In this first case illustration, the authors report on the qualitative part of a large quantitative and qualitative study of the homeless. Data were collected by means of individual intensive interviews, lasting from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours each, with 29 purposively selected men and women who were living in homeless shelters. The use of in-depth, structured interviews, designed to elicit detailed information, is fairly commonplace in many qualitative research projects.

**NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY: RE-PRESENTATION OF SELFD IN PEOPLE WHO ARE HOMELESS**

Katherine M. Boydell, Paula Goering, and Tammy L. Morrell-Bellai

The problem of homelessness is a pressing social and health concern ascribed to the interaction between personal, social, economic, and service system resources. This article is based on a qualitative study of the experiences of 29 homeless individuals. In-depth interviews were conducted with single adult shelter users. Analysis revealed the self to be a process that was continually developing. Participants tacitly locate their self-concepts in the past, present, and future.

future. These time frames reflect the form and content of self. They also reveal hopes, dreams, beliefs, and understandings about self. The ways in which homelessness discredits notions of self and personal identity and the hierarchy of identity that homeless individuals use to cope are also examined.

Homelessness and Identity

Studies show that homelessness involves much more than not having a place to live. Individuals often lose their sense of identity, self-worth, and self-efficacy (Buckner, Bassuk, & Zima, 1993). Hallebone (1997) studied 38 homeless men ethnographically and found that psychosocial identities tended to be fragmented. An additional group of 30 homeless young people were found to suffer a marginality of psychosocial identity. She found that the extent to which alternatives to homelessness were perceived depended on the construction and deconstruction of a collective culture and identity of homelessness.

The stereotypical view of homeless people portrays them as passive, lazy, disaffiliated, and disempowered (Cohen & Wagner, 1992). Taylor’s (1993) study involving qualitative interviews with 10 homeless women indicates that participants shared experiences of depersonalization and stigmatization and the subsequent effects on their personhood. It was found that being or appearing unclean and having an identity without certification (paper proof) greatly affected the women’s sense of self-esteem and personhood.

Snow and Anderson (1993) report that those recently dislocated expressed a strong aversion to other homeless individuals. In contrast, those who had been homeless for extended periods of time were more likely than those recently dislocated to embrace self-concepts such as tramp and bum (Snow & Anderson, 1987). These unconventional self-concepts may be acquired and reinforced, at least in part, through social comparison and identification with other homeless people (Grigsby, Baumann, Gregorich, & Roberts-Gray, 1990). Cohen and Wagner (1992) specified the construction of a positive homeless identity in their ethnographic study of homeless activists. Montgomery (1994) found that homeless women felt that their hard times contributed to the creation of a new and more positive self. Stubborn pride, a positive orientation, and a moral structure rendered a clarity of focus and a determination that permitted these women to move against the negative forces in their environment. The literature also suggests that there is a spiritual dimension to the experience of homelessness that is often ignored (Montgomery, 1994). Matousek (1991) describes how the profound loss of...
self, which is associated with homelessness, presents a spiritual challenge to define one’s very existence.

The theoretical premise of this article is an interactionist analysis of human lived experience (Dietz, Prus, & Shaffir, 1994). Central to this premise are identities, either people’s definitions or typification of self and others. Insofar as people act toward objects as they define those objects, the meanings that people attribute to objects, including oneself and others, have a significant bearing on the ways in which people act toward one another. As reflective entities or objects of their own awareness, individuals can attempt to project particular images of themselves to others and thus encourage others to define and act toward themselves in more desired manners. Goffman (1959) uses the term impression management to refer to this aspect of identity work in his book, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Lived experience represents the stage for ongoing work, focusing on identity as people “anticipate, project, define, interpret, assess, accept, resist and modify images of self” (Dietz et al., 1994, p. 60 [sic]). Achieving a sense of self requires that one be able to make reflections both toward the other and toward one’s own being as an object of one’s own awareness. People respond not only to the objective features of a situation but also to the meaning that the situation has for them (Thomas, 1923). Once such meanings have been assigned, the consequent behavior is shaped by the ascribed meaning. The subjective, verbal, and written expressions of meaning given by the individuals studied are windows into the inner life of the person (Denzin, 1989).

