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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Valerie Karen Ambrose entitled "'It's Like a Mountain": The Lived Experience of Homeless College Students." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Educational Psychology and Research.

Mary F. Ziegler, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Ralph Brockett, Gary Skolits, Colleen Gilrane

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Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

“It’s Like a Mountain”: The Lived Experience of Homeless College Students

A Dissertation Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Valerie Karen Ambrose

August 2016

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Todd Juhasz, and my parents, Ann and Don Ambrose, for their unwavering support and unconditional love. I could not have finished this journey without them. Also, I dedicate this to both of my grandmothers, Karin Welch and Muriel Ambrose. Both of them would have liked to have gone to college, and they would have excelled, but neither of them had the opportunity. This is for them.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe the experience of college for homeless students. Using a phenomenological approach, the researcher completed interviews in which participants were asked to describe what college was like for them. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a hermeneutic approach. All interviews were analyzed within the contexts of each other to identify themes. The participants all lived in a world of homelessness that they could never fully ignore. The world of homelessness was grounded in the contexts of the body and other people. An encompassing central theme of “Escaping the Homeless World through College” wove throughout the interviews as students described the ways in which college did or would help them escape. This central theme was divided into long- and short-term escapes. Three themes emerged within the central theme including: (a) “Meeting Basic Needs,” (b) “Emotional Stress,” and (c) “Isolation.” Each theme revealed the ways in which the world of homelessness intruded on and created barriers to the participants’ college goals. The theme “Meeting Basic Needs” contained the sub-theme “Lack of Ability to Focus on Studies” and the theme “Isolation” contained the sub-theme of “Independence.” Study findings suggest that homeless college students experience physical, emotional, and interpersonal challenges that hinder their ability to perform in school even though they are motivated to attain a college degree that they think will enable them to escape homelessness and find a job that will provide stability and security.

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Chapter I

Introduction

We live in one of the most unequal societies in the developed world (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). In their far-reaching interdisciplinary study, social epidemiologists Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) show how detrimental economic inequality is for a society's members. For example, they assert, "as affluent societies have grown richer, there have been long-term rises in rates of anxiety, depression and numerous other social problems" (p. 6). In fact, the problems associated with poverty occur more often and with more severity in unequal societies. Homelessness is one of the symptoms of an unequal society and is often caused by these social problems: situational crises, societal structures, and distorted forms of capitalism (Belcher & Singer, 1988; Clapham, 2003; Goode & Maskovsky, 2002; Snow & Anderson, 1993).

Homelessness has been conceptualized in multiple ways. Lee, Tyler, and Wright (2010) assert that sociologists have come to a "rough agreement" (p. 509) about a conceptual model of the causes of homelessness. This model consists of macro- and micro-level events, structures, and characteristics that tend to precede homelessness. Once a person is homeless, there are two main ways the U.S. Government and scholars have categorized those who are homeless. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (U.S. DHUD, 2012) focuses on the criteria that would qualify one for services. This tends to be a snapshot of the person's life at the moment—an immediate look at the person or family's situation.

In contrast, scholarship tends to focus on the broader picture of homelessness—the causes, interventions, and outcomes, for example. The categories that appear most often in sociological literature are chronic, episodic, and temporary homelessness. Chronic homelessness is when one is in a shelter or lives on the streets for an extended period of time; essentially, one

is permanently homeless (Lee et al., 2010). Episodic homelessness is when one moves back and forth from housing to homelessness. And, temporary homelessness is when one is homeless for a short time, but manages to find housing and keep it. In recent years, scholars have begun to compare single homeless adults with homeless families. Homeless families tend to consist of single mothers with children and have fewer mental or addiction problems in contrast to the disabled, mentally ill, and/or addicted older single male who has been the traditional face of homelessness (Culhane, Metraux, Park, Schretzman, & Valente, 2007). Also, familial homelessness is the fastest growing subgroup of the homeless; Gupton (2009) contends “the face of homelessness [is] shift[ing] from adult males with mental illness to women with children” (p. 176).

