The Strengths of Young People Who Are Homeless

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ABSTRACT

Researchers examined how young people who are homeless conceptualize and interact with challenging circumstances, adopting a human agency focus rooted in the constructionist model of resilience. Thirty-five young people who were homeless in Ottawa participated in in-depth interviews and/or focus groups. Participants reflected upon their strategic decision-making and described how they solved problems in the midst of adversity, planned for the future, consciously altered their identities, and balanced the costs of engaging in certain behaviours. A constructionist approach to resilience allowed for insight into behaviour that is often seen as risky or outside social norms.

Keywords: strengths, human agency, homeless, youth, resilience, constructionism

RÉSUMÉ

Les chercheurs ont examiné la façon dont les jeunes gens qui sont sans-abri conçoivent et interagissent avec des circonstances difficiles. L'approche adoptée met l'accent sur le facteur humain tout en se basant sur le modèle constructiviste de la résilience. Trente-cinq jeunes gens qui étaient sans-abri à Ottawa ont participé à des entrevues approfondies et/ou groups de discussion. Les participants ont réfléchi sur leur processus de prise de décision stratégique. Ils ont aussi décrit comment ils ont résolu des problèmes en pleine adversité, fait des plans pour l'avenir, consciemment changé leurs identités, et pondéré certains comportements en évaluant leur coûts. Une approche constructiviste de la résilience a permit de comprendre un comportement qui est souvent considéré comme risqué ou en dehors des normes sociales.

Mots clés : les forces, le facteur humain, l'itinérance, les jeunes, la résilience, le modèle constructiviste

How appropriate is a focus on strengths and resilience when working with young people who are homeless? Does such an emphasis overlook broad social inequalities and marginalization? The Canadian Homelessness Research Network estimates that at least 200,000 Canadians experience homelessness in a given year and young people aged 16 to 24 years make up 20% of this population (Gaetz, Donaldson, Richter, & Gulliver, 2013). Young people who are homeless encounter adversity at a key time in their lives while they are transitioning to adulthood. Many leave home early and do not reach traditional indicators of adulthood in the same timeframe as young people who have stable housing (Hagan & McCarthy, 2005). Despite adverse conditions, social exclusion and oppression, many young people who experience homelessness demonstrate tremendous resilience (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007). A large amount of research has been conducted on the risk factors, deficits and pathology encountered by young people experiencing homelessness, and recently there has been growth in research focusing on the strengths and resilience of this group (Bender et al., 2007; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Kolar, Erickson, & Stewart, 2012; McCay et al., 2010).

The strength-based approach to working with young people holds the underlying assumption that "all people have strengths, talents and goals, and that all environments consist of resources, people and opportunities" (Krabbenborg, Boersma, & Wolf, 2013, p. 360). The strength-based literature supports the idea that young people experiencing homelessness possess many strengths, and that these play an important role when navigating life's obstacles (Bender et al., 2007; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Ungar, 2004a; 2005). The few studies that document the strengths of young people who are homeless show that they carry a unique set of positive attributes, possibly due to the need for skills in the midst of adversity. In Bender et al.'s (2007) qualitative study with 70 young people who were homeless, and Foster and Spencer's (2011) study with 45 street-involved young people on social assistance, the following strengths were identified: responsibility for themselves and their futures, aspirations and goals to transition off the streets, a sense of judgment as to whom to trust and what to share, positive attitudes when facing daily challenges, ability to adapt when faced with adversity, interpersonal skills, organizational skills, observational skills, and problem-solving skills. Researchers have also documented the relationship between trauma and the development of strengths: while trauma is strongly associated with long-term harm, it is also associated with self-reflection that for some may lead to personal growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Rawana & Brownlee, 2009).

