

HOMELESSNESS, IDENTITY AND THE THERAPEUTIC SPACE

*There is a psychological consequence of young people being made homeless.
Surabhi Chaturvedi from Centrepoint surveys the scene from a social
and psychotherapeutic perspective*

Around 80,000 young people under the age of 25 experience homelessness in the UK every year¹. The majority of them have to leave home due to factors beyond their control, including abuse, neglect or a breakdown in family relationships. The instability and uprooting that necessarily result from becoming homeless impact on a person's physical and mental health, and on opportunities for education and employment, as well as increasing their vulnerability to crime and violence. For example, findings from Centrepoint UK's services suggest that a third of young people experience mental health problems². However, these figures are likely to be an understatement, as the majority of mental health issues experienced by homeless young people are likely to go unreported or undiagnosed.

Moreover, homelessness can affect a young person's wellbeing in ways that are not ordinarily captured by a mental health diagnosis. One of these is the impact that homelessness can have on a young person's identity and sense of self.

Homelessness, loss and identity threat

The loss of a home represents a far greater loss than that of shelter or a place to live. Literature on the subject has identified physical as well as psychological components of homelessness, with the latter generally

including feelings of not belonging, isolation, rejection and not having 'psychological space'³⁻⁵. In many cases, young people experience several losses prior to becoming homeless, in the form of breakdown in family relationships, violence, abuse, or a chaotic, unstable home environment. Participants in qualitative studies on the experience of being homeless have revealed how rejection by the family leads to a feeling of *psychological homelessness*, which often precedes physical homelessness³.

Literature looking at the relationship between homelessness and identity suggests that being homeless can pose a further threat to identity and self-esteem, due to the impact it has on achievement, opportunities for and access to positive, enjoyable experiences³. Homeless individuals deal with *marginality* on several levels, including associated problems of mental illness, substance misuse or abuse⁴. Homelessness often also coincides with lack of a support network and feelings of isolation. Moreover, it can have a negative impact on identity and self-worth because the dominant discourse and external representations of what it means to be homeless are based on negative stereotypes that communicate a very particular set of messages about homeless people, including images of criminality, antisocial behaviour and victimhood⁶.

These external representations are significant because identity and a sense of self are fluid constructs that are not only based on the individual but socially





For illustration purposes: posed by model

constructed according to how we are seen by others, our interactions and our social experiences⁷. It has also been noted that if a particular identity attribute is heavily stigmatised, it becomes difficult to present it as just one attribute of many⁶. Prejudice and stigma therefore affect the fluidity of identity. For a homeless individual, the *homeless* attribute can become the dominant or only identity attribute, leading to a 'homeless identity', and this 'has severe implications for those experiencing homelessness, as well as for their sense of self⁶. Findings from phenomenological studies suggest that the *negative* identity that is imposed on a homeless person can be adopted at the expense of a *personal* identity³. Many homeless people become accustomed to being treated as if they are invisible or do not matter⁸ and come to regard themselves as unimportant and worthless. This, too, is supported by findings from research into the experience of homelessness³.

In addition to the individual losses and challenges that lead to a young person becoming homeless, homelessness itself can be experienced as a negative label and cause young people to feel further marginalised. According to Bentley⁹, stigma and prejudices against homeless people, especially young people, reveal society's denial of a homeless person's right to exist. The negative perceptions surrounding young people as a group further compound these experiences, as do cross-sectional experiences of racism, homophobia, victim blaming (in cases of sexual violence and abuse) and other forms of discrimination.

Research supports the idea that long-term homelessness can lead to a 'devalued self'⁴, due to social discomfort and a sense of stigma arising from homelessness. We regularly use aspects such as work, education, family, home and our support networks to anchor ourselves within our realities and identities, so it is not difficult to imagine that the loss of these anchors due to homelessness can lead to a loss of a sense of self.

Notes from the therapeutic space

Exploring a sense of self

Centrepoint has a Health and Wellbeing Team that offers confidential, individual counselling and psychotherapy to the young residents of its supported housing services. Riggs and Coyle³ highlight how the therapeutic space and relationship can mitigate some of the psychological losses associated with homelessness by 'providing safe, home-like conditions for exploring psychological possessions, including their sense of identity'. For the young people accessing counselling, the therapy space is used to talk about what it means for them to be a homeless young person and the impact it has on their sense of self. This particular aspect of homelessness may not ordinarily be voiced or explored in spaces other than therapy or counselling, where the focus might be on provision of practical advice and support.

In my individual therapeutic work with young homeless people aged 16 to 25 years, both within and outside Centrepoint, the confluence of the psychological and social is evident in the manner in which the fact of being homeless, and what it means for each individual client's internal and (perceived) external identity, becomes the focal point of the therapy.

As we've implied, the loss of home brings with it not only the loss of a safe place and shelter but also the loss of a stable grounding from where children and young people can have opportunities to achieve personal, educational, social and professional goals. In the therapeutic space, this may be expressed in the form of a profound sense of loss of a 'plan' or a 'dream', and worries about an uncertain future. For many young people who actually have to give up their education or lose their job due to becoming homeless, this loss is very real and can cause feelings normally associated with grief, such as anger, frustration, shock or depression. Homelessness, and the resulting, subjective sense of a lack of control over one's life and future, can also have a significant impact on identity. Studies on experiences of homelessness also document a feeling of pride in a former identity and subsequent feelings of loss of this past self as a result of homelessness⁴.