Homelessness and Education

Particularly in the United States, “educational attainment is by far the most important characteristic for predicting earnings” (Julian, 2012). Also, according to U.S. Census Data, each educational milestone—completing some high school, earning a high school diploma, completing some college, earning an associates or bachelor’s degree—corresponds with a higher average yearly salary (Julian & Kominski, 2011). Therefore, education can assist people in avoiding some of the causes of homelessness such as a job loss (micro) or an exorbitant cost of living (macro). If we can help those who fall into homelessness for macro and/or micro economic reasons to increase their educational levels, it follows that they may be better able to regain housing and remain housed.

Governmental Response

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (MVA, 1987) is the federal legislation aimed at dealing with the problem of homelessness, which includes The McKinney Education of

Homeless Children and Youth Program. Initially, there was a provision for adult education, but its funding was cut in 1996 (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2006). The purpose of the McKinney-Vento Act and its provision for children's education is essentially to make sure homeless children are enrolled in school as much as possible (U.S. DHUD, 2013). Therefore, homeless children are identified for services and tracked by the schools and federal government, but this is not the case for homeless adult students. Recent scholarship has turned to the problem of college access for those students who grew up in families that deal with housing insecurity (Case, 2013; Hallett, 2010; Tierney & Hallett, 2012; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).

Homeless College Students

A growing segment of our college student body is homeless (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Eisenberg, 2015; National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth [NAEHCY], 2014; Paden, 2012; Sackett, 2015). Unfortunately, these students are also difficult to identify because the government and colleges do not track them (or do so in a cursory manner) and the students are often afraid of being stigmatized (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009; Danielson, 2011; Karinshak, 1996; Paden, 2012; Sackett, 2015). Perhaps as a result of this difficulty in identifying and tracking homeless college students, there is little adult education literature dealing with this group. In searches of the adult education journals, I was only able to find one article dealing with homeless college students, and it was a practitioner piece (Karinshak, 1996). Searches in other disciplines—counseling, social work, sociology, and/or higher education—resulted in a few articles about traditional aged students at 4-year institutions. In those cases, the focus was on the supports that exist for homeless students in the college, rather than the experiences of those students. In the last few years, governmental agencies have published reports on the little that is known about these students (NAEHCY, 2014; Sackett, 2015), and the

Wisconsin HOPE Lab conducted a survey of 4,000 college students about their living situations (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2015). However, these reports are only the beginning of this important conversation. Therefore, there is a dearth of information about homeless college students and even less understanding of what college is like for them.

Nontraditional Students and College

While little has been written about homeless college students, they may fit into the nontraditional student literature. Nontraditional college students are defined in three ways: students over the age of 23 (or 25), students with particular backgrounds (e.g., being a first-generation college student), and factors that may cause a student to drop out (e.g., role-conflicts; Clark, 2012; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Kim, Sax, Lee, & Hagedorn, 2010; Philibert, 2005). Also, nontraditional college students are the fastest growing group of students attending college (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Wyatt, 2011). Studies on nontraditional college students have shown that they are often at higher risk of not completing their college educations because of life pressures and backgrounds, yet they have also been found to be more intrinsically motivated than traditional college students (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013; Taylor & House, 2010; Wyatt, 2011).

The nontraditional student research that most pertains to homeless college students is that which focuses on first-generation and low-income students and their social and cultural capital deficits. Essentially, first-generation and low-income students may not know anyone who has been to college (social capital) and who can assist them in understanding the application process, how to act in class, and even the importance of college (cultural capital; Karp, 2011; Tierney & Hallett, 2012). This lack of social and cultural capital can be a contributing factor in these students' feelings of not fitting in and of a desire to quit college.

Homeless college students have not been explicitly singled out as a particular subgroup of nontraditional students; however, studies that focus on this population will add to the adult education literature that focuses on nontraditional students. Learning more about homeless college students will assist researchers, instructors, administrators, and staff in their understanding of this particular population and the nontraditional student body at large, enabling us to better serve this growing group of students.