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the self and the capacity to reflect on the self are viewed as critical features in the organization of human conduct and coordinated action (Blumer, 1969, 1980; Mead, 1934). It is through interaction with others that humans develop and create not only their own individual world but also the social world (Blumer, 1969, 1980; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). Through interaction with others, humans learn and conduct societal roles through socialization processes (Hewitt, 1989, 1991).

North American society presents a particular set of messages, both explicitly and implicitly, about the value of homeless people in our society. These characteristic conceptualizations about homelessness are encountered within the family, educational institutions, the judicial system, and the mass media and are articulated in public opinion. Southard (1997) has noted that this has discernible impacts on the development of self-concepts within the homeless population. She states that the study of homeless individuals can provide insights into questions about identity construction and self-concept.

According to Goffman (1963), felt identity is a person’s subjective sense of his or her own situation and the continuity and character that person comes to as a result of his or her various social experiences. In contrasting felt identity with his conceptualizations of social and personal identity, Goffman differentiated between others’ perceptions of the individual and the individual’s own perceptions. He explains that “felt identity is first of all a
subjective, reflexive matter that necessarily must be felt by the individual whose identity is at issue” (1963, p. 106). Erickson (1995) notes that, although Goffman did not describe this facet of self as fully as his impression manager, his mention of personal identity, biography, and ego, or felt identity, denotes the makings of a transitiuational self (i.e., that which enables one to feel real) rooted in self-feelings (Goffman, 1963; Schwalbe, 1993).

Goffman was not the first to suggest the existence of an emotionally grounded, transituational self. Although an emotions-based sense of self may at first seem contradictory to the professed cognitive emphasis of symbolic interactionism, feeling and emotion can be found within nearly all interactionist conceptions of self (Erickson, 1995). Whereas social identities are depicted as those that others assign to the actor, felt identities connote a particular form of personal identity that the actor claims for the self and experiences in terms of self-feelings (Goffman, 1963; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Snow & Anderson, 1987). Furthermore, because all personal identities develop over time and through an actor’s reflective observations of self in interaction with others, not only will they be closely related to the content of social identities assigned by these others, but they may also be similarly structured (Erickson, 1995). Despite this conceivable overlap, it should be acknowledged that the content or meanings underlying a social identity that others ascribe to an actor may not be the same as those meanings that the actor ascribes to self (Britt & Heise, 1992; Hewitt, 1989; Reitzes & Burke, 1980; Snow & Anderson, 1987) and that constitute his or her sense of authenticity (Erickson, 1995).

People are not usually cognizant of felt identity or of how authentic they are feeling at any given time. As Mead (1913/1964), Goffman (1963), and Hewitt (1989) have indicated, one is made aware of this facet of self only through the process of self-reflection and only when a self-referential or essential problem arises that calls one’s habitual character into question. The experience of homelessness explicitly calls an individual’s character into question. Erickson (1995) notes that people who embody the marginalized groups of a particular social context are frequently faced with dilemmas that require them to choose between acting in accordance with their self-values or in accordance with the expectations of powerful others. Snow and Anderson’s (1987, 1993) study of homeless street people supports the suggestion that issues of authenticity are more pertinent among those belonging to marginalized groups. Their ethnographic research highlighted the use of “identity talk,” the main way in which the homeless were able to construct, assert, and maintain their valued personal identities. These identities often differed from the general societal conception of a street person. Snow and Anderson found that the behavior of their interviewees was better understood through an effort to understand the meanings that the homeless individuals themselves adopted rather than by concentrating only on the more unidimensional attributions made by others. As Erickson (1995) has noted, it is important that research focusing on identity issues capture a sense of self that is both multidimensional and unified.
In this article, the findings from the qualitative component of a large-scale multimethod study of the homeless population in Toronto, Canada, are presented. The methodology and findings of the quantitative component of the study are reported elsewhere (Goering & Tolomiczenko, 1998). A sample of 300 single adult shelter users selected to match the more than 10,000 homeless adults who took refuge in these shelters in 1995 (and an additional 30 shelter avoiders) participated in a structured interview that included components of the Diagnostic Interview Schedule. The approval of the participants was obtained for all components of the study. In-depth interviewing, described by Charmaz (1991) as a “directional conversation that elicits inner views of respondents’ lives as they portray their worlds, experiences and observations” (p. 385), was used. The guideline questions employed in the interview were developed in the context of a focus group held with 8 individuals who were homeless. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 29 individuals purposively sampled from the 330 who were interviewed quantitatively.

