Young people’s accounts of homelessness: A case study analysis of psychological well-being and identity

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Abstract

With the aim of informing counselling psychology practice with young homeless people, this paper reports a qualitative study of psychological well-being and identity among four young people, recruited in the English Midlands, who had experienced homelessness between the ages of 16 and 25. All participants were interviewed; interview transcripts were subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis, with analyses presented on a case-by-case basis. In physical terms, participants associated homelessness with a lack of permanent housing or a secure place for physical possessions. In psychological terms, homelessness was associated with feeling isolated, rejected or alienated, lacking an emotional attachment to or identification with a place and lacking a safe space for psychological ‘belongings’. Participants also referred to a loss of identity and person-hood whilst homeless. Identity threat had been dealt with through intrapsychic and intergroup coping strategies. Suggestions are offered for counselling psychology practice with this population.
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Introduction

Mental health problems among the young homeless population – including depression, substance abuse and suicidality – are a source of growing concern (Reilly et al., 1994; Craig et al., 1996; Holland, 1996; Bentley, 1997; Reid & Klee, 1999). The threat that homelessness may pose to identity – for example, in terms of its socially stigmatised, negatively distinctive status – could be seen as adding to or mediating these problems.

Homelessness is frequently equated with ‘sleeping rough’, which represents the most visible form of homelessness but fails to reflect the full scale of the problem (Phelan et al., 1997; Rush, 1998; Sayce, 1998). Many young people are homeless in a hidden sense due to the impermanence of their accommodation (Hutson & Liddiard, 1994; Moore et al., 1995; Arden & Hunter, 1997; Reid & Klee, 1999) and are living in overcrowded, damp or unsafe conditions, tenuously housed in temporary hostels, bed-sits, bed and breakfast hotels or living under the threat of eviction (Shinn, 1992; van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997). The concept of ‘hearthlessness’, meaning the absence of any home-like ethos within a place of abode (Moore et al., 1995), illuminates the psychological component of homelessness and helps to explain why some young people in temporary or tenuous accommodation still view themselves as homeless. This lack of attachment to and identification with temporary accommodation may be understood through concepts of place attachment (an emotional bond to a place – Twigger-
Ross & Uzzell, 1996) and place identity (thoughts, feelings, attitudes and behaviours relating to place – Proshansky et al., 1983). Emotional attachment to and identification with a place is seen as intrinsic to psychological health; without it, individuals may experience isolation and low self-esteem (Chawla, 1992; Rubenstein & Parmelee, 1992). However, those who experience psychological problems associated with homelessness may be unwilling to access health care services provided by the NHS and non-statutory agencies – including services provided by counselling psychologists – because of a desire not to be labelled as homeless (Shiner, 1995; Reid & Klee, 1999) and also because accessing primary care services is problematic for those who do not have a permanent address (Wood et al., 1997). These factors must be taken into consideration in planning services for this group. If counselling psychologists are to be involved in effective service provision for this population, they need to be informed about the psychological challenges faced by young homeless people. A greater understanding of the ways in which young homeless people attempt to cope with their circumstances is also crucial for practitioners working in this area.

The study presented in this article examines accounts provided by four young people who have experienced homelessness. It considers the relationship between homelessness, psychological well-being and identity and uses these insights to explore how counselling psychologists might intervene to alleviate psychological distress experienced by this group. The consideration of identity is informed by Breakwell’s (1986, 1996) identity process theory. This theory sees identity maintenance and change as occurring through processes of assimilation-accommodation and evaluation which guide the ‘absorption of new components into the identity structure and the adjustment which occurs in the existing structure so as to
find a place into which to fit the new elements’ (Breakwell, 1986, p.23). Identity threat is said to arise when one or more of the principles that define desirable end states for identity (self-esteem, continuity, positive distinctiveness and self-efficacy) are challenged – for example, when new material has to be incorporated within identity (such as ‘being homeless’) but when this cannot happen without abrogating identity principles. When faced with a situation of identity threat which cannot be dealt with by the identity processes, Breakwell (1986) claims that the individual may turn to three types of coping strategy. Intra-psychic strategies operate at the level of cognitions and emotions (for example, denial or reconstrual of the threatening situation); interpersonal strategies focus upon action to remove aspects of the social environment which generate threat (for example, isolation from or conflict with anyone who challenges the existing identity); and intergroup strategies involve seeking support from others in a similar situation in order to avoid social isolation, to share information relevant to coping and/or to engage in group action to alleviate threat at a collective level.