Statement of the Problem

When it comes to education, critical theorists such as Paolo Freire (2000) and Henry Giroux (2008) have called for more attention to be given to the education of those who do not have the power in a society. One of the most powerless groups in American society is the homeless. There have been some efforts amongst homeless populations to agitate for change and some have been successful, such as securing the right to vote and expanding housing opportunities (Lee et al., 2010). However, many of these movements lose momentum through the loss of their more talented organizers, who are more likely to exit homelessness, and because of the vast power differentials between the homeless and the community decision-makers. Lee et al. state, “any attempt to change a community’s response to homelessness can ignite fierce opposition” (2010, p. 512), and there seems to be a continual pendulum swing between punitive and supportive initiatives in communities.

Also, homelessness is becoming more of an issue for college students. Paden (2012) states, “A growing and often unidentified segment of students are those who are essentially homeless” (p. 669). While homelessness is increasing amongst college students, the students are difficult to identify, track, and assist because of fears of stigmatization and a lack of institutional attention (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009; Danielson, 2011; Karinshak, 1996; Paden, 2012). These

issues also present barriers in attempts to research homeless college students and their needs, lives, and choices. Without an understanding of the college lives of homeless students, we are underserving many of our students and may be missing opportunities to break down some of the barriers that keep people from escaping homelessness. This study will begin to remedy this gap in the literature by exploring the experience of homeless college students in hopes of beginning a dialogue about and building awareness of this heretofore-invisible population.

Purpose of the Study

Studies have shown that students who are homeless during their K–12 schooling have more barriers to accessing college than those students who have not been homeless (Tierney & Hallett, 2012). Similar barriers may affect homeless adults who would like to go to college. Also, while we know quite a bit about nontraditional students such as veterans, minorities, and disabled college students, few studies have looked at any aspect of homeless college students' lives, let alone their experiences of college. Therefore, there has been a lack of qualitative and quantitative research that explores how homeless students make meaning of their experiences in college. In this study, I bring those experiences and the voices of homeless college students to the forefront. The best way to understand what an experience is like for someone is to ask him or her about it. So, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experience of homeless students in college.

Research Question

The research question I explored in this study was: What are homeless college students' experiences of college? A qualitative study provided an opportunity to give voice to the experience of college by students who were homeless while enrolled in college. The purpose of phenomenological studies is to uncover the essence of an experience so that it may be better

understood (Thomas & Pollio, 2002; van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological researchers want to know what the experience is like to the participants and do not want to influence the participants' responses by focusing the study on other researcher-chosen topics that may influence the responses of the participants; therefore, the study may only have one research question (Thomas & Pollio, 2002; van Manen, 1990).

Research Paradigm

In order to explain why I chose the phenomenological research method, I first described my ontological (beliefs about reality) and epistemological (how people can know about each other, things, or phenomenon) leanings. I then described phenomenology and why I believed phenomenology best fit myself as a researcher in combination with my research question.

Ontology & Epistemology

In constructivism, multiple realities exist and both individuals and groups create these realities (Glesne, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Hatch, 2002). I do think that societal structures have a strong influence on our identity development, but I believe that people have their own ways of understanding their experiences and creating their realities. For Guba and Lincoln (1998), constructivists think realities are “mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature (although elements are often shared among many individuals and even across cultures)” (p. 206). Constructivist research can be seen in the “co-construction” (Hatch, 2002, p. 15) of reality that is enacted by the researcher and the participant. Therefore, as a researcher I worked with the participants to identify and frame their experiences of the college while being homeless.

Qualitative Approach: Phenomenology

Hatch (2002) asserts, “Qualitative research seeks to understand the world from the perspectives of those living in it” (p. 7). Therefore, the experiences of people are important to understand in order to learn what shapes a particular group’s or person’s world. In reference to the importance of understanding college students’ experiences, Karp (2011) states, “Students create their own understandings of college, and these understandings influence their learning and the ways that they experience attempts to improve their outcomes” (p. 21). Along with my ontological and epistemological predisposition for qualitative methods, I believed my interest in the experience of homeless students in college strongly led me to a phenomenological study because phenomenology attempts to understand the realities that people develop (Thomas & Pollio, 2002; van Manen, 1990). Hatch (2002) states that in hermeneutic phenomenology, “multiple, socially constructed realities exist and that the meanings individuals give to their experiences ought to be the objects of study” (p. 30). It assumes that there are specific elements of a certain type of experience that can be found across different people’s descriptions of that experience, and this is often in response to societal and cultural frameworks. There is room for difference in experience, but there are certain elements that are in common. Through these methods, I explored the meaning my participants gave to their experiences in the context of their realities.