Young people living on the street have valuable skills, attitudes, and resources that help them navigate and negotiate their surroundings. While the general concept of resilience comprises overcoming adversity, there are numerous perspectives and debates on how resilience functions (Tisseron, 2009; Tremblay, 2005). An objective perspective of resilience frames it as a process that is inferred from observing and measuring a person's competent functioning despite adversity or identification with a "high risk" group (Cicchetti, 2003; Masten & Coatsworth, 1995). It focuses on predetermined indicators of successful outcomes generally relating to academic, social, and conduct-related competencies (Ungar, 2004a). There are a growing number of critiques of this resilience discourse. Foster and Spencer (2011) argued that resilience introduces an oppressive logic to the lives of young people whereby they are perceived as either "at risk" or narrowly averting risk, essentially stigmatizing people living in poverty or already experiencing marginalization. Resilience is also being discussed as a form of governance (Howell, 2015; Howell & Voronka, 2012; Lentzos & Rose, 2009). The concept of resilience can imply that individuals are responsible for their own well-being and mental health, inferring that they are also responsible for overcoming the socio-economic problems and inequalities

that have led to their marginalization and oppression. Resilience outlines a quantifiable, measurable way for people to act (Howell & Voronka, 2012; Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys, & Averill, 2010).

An alternative, constructionist view of resilience suggests that people subjectively perceive risk and protective factors based on their personal situations or social contexts (Ungar, 2004a; 2004b; 2005). Definitions of success may change from one group to another, from individual to individual, and from day to day. This approach stresses the interaction of structure (social arrangements) and agency (individual responses and choices), and seeks to understand experiences of young people as they interact, attribute meaning to, and respond to their circumstances (Giddens, 1983; 1984). In his theory of structuration, Giddens (1983; 1984) argues that while structure shapes and constrains human agency, people are reflexive and capable of monitoring their social environment and allowing their observations to influence their courses of action.

Young people who are homeless experience exceptional structural constraints that limit what they can accomplish within the confines of the law. Some strategies used by young people who are homeless may appear as maladaptive or be designated as "trouble" by external observers (Kolar et al., 2012; Ungar, 2004b). For example, Kolar and colleagues (2012) observed social distancing and aggression as adaptive strengths of the young people they interviewed. It has been argued that benchmarks of positive adaptation often reflect values of white, middle class families; however, these strategies may be among the limited resources available for young people when attempting to make positive change in their lives. Again, a constructionist view acknowledges these strategies as strengths and validates the role they play in navigating challenging circumstances (Kolar et al., 2012; Ungar, 2004b).

The aim in researching human agency is not to place responsibility on young people to solve complex socio-economic problems, but to learn how young people adapt and make decisions within very real constraints often as a result of class, race, ageism, gender and sexual discrimination, and other social inequalities. To achieve a holistic understanding in this field, research on youth homelessness needs to explore the interaction between structural constraints imposed on young people and how young people interpret and respond to their circumstances. A strengths perspective is also crucial to balancing discussion of risk factors and deficits to avoid reinforcing marginalization by portraying homeless youth as disempowered without recognizing the remarkable ways that many overcome adversity.

Current Study

We contribute to this exploration by linking the current research on strengths and young people who are homeless with the constructionist model of resilience. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to explore the role that strengths play as young people navigate homelessness as well as the role adversity may play in young people's self-awareness of their strengths. This analysis advances understanding of how young people who are homeless conceptualize and interact with the obstacles they encounter, and furthers a constructionist understanding of the process of resilience.

We explored the following research questions:

1. How do young people who are homeless engage in decision-making?

2. How do young people who are homeless navigate and negotiate their circumstances, and engage in problem-solving?

METHOD

A partnership between a university and a local youth-serving agency served as the point of entry for this study. The local agency operates a housing continuum ranging from a drop-in facility to emergency, transitional and long-term housing. A broad definition of homelessness was used in order to create wider parameters of inclusion (Hagan & McCarthy, 2005). Participants experienced either absolute homelessness (i.e., no access to physical shelter of their own and sleeping in temporary shelters or on the streets) or relative homelessness (i.e., concealed homelessness, living in shelters or spaces that do not meet minimum housing standards) (UNECE, 2004). Participants either had a period of homelessness lasting one month or more in the past year, or they had experienced three or more shorter episodes of homelessness in the past year.

The study included 24 qualitative in-depth interviews with young people who were homeless in Ottawa, a focus group with five young men, and a focus group with seven young women, with a total of 35 young people participating overall. Data collection took place in the winter of 2011–2012. The young people were recruited from the agency's drop-in. The interviewer volunteered at the drop-in two months prior to the interview start date to build rapport with service providers and young people. Participants were recruited through posters and word-of-mouth. The interviewer was available for interviews during drop-in hours and participants often told other young people about the study after their participation.