Method

Participants

Four participants (two males and two females), who had experienced homelessness between the ages of 16 and 25, were recruited through a Young Homeless Project in the English Midlands. All four had been homeless prior to being housed by the project’s supported accommodation scheme. After leaving the project’s accommodation, all had secured tenancies within the private sector or via the county council and local housing associations. In terms of ethnicity, three participants were white and one described herself as African Caribbean-
English. Two had been educated to college diploma level, one had A-levels and one had no educational qualifications.

**Procedure**

Data were collected via hour-long, individual, face-to-face interviews at the Young Homeless Project. Participants were asked to describe their circumstances prior to becoming homeless, including their relationships with family members and friends, how they coped with the experience and what effects, if any, being homeless had upon their sense of self and psychological well-being. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

**Analytic Strategy**

Transcripts of the interviews were subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) – a method which offers a systematic way of analysing qualitative data and which aims to explore each participant’s story to obtain some sense of their experiences, cognitions and meaning-making (Smith, 1996; Smith et al., 1997, 1999). Although different versions of IPA vary in the extent of their idiographic commitment, the small sample in this research made it appropriate to treat each interview as a case study and then work towards drawing conclusions about the group of cases (Smith et al., 1995, 1999). IPA was selected as our method of analysis because it foregrounds the phenomenology of research participants – and so accorded with our desire to ‘give voice’ to our participants on their terms, to the extent that we could – whilst recognising that the outcome of any qualitative analysis inescapably represents an interaction between participants’ accounts and researchers’ interpretative frameworks. Also, we were aware
that IPA has been successfully used to offer theoretically-informed analyses of identity accounts in the past (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000).

The analysis involved the repeated reading of each transcript, which resulted in notes being made about what were considered key phrases, including summaries of content, connections between different aspects of the transcript and initial interpretations. These notes were condensed to produce themes for the transcript. Checks were continually made to ensure that emergent themes were consistent with the data and were not simply a product of expectations that had been shaped by our awareness of relevant literature or by our analysis of other transcripts. Only at this stage were identity process theory and other theoretical concepts explicitly invoked as possible resources for developing our psychological understanding of these themes, resulting in an analysis that was informed by theory but not driven by it. For a more detailed account of the procedures involved in IPA, see Smith et al. (1999).

Such an analysis inevitably involves a high degree of subjectivity. In this study, it was hoped that the researchers would be sensitised to different aspects of the data set due to their respective interpretative positions as a female counselling-psychologist-in-training who has worked therapeutically with young homeless people and a male, social psychologist who is experienced in identity research, thereby yielding a rich analysis. We do not believe that there can be a definitive, ‘true’ reading of the data: instead what we offer is a reading of the data shaped by our interpretative positions. The centrality of researcher subjectivity means that traditional criteria for evaluating research quality (such as reliability), which are based on an assumption of researcher objectivity and
disengagement from the analytic process, are inappropriate in assessing this study.

Among the alternative criteria that qualitative researchers have suggested is the criterion of persuasiveness by ‘grounding in examples’, applied through an inspection of interpretations and data (Elliott et al., 1999). In this article, interpretations are illustrated by data extracts to allow readers to assess the persuasiveness of the analysis for themselves. In the quotations that follow, empty square brackets indicate where material has been omitted; information within square brackets has been added for clarification; ellipsis points (…) indicate a pause in participants’ speech; and italics indicate emphasis. All potentially identifying information has been changed to protect confidentiality.