Definitions, Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

Throughout this dissertation, some key terms will be used. Following are some definitions:

1. Homeless: As stated in the introduction and the literature review, the government and scholars of homelessness have used various terms to describe and define homeless

people. In this study, participants self-identified as homeless or having been homeless, so homelessness will have a personal definition for each participant. All participants fit within the categories of couch surfing (staying with friends), living in a car, or sleeping outside/in a shelter.

2. College student: For the purposes of this study, a college student will be defined as anyone 18 years old or older who is/was taking at least one class for credit at a community college, college, or university.

The first assumption of this study is that the experience of homeless college students is different from that of other college students and thereby worthy of investigation. Next, phenomenological research methods illuminate the experiences of understudied groups. Finally, an increased understanding of the experiences of homeless college students is an important step in making sure this population is appropriately and adequately supported at their institutions.

This study was limited to the relatively small sample size of nine participants culled from the college populations in a city in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. This sample size is in keeping with phenomenological practices (Thomas & Pollio, 2002), but this research cannot be generalized beyond the experiences of the participants in the study. Participants were found through flyers on campuses and direct contact with the researcher. About half of the participants were former students of the researcher, so familiarity and rapport with the researcher may be important in the recruitment of participants from this difficult to identify population. Also, most of the participants chose not to utilize the shelter system and many other services; therefore, it is possible that college students who do utilize those services may have different experiences than those captured here. Moreover, the majority of the participants were attending community college, which means this study may not be representative of the experience of homeless college

students at 4-year colleges. Finally, the focus of this study was the experiences of homeless college students; thus, it may not be applicable to other populations and/or other settings. For example, homeless GED students may have a very different experience than homeless students in college. Therefore, this research will only provide insight into this particular population and participant group.

Significance of the Study

Both the quantitative and qualitative data on homeless college students is very limited. Since so little is known about this experience, it is important to begin to understand the phenomenon in order to be sure that interventions and services that target this population are needed and wanted. Homeless college students tend to be an invisible population; in fact, I was only aware of the homeless status of one of the five participants who were former students while I was teaching them. This research study brings these students and their stories into the forefront, and it will help instructors, administrators, and policymakers better understand the experiences of this population. The knowledge of the motivations for these students attending college as well as the barriers to learning that they experience will be useful in informing future initiatives and services that are targeted to this population. Finally, this study adds to the very limited, but growing, body of literature about these students and illuminates areas that are in need of future study.

Overview of the Following Chapters

In chapter II, a review of the pertinent literature framing the topic is presented. Chapter III outlines the methods used to conduct the research project and to analyze the data collected. Chapter IV presents the results of this analysis. Finally, chapter V provides a detailed discussion

of the findings and their connections to research and theory along with implications for further research and practice.

Chapter II

Literature Review

In this chapter, I begin with a big picture look at American homelessness, including the research on the causes of homelessness and the ways the homeless have been categorized. I then move into an overview of the legislation that has been passed by the federal government in an attempt to make sure homeless children are educated and the research that has been done on homeless children's educational experiences. Finally, I look at the research that has been done on homeless college students and nontraditional populations in college.

Economic Inequality

“As affluent societies have grown richer, there have been long-term rises in rates of anxiety, depression and numerous other social problems” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, p. 6). The United States is one of the most unequal countries in the world and that inequality brings with it an increased occurrence of social ills such as mental illness, violence, and poverty (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Income inequality in the United States has increased to the greatest levels since the 1920s (McCall & Percheski, 2010), and Lee et al. (2010) state, “Homeless persons anchor the low end of a vast and growing wealth disparity in the United States” (p. 502). In 2010, the poorest half of the population in the United States owned 1.1% of the country's wealth in contrast to the wealthiest 10%, who owned 74.5% of the nations wealth (Levine, 2012). Social mobility is also lower in more unequal countries, meaning it is quite difficult to move out of poverty (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). This lack of social mobility may cause hopelessness and despair, which contribute to the continuation of the cycle of poverty throughout the generations (Corcoran, 1995; McCall & Percheski, 2010). Furthermore, those who are in poverty have a

higher risk of becoming homeless, particularly if they live in an area where the cost of living is high (Lee et al., 2010; Quigley, Raphael, & Smolensky, 2001).