Candidates for the qualitative component were selected based on their comfort in talking about and ability to recall in detail the events that occurred in the year before their becoming homeless. Interviews were held at a later date than the quantitative interview, and they lasted from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours. Interviews were conducted in quiet rooms in hostels, coffee shops, or offices of the research team, depending on the preferences of the research participant. There was a deliberate attempt to include both genders, various age groups, and both shelter users and avoiders. Interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 61 years, with a mean age of 37.96 (SD = 12.58) years. Thirty percent were female, and 52% had not completed high school. Fifty-two percent had never been homeless before. Participants provided revealing
insights into life on the streets and told their story of the pathways that led to homelessness.

All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Interviewer field notes were also transcribed and treated as text for the analysis. Researchers had no prior relationships with informants other than, in some cases, conducting a previous quantitative interview as part of the same study. Following the work of Diekelmann (1992), a participatory team approach was used in the analysis. The four-member team began by reading and rereading the interview transcripts. The first 10 interviews were then coded by all members of the team. This was followed by a meeting to discuss each interview in detail and to review the codes. There was a high degree of agreement in coding among the team members, and each instance of divergence was discussed until a category was agreed on. Once a set of codes was established, each of the remaining interviews was coded by at least two members of the team, one of whom had conducted the interview. These interviews were then discussed by the entire team, and coding adjustments were made as necessary. Codes were entered into The Ethnograph, a computer program designed to assist with the analysis of qualitative text-based data (Qualis Research Associates, 1998; Seidel, Kjolseth, & Seymour, 1988). This program reproduces some of the tasks of identifying, coding, and collecting segments to facilitate comparing them, developing themes and propositions, and revising initial segmentation and coding decisions (Seidel & Clark, 1984). This article focuses on one of the concepts emerging from the data, namely, the ways in which homeless individuals presented their past, present, and future self.

Results

The analysis of the transcripts indicated that homeless individuals strive to have valued lives and selves. Because of their homelessness, they experience disrupted plans and altered lives. The narrative text revealed that homelessness poses identity problems; positive former identities are preserved, current identity is devalued, and future identities are glimpsed. Past, present, and future blend into one another as homeless individuals (for a number of reasons related to their biographies and context) cling to selves situated in the past or create selves oriented to the future.
Past Self

Study participants identified that homelessness means a loss of identity on two levels. In effect, the absence of a permanent address can mean a lack of an established identity and reduced access to entitlements and rights, such as having difficulty in receiving financial assistance. On a more personal level, there is the psychological impact of losing a sense of identity. Homeless individuals in this sample showed pride in their former identity, an identity now lost to them. Both newly and chronically homeless individuals demonstrated this sense of pride in who they had been and what they had done. As the following quotes indicate, much of the presentation of a past self is focused on people’s identity in the workforce:

A gypsy trucker is one of them truckers that do specialized loads. . . . We were the drivers that never had accidents. We were the drivers that had the safest trucks on the road because we maintained them ourselves. . . . It was a great life. I had fun. I was working as an actor/writer and doing a bit of interior construction work, painting . . . I was doing okay. I was running my own business. . . . I used to, you know, be very strong mentally. I used to be able to combat the depression and be able to say to myself, like, “enough of this, stand up and do this and do that,” and then I’d do it. I was a property developer . . . and that took guts. . . . Before long, I had other people selling properties for me.

The reference to a past self also encompassed educational achievement as participants spoke about the fact that they had been excellent students and had achieved success in the school setting.

Present Self

When speaking about their current situation, all interviewees who were newly homeless (first episode of homelessness, n = 14) presented themselves in a positive manner. Adjectives frequently used to describe themselves include *honest, kind, lovable, moral, friendly,* and *strong and hardworking.* Newly homeless individuals often presented their current self by stating what they were not, for example, violent, sneaky, weak, helpless, and dirty: “I’m a gentle person. Not prone to violence. I’m very, I guess you could say introverted.”