**Analysis**

**Paul**

Paul is 22 years old. He became homeless shortly after his sixteenth birthday. He now lives with his five-year-old daughter in a two-bedroom flat rented from the local housing association. He has been living there for the past three and half years.

i) The ‘fun-loving teenager’ and family conflict

Paul described himself as a ‘typical teenager’ before he became homeless: ‘I was a fun-loving little kid who drank too much...got into a little bit of trouble...smoked some weed...went to school, bunked off school, had a laugh with my mates – I was just a typical teenager, you know what I mean?’.

He reported that, during his teenage years, his relationship with his parents had been characterised by conflict and rebellion: ‘Three or four years of my parents
and me not getting on. I guess most of it was typical teenage rebellion. [ ] Once it got to the point where my Dad threatened to hit me with his belt, you know. I turned around and told him if he did that I’d fucking kill him’. Conflict with parents is frequently instrumental in young people leaving home (Hutson & Liddiard, 1994; Craig et al., 1996). For Paul, tensions at home seemed to reach boiling point when, at the age of 16, he discovered that his girlfriend was pregnant: ‘I mean, as far as my parents were concerned, that was the last straw. My mother chased me up the road with a fucking broom swinging at my head...and I didn’t go back’.

ii) Rejection
Paul recalled feeling rejected by his mother’s reaction to the news that his girlfriend was pregnant: ‘Here was this woman who was supposed to love me no matter what rejecting me...I was feeling quite rejected for a long time but that just put the cherry on the top of the cake, to be honest with you’. From this, it would seem that Paul’s feelings of rejection had been present for some time. When asked to expand upon this, he replied: ‘I felt rejected by my mum, my dad, ostracised by the rest of my family, you know – before all of this actually happened, to be quite honest’. Feelings of being rejected by the family may contribute to a feeling of ‘psychological homelessness’, which, according to Baldwin et al. (1997), often precedes physical homelessness.

iii) Losing former identity and adopting negative homeless identity
Being homeless signalled a change in the way Paul was viewed by others: ‘As far as people, most people were concerned, I was a piece of shit on the floor...who did drugs, who did drink,
who *stole*, who mugged, who smelled...[ ] except that I wasn’t that person – I was still this fun-loving teenager. And then the fun-loving teenager disappeared and I became...what people perceived me to be’. From this account, it would seem that when Paul became homeless, his former self receded and he adopted a strategy of compliance with the expectations of others: his identity became governed by other people’s responses to him. This was further illustrated when Paul explained: ‘You *lose* who you are and people impress upon you who you *are* just by walking past you in the street...their opinion of you...and you adopt that identity [ ] the one that’s *expected* of you’. The data imply that Paul experienced a loss of his former identity. In terms of identity process theory, being homeless appeared to threaten his continuity of self, causing him to question whether he could continue to be the ‘fun-loving teenager’ he had once been; it also threatened his identity in relation to his sense of self-esteem and distinctiveness, resulting in a loss of person-hood: ‘You become like a non-person, you know. People don’t bother with you...talk to you, look at you...which crumbles down any self-worth’.

Not being ‘seen’ by the general public is a common experience for many homeless people who become accustomed to being treated as if they were invisible and untouchable (Baldwin *et al.*, 1997; Bentley, 1997). In addition to being ignored, Paul conversely became the target of abuse: ‘Some people would see me just sat there and they’d just throw money at me or abuse me and shout at me, you know...it’s almost like you’re sub-human’. Such experiences have been referred to as a denial of a homeless person’s right to exist within society (Bentley, 1997).