What Causes Homelessness?

But what exactly causes homelessness? Lee et al. (2010) assert that sociologists have come to a “rough agreement” (p. 509) about a conceptual model of the causes of homelessness. This model consists of macro- and micro-level events, structures, and characteristics that tend to precede homelessness. First, macro-level precursors to poverty are broader societal issues and organization, such as distorted forms of capitalism (unequal income distribution), economics (poverty, high joblessness), and policy (welfare reform, mental health practices, housing, drugs; Belcher & Singer, 1988; Blau, 1992; Burt, 1992; Jencks, 1994; Lee et al., 2010; Quigley et al., 2001; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Wright, Rubin, & Devine, 1998). Historically, rates of homelessness tend to be the greatest where affordable housing is difficult to find because of the high cost of rent and lack of vacancies (Lee, Price-Spratlen, & Kanan, 2003; Quigley et al., 2001; Wright, Donley, & Gotham, 2008). In 2011, those with the lowest 20% of income who were housed spent an average of 87% of their income on housing (National Alliance to End Homelessness [NAEH], 2013). Affordable housing is defined as costing a household “no more than 30 percent of its income” (NAEH, 2013, p. 18). This high expenditure on housing puts those who are in the bottom 20% of the U.S. income scale at risk of homelessness.

In contrast, micro-level precursors to poverty are individual life events and personal characteristics such as psychological disorders, institutionalization, abuse and neglect as a child, death of a spouse, and/or domestic violence (Bassuk, Perloff, & Dawson, 2001; Crane et. al, 2005; Jasinski, Wesely, Wright, & Mustaine, 2010; Koegel, Melamid, & Burnam, 1995; Tyler, 2006; Wright, 1990; Yoder, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2001). The macro issues tend to exacerbate the

micro. For example, the stress caused by lack of healthcare may cause a person to feel more helpless and depressed, which may then lead to her/him to be less punctual to and attentive at work, which leads to him being fired. There are buffers that soften the macro and micro influences such as supportive family and friends and effective social services (Lee et al., 2010). However, it is the strength of these buffers in relation to the macro and micro issues that may be the deciding factor as to whether the individual will become homeless.

Who Are the Homeless?

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development conducts an annual “point-in-time” estimate in which they conduct national surveys to determine homelessness rates. In 2015, 564,708 people were homeless on a given night in January (U.S. DHUD, 2015). While the rates of homelessness decreased nationally, it increased in 17 states between 2014 and 2015. In order to better serve and understand those who are homeless, the U.S. Government and researchers have developed categories of homelessness. There are two main ways to categorize the homeless. The first is utilizing the definitions created by the U.S. Government. Also, according to the U.S. DHUD (2013), the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act of 2009 provides six main categories of homelessness (both for individuals and families): (a) those who do not have adequate or permanent nighttime residence, (b) those whose nighttime residence is not meant for human sleep, (c) those who live in a shelter, (d) those who are exiting an institution and do not have consistent nighttime residence or live in a shelter, (e) those at imminent risk of homelessness, (f) those who moved frequently in a short period of time, and (g) those fleeing domestic violence and/or a life-threatening situation.

The term “literally homeless” encompasses the first three U.S. DHUD (2012) categories in their “Criteria and Recordkeeping Requirements for Definition of Homeless” document (p. 1).

The main difference between the group that is literally homeless and the group that is fleeing domestic violence is the violence factor. The other differences are that there are shelters that are particularly aimed at helping the victims of domestic violence and that domestic violence adds another obstacle to finding housing. Those who are homeless due to domestic violence are more prone to “anxiety, depression, and somatization than those who have never experienced abuse, a situation that mitigates against their ability to leave public assistance, to find and retain long-term employment and independence, and to succeed at education and training efforts” (Rice, 2001, p. 362). Therefore, the added burden of domestic violence may make it more difficult for these homeless women to become self-sufficient and provide for their children. However, the women who flee domestic violence contribute to one of the largest groups suffering from the economic downturn because the economic stress can cause more violence in the home; Gupton (2009) contends “the face of homelessness [is] shift[ing] from adult males with mental illness to women with children” (p. 176). However, in a synthesis of the literature on the rates of homelessness in the United States and Europe, Shinn (2010) did not parse these two groups. She reported that the percentage of Americans who will be literally homeless at some point in their lives (including domestic violence victims) has been estimated anywhere between 6.2% and 8.1%.