The interview guide was piloted with four young people who met the study's inclusion criteria. They provided feedback on the questions and interview style following their interview. The study also included focus groups and interviews with service providers working with young people who were homeless in Ottawa; however, the focus of this paper is on the qualitative data collected about these young people. Approval for this research was obtained from the Research and Ethics Board at the university, and a letter of support was provided for the Ethics Board on behalf of the agency.

Participants

Demographic information was collected from the 24 interview participants. They were between the ages of 16 and 24 years of age: six were 16 or 17 years old and the remaining 18 were 18 years or older. All but three participants were current or past clients of the agency. Fifteen of the 24 interview participants identified as male, four identified as female, three as transgender, one as queer and one as male fluid. Fifteen interview participants identified their ethnicity as Caucasian, two as Native and the rest identified other ethnicities (e.g., Asian, Eastern European, Latin American, Arab). Seven interview participants had spent time in jail, 10 identified that they sold *and* used drugs or alcohol, an additional nine said they used drugs or alcohol, whereas five said they neither sold nor used drugs or alcohol. Five interview participants had been homeless for less than three months, eight had been homeless for three months to less than a year, and 11 had been homeless for a year or more.

Procedure

The main activity of the focus group involved completing a table that identified challenges young people face on a daily basis, what they do to respond to such challenges, and things they found most helpful in tackling these challenges. The in-depth interviews were organized around the following four open-ended

questions with associated prompts: (1) Everyone has a personal story of where their life has taken them so far. Can you share your story with me? (2) How do you handle challenges that you have experienced because of homelessness? (3) What do you feel are the next steps on your journey? and (4) Is there anything else that you would like me to know about your story? Two particularly relevant prompts for this analysis followed the second question. The interviewer would prompt with: "Is there anything that you rely on to help you through difficult times?" and "I've been hearing that spending time homeless can change you. Is that true for you?" The latter question was added after piloting the interview guide.

Qualitative Analysis

All of the interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were uploaded into QDA Miner and were coded for key themes. Each case was examined and coded vertically to look for the continuity and integrity of themes on an individual level. Following the vertical coding, a horizontal reading and coding process was conducted to explore theoretical connections and themes among the different cases. Inter-rater reliability was enhanced through collaborative coding of two transcripts early in the research process, and one later in the research process. Feedback sessions were also conducted with six young people after the qualitative data had been collected and coded in order to report back on findings and discuss the relevance of conclusions researchers had drawn. All names of participants in the discussion to follow are pseudonyms.

RESULTS

In this section we present the interview and focus group results based on the research questions.

How Do Young People who are Homeless Engage in Decision-Making?

We included results here when young people expressed how they thought about their choices or actions.

Avoiding drama. Several of the young people in this study explained the importance of being careful not to anger other youth on the streets, because if you anger someone and they come after you, they may have a whole group with them. Five young people referred to this as "drama," and they explained how they avoided drama on the streets. Two young people described how they carefully observed their peers before approaching someone new, and one young woman deliberately befriended a larger youth because she believed that people would leave her alone if she were in his company. Kristin (age 18) said, "I associate with a few fairly well respected people, and that keeps me safe. If I piss someone off and I didn't have tough people around me, I'd have three or four people coming to kick my ass." Before becoming homeless, Chad (age 17) was caught in a cycle of gang violence. When he became homeless in a different city he decided to no longer align with a gang. He chose to avoid drama and try to calm down when insulted. He said, "I find since I've been on the street, I'm not as violent." Chad also tried to "lay low" by choosing friends "who do their own thing and avoid all the drama." He explained, "Basically, just try and avoid confrontation at all costs. Don't piss anybody off, just keep your mouth shut real good. Avoid certain people who you know don't like you, and make sure you stay friends with the right people."