iv) Something to live for: curbing suicidal thoughts
Paul’s crumbling sense of self-worth was accompanied by thoughts of suicide: ‘I felt I didn’t matter...I didn’t give a shit about me...I’d have quite happily curled up and died. The only thing to stop me was the fact that my girlfriend was pregnant and I wanted to be there for my daughter’. His sense of responsibility as a father appeared to be crucial in helping him to deal with the impulse to end his own life: ‘I made certain promises to my daughter and that gave me an opportunity to try and live up to them’. Paul’s fatherhood may have represented an opportunity to accommodate a new identity element which potentially offered a new source of self-esteem, distinctiveness and/or self-efficacy and thereby alleviated the threat to identity arising from being homeless (Breakwell, 1986, 1996). It may also have provided hope for the future.

v) New beginnings

The birth of his daughter and obtaining help from an organisation for homeless people appeared to be crucial factors in Paul’s exit from homelessness because they offered an opportunity to have his personhood recognised and build a new life: ‘I think it was a combination of my daughter being born and the promises I made to her and that I was made to feel welcome [by the homeless organisation] and I was asked how I felt and asked who I wanted to be’.

When asked if there had been anything positive about his homeless experience, Paul replied in terms of his identity and his current life situation: ‘The fact that I am who I am now – [ ] I’ve got custody of my daughter, I’ve got my flat, I’m at college...If those things hadn’t happened to me, what would I be doing now?’. The original threat posed by homelessness seemed to
have been translated into something with positive implications. This process of reconstrual has been identified by Breakwell (1986) as a coping mechanism in situations of identity threat. Paul’s account also seemed to suggest that he had assimilated the experience of being homeless into his identity and now owned it as an important part of himself.

Clare

Clare is 25 years old. She experienced homelessness between the ages of 17 and 22. She now lives in a one-bedroom council flat, which she has occupied for nearly four years.

i) Separation and loss

In Clare’s account, separation from her mother appeared to mark the beginning of her homeless experience. She was 17 years old when her mother and step-father (with whom she had been living) decided to move to a different area: ‘When I think about it, that’s when I became homeless. [ ] It was really when my mum left that the problems started, I suppose. Or you could say that was the root of the problem because I’d have probably stayed at home for a couple more years or whatever’. Clare reported having had little control over her parents’ decision to relocate and, following their departure, she described feelings of shock, numbness and dissociation – features characteristic of the early stages of grief (Murray-Parkes, 1996; Archer, 1999): ‘I floated through that week. I don’t recall crying or being upset or really stressed or angry. [ ] It was almost a dream that week was’. Clare’s separation from her mother and subsequent feelings of homelessness might therefore be conceptualised in terms of loss.
ii) No place for personal issues; depression

Clare lived for several months without a permanent base. She coped initially by sleeping on friends’ floors and sofas, a strategy used by many young people in housing need. Moving into a hostel space did not provide safe conditions for her ‘personal issues’: ‘If you need a roof, if you need a place over your head and somewhere warm and relatively safe or whatever, you know – it [the hostel] was fine for that. You know, as far as dealing with any of my personal issues or problems or whatever, that was different. I think through that time, I didn’t deal with any of my problems’.

It has been suggested that a lack of ‘psychological space’ for personal issues may lead to emotional withdrawal among homeless people; psychological possessions such as thoughts and feelings may be protectively stored away inside the individual concerned (Bentley, 1997). This process seemed to be illustrated by Clare’s description of her own social withdrawal from the other residents in the hostel: ‘I don’t know whether I was depressed but I shut myself away a lot...from the rest of the people. And it was something like twenty people who lived there or whatever.[ ] I did have quite a long – quite a few months where...I just stayed in my room’. Her social withdrawal seemed symptomatic of depression and during the course of being homeless, she experienced suicidal ideas: ‘I’d thought, you know...do yourself in and stuff’. Depressed and suicidal feelings amongst young homeless people have been substantially documented (Feital et al., 1992; Reilly et al., 1994; Holland, 1996; Baldwin et al., 1997).

