

Hope in homeless people: a phenomenological study

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This study attempted to elucidate the meaning of hope as it occurred in the lived experience of seven homeless people residing in a cold weather shelter and to identify strategies that are used to maintain hope. It adopted a hermeneutic, phenomenological method and produced an emerging theory comprised of five key themes. These were: *expectancy* with hope experienced as future imagined reality, a way out of present difficulties and concretely linked to having one's own home; *connectedness* perceived as a meaningful relationship between self and others (family, friends and the shelter) which sustained hope; *view from the street* experienced as a dichotomy between hope/joy and hopelessness/despair; *emotionalism* expressed as a barrage of varied and often conflicting emotional states which either strengthened or depleted hope and *brokenness* described as a feeling of being worn down and drained of energy due to the constant struggle for survival in harsh conditions on the street, which weakened hope. The study provided a clearer understanding of the meaning of hope from a homeless person's point of view. At the end it ponders the possible implications for primary health care nursing.

Key words: homelessness; hope; phenomenology; primary health care; survival

Introduction

Although there has long been homelessness in Britain the problem has increased in magnitude during the past three decades eliciting greater public awareness and concern. Recent research indicates that the number of official homeless people tripled between 1978 and 1998 and is currently 143 500 households approximately 330 500 people (Shelter, 1997). In central London where this research is focused, at least 2600 people over the year spend some time sleeping on the streets (Housing Services Agency, 1998) with an average of nearly 400 people on any given night (Homeless Network, 1998). This client group is often referred to simply as 'the homeless' a label which implies sameness, and which does little to broaden our understanding of contemporary homelessness. On the contrary, those people who are homeless all have their own stories to tell, different histories, different lives and

different experiences. This study is a narrative about the experiences of a group of 'street' people residing in a cold weather shelter in central London, as told by them.

The meaning and antecedents of homelessness

Homelessness itself has been characterized as both an acute trauma and a chronic stressor that taxes the physiological and physical resources of those who experience it. Extreme poverty, deprivation, isolation, violence and multiple losses are frequently recurring themes in the lives of homeless individuals (e.g., Bardsley *et al.*, 1998). To be without a home is to be placed in a position of insecurity (financial, emotional and social), and vulnerability with no permanent claim to individual space and no sense of being able to build on the emotional foundation a sense of home provides (Bentley, 1994). Trapped by a lack of resources homeless people profoundly experience society's inequalities, which has consequences for prioritizing goals. In a qualitative study (Newman, 1993) homeless women experienced feelings of giving up, self-blame and helplessness. Goodman *et al.*, (1991) who proposed that learned helplessness is

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a highly prevalent psychological state among homeless people who frequently experience, poverty, eviction and abuse of all types, has reiterated this view.

Prominent among the antecedents to adult homelessness is poor attachment, developmental trauma and family history. According to Bowlby's (1969; 1973) theory of attachment, feelings of safety and connection are essential for children to attain their emotional security necessary to develop self-reliance, autonomy and self-esteem. Many of the long term homeless have a history of adverse childhood experiences (Herman and Susser, 1997). There is often a history of abuse (physical and/or sexual), being in care, and early losses. For these homeless people their ways of being and patterns of relating had been organized in response to psychological trauma (Goodman *et al.*, 1995), often of a cumulative nature over a period of time. The mechanisms used to survive on the streets reflect the effects of traumatic experiences, early childhood deprivation and unmet childhood needs for attention, containment and support, such as a desperate need to be accepted and belong. As Van der Kolk (1989a, p. 31) observed 'trauma occurs, when one loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat within or without oneself to deal with frightening emotions or experiences'. Homeless people lack a safe place in both the physical and the psychological sense. Homelessness means being disconnected from the social support systems that provide help in times of crisis. It means being without structure, utterly alone. This reinforces the vulnerability of the homeless person, which is manifested in an inability to cope with either internal or external stresses and unable to maintain a positive direction. The focus moves away from the future and fixes on day-to-day survival and with it an inability to set goals or work towards breaking out of their homeless state. Thus homelessness evokes feelings of hopelessness and despair.

