the present paper is to propose a study that can build a theory of stigmatization of the homeless population in light of the preexisting research on stigma and homelessness. The general research question I intend to answer via the study is, "How do individuals facing homelessness experience and respond to social stigmatization?" To explore this question, I plan to focus on a specific subpopulation of the homeless (African American men with co-occurring mental illness and substance use disorders who are facing homelessness) and utilize a specific type of qualitative research methodology (grounded theory, originally developed by Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This methodology allows for the creation of a theory that can explain individuals' experiences and responses to stigmatization as opposed to simply describing them.

In summary, I am proposing a grounded theory study of how a specific subgroup of the homeless population experiences and responds to social stigmatization. It is my hope that the results from this study can be used to drive practices employed with individuals facing homelessness. For my poster presentation of the current paper, I can provide a more extensive review of the literature as well as a more detailed outline of the data collection and analysis procedures I propose.