



“Waiting to go home”: Narratives of homelessness, housing and home among older adults with schizophrenia



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 June 2013

Received in revised form 6 January 2014

Accepted 6 January 2014

Available online 31 January 2014

Keywords:

Older adults
Schizophrenia
Homelessness
Housing
Social services
Narrative

ABSTRACT

This study used thematic narrative analysis to develop an understanding of how older adults with ongoing symptoms of schizophrenia who have experienced homelessness understand and express their life course and present-time narratives of homelessness, housing, and home. Findings were developed from 26 individual interviews with five study participants and 33 systematic field observations of their homes, treatment environments and neighborhoods. Presentation of the participants' narratives illuminates how participants experienced shared challenges in unique ways and the meaning they assigned to experiences of homelessness, housing and home, particularly in regard to identity and ongoing challenges. While all participants were housed, housing did not equate to a sense of being home. Implications for social work practice and policy, and directions for future research, are discussed.

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Introduction

Homelessness, defined broadly as the lack of adequate, stable shelter (Hombs, 1994), has been attributed to a variety of contributing factors including socioeconomic structural inequalities (Shaw, 2004); housing policies and housing shortages (Blasi, 1990); deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, urban renewal, the decrease in lower-skilled jobs, changing political priorities and bureaucratic obstacles (Wright, 2009), as well as a variety of individualistic explanations (Lee, Lewis, & Jones, 1992; Wright, 1990). The connection between homelessness and mental illness in Western countries has been well established, with mental illness viewed alternately as a contributing factor (Shaw, 2004) or a consequence of homelessness (Koegel & Burnam, 1992). A recent analysis estimates that 42% of homeless persons in Western countries have psychotic disorders, such as schizophrenia (Fazel, Khosla, Doll, & Geddes, 2008). Although embedded in policies and

societal structures, the experience of life course adversities such as homelessness and schizophrenia are ultimately those of the individual (Blasi, 1990; Shaw, 2004). While mental illness has long been associated with stigmatized identities (Goffman, 1963), interaction with, response to and interpretation of housing environments can also affect sense of self and confer a layer of prestige or stigma on one's identity (Blasi, 1990; Shaw, 2004; Wardaugh, 1999). Thus the experiences of homelessness, housing, and home go beyond the concrete issue of shelter to the meaning of housing for sense of self. Nested in narrative gerontology and framed by the theory of cumulative adversity and advantage, this article presents results from a thematic narrative analysis investigation focused on the identification of the meaning of housing and home in later life narratives of older adults with schizophrenia who have experienced homelessness, and how those meanings attach to later life narrative identity and ongoing challenges.

Background

Ethnographic and narrative-focused research has been vital to the definition of modern homelessness, identification of its potential causes, and the development of related policies

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(Baxter & Hopper, 1981; Hombs, 1994). Methodologically connected to those earlier investigations, a small but growing literature has begun to examine the meaning of housing and home, some of which focuses on persons who have been homeless and have serious mental illnesses.

Prior research has formulated the meaning of home as that of an available safe haven and refuge from social forces and psychological stressors (Blasi, 1990; Shaw, 2004; Wardaugh, 1999). Extending from this, the concept of “ontological security” describes the sense of security and control that comes from having a home that provides constancy in a setting wherein life’s daily routines are enacted, people feel most in control of their lives, and, free from surveillance, can formulate personal senses of identity (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Shaw, 2004).

Gurney (1997) used episodic ethnography to explore the concept of home for working-class women in England, finding that the meaning of home was often constructed in relation to climactic events in people’s life histories. Homes were experienced as the setting for identity-forming events and patterns, as well as a sense of fulfillment. Leith (2006) used phenomenological analysis of narratives to explore the meaning of home for older women in congregate care housing settings, finding that “home” was in part defined by internal factors, such as the deliberate resolution to make a place a home and to remain there. The Gurney (1997) and Leith (2006) findings make important contributions to the understanding of ontological security, the meaning of home and homemaking. However the participants in those studies did not have serious mental illnesses or histories of homelessness.