Reshaping identity. One pattern that emerged in the interviews was the notion that experiencing

homelessness and becoming disconnected from pre-existing social networks allowed some young people to experiment with their personal identity or to recreate themselves. Pete (age 18) described himself as very shy and withdrawn prior to becoming homeless. During his first night of being homeless, he made a decision to change aspects of his personality. He described how "everything changed," including the way he dressed and the music he listened to. He explained:

> I changed my ways of doing things overnight. Rather than being that secluded, cocooned person, I was the one that's always out there having fun all the time and trying to keep a positive outlook on everything rather than being depressed all the time. Making friends wasn't my forte, and interacting with people wasn't my thing, so it was new… sort of test ground for me… I thought for a little bit, and then decided, "What the hell… why not try it?" I started realizing, "Okay, this actually does work and I'm actually making some decent friends, and people actually like me for what I am." So I was like, "All right, let's do this instead." (Pete)

Pete believed that the positive changes he experienced in his life and his "breaking out of the inner shell" were accomplished as he adapted to becoming homeless. Young people in the study said that experiencing homelessness increased their gratitude for what they had, increased their acceptance for people who were different, and taught them to advocate for themselves.

A few participants discussed experiences in relation to their gender identities and sexual orientation. For those on the street, because of family conflict around their gender identity, they experienced more freedom to discover who they were without the fear of judgment from family, and appreciated the queer-positive role modelling within the youth-serving agency. Five participants were transitioning in their gender at the time of the study and expressed that they had space to further discover their identity and begin presenting themselves to people as transgender, as well as more access to information and services tailored to trans-youth. All five of these young people began identifying as transgender once they were homeless. Still, these young people experienced barriers to self-expression, including sexual violence, bullying, and conflicts with police relating to given names versus names they had adopted to reflect their gender identity. Three young people had been supported by the youth agency in changing between youth shelters designated for young men and young women, with one young person opting to return to the first shelter because of judgment experienced from peers. Many young people interviewed were actively negotiating and experimenting with their gender identity and sexuality, and found that homelessness offered opportunities and barriers to self-identity that they believed were different than young people with stable housing.

Future dreaming and planning. Thinking about the future was an important strategy for some young people in difficult circumstances. Jay (age 17) tried to think about where he was going, rather than dwelling on past experiences of abuse, drug dealing and limited opportunities in school. He said, "I try not to look back. I try to look towards the future and what I can do, and not what I have done." Chad presented a very connected narrative about his dreams to become a mechanic, own a cottage, and a motorcycle:

> Dreams [are] what get you through the day. When you're staring down the barrel of a gun, all you're thinking is, "Man, I'm gonna fucking die right now," and you get sad 'cause you're like, "Man, I haven't accomplished shit." So you think of your dreams and you're like, "If I get through this, I want out." (Chad)

For Chad, dreams helped him stay motivated and centred following traumatic aspects of street life. Dreams seemed to play a role in his day-to-day choices.

Many young people we interviewed planned for the future strategically, linking present situations with future goals. Some young people who entered homelessness were already considering strategies for exiting. Ella (age 16) explained the importance of taking the time to think through strategies to avoid becoming an adult who was homeless. She said, "You've got to make those decisions when you're younger, so you don't have to end up like that, just stuck." At the time of our interview, Ella had chosen not to use drugs to avoid addiction, she was continuing her education in an alternative school despite multiple set-backs, and she was re-evaluating her career plans based on her assessment of her abilities, choosing not to become a paramedic since that would require more skills in math and science than she felt she possessed. She also made a choice not to receive a free apartment from a drug dealer, since she was concerned that "getting booked" or charged for a drug offence would limit her future possibilities. This type of strategic thinking was echoed by Pete, who regularly made a six-month plan for what his next steps would be, and Vince (age 20) who used his time sitting in the "drunk tank" to develop a set of goals. The ability to see a positive future, despite immediate and pressing circumstances, was a strategy young people used to pass through difficulty, overcome daily challenges, and transition out of homelessness.

How Do Young People who are Homeless Navigate and Negotiate Their Circumstances, and Engage in Problem-Solving?

The following findings highlight ways in which young people who are homeless respond to problems and crises in a strategic, intentional way. Results were included here when they involved complex problem-solving concerning a challenge, such as health, death, or violence.