The meaning of hope: theoretical perspectives

Although no universal meaning of hope exists, it is a universal need for humans. Hope has been described by theologians (Fowler, 1981); psychologists (Erickson, 1982); social scientists (Kegan, 1982) and nurse researchers (Ross, 1994). From a theoretical perspective hope is conceptualized in various ways, such as, a positive feeling (Lynch,

1974) that included some kind of activity (Farran *et al.*, 1990) and involved the expectation of attaining realistic goals (Freyne, 1995). Erickson, in his theory of development, suggests that hope emerges during infancy, the first of three basic crucial stages of life, and out of the antitheses of trust versus mistrust (1982: 55). It is through these early beginnings and the nourishment of the maternal/paternal relationships that the individual first learns to trust or mistrust, and upon these beginnings that the foundation of hope is built (Farran *et al.*, 1995).

The literature on emotional aspects of hope, use terms such as *resilience* (Fine, 1991), *hardiness* (Kobasa, 1982) and *stamina* (Colerick, 1985) to refer to the ability to maintain a positive sense of direction in life in spite of emotional acknowledgement of major losses. Although some homeless people undoubtedly possess these attributes in order to survive in the harsh environment on 'the street', many homeless people talk of feelings of powerlessness and a sense of helplessness. They have often moved from difficult and violent situations and feel that they are victims in every way. Numerous organizations in London, such as specialist primary health care teams and cold weather shelters have begun to grapple with this problem and offer homeless people a sense of direction in both a physical and a psychological sense.

Aim of the study

Whilst there are numerous studies on homeless people e.g., in terms of its demography, little is known about what sustains and fosters a homeless person's hope. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore people's experience of being without a home from their points of view and to discover their meaning of hope in spite of the adversity of their circumstances. With this aim in mind, and given the lack of prior research and extant theory in this area, a qualitative approach was implicated. Qualitative research is essentially a way of describing and analysing the culture and behaviour of people from the point of view of those being studied (Bryman, 1988). It enables the wholeness and complexity of the phenomenon to be studied and represented (Orford, 1995), rather than delimit people's experience into predetermined categories derived from existing theory. Since I wanted to understand the intricacies of the homeless person's

hope experiences, hermeneutic phenomenology presented itself as a useful philosophical approach, hence methodology to use for this research.

Phenomenological research methods

The theoretical framework embodies the central concepts of Heideggerian (1962) phenomenology, which is based on an existential perspective, and considers that an understanding of the person cannot occur in isolation from the person's world. It proposes that each person has a unique view of the world and that each person's social reality is as valid and true as any other view. Homeless people interpret their own world and make it meaningful for them and these interpretations are their social reality. Researchers therefore need to try to understand the individual's interpretative processes in order to understand the individual's experiences, and so the individuals' perceptions and accounts of their experiences are important (Smith, 1996).

Phenomenology, is an attempt to give a systematic, descriptive account of the most fundamental aspect of the experience as reported by the subjects. The experiences of the phenomenon as told by the subjects are analysed to uncover the underlying perceptual and conceptual themes that structure or characterize a given experience. Phenomenology is unique in that it makes no prior assumptions about the phenomenon. The purpose of this method is to obtain a description of the phenomenon only. The method allows the data to emerge from the subjects without the need to transform them. It was from this standpoint that I explored with homeless people their experiences and the underlying hope issues, which manifest themselves. It is anticipated that by exploring the struggle with hope that homeless people go through, this will expand the knowledge base of primary health care providers in terms of interventions, which may facilitate hope.

Methodology and research design

Subjects in the present study were recruited from residents at a cold weather shelter in central London and were screened on the basis of their willingness to participate in a study of hope and homelessness. As the name suggests the cold weather shelter is open during the coldest months of the year between November until March. The shelter offers the most vulnerable of the homeless community a refuge and a space where they may begin

to re-evaluate their lives, their needs and themselves. Prior to commencing the study a visit was paid to the centre to discuss the research and the arrangements to be made for the recruitment of participants. Following ethical approval from the educational organization and obtaining permission from the Director of the centre, and informed consent from participants, the research study began. Seven people volunteered for interview. The interviews were conducted at the shelter over a period of five-weeks. Brief demographic details of the participants are shown in Table 1.

The methodology used was hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, which aims to access the 'insiders' perspective – the lived experiences of those people who were homeless, whilst recognizing that this cannot happen completely. Subjects were asked to address the following areas:

- Please describe your experience of homelessness
- What is the meaning of homelessness for you?
- What is the meaning of hope for you?

