Swimming upstream: The strengths of women who survive homelessness

A study of the strengths and personal resources of women who had overcome homelessness revealed that the experience of homelessness for these women was a temporary state of disruption resulting from an effort to free themselves from conditions associated with despair, such as abuse or addictions, and to search for a better life. Personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal categories of strengths were identified that enabled these women to move in a positive direction toward health and self-actualization. The synthesizing metaphor "swimming upstream" describes the stoic determination required to go against the overwhelming negative forces of their environment. Key words: feminist research, grounded theory, homelessness, poverty

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THE PROBLEM of homelessness, especially among women and children, has become an urgent social and health concern. The purpose of this article is to challenge existing stereotypes and stigmatization of women who experience homelessness and to present the results of a preliminary study that identified the strengths and resources of these women.

The reasons for homelessness in the United States are complex but in general can be attributed to changing socioeconomic conditions and trends in the distribution of resources. Dramatic cuts to governmental housing programs for the poor and other social programs and the displacement of low-income units owing to gentrification have resulted in a lack of affordable housing for many Americans.[1] These conditions have created a population known as the

"new homeless," with women and children as the fastest growing segment. In fact, it is projected that in the near future a majority of the United States' homeless will be single mothers with children.[2] This population is quite different from the "old homeless" population that was dominated by older alcoholic white men; however, efforts to help the homeless are still affected by "skid row" stereotypes that deny the existence of these vulnerable women and children, or treat them as derelicts.[3]

Women who find themselves homeless face risks unique to their identity as women. Stoner[3] notes hazards particular to women, such as rape and the frustration of the women following coercive sexual encounters, and the need to trade sex for food, shelter, and other needs.

Still another problem unique to homeless women is that they are often fleeing from domestic violence and other forms of victimization, such as abuse by their family of origin. In Colorado, domestic violence was cited as the biggest factor contributing to homelessness among women.[4] Strong evidence exists that incest and other forms of abuse by family members are prevalent among homeless women, as well.[5-7] In fact, one study[8] found that the overall rate of sexual abuse among women living in poverty was an alarming 89%.

DECONSTRUCTING SOCIAL MEANINGS OF HOMELESSNESS

In order to understand the experience of homeless women, it is necessary to deconstruct some of the culturally embedded social meanings that underlie motives to "help" homeless people. Marin[9] examined the social and historic context of the mean-

ings of homelessness. According to Marin, the problem of homelessness can be traced to the emergence of bourgeois culture and the attendant rise of capitalism, industrialism, and individualism. Order, control, and purification became the hallmarks of civilized life, especially in the 19th century Victorian era. The roots of helping were established during this era as a masked expression of the need to maintain order and "hygiene" through the purification of society from all that "remained resistant to progress, unassimilable and incorrigible, inimical to all order." [9(p46)] This need to purge society of this "verminous" element was expressed in the guise of "moral duty" to "help" those less fortunate by cleansing them of their bad habits. This attitude of moral superiority may be reflected in research and in programs today that are geared toward identifying and correcting deficiencies within the homeless person rather than correcting the deficiencies within our economic and social institutions that create homeless conditions.

Marin advocates that, while society owes those who have been marginalized against their will whatever help is required for them to regain their place in the social order, society also needs to create space for those who, for whatever reason, find it impossible to live within the mainstream of society. These individuals serve to challenge our belief in a "society so well disciplined and moral that deviance of this kind would disappear."[9(p49)] We have an existential obligation to allow these individuals a way to exist with dignity.

Jonathan Kozol,[10] in his book *Rachel and Her Children*, described the atrocities homeless families in New York face on a daily basis and came to a conclusion similar to Marin's. He argues that our public policy

conveys the idea that home is something that must be earned through correct behavior; that individuals experiencing homelessness are expected to prove that they are worthy of such a basic human need.

These biases against disadvantaged people are reflected in research that studies deficiencies and pathology within this population. Robert Woodson,[11] chairman of the Council for a Black Economic Agenda, criticizes traditional attempts to understand poverty by studying those who have failed. Conclusions and generalizations drawn from these studies create a "pathology" of the poor.