Life skills. Young people living on the streets are responsible for managing their own lives without the assistance of parents. Some shared the view that they are developing more advanced life skills than young people who are living at home. Many of them were active in caring for their health, making medical appointments, visiting drop-in healthcare services, and using the laundry services at the drop-in or in the shelters to clean their clothes. One young woman on the street who was an intravenous drug user carried a garbage bag with her, which protected her backpack filled with everything she needed to sterilize her needles and care for her injection sites, including Ziploc bags filled with antibiotic ointment.

Young people find many ways to meet their needs once they become homeless. While some turn to illegal activities, like selling drugs, others explore alternative ways to meet their basic needs. Participants described a number of skills used, such as pooling resources together, panhandling, bartering with businesses, receiving food from restaurants or shops at the end of the day, and receiving shoes from a local shoe store. Most of those making money through illegal activities saw this as a temporary way of meeting basic needs or as a means to end. Adam (age 18) successfully set aside a small portion from his drug dealing each week to save first and last month's rent, and then transitioned into housing.

While many young people said that experiencing homelessness had built their self-reliance, it came with a cost. A focus group participant said that she had to grow up too fast, a theme that her peers echoed. Tomas (age 19) said that if he did not take care of his basic needs, there was no one else who would do it for him. He was proud of his independence and at the same time grieving the loss of his caregivers who were both killed in a car accident.

Responses to death. Three young people mentioned they had witnessed the death of a friend. Chad was involved in gang violence at a young age. The early loss of three of his closest friends to violence before he turned 16 motivated him to make the most of his life: "I think it's another thing the streets taught me. I have to live my life for my friends that died [because] they didn't get the chance." Similarly, Kristin (age 18) found that witnessing the death of a close friend from an overdose became a powerful motivator to get sober and leave the streets, but explained that it was challenging to maintain the motivation to change when she was surrounded by peers who were still using. She said, "I had a friend die in my arms. She overdosed. She tore her skin to pieces. That's why I'm trying to be sober, but what else do you turn to when you have no other comforts?" At the time of her interview, Kristin had managed to stay clean and sober for two weeks since the death of her friend:

> I think I'm capable of getting sober. If I can do two weeks, I can do six months, I can do a year… I'm capable of taking that first step, and the second one, and getting out of here. I believe I'm capable of completing my high school education, finding somewhere to live, becoming successful. (Kristin)

Resisting victimization. Marshall, (age 17), described a day at a drop-in centre when he was attacked by a young woman because she wanted to use the computer he was on. He recounted:

> Some Native chick came and punched me in the face because she wanted to see the computer. First of all I just stood there and let her punch me in the face a couple of times. And I got up and said, "I'm sick and tired of being a fucking twinkie." I got up and I started beating the crap out of her, and I'm like, "No, it's not happening!" (Marshall)

Marshall described this fight as a pivotal moment. He had experienced high levels of victimization from an early age and had responded by running away from abuse or retreating into himself and engaging in self-injury. This instance, he explained, was one of the first times he confronted someone who tried to abuse him:

> You know what? Now, I feel better about myself. I guess that doing what I did yesterday kind of made me realize what I have now; that I have the power to stand up for what's going on. Before, I never stood up for anything. I would say I actually enjoyed being homeless, 'cause I think it's changed me, changed what I've went through. (Marshall)

The strength Marshall displayed in this moment would not be obvious for an onlooker since it was outside of social norms. However, Marshall learned he had capacity to resist abuse, and this realization improved his self-image and his personal sense of power.

When Jake (age 19) accessed support at the agency, he learned that his history of violent victimization in the child welfare system and his homelessness would grant him priority status on the social housing registry. He described how he encourages young people to use any history of victimization to gain priority status as he did:

> I tell a lot of people who walk into [the drop-in], 'What brought you?' I try to find something, any priority I can think of in my head: safety priority, medical priority...I just want to jog people's memories, "Did anyone ever hit you? Were you ever wronged in any situation? So you left because of this, right?" (Jake)

Jake used vulnerability and a history of victimization as a tool to negotiate and meet his needs, rediscovering his sense of power by using his trauma as a tool to access services, and coaching his peers to disclose their victimization so they could also receive needed supports.