The author approached each client in a way that conveyed respect for and dignity to the person and used therapeutic communication and interviewing techniques. The approach was as un-intrusive and noncoercive as possible. All participants signed an informed consent form. An attempt was made to allow the respondents to talk freely whilst also ensuring that the focus was maintained. But, there was also sufficient flexibility, to allow for emergent themes to be explored. Up to one hour was allowed per interview. A climate of trust and openness was quickly established and participants fed back positively about the experience as giving them a rare chance to reflect upon their lives.

Qualitative analysis

The aim of qualitative analysis is to re-present the data at a higher level of abstraction and explanation, while retaining the wholeness and complexity of the phenomenon. Many steps in the process of analysis were included to ensure rigour in this study and to enable emergent themes to be generated from the data through hermeneutic processes (Orford, 1995).

- **Step 1:** the first step initiates the stages of analysis and begins with a transcription of the narra-

Table 1 Demographic details of participants^a

Subject	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Marital Status	Born in London	Homeless before coming to London	Housing Status	Length of time homeless
Jack	59	male	Scottish	widowed	No	yes	streets	19 years
Mike	21	male	British	single	No	no	streets	5 years
Tom	37	male	British	divorced	Yes	n/a	streets	7 years
Maggie	46	female	British	divorced	No	yes	streets	10 years
Pete	36	male	British	divorced	Yes	no	streets	4 years
Ron	52	male	British	divorced	No	yes	streets	20 years
Jake	24	male	Anglo-Pakistan	single	Yes	n/a	friends/ streets	5 weeks

^aPseudonyms have been used.

tives verbatim. The initial reduction, as it is known in phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994), began with the careful reading of each narrative by the researcher, with the focus being on the whole. Every effort was made on the researcher's behalf to totally submerge herself in the text in order to identify the implicit or essential (ontic) basis of the participants' experience of hope. The goal of the first reduction was to produce a condensation or summary of the narratives by deletion of nonessential material such as social exchanges, asides and repetitions. This reduced the bulk of the text to relevant material. Words were not changed, nor was the order of words changed. It was merely an attempt to abbreviate the narrative to its shortest form without loss of meaning or significant details (Moustakas, 1994).

- **Step 2:** the next step in the analysis of data was thematic reduction, the goal being to find a framework by which the data can be organized and interpreted. Thematic reduction begins with the researcher reviewing each of the narratives and highlighting in them significant statements (Colaizzi, 1978). Significant statements are any element of the event that is seen as essential to the phenomenon being investigated. Because the extraction of significant statements is an interpretation of the text, careful attention must be given to reliability. As such, the researcher created a composite list of all things that was deemed as significant statements for each narrative. (Appendix 1 provides selected examples of significant statements with a verbatim transcript).

- **Step 3:** once this complete list of significant statements were obtained for each narrative the next step in the analysis was to determine which of these significant statements were in fact illustrative of themes, that is, which were central to the structure of hope and homelessness. Utilizing Van Manen's (1990) selective reading approach, I listened to or read the text several times and asked myself questions such as 'What is happening here?' or what statement or phrase(s) seems essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described which facilitated the phenomena to emerge?
- **Step 4:** this step draws on the concept of the hermeneutic circle (Benner, 1994) in an effort to uncover the story's essence(s), and works with the understanding of the inter-subjective, interconnected nature of the interview that is highlighted by Chapman's (1994) statement which claims that:

Essences are not merely those themes which are apparent in the statements made by each participant: they are the coalescence of the streams of consciousness of each participant and the researcher . . . in order to convey the participant's lived experience.

(Chapman, 1994: 191)

It is during this stage of the method that 'essential themes' are sifted from nonessential themes. What is and isn't essential is a choice made by the researcher that is relative to the context of the interpretation. A concerted effort is made during this stage to reflect critically on the choices made by repeatedly holding the ident-

ified theme against the overall context of the story(s) being told and asking: Does the interpretation fit the context of not only this particular section of the text but the text as a whole? Once identified the essential themes are called upon during the discussion of the interpretation to help guide the selected anecdotes from the participant's stories in an effort to further exemplify the essence(s) of the participant's lived experience.