The literature on those at imminent risk of homelessness and the group consisting of those who moved more than twice in the last 60 days tends to be focused on the causes of homelessness and what may push an individual into homelessness. This connects to the macro and micro causes of homelessness, some of which are being low-income or losing a job (see subsection “What Causes Homelessness?” in chapter II). The newest addition to the imminent risk of homelessness category is the phenomenon of *doubling-up*, which is when two or more

families live in the same dwelling. This was a “controversial inclusion” (Tierney & Hallett, 2012, p. 47) because these people are living somewhere that is designated for human habitation. However, there are more people in the apartment or house than were intended by the builders. There is also the question of whether people who are *doubled-up* will self-identify as homeless.

The second way to categorize the homeless is through the groupings of chronically, episodically, and temporarily homeless (Culhane et al., 2007). The literature on homelessness tends to focus on chronic homelessness. These are those people who stay in shelters or on the streets for extended periods (Lee et al., 2010). The chronically homeless accounts for approximately 10% of the homeless population (Culhane et al., 2007). They also tend to be the least healthy group (Kushel, Vittinghoff, & Haas, 2001; Wright, 1990) and have behavioral or other health problems that make it difficult to become housed without the assistance of a program (macro). The literally homeless (U.S. Government label) includes those who are chronically homeless, but also includes those who are newly homeless or perhaps episodically or even temporarily homeless, so long as they fulfill one of the three criteria. The episodically homeless are another 10% of the homeless population, and they tend to go from homelessness to housing and back (Culhane et al., 2007). About half of the episodically homeless tend to have behavioral health issues, which put them at higher risk for a return to homelessness. Finally, the other 80% of the homeless population are those who are temporarily homeless (Culhane et al., 2007) and would also be included under the literally homeless umbrella. These tend to be people who are only homeless for a short while and then manage to find housing.

The most recent trend in scholarship on homelessness moves the focus away from the single adult to the homeless family. Culhane et al. (2007) state “shelter use patterns are fairly consistent with published results from the single adults’ typology” (p. 10). This means the

patterns seen are similar to the second system of categorization: chronic, episodic, and temporary. However, there are some differences between the adult single homeless person and the adult head of the family in a homeless family. Heads of families tend to be younger female high school completers who have more contact with family or other housed adults (Burt & Cohen, 1989; Burt, Aron, Lee, & Valente, 2001; Fischer & Breakey, 1991; Metraux & Culhane, 1999; North & Smith, 1993; Shinn & Weitzman, 1996). Very few differences have been found between homeless and low-income mothers when it comes to mental stability, work history, education levels, and criminal activity. Culhane et al. (2007) state,

It could be argued that the differences that *have* been found are confounded with the selection effects of the homelessness process, including a greater degree of residential instability among homeless mothers, comparable but more strained social networks, more common separations of mothers from children and other family members, and higher rates of domestic violence. (p. 3)

The macro differences seem to be the deciding factor between being housed and being homeless; those mothers who are homeless have lower incomes and less public and private support.

Homelessness and Education

Poverty can become an intergenerational inheritance. Corcoran (1995) states, “parental economic resources consistently predict children’s adult attainments” (p. 261). Therefore, children whose parents are poor and/or homeless are much more likely to also be poor and potentially homeless in adulthood. However, when education spending in a country is high and is fairly allocated (particularly in early childhood), the influence of poverty on the following generation decreases (Abington & Blankenau, 2013; Mayer & Lopoo, 2008). Putting money into early childhood educational programs encourages development of skills, and subsidizing college

enables students to fulfill their potentials (Abington & Blankenau, 2013; Restuccia & Urrutia, 2004). This illuminates the importance of education to the amelioration of the problem of poverty.