Protecting peers. We observed that young people who were older or had more street experience expressed a desire to protect or instruct young people who were new to the streets. Aaron (age 23) described an incident where he protected a young girl on the street who was drunk:

> One time I saw a girl passed out and guys were surrounding her. I was like, "Yo, get the fuck out of here." I sat there the whole night. I stayed there till she woke up, and then she was like, "Thank you. I've never had someone do that." I was like, "Listen, I've been on the streets, and I know what could happen to you. I'm not one of these sick pigs; I'm here to help." I felt good about myself; I knew I did something good, and from then on I started helping everyone I could. (Aaron)

Similarly, Jean-Olivier (age 20) befriended a young person at the drop-in centre who was new to the streets and in conflict with his family. When the young person received an invitation to dinner with his parents, Jean-Olivier bought him some new pants and planned to go with him to provide support. Other young people shared information with each other about local resources; they pooled personal resources, and banded together for mutual protection.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study contribute to the academic discussion around resilience, responding to normative risk-based frameworks with a constructionist and strength-based alternative that improves understanding of how young people who are homeless make decisions about their lives. As with other strengths research with young people who are homeless, participants in this study were strong and adaptive. They described their decision-making strategies, they solved problems in the midst of adversity, they planned for the future, consciously changed their identities, and balanced the costs of engaging in certain behaviours. Transitioning into adulthood within the context of homelessness required an earlier level of autonomy and independence than would be required of young people with stable housing, although it also presented a steep learning curve. This study validates the notion that young people who are homeless experience forms of positive adaptation in light of the adversity they face. However, because of the way that resilience is generally defined, these same young people are not likely to be identified as examples of resilience because of not reaching traditional milestones to adulthood—they may not be in school, they may be unemployed, selling or using drugs, and committing criminalized acts to meet their basic needs. A constructionist model of resilience (Ungar, 2004; 2004a; 2005) addresses this disconnect by acknowledging the skills involved in how marginalized young people navigate and negotiate the tensions of life on the streets, regardless of whether or not these skills are part of an objective definition of resilience.

While the role of structure is essential to contextualizing youth decision-making, in this study we highlight the agency of young people in the process of adapting to adversity. In doing so, we contribute to an understanding of how young people subjectively experience homelessness, and how interpretations of their circumstances influence their decisions. The purpose of emphasizing human agency is not to suggest that young people are homeless because they want to be, or that individuals are responsible for their circumstances, but to highlight the interaction between individual agency and social systems, policies, and socio-economic inequalities. The decisions and economic realities of young people on the streets are constrained in very real ways by pre-existing structures. However, their choices are not predetermined. The young people we

interviewed were strategic and strong, and the findings of this research contribute to a more holistic view of a population that is often studied exclusively for their multiple risk factors and structural disadvantages.

This research has framed the "positive adaptation" component of resilience around the concept of strengths, both visible and hidden. Critics of resilience discourse object to the practice of describing young people as "at-risk" and the expectation that young people described as resilient are achieving a normative set of expectations related to housing, school, and employment (Foster & Spencer, 2011; Mallet et al., 2010). As an alternative, we have explored what strengths young people possess, finding that many of the strengths identified counter normative values and contradict traditional understandings of risk and protective factors.

Implications

Social programs and social policies frequently focus on questions of risk, exclusion, social control, and marginalization (Ronel & Elisha, 2010). Strength-based service providers assess strengths and build intervention strategies around these strengths, acknowledging the resourcefulness and capacity for change within people (Roebuck, Roebuck, & Roebuck, 2011; Saleebey, 2013). Planning interventions within the constructionist perspective, a worker treats a person as an expert, while still challenging social constructions that reflect social inequality (Carpenter, 1996). Similarly to Kolar et al. (2012) and Ungar (2004a), we found that problem-solving strategies and solutions used by young people who are homeless may appear as maladaptive or designated as "trouble" by external observers. This study further encourages service providers to see the human agency and abilities of young people despite social norms. From a policy perspective, greater recognition of human agency of young people who are homeless may encourage policy makers to include young people with lived experiences of homelessness in decisions that will affect them, including housing policies, shelter rules, access to health care, and social services, and law enforcement practices.

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