- **Step 5:** the process is continued until the researcher is satisfied that the current thematic structure formed out of the significant statements is the best representative of all the narratives. The analysis and review process was completed when no new themes arose.
- **Step 6:** in order to check the validity of the researcher's work an independent researcher was given a randomly selected narrative to check. He was asked if the thematic structure given captured the structure of the experience of hope and homelessness as presented. It should be noted thus, that at all points of the analysis only the actual words of the respondents were used in determining a thematic structure. Two basic questions were asked to determine validity: 1) does the report enable the reader to enter more

fully into the lived experience and 2) are the findings recognizable by those who live the experience? The second question could only truly be answered by taking the thematic structure back to the participants, which with a transient population was difficult. Thus, the independent researcher concluded that, as the emergent thematic structure reflected key issues in the selected narratives, it was 'likely to be recognizable by those who lived the experience'. As such, the narratives captured the experience of hope and homelessness as represented by the subjects and enabled the reader to enter more fully into their lived experience.

Credibility of the findings and the interpretation were assured through prolonged engagement with the data, the presence of the essential structure in all the narratives, use of the participants own words to name and illustrate themes, and presentation of the thematic structure to an independent researcher for feedback and critique. These form a 'paper chain' of evidence, which is accessible for checking (Huberman and Miles, 1994).

Findings

The thematic reduction yielded a structure representing the essential nature of the lived experi-

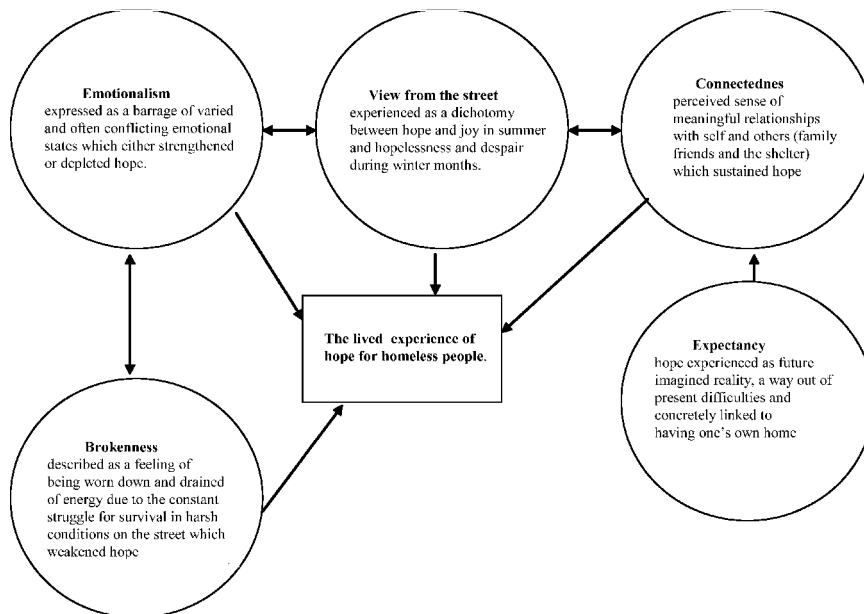


Figure 1 Thematic structure of homeless person's hope experience.

ence of homelessness and the specific constituents of hope, as understood by the researcher. The structure included the following inter-related theme: expectancy, connectedness, view from the street, emotionalism, and brokenness. (See Figure 1).

To explain each of these themes I will consider them in turn and provide verbatim examples taken from the narratives for illustration.

Theme 1: Expectancy

Hope is characterised by an expectation of achieving something in the future albeit with some uncertainty. Thus being without a home is considered a threat to hope as it highlights the fact that the future is uncertain. Mike, the youngest respondent, said:

I feel hopeless all the time, funny enough there is nothing I can do about it. There is no point in looking too far ahead. I don't know where I will be this time next week. I don't even know if I will be alive this time next week.

Despite this, all the respondents expressed a wish (perhaps unrealistically) to obtain a 'home' of their own whereby they could exert a sense of control over their lives. This was perceived as the most fundamental need in the process of transition to a more settled way of life but it may be idealized by some as the panacea to all the individual's problems. Jack (age 59) who had been homeless for many years said:

I want to get my own place. I am getting a bit fed up with this life now. I've done it for a long time. I think I am ready for a place of my own, my own little place so that I can be independent again.

Theme 2: Connectedness

Connectedness was defined as the perceived sense of a meaningful relationship with self and others (family, friends, professional caregivers, and the shelter). Respondents referred to the social and psychological benefits of being homeless with comments pertaining to the bonds between fellow homeless people and of being looked after that they had never felt before. Having 'buddies' helped to relieve the problems of survival on the street,

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whilst groups bonded for protection or for companionship. This was linked to hope.