In the therapeutic space, the impact on identity of negative, socially constructed views about homelessness, and the stigma associated with it, also show up. One example of this is when clients describe themselves in highly negative terms used by the media and wider society to label the homeless. When exploring what it means for a client to be a homeless young person, many young people explicitly speak about how they think others see them, along with feelings of frustration and shame. This feeling is compounded by the fact that the causes of youth homelessness are widely misunderstood and young homeless people are often held responsible for the situation in which they find themselves¹⁰. Findings from research³ and my own clinical experience support the idea that young people feel a sense of blame in how others perceive them.

Even when the sense of invisibility and a 'devalued self' are not always a part of the young person's sense of self, these feelings can lie under the surface and be triggered by particular experiences or interactions. Clients have spoken about how even seemingly positive experiences such as attending college or social gatherings can serve as reminders of their 'marginality', bringing up feelings of shame, worthlessness and feeling 'different' from others through an unfair comparison with peers.

Mitigating the identity threat

When faced with threats to the self, individuals often respond with active attempts to preserve and assert a positive self-identity by distinguishing clearly between who they 'really' are and how others might perceive them. For example, clients often speak candidly about how it feels to be 'seen as being homeless' and the assumptions others might make about them, such as

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the likelihood of having been through family abuse, criminal activity, drug use etc. This includes feeling as if others will assume they are homeless because they have been turned out by their families due to violence or criminal acts. This mirrors stereotypical images of homelessness being connected to crime or victimhood⁶. While histories of abuse or offending might reflect reality for some young homeless people, in the dominant discourse it is widely generalised. Even for young people who do have a history of violence or offending, therapy offers a space where all these experiences can be validated and explored without stigma or prejudice, offering young people a novel experience.

Theories of identity formation that emphasise social interaction note that, although there is an overlap between personal identities and social identities, there is potential for people to maintain the difference between the two⁶. The distancing of oneself from a socially constructed 'homeless' identity is one of the ways in which people may respond to identity threat. Moreover, previous authors have noted the tendency for people to create hierarchies within homelessness in an effort to differentiate themselves from other homeless individuals⁴ – perhaps those they consider to fit the negative stereotypes. A few young people have brought into therapy a feeling of dissonance that has arisen from how they see themselves or how they 'really' are and how they are seen by association with other homeless young people.

Other ways in which identity threats are mitigated include conscious efforts to dress, act or 'present' themselves exactly as they did prior to becoming homeless. For many young people, actively preserving the 'former' self can serve the positive function of reiterating or redefining their homelessness as 'temporary' and, therefore, of keeping the 'homeless identity' at bay.

Although strengths and positive identity development among homeless individuals have not been extensively studied, a few authors have highlighted

how hard times can contribute to greater moral clarity, a stronger sense of self and a greater understanding of life⁴, and note how this can lead to wisdom that transcends the former self. In my clinical work, I have encountered young clients who reflect on how they have changed as a result of their experience of homelessness, including developing an emotional growth, maturity and understanding for others. Comparing this with their former selves enables a process of recovering a strength amid the loss of the past self and developing a positive current identity out of adversity.

Recovering a personal narrative and facilitating reconstruction

As noted elsewhere³, through an empathic, non-judgmental, safe space, counselling can offer an environment akin to a 'home' where clients can explore their own narrative and, in doing so, redefine their identity in their own terms. Counselling is ultimately an opportunity for young people to tell their stories in their own words, and this process itself can be empowering in allowing them to discard stories that have been imposed on them through (mis)representations of homelessness in media and society.

'Psychotherapy must remain an obstinate attempt of two people to arrive at a recovery of the wholeness of being human through the relationship between them.'¹¹

For some individuals experiencing homelessness, this wholeness is compromised because the homeless attribute supersedes all others. In order to recover this 'whole'ness in therapy, therapists encourage clients to identify and re-own unique strength attributes that may have been lost when the 'homeless identity' was adopted. The experience of telling one's story in itself empowers clients and enables the recovery of a personal narrative by the process of reflection, exploration and analysis of multiple, dominant, externally imposed narratives.

In addition to the value that a supportive relationship has for someone experiencing a loss of their support

network, the unconditional positive regard and respect offered to young people in counselling and other supportive roles is in stark contrast to the negative messages about homelessness that may have shaped their sense of self. Through this contrast, clients may be able to see themselves differently and thereby reshape their identities in a more positive light by embracing identity attributes other than 'homelessness'. Provision of positive experiences and support in accessing education, employment or leisure activities alongside counselling is also vital to building a young person's positive self-esteem and a trust in their self-efficacy and self-worth, and provides anchors with which their self can find stable ground.

Where low self-esteem is partly attributable to social stigma and prejudice, its resolution lies not only in the sphere of individual psychology but also in acknowledging and challenging the social processes that perpetuate a negative stereotype of homeless young people. In working through issues of low self-esteem and a negative self-concept, therapists and counsellors naturally undertake a collaborative exploration of the world within the client. However, it would be useful to allow for and even encourage an exploration and critique of the political and social processes – such as stigma and prejudice – that exist outside the client.

And finally

In addition to supporting clients to resolve their feelings of loss, internal negative beliefs and traumas, therapists working with homeless people come face to face with barriers and challenges that exist in the world outside counselling and psychotherapy. In such a context, an empathic response to the client necessarily includes an acknowledgement of the inequalities that homeless young people frequently face, as well as a firm, supportive stance against discrimination and in support of the client's human rights.

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