Very little research has been done that studies the strengths within this population. Most of the research up to this point has described demographics or the problems of the mentally ill homeless.[12] However, several studies done in nursing suggest that the homeless women do make positive attempts to cope,[13–15] and that the search for connection and relationships is an integral part of their experience.[16–18]

Other literature suggests that there is a spiritual or soulful dimension to the experience of homelessness that is often overlooked. Homelessness is, in fact, the literal experience of what for most of us is a metaphor — that we stand naked and alone in the universe. Matousek[19] describes how this profound loss of self presents a spiritual challenge to define one's very existence. Understood from this perspective, perhaps the homeless who have walked this path have something to teach the rest of us. Eve Ensler, playwright of *Ladies*, a play about homeless women, suggests these women represent a kind of existential courage:

Many of us learned young that home was an unsafe place. People who end up being physically homeless have already braved emotional abandonment and called abuse what it really is. Rather than pretending, they've had the courage to live this homelessness and we fear them for telling this emotional truth.[19 (p14)]

An essay from a homeless woman published in a shelter newsletter,[20] suggests that the pain of homelessness was, at least for her, experienced as a spiritual path. She described the pain caused by her estrangement from her husband and children:

Having acknowledged the barren desert, I am challenged in my daily walk to nurture a personal oasis. How I do it is a question that sometimes still befuddles me. I meet many obstacles. Ultimately, through my activities . . . along with my turning to God, I sustain myself in the midst of my pain. I try to lay aside the present roadblocks to getting our family back together. I work to center my energy on my inward journey with God. Sometimes it is not easy. However, through pause and reflection, as Ripple has stated, "I learn more fully and discover the inner geography of my own pain. I've learned to let go of more of life's answers and ask more of life's questions." My journey continues.[20]

As a volunteer counselor for homeless women, this author has had the opportunity to work with many women such as these who have faced this challenge to their very existence with dignity and courage. The desire to learn more about these strengths and the meanings that enable these women to persevere led the author to undertake a preliminary investigation of the strengths and resources within this population.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND FOCUS

Guiding concepts

This preliminary investigation sought to discover the sources of personal strength

and meaning that allow women to overcome devastating life situations, including homelessness, and to discover sources of possibility and hope available to women living with extreme disadvantage. Homelessness was defined as a disruption of basic sustaining connections and affiliations that include loss of a consistent place to live and temporary or permanent disaffiliation from friends and family.

Grounded theory method,[21] along with the values and methods of feminist inquiry,[22-25] were used in this investigation. The values and methods of feminist inquiry were used to guide the researcher's intention to benefit the participants as well as to advance science.

Data collection

Seven participants were nominated by shelter staff or others as someone who was or had once been homeless, and whose experience had taught her something about living with hard times or had inspired her in some way. Nominations were also obtained through the League of Women Voters' "Women to Watch" program that honors women who have overcome great odds. The reasons for the nominations were recorded as data.

Each participant was informed that she had been identified as an expert, someone who had lived through very hard times in a way that had inspired others, and each was offered a $25 honorarium for her participation. As an alternative to the formal interview, the researcher engaged in a mutual dialogue with participants.[25] During the discussion, the researcher asked facilitative questions to elicit meanings and strengths. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

In addition to interviews with these participants, the researcher spent 2 to 6 hours per week as a volunteer at a daytime shelter for women and children and recorded critical incidents during that time. Poems and essays published by these women in the shelter newsletter were also used as data. Consultation with shelter staff and participation in board meetings were done in order to incorporate a broader social, political, and historic context. Data collection and analysis continued concurrently until saturation was reached with regard to the major categories.

In order to remain faithful to the participants' experience, the researcher reviewed interpretations and findings with two participants. Both agreed that the interpretations represented their experience well.

RESULTS

The sample of participants interviewed included seven women between the ages of 35 and 53 of African American, Native American, Hispanic, and first-generation Italian American descent. Four of the women were currently employed and housed independently, one was living in a subsidized hotel, and two were living independently in apartments on disability incomes. None were homeless at the time of the interviews. All of the women had raised children, and five of the seven were currently engaged in parenting school-age children. Two of the women lived with a spouse; the rest were divorced. None of the participants had been diagnosed with a major mental illness; however, two were recovering addicts. Education level ranged from never having finished high school to an associate's degree.