iii) Concepts of ‘home’ and being ‘homeless’
Clare described her concept of ‘home’ as ‘a safe, secure place to live that feels safe and secure to you’. Without these conditions of safety and security, she could not regard her surroundings as home: ‘[Supported accommodation] didn’t feel like my home because it was the same at the hostel. You had to lock your cupboard in the kitchen, you had to lock your bedroom door and stuff. That’s a reality of life, isn’t it? But again, it didn’t feel like my home’. It would appear that Clare experienced a sense of ‘hearthlessness’ in relation to her accommodation because it lacked a home-like quality (Moore et al., 1995). For Clare, a home was more than a structural base and being homeless was not simply about sleeping rough: ‘You can have a house – [ ] you can have a base or whatever but it might not feel like a home to you. [ ] I mean, everybody knows the myth of homelessness – you’re on the streets or whatever – but that’s not the case at all. That wasn’t the case for me. [ ] I think it’s more like not belonging, not feeling that you belong in a certain place’. For Clare, homelessness meant an absence of safety, security and belonging. Housing alone could not provide these home-like conditions.

iv) Cold response from family

When asked how other people responded to her when she was homeless, Clare provided the following account: ‘My grandparents were very cold and my brother was very cold and I wasn’t seeing my dad at that time and my mum was very cold...yes, it was a very...null and void feeling’. Whilst she was homeless, Clare appeared to feel psychologically estranged from her family (Hammond, 1988; Breakwell, 1992). This experience of alienation and isolation seemed to pose a considerable threat to her sense of identity, leading her to lose sight of who she was temporarily: ‘If you connect it to who I am, I felt like a nobody because nobody wanted to know me’.
v) ‘Salvation’ in being needed

Clare’s coping strategies involved establishing a routine and maintaining regular contact with an elderly couple who needed her help: ‘I used to go to town every Friday and I used to visit an elderly lady and her husband and I used to do some jobs for them and stuff and help them out and I got really fond of both of them. [ ] So Fridays were always...I used to call them my “Saviour Day”. [ ] I knew that they needed me to go on a Friday. [ ] I was needed...so Friday, I was fine. [ ] I could be as down in the dumps as whatever on Thursday but Friday I’d get up to town on the bus every week without fail...I think that saved me really’. In terms of identity process theory, feeling needed by others was important in maintaining Clare’s self-esteem and feelings of social value. Her work with the elderly couple may also have enhanced her sense of self-efficacy by giving her an opportunity to be effective in achieving goals. Having a structure to her week seemed to provide a sense of continuity and security whilst she was living in temporary housing.

Clare derived further support from the Young Homeless Project which helped her find accommodation and provided conditions of belonging and group membership: ‘Everybody made you feel so welcome and stuff. I used to call it the “glue pot” because on Friday, I used to come down on Friday – just like pop in for a quick cup of tea and you’d be there for hours, just chit-chatting and talking to people and other people from the other houses and all the group stuff they do as well, which was really good. I got really involved in that part’. Clare seized an opportunity to become involved with other young homeless people, which might be seen as an intergroup strategy for coping with threatened identity (Breakwell, 1986).
John

John is 24 years old and became homeless when he was 21. He recently moved from project-supported accommodation into a one-bedroom flat, which he has occupied for the past six months.

i) Homeless without choice

John reported that when he was 21, his parents found him alternative accommodation without his knowledge: ‘It was arranged to move into a bed-sit while I was away, while I was on holiday with my girlfriend. When I got back, my parents had sort of – [ ] they sorted it out and kind of got me a bed-sit sorted out. [ ] I got back and it wasn’t home any more…well it didn’t feel like it’. John’s perception seemed to be that he had been made homeless by his parents: ‘It was as though they just pulled the carpet out from under me when they moved me out. [ ] I was never like “homeless-on-the-streets” homeless but I got um…well, I was kind of kicked out of home’. John’s sense of being homeless was related to his perception of being rejected (‘kicked out’) by his parents and the temporary nature of his accommodation.