Being on the streets, I've made lots of friends, that helps. We all sit around and drink together, sharing, there's no trouble between us. We give each other hope among ourselves. We look after each other.

A feeling of connecting was frequently reported in the narratives. Connectedness was related to the homeless person's perception of caring for, listening to, understanding, and supporting and encouraging them as human beings. It was evident that this interaction served as a source through which hope could be derived. Conversely a disconnection was reported if the respondent's perceptions were incongruent with the above.

Theme 3: View from the street

For most of the respondents the experience of being without a home and on the streets was a very difficult one and their feelings alternated between hope and hopelessness. On the one hand some spoke of the joy and freedom of street life, especially in summer and the raising of spirits and of hope. The following view has captured this.

I mean it's lovely in summer, You have got the warm weather you don't have to carry many blankets around and you don't need a lot of clothes.

In contrast winter was more problematic and much energy was expended in trying to keep warm and maintain existence, which depleted hope.

The cold is in you, it goes right through you. You can't get the cold out of you some days. Yeah, it's hard when you can't get the cold out of you.

From the interviews, it would seem that street life was not random but had a certain order full of daily routines and rituals which enabled the respondents to maintain their hope. For the majority keeping clean was very important and part of the daily routine. People saw cleanliness as important in terms of feeling better and as part of a strategy for maintaining hope.

Look see my arms. I have got a bacterial infection, which spreads through cuts. It's going now gradually. It got so bad that it is

taking quite a while to clear up. Purely because I am not in the position to shower morning and night. That would have been ideal. It made me realise just how difficult it is being on the street.

For the street people, the most basic form of existence, the occupying of physical space, was seen as being under constant threat, which hindered hope. In response groups were formed for protection from physical threat. Instances of members of the general public reacting with violence against street people were given. The following comments from their narratives illustrate these concerns.

Safety is definitely a problem. When you sleep rough you very rarely get into a deep sleep you are always on the alert. Sometimes I got a kicking from passers-by just for the hell of it. I have been kicked and spat upon and I have had my sleeping bag set alight.

The sheer practical effort of maintaining the physical self was spoken about in great detail centring on the energy required maintaining existence. As in Herth's (1996) American study the respondents in the present study described the immense drain on their energy from attempting to access the basics of life such as food clothes and shelter. They also expressed a need to balance their internal (psychological) energy with external demands.

Theme 4: Emotionalism

A multiplicity of emotions were expressed and feelings of guilt, loneliness, anger, loss hopelessness and ambivalence were captured in the following testimonies:

To be out on the streets, an out-and-out junkie the kind people often associate with being a junkie, a typical dirty junkie. Being thrown from a nice home environment it's a shock. I lost my job, the using went up because I was using money to support my habit. I did throw myself into a desperate situation.

For some suicide seemed to be the 'only way out'. Others articulated feelings of marked loneliness and felt that they were merely existing. All respondents identified devaluation of human beings and degrading or belittling comments as a threat to

their ability to sustain hope. An example of the responses given were:

'Low-life that's all they are fit for'. But that's not so, we are human beings like anybody else, but for different reasons we have ended upon the streets. If it were not for places like 'cold-weather' we would still be there. I always look at it like this it could happen to you.

It was clear from the narratives that for street people the 'physical' and the 'psychological' were closely linked. Like those in Bentley's (1996) study their physical properties (possessions) and psychological properties (thoughts, feelings, and emotions) were not safe on the streets and had to be stored somewhere inside themselves.

Being on the street is pretty vicious sometimes and for myself I just shut off emotionally really. I put my emotions on hold. I got all my emotions. I care, I feel things, but on the street you tend not to let them out of yourself, you hold on to them.

Theme 5: Brokenness

Whether uncertainty about the future leads to either hope or despair has major implications for the ability of persons to respond in the face of adversity (Fine, 1991). It was evident from the narratives that all of the respondents had experienced some form of brokenness and some – especially the older ones – were worn down by the constant struggle for survival in harsh conditions on the street. Although being in the shelter offered them a little respite, some felt that their life was 'on hold', they felt uncertain concerning their survival and re-integration into mainstream society.

Being on the street I feel like nothing you know, like useless. I don't feel like I am needed for anything and I suppose that makes things worse because whenever I go outside nowadays I don't feel good. I don't care anymore. I don't care you know. I don't care if I live or die anymore. That's the state I am in really.