These participants grew up amidst varying amounts of family dysfunction and trauma. While one participant described growing up in a supportive blue-collar family environment, most described growing up amidst deplorable conditions. Six of the seven participants reported having been physically or sexually abused as children. Three of the five were repeatedly sexually abused. Four experienced physical violence, neglect, or abandonment by their mothers.

Data analysis revealed that the homelessness among these women was a temporary state of disruption that resulted from an attempt to break away from conditions characterized by abuse and oppression and to move toward a better life. The strengths that enabled these women to move in a positive direction were categorized as personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal. The synthesizing metaphor that best described their path was "swimming upstream." Each of these findings will be described briefly.

The process of homelessness

The process of homelessness among the women who were struggling to create meaningful lives was actually part of a drive toward health and self-actualization. These women chose to endure a temporary state of disruption, including homelessness, in order to break away from something much worse, such as domestic violence or an environment of drugs, violence, and despair. For example, a woman who had been a drug addict had never known anything but addictions her whole life. For her, the first step toward a new life was to walk away from her apartment and all of her connections and stay at a shelter until she got help.

Leaving home with no resources was an act of hope and courage. To break away and determine their own life path required that they be able to imagine a new reality apart from what they had always known, such as abuse. For example, a woman who had been sexually abused by her father, and later battered by her husband, thought her situation was normal. This belief was reinforced by advice from her family and neighbors in her small town to try harder to please her husband. In order to leave, she had to somehow know that there was an alternative. However, as another woman explained, "to imagine an alternative requires self-esteem. You don't think you can. There has to be someone there to let you know you can do it." This support from others will be described further in a later section.

Before giving up on their primary relationships and leaving the only life they had ever known, they had to exhaust every possible hope that things would improve and use up whatever pleasure or advantage there might be in staying. For example, the woman who was a drug addict for 35 years described having to become "so sick of it. . . [you] have to hit bottom." Women who were being abused by their husbands described how the abuse became worse than their fears of leaving. In fact, the woman who was abused by her husband paradoxically found the courage to leave her husband after he shot directly at her at close range with a hunting rifle. Miraculously, she was not hit. She explains

And you think I would have been more scared of him, but after he did that to me—he had stabbed me already, he had choked me, he had done everything to me—and I was terrified of him, but after he shot me, I just took a different view, and thought 'I wasn't meant to die by him'. . . . It gave me the power to finally stand up and leave him. . . . I thought any place is better than this.

Personal strengths

The qualities that these women drew from within themselves to overcome their disabling life circumstances included a stubborn sense of pride, a positive or optimistic orientation, and a moral structure, all of which contributed to their clarity of focus and determined action to go against the forces of their environment.

Stubborn pride

The first strength, the stubborn sense of pride, included a tenacious hold on their dignity. However, while this pride was a source of motivation, it was also seen as a potential liability, making it difficult to accept help from others. As one participant said, "it's [pride] not good but it's all I have." Another said she got through the bad times "because I'm so stubborn. . . . Too many things have happened to me, why should I give up now." Another said "I'm built like a Timex; I take a licking and keep on ticking." Pride was expressed by maintaining independence (sometimes this meant going to a shelter rather than staying with friends or family if doing so would compromise their integrity), always "doing right" by their children, and by having a hard time accepting charity.

Positive orientation

Another strength was a positive orientation. Even in reconstructing their childhood, they did not describe themselves as victims; instead, they told stories of finding hope and possibilities amidst very meager resources. A woman who grew up like a "stray cat," living on the streets of a small southern town since she was 5 years old in order to escape her mother's violence, describes how she always found hope:

I'd think, well, I'm alive and I'm not being beaten, so I think I'm better off than what I was, so I felt like I was blessed, actually . . . that I was out of the situation I was in, and that it couldn't get no worse, and if I worried about it it was just going to be a waste of time . . . because then something works out . . . but it doesn't come as fast if you don't believe it. . . . I've learned to think positive and that's probably one of the things that has gotten me through a lot of things . . . . If you're thinking positive . . . that something's going to happen, any opportunity that comes along, you can tune into real fast. . . . When I didn't have the hope I would go and get into things that would make it worse—like alcohol, drugs, men that I didn't like, and that I was going to be sorry about later—but when I got the hope I say, "this too shall pass."