Several individuals referred to themselves as introverted and stated that they did not like to talk and that they kept everything inside: “I don’t bother nobody and nobody bothers me. I really don’t like to talk much.”
This inwardness was often identified as an adaptive coping strategy used to avoid conflict with others: “I just keep to myself. I stay out of problems that way.” In addition, many participants referred to themselves as independent. In at least a couple of cases, this independence was specifically linked to having difficulty in reaching out to others for support when homeless: “I’m an independent person and do not want to rely on anybody. I certainly don’t like being dependent on anybody.”

Although some individuals who were chronically homeless \((n = 15)\) used positive adjectives such as resourceful, independent, generous, proud, and a survivor to present their current selves, they were far more likely than the newly homeless to be down on themselves:

I’ve fallen down for years and years and years and years, and I’ve never accepted reality. Never accepted it. . . . I’m 48 years old, and I haven’t done a damn thing yet. Uh, I don’t have a car. I don’t have a house. I don’t have property. I got nothing. I’m like, besides these clean clothes I have on, that’s it. Uh, so, for me to accomplish anything, I’ve got a very short period of time.

Those who were chronically homeless tended to put themselves down by stating that they were unreliable, unaccomplished, and irresponsible. Several admitted that they were pretty violent, and a couple of individuals used the term disgust to describe how they felt about themselves:

This is the first time that I’ve ever lived this low. And I’m disgusted with myself, honestly. I felt disgusted with myself, you know, that I messed up. I felt bad like, you know, like I was a nobody, you know? . . . There’s times I just, you know, just feel what’s the sense of my living, you know?

The Devalued Self

Homeless individuals experience social discomfort and a sense of stigma resulting from their homelessness (Hallebone, 1997). They are dealing with marginality, often on several levels, including associated problems of mental illness, alcohol or drug misuse, and abuse histories. Because of impoverished social support networks, many homeless people have limited practical and emotional support available to them. Consequently, social isolation and alienation are not infrequent. Many individuals in this study, both newly and chronically homeless, spoke of a devalued self because of their homeless situation:

You get so battered and bruised that finally you are just this whirling cyclone of experiences and emotions that you just, you’re going to break. I’ll see people who I saw on the streets then, still on the streets
now. And so I ask the same question, “How come you guys don’t have a place yet?” But as far as I can tell, they have just given up. Totally. And just hanging on for survival. . . . It’s almost like you get into it, and it becomes a way of survival. It becomes a way of life, and this is now the people I am comfortable with, the areas I’m comfortable with, and that’s it. They turn their back on society. You never have to feel vulnerable. That’s what the shell around you is for. A little wall you carry around with you that you don’t let nobody break down. I’ve lost. I’ve lost every sense of pride that I ever had in me and, uh, I need to get that back. It’s been a very humbling experience. I’ve gone from managing a $2 million store to scraping crud off dishes and almost vomiting in the process. . . . I was very angry. Look at you!

Interactions with others also serve as a milieu in which definitions of present self are constructed and sustained. This devalued sense of self that is experienced by interviewees was often reinforced by other individuals who they came in contact with in their day-to-day lives in the shelters and on the streets. One participant stated that other people think that she is stupid. Others described similar experiences:

Well, they all think I’m a lazy, shiftless, no-good bum. Take your pick. I have no choice. It’s like, believe me, if I could find work, I’d be very happy. They were saying, “You should try this place.” And I would look at a couple of addresses that they would recommend, and they were complete crack houses and really bad living conditions. And they would say, “Well, you were living on the streets, so this should be good enough for you.”

Several individuals in the study avoided disclosure of their homelessness status, which served to control their devalued identity. The first night that one participant found herself homeless, she went to an all-night coffee shop, but when asked if she was okay, she was too embarrassed to tell the person behind the counter that she was homeless. Instead, she said that she was working the late shift and forgot her key. Another participant said that if he passes someone he knows on the street, he turns his face quickly the other way. He stated quite clearly that he did not want anyone he knew to see him homeless.