Liebow (1993) used narrative and ethnographic methods to understand the lives of homeless women living in the shelters, some of whom might have had serious mental illnesses. The women engaged in an “unremitting struggle to remain human in the face of inhuman conditions” (p.3), seeking out self-respect, a sense of community and a sense of connectedness to the world, even in the face of struggling with day-to-day survival. They struggled “to remain human in an unremittingly dehumanizing environment” (p.222). Adequate shelter was required to achieve that goal.

Padgett and Henwood (2012) used narrative analysis methodology among formerly homeless persons with mental illness and found that participant narratives shared appreciation of the benefits of having a home and gratitude for housing. The perceived advantages of housing were connected to those described by ontological security, however, obtaining and maintaining housing did not erase the lifetime of adversity experienced by many of the participants.

The meaning of having a home is thus more than simply having a shelter. Home is a space in which self-esteem, identity, and when needed, a renewed sense of humanity may be developed. Snow and Anderson (1987) used ethnography to understand the meaning that persons experiencing street homelessness attach to that experience, and to their personal identities. Their narrative identity patterns fell into three categories: distancing themselves from their identities as homeless persons; embracing their identities as homeless persons; and engaging in fictive storytelling that explained their present circumstances. Through examining patterns of narratives, the authors concluded that a need for self-esteem,

identity, and to make meaning from life experiences remained, despite the hardships and threats to survival in their lives.

Padgett (2007) used life history narrative interviews and grounded theory analysis to examine questions of ontological security among formerly homeless persons with mental illnesses. Participants valued the features of ontological security provided by independent housing, including control and self-determination, the ability to enact daily routines, and privacy and freedom from surveillance. As in the findings of Snow and Anderson (1987) and Liebow (1993), homelessness had been experienced as an assault to sense of self. Therefore, in addition to safe and stable shelter, housing was valued as the setting for identity re-construction and repair, and a symbol of having overcome years of adversity. Stigma, social isolation, and uncertainty about the future were ongoing challenges for the participants. Additionally challenges for formerly homeless persons with mental illnesses were identified in the Padgett, Hawkins, Abrams, and Davis (2006) case study and narrative analysis of life history interviews of formerly homeless women, including the need for increased autonomy, protection, and restoration of status and devalued identity.

In Shibusawa and Padgett’s (2009) narrative inquiry into the experience of aging among formerly homeless individuals with serious mental disorders, the importance of having the space and time to evaluate, reflect upon losses, and address ongoing issues were identified. These findings suggest that age, in addition to mental disorders, has the potential to affect the experience of and adaptation to housing.

Adaptation to housing and home, and overall recovery from the experience of homelessness, may vary across populations dependent upon a host of internal and societal factors, such as age, mental illness, and available supports (Wright, 2009). As an especially vulnerable population, later life concerns of older adults with schizophrenia have been underexplored (Cohen, 2003; Harvey, 2005), particularly in regard to first-hand life course and present-time experiences of homelessness, housing and home. Improved understanding of the too often conjoint adversities of homelessness and schizophrenia, gained by listening to and observing those who have experienced them first-hand, has the potential to improve social service programs designed to address those challenges (Flanagan, Davidson, & Strauss, 2007; Strauss, 2008). Narrative research strategies are best suited to addressing research aims focused on understanding life experiences as narrated by those who live them (Chase, 2011), therefore the present study uses analysis of retrospective life history narratives of older adults with schizophrenia to explore and identify of the meaning of homelessness, housing, and home in later life narratives of older adults with schizophrenia who have experienced homelessness, as well as how those meanings attach to later life narrative identity and ongoing challenges

Theoretical context

In thematic narrative analysis, theory is used recursively to inform and frame the study, while at the same time the generation of new theoretical constructs is promoted through the use of inductive analysis. Stemming from a social constructivist paradigm, the specific theoretical setting for this article connects narrative gerontology and the theory of

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