Moral structure

In addition to thinking positively, these women actively created a moral structure to guide their life. These moral principles provided a contrast to the chaos and lack of moral behavior they experienced growing up and gave them a new direction. One woman explains

I've grown to know what was right or wrong without anyone telling me what was right or wrong. . . . Does that make sense?. . . We had no choice but to learn what was right. We never got the leeway of learning [through trial and error] what was wrong.

It wasn't entirely clear how they learned what was right, but some of the sources they drew from included religion, positive role models, rational and logical thinking, and empathy (imagining how others must feel).

Clarity of focus and stoic determination

All of these factors, stubborn pride, a positive orientation, and a moral structure,

contributed to a clarity of focus and a stoic determination that allowed them to move against the negative forces in their environment, toward a better life. This movement against the forces of their environment, to be the opposite of what they had always known, was like trying to swim upstream. As one participant explains, "I look at my family. I can go with the flow or go the opposite way. . . . My goal is to be the total opposite." Another woman who works very hard to "do the opposite" of her mother stayed on track by producing volumes of personal self-help programs on her computer, based on "the positive books about people that tell you how you're supposed to live your life." She has affirmations and positive reminders placed all over her apartment.

Not only did these women have to go against the tide of negative influence, they also had to struggle against bureaucratic structures, such as welfare, that made it difficult to succeed, and the social stigma of being homeless. As one participant pointed out: "It's like you've been in jail or something. You have to work twice as hard to prove you're responsible or worthy."

The type of determined action required was best illustrated by one participant who signed herself out of a hospital against medical advice where she was being treated for broken ribs and a punctured lung (she had been beaten by a family member), because if she missed that much school she would flunk out and lose her grant. So, in spite of everyone's objections, she left the hospital and went to her classes with a rib belt, a luggage carrier for her books, and a TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) unit to control the pain. At the time of our interview she had just graduated from this program with an associate's degree.

This attitude of stoic determination seemed to help them to not "succumb" to despair or to temptation (such as to drugs). As one woman explained, being strong meant not to "let yourself crumble and cry all day long . . . not let yourself go." Another got through several crises, including her fiance's suicide, because school kept her "too busy to think." However, in spite of this stoicism, the participants' stories were not characterized by themes of isolation and individual achievement. Instead, their strengths were described in the context of relationships with others. These relationships are described in the next category, interpersonal strengths.

Interpersonal strengths

Finding connections and sustaining relationships provided the context for the individual strengths of these women to emerge. This finding is consistent with previous studies[16-18] and with feminist psychology.[26,27] As one woman noted, her first step in dealing with homelessness was to learn to ask for help from others. This sense of connection was facilitated by supportive communities that provided a context for them to rebuild their lives and through their own commitment to personal relationships.

Participation in community

Connection with a larger community helped these women rebuild their lives by mobilizing their strengths and by providing a new context that made it possible for them to move forward in a positive direction. Properties of the communities that seemed to facilitate self-sufficiency included positive perceptions by others, opportunities to

contribute and to help others, and the opportunity to experience a sense of unity and bonding.

Positive perceptions by others

Communities that were supportive saw strengths in the women that challenged some of the negative messages they had been programmed to believe about themselves. One recalls a shelter where "they sought my input on everything. They thought I was responsible." Another was befriended by a volunteer who told her, "I stood out. . . . I seemed different . . . I seemed like someone others would listen to."