Having the status of homelessness seemed such a traumatic experience that painful feelings had to be blocked out in order to survive and not be overwhelmed by them.

Discussion

This phenomenological study proposed to explore accounts of hope without *a priori* assumptions utilizing a method that allowed the meaning of the experience to emerge from the lives of the respondents. The findings of the study identified five inter-related themes, which characterized the experience of hope for homeless people: *expectancy, connectedness, view from the street, emotion-alism, and brokenness*. Not surprisingly, these results confirm much previous work done on hope and homelessness (Herth, 1996) and on homelessness (Bentley, 1996; Crisis, 1999) especially when similar thematic methodologies were used. Likewise I feel that the respondent's personal narratives as described in this study offer some fresh ideas about the phenomenon and lend support to the active presence of hope in homeless people regardless of their dire circumstances.

Hope as envisioned by homeless people in the present study was pragmatic and generally related to having 'a place of their own', although this may be being idealized as the panacea to all the individual's problems. So, whilst residing in the cold weather shelter the respondents were filled with hope and expectation. Their hope lay in the hands of the shelter staff, especially the resettlement worker who would somehow provide a 'home' for them when the shelter would close in the spring. It is worth noting that many of their early and family experiences were of deprivation, low socio-economic conditions, lack of educational and employment opportunities and abuse of all types. Harshness and violence seemed to be the norm in their family and personal relationships and ultimately on the streets. They seemed purposeless and lost in their lives and attempted to escape from their problems via 'emotional crutches' such as alcohol and drugs. Life on the street may seem to offer an escape from their difficulties but in fact such a life style may expose the homeless person to the very conflicts he/she is trying to escape from.

The capacity to make sense of one's experience is suggested as means of maintaining hope. For the homeless respondents the de-humanizing responses of people directed at them made it difficult to meet basic needs for self-esteem and respect, which diminished hope. Their anger and indignation regarding their homeless state encouraged them to verbalize their frustrations, while their lack of self

esteem and low self worth rendered them powerless and without a voice to do so. Miller (1983) has previously identified this theme in her work with people with chronic illness. She asserted that self-esteem is an important variable in counter-acting hopelessness and maintaining hope, in that individuals need to feel good about themselves, their value and their worth before they can invest in improving their situations. For the most part, the people in the present study saw themselves as failures and of minimal worth. Likewise, (Tones, 1991) suggests that some form of control over one's life is an important psychological need. The perceived lack of power and control over the lives of the respondents led to feelings of helplessness and depression. The data revealed that all seven respondents had a negative internal perception that could be attributed directly to the physical limitations of homelessness.

Additionally, the respondents expressed intense and ambivalent feelings and emotions about their personal experience of homelessness and often felt broken without hope. They described feeling worn down and drained of energy due to the constant struggle for survival in harsh conditions on the street and the importance of maintaining both physical and psychological energy in order to sustain hope. Hope was weakened through isolation and distancing from their friends, from their families and from society. As the data suggests, most of them had now no connection with their family of origin and indeed their street 'buddies' were their 'family', but could not always be relied upon. A feeling often expressed was of going through the motions of living yet feeling no connection with the external world. To defend against these unbearable hopeless feelings the homeless person tries to create some kind of lifestyle that functions as a sanctuary (Goodman, Saxe, and Harvey, 1991). This was the plight of the present homeless cohort. In this sanctuary, often alcohol or drug induced, there is no intrusion by others and the individual can feel at one with the world, rather than in a state of disconnectedness. The need constantly to manage negative outside factors and to foster one's inner sense of hope in order to remain hopeful was identified earlier by Ersek (1992) in bone marrow transplant patients.

Throughout the interviews the quality of the relationships most valued by the respondents was the existence of, or a lack of a sense of connection,

a feeling of being listened to and valued as a person. Herth (1996), who suggests that understanding and acceptance may be a vital hope engendering intervention, has also reported these. Respondents in this study were able to perceive and value similar qualities in those relationships that they defined as life affirming and nourishing. Homeless clients' stated appreciation of qualities of warmth, understanding time and care, infer a need for a relationship where these qualities were present. This hope is also linked to the need for connection between the self and others, of feeling cared for, listened to, understood, supported and encouraged as human beings, which was, on the whole, provided at the shelter. They all valued the experience of being able to share their feelings about their homeless state and their hopes and dreams with me the researcher and all commented on the therapeutic value of this encounter.