His sense of belonging and identification with his new surroundings (his place identity) appeared weak and may have had implications for his well-being and self-esteem (Proshansky et al., 1983): ‘It [the bed-sit] felt like somebody else’s place that I was borrowing for a while. [ ] I had a roof over my head but it still wasn’t secure because if this, you know – if there’s a problem with this, then where do I go?’. The impermanence of John’s situation clearly resonates with empirically-based definitions of homelessness that refer to individuals who are
without permanent accommodation (Moore et al., 1995; Reid & Klee, 1999). Again, the notion of ‘hearthlessness’ may also be helpful in understanding why John saw himself as homeless (Moore et al., 1995).

ii) Disorientation and denial
At first, John appeared to have experienced a sense of disorientation and denial about his situation: ‘I woke up in a strange bed, not knowing where I was...still trying to think “Oh, am I really here? Oh, I’ll go home later and it’ll be all right”’. Breakwell (1986) has referred to temporary denial as an intrapsychic strategy which individuals may use as a way of ‘buying time’ in order to adjust to a threat to identity. John’s temporary denial about his situation may be seen as an attempt to prepare himself for a new conception of himself as being without a home.

iii) Ambivalent identification with and attachment to place
After a series of temporary housing arrangements, including several months in supported accommodation managed by the Young Homeless Project, John moved into his current flat. It seemed important for him to stamp his character on his surroundings: ‘I’m filling my flat with my character as quickly as I can. There’s still some of my character back at my mum’s house as well when I go round.[ ] When you’ve lived somewhere for that long it’s got your character in the house as well’. Although John viewed his new flat as a container for his identity, part of his identity still seemed to reside at his mother’s house, which represented his primary place attachment (Proshansky et al., 1983; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). John’s desire to fill his
new environment with his character may have reflected an attempt to form a new place attachment and make the flat ‘homeful’ (Moore et al., 1995).

**Julia**

Julia is 29 years old and lives in a flat which she has occupied for the past five years. She first experienced homelessness at the age of 19, following an argument with her mother; having been told to leave, Julia was barred from returning home.

i) Blame

Individually-based explanations of youth homelessness traditionally suggest that young homeless people, through their behaviour, are somehow directly responsible for their homelessness (Hutson & Liddiard, 1994). Although Julia had not chosen to leave home, a sense of being blamed by others for her homeless status featured strongly in her account: ‘What I felt was that they automatically thought it was because I’d been bad or I’d done something wrong, that I was to blame’.

ii) Impermanence and needing to make a connection

Julia defined her homelessness in relation to the impermanence of her accommodation: ‘I know I was in the hostel but I was still homeless basically because I didn’t have a permanent place’. She proceeded to describe the needs of homeless people beyond housing: ‘They need somewhere to live – but still not just a roof. They need the connection with somebody that they can talk to basically, to talk about how they feel and that there is company and that someone can help them practically as well as emotionally and then you go on to build upon
and do things’. Homelessness for Julia also seemed to encompass a lack of emotional connection with other people. Recovery from homelessness is known to be facilitated by opportunities for individuals to re-connect with growth-promoting social networks (Bentley, 1997).

iii) Opportunities and personal development

It would seem that the opportunity for meeting others and becoming involved in homeless project activities was a positive element of Julia’s homeless experience: ‘I’d say it’s had good effects because now, you know, I’ve done stuff with the [Young Homeless] project and other projects and that which, had I not been homeless I might not have ever got to meet the people that I have met and got to do other things, you know’. Gaining new experiences and survival skills has been emphasised as a positive by-product of surviving the homeless experience (Brandon, 1980; Hutson & Liddiard, 1994). Julia’s activities with the Young Homeless Project involved raising the profile of youth homelessness and challenging negative attitudes towards homeless people. According to Breakwell’s (1986) model of coping with threatened identity, Julia’s activities might be viewed as part of a group-level strategy for change aimed at educating people to think differently about homelessness and ultimately reducing the threat it might pose to identity.