Coping Mechanism: Identity Hierarchy

A common theme was thenotion of being different from other homeless people. Many newly and chronically homeless interviewees referred to themselves as not like them (other homeless people), not as bad, not as lazy, and not as unmotivated. There was the creation of an us-them dichotomy within the ranks of the homeless: “The other people in the shelters . . . are the bottom of the heap.”
Not only was the present self presented as other than, it was presented as better than. The other homeless people were negatively appraised:

It opened my eyes just to see the different kind of people, the way they live, you know, and most of the people that are there [in shelters] don’t even care. Like, I have seen people wear the same clothes since I’ve been here. You know, their teeth all yellow, beard, and they just let themselves go.

Interestingly, even the most poignant story told by a man who had a history of chronic homelessness and had lived in a park for 4 years contained this hierarchy of homelessness. He talked about the fact that so many homeless men and women were much worse off than he was. One such individual was described begging at a major city intersection. He noted that this person was even dirtier than he was and that he felt like doing something for this person. He found it extremely upsetting that this person was invisible to the passersby and wanted to stop and help him. He also spoke of another homeless person who occupied the same park as he did. This person did not have a makeshift shelter within the park, and this participant helped him to create a space for himself.

Another participant talked about the women she sees in the shelter who have been there a long time and seem to have absolutely no motivation to change their situation. She made it clear to the interviewer that she is not like them:

I find that a lot of them have maybe, have been doing the shelters too long. They’ve gotten into the rut. It’s like, they just sit around all day. They watch TV all night. They eat dinner. They watch TV some more. They go to bed. They bitch and complain about they’re not happy, but they’re not willing to go out and . . . do enough to get out of here. I can see why it would be easy for them to slip into that. I mean, they’ve got a hot meal every night. They’ve got a bed. They’ve got TV. You know?

One participant compared herself to other women in the shelter, stating that she is far more resourceful than they are. She used her 10 years of successfully running her own business as an example. A male participant made a similar point with respect to the men’s shelters:

A guy I was talking to this morning, he’d been there 14 years. And there’s nobody to push them out. You know what I’m trying to explain to you? . . . They’ve got a bed they don’t have to pay for. They’ve got three meals a day. . . .

Another participant compared himself to other men in the shelter, pointing out that, unlike them, he would be working if he did not have a bad foot:

I think a lot of them don’t have a future because they’ve got no outlook. If I didn’t have this foot problem, I’d have a job like that [snaps his fingers] and fast.
Three participants felt that they were unlike the other homeless because they do not possess many of the characteristics often associated with homelessness:

I don’t belong. I’ve never been a drug user. I don’t have a husband that abuses me. Mental illness... I don’t know anything about those things. It’s just a unique set of circumstances. Why would they do this to me? I am lumped in with women who have been battered and abused, and I’ve never been. I’ve never been. That’s not ever happened to me... in my life. I don’t have certain, you know, problems. Like I’m not completely nuts.

Future Self

Many interviewees, both newly and chronically homeless, addressed a future that encompassed a nonhomeless identity. Their narratives considered the possibility of identity transformation and the notion of a reformulated self that focused on individual capacity and the promotion of health and well-being. In her work on individuals with chronic illnesses, Charmaz (1994) discusses the notion of transcendence of self. This transcendence signifies a form of self-acceptance in which reevaluation and renewal of self play important parts. It necessitates making choices and taking action. This concept of transcendence can be applied to the population of homeless individuals interviewed for this study:

Hopefully, though, like I say, I’m going to be out of there at the end of the month at the latest. When I leave here [the shelter], believe me, that’s it. I’m determined not to [become homeless again]. I’m determined to have that key. I don’t care what anybody says, I’m going to get out of this situation. These are things I want to accomplish. What I’d like to get into right now is computer processing. Be a computer technician.

Several individuals mentioned that they would like to pursue work that involved helping other homeless individuals. The notion of a hierarchy of homelessness can be applied here as well. Those formerly homeless individuals are now in a position of being a helper and not a helpee. It appears that these people can only connect by not being one of them any longer, a form of temporal dissociation. Some of the shelters offered positions for their clients to become aids in working with shelter staff to help other homeless individuals.