Implications for the primary health care nursing

The findings of the present study have practical implications for primary health care nursing practice, as they provide a framework for selecting strategies to foster hope in homeless people. In response to the 'homeless' agenda, specialist multi-disciplinary primary health care teams have developed in London, where attempts are made to address complex issues. Besides providing primary care and referral services, nurses can be instrumental in establishing day care programmes in places such as cold weather shelters, which maintain a purpose in life for homeless people. From a health promotion perspective it may be possible to engage patients/clients in hope work, including dealing with both positive and negative emotions associated with homelessness, and identifying and confirming a purposeful future. Roger's (1959) components of psychotherapy require primary health care nurses to offer unconditional positive regard, empathic understanding, and the client to perceive them. However, responding to the needs of homeless people presents a challenge for primary health care teams. Firstly, this client group is often in poor physical and emotional health and is simply concerned with day-to-day survival rather than aspects of health promotion. Keeping warm and finding food is a priority so that health is not prioritized. Secondly, often because of their past negative experiences there is a great deal of

ambivalence towards, and lack of trust of anyone in a position of authority, which adversely impacts on engagement with community practitioners, and makes the formulation of a therapeutic alliance and longer term work problematic. Finally, at a very practical level, the problem of homelessness itself need to be addressed, which is in the hands of housing officials and beyond the scope of this study. It is clear however, that providing a physical home for a homeless person without addressing their psychological homelessness would have limited success.

Implications for future research

The usefulness of any phenomenological study is to describe the phenomenon as it actually is experienced by individuals. The results of the present study offers some insight about how homelessness is experienced and its impact on hope, through the revelation of five thematic elements that should each be pursued independently in more detail. The findings, however, are considered in relation to the study's limitations. First, the sample was a convenient purposive sample that was relative homogeneous with respect to their homeless state, and not randomly selected or matched. This nonrandom procedure may influence the findings through self-selection bias. A significant limitation to this study was the fact that this construction of the lived experience was based solely on one interview with each respondent and did not explore other avenues of potentially useful data sources. Furthermore, the process of data collection and analysis of a large amount of written text was time consuming and challenged me to consider the value of the complex hermeneutic approach to the practice setting. Despite these limitations, the results of the present study lend support to the extent of hope in homeless people and contribute to the growing body of knowledge related to the experience of homelessness. There is a need for replication of this study with a larger, randomly selected sample of homeless people both in the shelter and those living on the streets. It is also intended that this research will precipitate not only more research about hope and homelessness, but a positive consideration of the utility of phenomenological methods as well.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to recover the structure of hope, as homeless individuals had perceived it. It remains a challenge for nurses and those working with homeless people in primary care to facilitate their hope given the complex nature of homelessness and the adversity of their circumstances.

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Appendix 1 Significant statements with verbatim transcript.

1. It was down to violence really I became homeless
2. I was amazed at the number of people on the street
3. Somebody showed me the ropes as regards begging
4. I used to be embarrassed to beg
5. It was a bit frightening out there on my own
6. I just curled up on the pavement
7. My health suffered
8. The cold is horrible you just shiver
9. Being on the street I've made a lot of friends
10. Hope is a bright light at the end of the tunnel
11. Where there's life there's hope
12. Hopeless a horrible feeling
13. Going backwards instead of forwards
14. Feeling negative about yourself
15. Thinking that I am the dregs of society
16. You hope to get up and start again
17. Retain your sense of humour

18. It helps on the grey days
19. You get a despondent and a bit black
20. I wonder when its all going to end
21. You have to get up and try again
22. Look at it from a different angle maybe

Example: Statements 12–22 are from the following transcription: “Feeling hopeless its a horrible feeling, sort of going backwards instead of going forward and just feeling negative about yourself. I used to feel that a lot was to do with homelessness really thinking that I am the dregs of society you know. And then talking to other people they used to say, “don't put yourself down”. You hope to get up, start again and not worry about that I'm homeless that I'm not the only one you know. Some people have got happy dispositions although they are not in a good position but they still laugh along with life you know. The main thing is that you got to retain your sense of humour because without that you are lost. You do get a bit despondent and a bit black I think. You think I wonder when all this is going to end. But then you have to get up and try again each new day and look at it from a different angle.”