A literature Review of the Psychological Impact of Homelessness

Campus Alberta Graduate Program In Counselling

Final Project Letter of Intent

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Submitted to Dr. Simon Nuttgens
The present letter of intent proposes an in-depth literature review of the psychological impact of homelessness and the experiences that have lead some individuals to exit from it. Rationale and implications of the study provide a basis for its need. The current literature lacks an in-depth analysis on the factors contributing to an individual becoming and remaining homeless and the psychological impact of such experiences. According to my investigation, the current body of literature lacks a comprehensive report on interventions, such as counselling. The proposed study aims to fill this void.

Problem Statement

There is a reported lack of an in-depth understanding of factors contributing to individuals’ homelessness and the psychological factors of living in such debilitating condition (Bentley, 1997; Evans & Forsyth, 2004). There is also a lack of reports on factors that may lead some individuals to remain homeless, or those that can empower homeless individuals to exit from such condition. Such an understanding is necessary for the development of counselling interventions (Bentley 1997; Hertlein & Kilmer, 2004; Washignton, 2002), as well as social policies, programs and interventions that can reduce the harm to this population.

Rationale

Home is a concept with deep existential implications, for it evokes a complex set of meanings for each individual. Homelessness, therefore, is more than having no address or phone number; it is a disengagement from mainstream society—from friends, family, neighbourhood, and community. Homelessness means being disconnected from the social support systems that usually provide help in time of crisis; it means being without
structure and utterly alone (Walker, 1998). Addressing the issue of homelessness requires that we understand the factors contributing to an individual becoming homeless, the psychological impact of such experience, and the factors contributing to a person remaining homeless. This understanding can assist in the development of effective interventions (O’Connor, 2005) such as counselling (Bentley, 1997; Hertlein & Kilmer, 2004; Washington, 2002) for individuals with homelessness experience.

Supporting Literature

Many factors have been proposed as the cause of homelessness. These factors include addiction (Evans & Forsyth, 2004; Fountain, Hows, Mardsen, & Strange, 2002), mental illness (Evans & Forsyth; Teeson, Hodder, & Buhrich, 2004) and physical and sexual abuse (Gearon, Bellack, Rachbeisel, & Dixon 2001; Wenzel, Leake, & Gellberg 2001). In addition, women’s route to homelessness has been reported to be different from men’s route to homelessness (Gearon, Bellack, Rachbeisel, & Dixon, 2001; Gearon, Nidecker, Bellack, & Bennett, 2003; Grimm & Maldonado, 1995; Ross, Glaser, & Stiasny, 1988). Women’s homelessness is often due to experience of sexual violence (Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Gearon, Bellack, Rachbeisel, & Dixon, 2001) and men’s homelessness is often due to the presence of a mental illness, criminal activity, prison time, and not having a place to go to after jail time.

There is a lack of literature on the psychological impact of homelessness. One of the two studies to review this impact is the study by Bentley (1997) who assessed a participant pool of 10 homeless men attending a day program in London, England. Another study was conducted by O’Connor (2005) to evaluate the role of therapeutic frame on counselling two homeless men. The proposed literature review aims to add to
the present knowledge of homelessness and the psychological impact of such experience by providing an in depth review and analysis of the available literature on homelessness.

Methods or Procedures

The analysis that I am proposing will be developed adapting Mertens’ (1998) recommendations, such as reviewing secondary sources to get an overview of the topic and evaluating research reports on an ongoing literature review, as well as my own experience in this field. I have been working with homeless individuals for the last five years, supporting them in various transitional housings in Vancouver Downtown-Eastside. There will be no facts or stories gathered from individuals or agencies other than what has been reported or written elsewhere as anything more than this would require ethical approval. Electronic databases that will be used for the literature review include: PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, Medline, SocINDEX, PsychLIT, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Dissertation Abstracts International, and two different search engines, OVID, and EBSCOhost. The key search terms will include homeless, homelessness, poverty, housing and instability, housing and violence. The search will also cover all the terms covered in the title. In addition, books, government studies, reports and other organization’s research projects, relevant information available on the Internet in addition to information provided by my supervisor will be utilized. Parameters in this literature review include using English language publications and articles published form 1980 to 2006. Both qualitative, quantitative studies and studies that combine these methods will be included. The present author adopts the definition of homelessness offered by the Kappel Ramji Consulting Group (2002) that includes individuals who were affected by either visible or hidden homelessness. Visible
Homelessness includes individuals who stay in emergency hostels and shelters and those who sleep in rough places considered unfit for human habitation such as parks and ravine, doorways, vehicles, and abandoned buildings. Hidden homelessness includes those who are temporarily staying with friends or relatives, women staying with a man only to obtain shelter, individuals living in illegal or physically unsafe buildings, or those who are living in a household and are subject to violence just because they have no place to go to.

Potential Implications

Homelessness is a debilitating condition affecting as many as 150,000 to 300,000 individuals in Canada (McLaughlin, 1987). This proposed project is designed to add to the existing knowledge on homelessness which can potentially have a positive impact on the homeless population and may therefore serve as a mean of expression for the voice of this population. The project can also serve families of individuals with a history of homelessness, by helping them to understand the life of their loved ones and by instilling hope for a better future. Additionally, a thorough literature review could be beneficial for professionals, since it will provide a comprehensive review of the strength and limitations of the present research and by doing so may open new avenues for future research. Understanding the homelessness phenomenon can also help in developing counselling strategies that can address the specific needs of individuals dealing with such a complex and debilitating condition (Bentley, 1997; Hertlein & Kilmer, 2004; Washignton, 2002). The project could also provide support to educate public of the factors responsible for homelessness and provide a foundation for helping and advocating for this population.
References