Opportunities to contribute

These communities then offered opportunities for the women to use their newly discovered capacities to contribute to the community. All of the nominated participants who received help from a shelter participated in some way, either by helping in the laundry or the kitchen or by writing for the newsletter. Two of the women found new careers as counselors for the homeless as a result of their contributions. Another woman, who had been receiving food from a church, was pushed by a worker at this church to volunteer in their program as a tutor for Mexican-speaking people. Her initial response was "Me?! You want me to teach, how can I teach, I'm too stupid." But she finally agreed to do it, and the experience became a turning point in her life, giving her the confidence to continue her own education.

Unity and bonding

Finally, these communities offered an immediate sense of belonging that helped them resist the pull of more destructive affiliations. As one woman noted, people who are uprooted and vulnerable "are in danger of hooking up with the wrong people." As a recovering drug addict pointed out "even with drugs there is a bonding." One way these communities helped women to resist these pitfalls was by offering immediate kindness and unconditional acceptance. This provided them with an alternative to the exploitive relationships many had been victimized by. This kind of support was found at some of the shelter communities, churches, training programs, recovery programs, and schools. The woman who had been a drug addict in New York for 35 years described how confused she was at first by the kindness she experienced in a recovery community in another state:

People here are so kind. . . . I didn't know kindness. I couldn't believe it. I thought people here were backwards, country . . . I said, "They want something." They were all so nice. . .I don't have a damn thing to give, so I would back off. . . . [then] I figured I'll do the same thing. Then I found out it was real, not fake.

All of the participants expressed a strong value of giving unconditionally to others in similar situations and found an outlet for their generosity in these communities. This ethic of unconditional sharing seemed to be part of the immediacy and bonding we all experience during times of survival. One participant, who is now a counselor for homeless women, described how the trappings of her new "middle class" life have created a sense of alienation. She misses the sense of unity and bonding she felt during her transient times when her only responsibility was to the present moment and she could give whatever she had to spare to

whoever needed it. Now that she owns possessions and has responsibilities, relationships are more conflicted.

Commitment to personal relationships

Commitment to significant personal relationships, usually their children, served as another interpersonal strength for these women. Their children, rather than being seen as a burden, sustained them, and gave them a reason to persevere. As one woman said: "I probably wouldn't be here if I didn't have kids. I probably would have blown my brains out. . . . There is no way I could have got through this without [them] . . . they are my backbone."

Transpersonal strengths

The participants who were interviewed seemed to draw strength from another source that went beyond their individual resources and their relationships with others. This source of strength had to do with the meanings that they developed to make sense of their misfortune. These meanings allowed for a broader sense of coherence that transcended the chaos of their individual lives and allowed them to make peace with what had happened to them. It was quite remarkable that all of the nominated participants who were interviewed conveyed an attitude of acceptance of their life circumstances; there was a notable absence of bitterness. These meanings that sustained them had an existential or spiritual dimension. In all cases they experienced "hard times" as strengthening their spiritual faith or their values. The meanings they related consisted of five types: religious beliefs, rationality, being tested through trial, creation of self, and finding purpose in helping others.

Religious beliefs

Several of the women were sustained by their religious beliefs. One woman stated: "It scares me how much faith I have." She describes her years as a drug addict: "I was the devil's disciple. The devil had hold of me, but I always knew God was near. Now the devil can't touch me because I turn everything over to God."

Rationality

Other participants felt betrayed or disillusioned by religion and instead found meaning through rationality. One woman explains how she first looked to religion for answers:

[I started] studying about God, but I found some things that didn't make sense . . . like making women seem filthy, or Jericho, you can go ahead and kill everybody. . . . When I gave up God, I had to give up security . . . so I learned the natural laws . . . If I expect something to happen it will. If I live a good life, good things will come to me . . . . I'm more rational.

Tested through trial

Believing that they were being tested through trial was a way to make sense of and find some good in having had such hard times. As one woman pointed out, "I know now I can survive with nothing." Another believed, "The more I go through, the more I will be able to go through in the future."

Creation of self

Others saw their hard times as creating a new self. One woman looked back on the years of neglect by her alcoholic mother and explained that in some ways she hates her mother because of all the abuse, but "I also love her because she made me a beautiful

person inside because of the abuse" because she was forced to find goodness within herself. Another explained: "It was all worth it, 'cause see what came out of it. . . . Me, a new me. . . . Like a caterpillar . . . and I became a beautiful, beautiful butterfly."