Several individuals found that experiencing homelessness gave them a deeper understanding of life and its meaning. With that understanding came
wisdom that transcended their former self. One woman spoke about the possibility of doing volunteer work with other homeless women in shelters. She felt that, after having experienced homelessness herself, she would be in an empathetic position and be able to help others: “I think I would like to...I have always volunteered in a situation like this. I have always volunteered with kids.”

One participant worked part-time at the hostel he was living in and expressed how this had helped the healing process for him. He also added that he wanted to change his career goal to focus on helping others who were homeless: “I’m enjoying what I’m doing. It’s kind of like, well, do I really want to go into something more like this line of work? Something dealing with the human heart.”

Many others also referred to their desire to help marginalized individuals in some manner:

I’m gonna work with him [the shelter staff person] on that. It’s like a way of giving back to it... It would give me a good feeling to work with them, you know. I’ve gotten hope. There is a lot of hope. I have gotten hope because I help out in the shelter and stuff like that. My biggest goal is to be a social worker... to be a gay youth worker. ’Cause I’ve been there. I’ve seen it. I’ve done it.

One participant, although initially ashamed of his homelessness, came to view homelessness as a new experience that opened his eyes to a segment of society of which he had known nothing. Another participant looked at the problems she experienced while homeless as learning experiences: “The road to success is paved with failures.”

Discussion

Results of this study demonstrate that homelessness, although an event, is also a process. It is gradual and entails a great deal of loss. The accoutrements (meaningful work, relationships, and a place to call one’s own) that are critical to helping individuals define themselves are lost. Homelessness poses a threat to identity. Felt identity, people’s own subjective perceptions of themselves, is important to this study. Instead of the customary conception of the self as passive and dependent on reflective appraisals, the self is viewed as active and rooted in emotion. Homeless individuals feel devalued, and they cope with that by using other relations as negative comparisons. The notion of an identity hierarchy as a coping mechanism and a response to a threat, although it is not present in the theoretical literature, is certainly found in this study.
Goering, Paduchak, and Durbin (1990) found that homeless women revealed that they did not want to live with other homeless people. Participants in this study demonstrated a disavowal of self with statements like, “It’s not like me,” and “I’m not like that.” They clearly disowned a negative identity. People make judgments of themselves. The homeless are viewed as being at the bottom of society.

Homeless individuals interviewed in this study put themselves at the top of the homeless strata. Others have found that, over time, people who are homeless make friends with others like them and come to accept a homeless identity, that is, the general social identity of a street person (Snow & Anderson, 1993). The notion of an identity hierarchy would not be applicable in this case.

The interview situation was an opportunity for self-reflection on the part of the interviewees. It, in itself, is a hierarchical situation in which identity is being revealed. A high proportion of participants in our study had no one who was close to them. The extent of their social isolation is important to understanding the interview and the presentation of self. We can learn more about the presence of self in these kinds of interviews, particularly in the absence of close intimate networks wherein people would normally get feedback and affirmation.

The importance of work and occupation to the interviewees must be recognized. The homeless individuals interviewed were less embedded in the social world, so occupation becomes more important to them. For example, 3 participants had been truck drivers, and each spoke at length about their work, specifically about their perception of being a productive member of society. Many talked about finding purpose in using their experiences in helping others in the future. Work was used to address a past and future self as well as to understand the current devalued self.