Overview

It is important to note that no claims can be made about the generalisability of these findings. As with much qualitative research, the production of generalisable findings was not an aim in
this study: obviously the heterogeneity of the homeless youth population cannot be represented by a sample of four people. Furthermore, the sample consisted of young people who were willing to identify themselves as once having been homeless and who were in touch with a Young Homeless Project. The experiences of young people who have been homeless but who were reluctant to take part in a study which would have identified them with homelessness might be quite different (especially in relation to identity issues), as might the experiences of those who are not in contact with services for homeless people. This research can therefore be regarded as offering insights into the experience of young homeless people in relation to psychological well-being and identity from a specific perspective. We hope that other researchers will explore the same issues with different groups of young homeless people in order to construct an increasingly complex and complete picture of the challenges they may face in order to inform counselling psychology practice with this population.

Turning to a general consideration of some of the study’s findings, throughout the interviews participants referred to both the physical and psychological components of homelessness. On a physical level, homelessness was associated with not having permanent housing or a secure place for physical possessions. On a psychological level, homelessness was experienced in terms of not belonging, feeling isolated, rejected or alienated, lacking an emotional attachment to or identification with a place and having no safe space for psychological ‘belongings’ such as thoughts and feelings. From the participants’ accounts, it could be surmised that a physical home could not per se have alleviated their psychological homelessness. Participants also appeared to have experienced homelessness as a threat to identity, specifically in terms of its capacity to undermine the achievement and/or maintenance of self-esteem, continuity, positive
distinctiveness and self-efficacy. Indeed, participants (explicitly and implicitly) referred to a loss of identity and person-hood during their homeless experience. There was evidence in all four accounts of intrapsychic and intergroup strategies for coping with identity threat in the form of reconstrual, temporary denial, compliance, seeking support from similar others and working for change.

It was clear from participants’ accounts that they felt that, at some stage, their homelessness had seriously compromised their psychological well-being. This accords with research which has identified depression, suicidal ideas and low self-esteem among young homeless people (Reilly et al., 1994; Craig et al., 1996; Holland, 1996). This may be partly attributed to the identity-related difficulties reported by participants, although there is a need to be mindful of the host of factors that may undermine psychological well-being among young homeless people. Identity process theory may prove useful in shaping formulations of the identity-related difficulties that may be faced by some young homeless people and in guiding counselling psychology practice. For example, interventions might be geared towards providing safe, home-like conditions for exploring the client’s psychological possessions, including their sense of identity. A humanistic approach providing the core conditions of warmth, empathy and unconditional positive regard would seem an essential foundation for such therapeutic work. The importance of affirming relationships for homeless people has already been identified by Koegal (1992) and Bentley (1997); this would seem to be an area where counselling psychologists, with their distinctive attention to the therapeutic relationship, could serve a useful ‘holding’ function (Winnicott, 1964). Integrating a solution-focused approach towards helping young people recognise their strategies for coping with identity
threat and other threats to psychological well-being might also prove useful in terms of reinforcing positive coping strategies.

Place identity and place attachment also proved to be useful concepts in understanding participants’ accounts of homelessness. Two participants referred to a lack of attachment to and identification with their environment during the time they were homeless, suggesting that homelessness removes opportunities to form an ‘emotional bond’ with the environment, which may result in low self-esteem and feelings of isolation and alienation (Chawla, 1992; Rubenstein & Parmelee, 1992; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Thus an understanding of the environmental attachments of young homeless people would be an asset to counselling psychologists working with this population.

This article offers insights into a range of psychological difficulties, practical and emotional needs and identity tasks that some young homeless people may face, together with strategies that were used to cope with these challenges. Counselling psychologists working with young homeless people need to be aware of both the material and psychological components of homelessness in order to develop the cultural empathy necessary to assist this group. We hope that this article may contribute to the process of developing informed practice for the benefit of young homeless people.
References