Finding purpose in helping others

Finally, having been through so much has made every participant want to use her experiences to help other women. For some, that is the meaning to be found in the hardship. In fact, almost all of the participants, in spite of their difficult economic circumstances, expressed reluctance to accept the $25 honorarium that was offered, stating they were doing this not for the money, but to help other women.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed that the experience of homelessness among women who are attempting to create a meaningful life is not a sign of failure or deficiency on the part of the individual, but may instead be an act of courage. The stories of these women have revealed social problems associated with homelessness, such as abuse and exploitation by family members and others, that are even more deplorable than homelessness itself.

While the purpose of this study was to discover the strengths of women who have experienced homelessness, these results should not imply that the conditions associated with homelessness can be taken lightly, or that individual women should be strong enough to transcend their circumstances. While each of these participants showed amazing survival abilities and was able to create a meaningful life in spite of circum-

stances, they were also plagued by continuing problems and emotional sequelae. Several of the women were still living under marginal economic conditions and continued to be vulnerable to homelessness as a result of any unexpected expense or setback, such as medical bills or job loss. In addition, many of the participants had symptoms of anxiety and depression that were characteristic of a posttrauma response; chronic health problems, such as asthma, that were exacerbated by years of stress; and social and behavioral conflicts.

This descriptive account of the strengths of homeless women is a preliminary finding, for while saturation was reached in terms of the four major categories, varying properties of these categories demand further investigation. For example, the process of homelessness revealed contrasting properties depending upon varying histories of abuse and addictions. These findings need to be compared further with cases that represent these different types and levels of victimization. For example, women who were addicted needed to "hit bottom" in a way that was quite different from women who were being battered.

In addition, questions were raised regarding the interpretation of self-described "strengths" of participants who have lived through extreme forms of abuse. Should qualities such as heightened arousal and performance in response to stress be accepted as strengths or interpreted as symptoms of a posttrauma syndrome? Related to this question is whether the qualities necessary for survival under such extreme conditions serve these women well in the long run. For example, selfless stoicism and stubborn single-minded determination made it hard for them to "let down" and accept sup-

port from others when support was available. When one participant, who showed an enormous capacity to take care of others (in spite of chronic health problems), was asked how she gets her needs met, she gave me a blank stare and replied that she didn't know what her needs were. Much popular literature addresses the needs of adult survivors of dysfunctional families and incest; however, popularized psychology tends to judge coping efforts from a middle class perspective and tends to pathologize selfless behavior through labels such as codependency.[28] Interpretations such as these seem to minimize the survival value and the heroic nature of the struggle these women have been through.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING

Nurses who work in community health, primary care, and mental health provider roles are in a unique position to be able to help women in homeless conditions. Nurses can help these women to imagine alternatives to their situation by letting them know another reality. For example, a counselor was the first to tell one participant that being beaten by her husband was not normal. Nurses also need to realize that it takes time for a woman to muster the courage to leave her primary connections in life, and she will not do so until she has exhausted all possibilities for hope in that situation. However, a nurse can be one of the persons who help a woman believe she deserves better and has what it takes to be able to follow her own path toward a better life.

Interpersonal strengths identified in this study suggest that nurses can serve as part of a woman's support network by showing unconditional acceptance, pointing out her unique strengths, and allowing her opportunities to contribute rather than just offering "charity." As Baumann observed,[18] becoming too involved in trying to correct these clients' "deficiencies" may disempower them.

Nurses also need to become involved at a political level to work for social change.[2,28] Not only do we need to advocate for policies that address the needs of the homeless, but we need to advocate for programs that address the deplorable social conditions of those who live in poverty, and prevent the abuse and exploitation of the women and children in these situations.

The next step for those women who have overcome homelessness seems to be to negotiate a place for themselves in relation to "mainstream" culture that does not negate their history and their struggle. Nurses can facilitate this integration and create new meaning by acknowledging these women as heroic figures rather than victims, thus transforming their stigma and shame into pride and self-appreciation for what they have overcome.

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