With respect to the loss of self, Charmaz (1990, 1994) discusses the chronically ill as being involuntarily dispossessed of former attributes and sentiments that comprise one’s self-concept, and the actions and experiences on which they were based. Like those who are chronically ill, the former identities of those who are homeless become questioned, undermined, or negated. Anderson (1991), in her study of immigrant women with chronic illness, identifies a devalued self that arises not only from the experience of chronic illness but also from the definition of self that is constructed in dealing with the migration experience. Like those who are homeless, Anderson’s sample of women was dealing with social isolation and alienation. The reference to future self in this study is similar to Charmaz’s (1990) notion of preferred identities by people who are chronically ill. Their preferred identities symbolized assumptions, hopes, desires, and plans for a future currently unrealized: the person’s vision of a future self. The individuals in this study talked about a future self who was involved in meaningful work and further strengthened by the homeless experience. Breese and Feltey (1996) found that the future plans of their sample of homeless women revolved around reentering the mainstream of larger society.
Very little research has been done that studies the strengths within the homeless population (Montgomery, 1994). One implication arising from this research is the value of encouraging professionals to focus on the strengths of marginalized people. The sense of hope and positive outlook regarding the future, expressed by many of the homeless individuals in this study, suggests that early intervention to capture and use this motivation to escape homelessness would be useful. Montgomery (1994) capitalizes on the strengths of homeless women and focuses on the sources of personal strength demonstrated by these women. Thrasher and Mowbray (1995) assume that those who are homeless have problem-solving skills to begin with and that they build on these skills and competencies. Sumerlin and Bundrick (1997) challenge researchers to identify the abilities of homeless people because they typically concentrate on the disease aspects of the homeless, overlooking their assets. They also note that literature on the wellness of homeless people is largely absent. The notion of the identity hierarchy within homelessness requires further exploration. Although this identity hierarchy was evident in both the newly and chronically homeless in this study, other studies (see Snow & Anderson, 1993) have found that, over time, some individuals come to accept a homeless identity. Future studies examining those who reject and accept homeless identities and why they do so are warranted.

References


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**FURTHER DISCUSSION**

This is a clear example of how to report a qualitative study that depends exclusively on intensive interviews for data collection. Because all the data from many hours of taped recordings had to be transcribed, then analyzed line by line, you can gain an appreciation for how labor-intensive qualitative research and evaluation can be. This was a large and complex study that had the resources of a team of researchers conducting it, but it still can serve as a model for much smaller studies. It represents one of several basic formats for the final, written production of a qualitative research or program evaluation report.

Some questions for further discussion might include:

1. Did you find the manner in which the review of the existing literature was presented (i.e., all at once in the very beginning of the report) helpful or distracting?

2. By line 141, had you learned enough about the problem of homelessness and the issue of the personal identity of those who are homeless so that you could understand the general thrust of this research project?

3. Would a brief, general summary of the literature review at line 141 have helped you navigate the transition to the Method section that follows?
4. Early in the report, did you have a clear understanding of the researchers’ goals, objectives, and specific research question(s)? If yes, where?

5. Do you have enough information to be assured that the human participants in this research project were ethically protected from harm?

6. Could you easily replicate this study if you chose to? In other words, was the Method section clear and complete enough so that you could repeat essentially the same research project on the same problem with another group of similar participants?

7. Do you believe that the outcomes reported in the Results section, starting on line 215, are supported by the data that were collected and analyzed?

8. Did you find the way the authors presented these results, in conjunction with short direct quotes from the participants, helpful or distracting?

9. What is your opinion of the fact that the report did not end with a separate Conclusion section?

10. Did you note any particular strengths or challenges with respect to how this study was conducted and reported?

11. Would you do anything differently if you decided to replicate this study? If yes, in which specific activities would you engage?

Please remember that these are questions to be discussed, not answered in any factual manner.
Participant observation is one common form of data collection in qualitative research studies, generally as part of a longitudinal ethnographic study of some subculture or group. Typically used as a sole technique or in conjunction with intensive interviewing and/or content analysis of existing documents, participant observation, as its name implies, involves face-to-face contact with individuals in their natural setting. The researcher acts, figuratively speaking, as a sponge that absorbs and extracts every noticeable expression, emotion, or artifact as well as the fluid environment in which these phenomena appear. Extensive field notes, composed as soon as possible after the observation, are a common source of data used by the researcher as participant observer.

This case illustration follows a mental health advocacy group over a 30-month span as it forms, develops, and faces challenges to its very existence. In addition to using participant observation, the author reports using personal reflections, interview transcripts, and group documents as sources of data.

SURFACING THE LIFE PHASES OF A MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT GROUP*

Wanda K. Mohr

Support groups have increased rapidly in number and become a viable alternative to formal treatment in the United States. However, little is known regarding how mental health advocacy or support groups start and develop,