Furthermore, “educational attainment is by far the most important characteristic for predicting earnings” (Julian, 2012). According to U.S. Census data, attainment of college degrees tends to have a strong positive relationship with an increase in income (Julian & Kominski, 2011). Those who complete a college degree will make approximately \$20,000 more a year than those with only a high school diploma. Even those who have completed some college make more on average than those who stop at a high school diploma. Therefore, the importance of college to the life chances of those without a degree is clear.

Low levels of education can be seen as both macro and micro causes of homelessness. Areas with high cost of living may cause those with low-education levels to become homeless because they cannot make enough money to afford housing. Those with the lowest levels of education also have the highest rates of unemployment—37% of those with an eighth grade or lower education and 35% of those with a ninth to 12th grade education are unemployed, in contrast with 22% of high school graduates and 17% of those who have some college (Julian & Kominski, 2011).

Government Response

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (1987) is the first legislation aimed at dealing with the problem of homelessness (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2006). It has maintained its validity and funding throughout the years. The MVA was originally passed in 1987 and has been updated periodically. In 1987, there was a provision for adult education, specifically “literacy training and academic remediation” (U.S. Department of Education, 1994);

however, in 1996, the funding for this program was cut completely (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2006). Most recently, in 2009, President Obama signed an amendment titled the HEARTH Act that expanded the definition of homeless as well as increased the emphasis on program performance (Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act, 2009).

The purpose of the McKinney-Vento Act and its provision for children's education is essentially to make sure homeless children are enrolled in school as much as possible (U.S. DHUD, 2013). Therefore, schools need to identify those students whose families are dealing with housing insecurity and provide as much assistance as possible for those students' educational needs (Canfield, Teasley, Abell, & Randolph, 2012). It does appear that the MVA increases the number of homeless students who attend educational programs (Miller, 2009); however, Hendricks and Barkley (2012) found it "fails to make a significant positive impact on the academic achievement of homeless students" (p. 184). In any case, once a student is out of the K-12 system, the MVA no longer applies and the educational assistance disappears.

In an attempt to improve college access for "unaccompanied homeless youth" the College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007 and the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 were passed by Congress. This made these students independent, rather than having to find their parents and get them to sign financial aid forms. They were also intended to "encourage federally-funded college access programs to serve these students" (NAEHCY, 2014, p. 1). However, after conducting a survey of 900 professionals whose work is influenced by these acts, the NAEHCY found that there are still significant barriers that homeless youth experience in attempting to gain access to financial aid including lack of documentation and bureaucracy.

K–12 Homelessness and Its Effect on College Students

Recent scholarship has turned to the problem of college access for those students who grew up in families that deal with homelessness (Case, 2013; Hallett, 2010; Tierney & Hallett, 2012; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Tierney and Hallett (2012) focus on the lack of social capital homeless students are able to develop by virtue of their low-income status, which is complicated by their lack of consistency in schooling. Tierney and Hallett maintain that the largest factor here is the low-income status—there is often a lack of guidance about and assistance with all elements of the social process. However, they also state that schools and/or other agencies need to do a better job of maintaining relationships with the students once they move so that the social capital that the students do have can be better utilized.

Additionally, homeless children experience “hunger and poor nutrition, health problems and lack of health and mental health care, developmental delays, psychological problems, and academic underachievement” (Rafferty & Shinn, 1991, p. 1176). They also have higher rates of substance abuse and unprotected sex (Edidin, Ganim, Hunter, & Karnik, 2012; Halcón & Lifson, 2004). Combined with these issues, Tierney and Hallett (2012) assert that homeless youths have a desire to remain unidentified as homeless in order to avoid the stigma. However, this makes it more difficult for them to receive the assistance they need in their current and future educational situations. Also, the transient nature of their lives cause them to have difficulty in maintaining relationships with those who may be able to assist them in understanding and maneuvering through the high school and then college systems.

Homeless College Students

Unfortunately, many of the people who are experiencing the negative effects of homelessness are college students. In fact, “[a] growing and often unidentified segment of

students are those who are essentially homeless” because of the recession (Paden, 2012, p. 669). While homelessness is increasing amongst college students, the students are difficult to identify, track, and assist because of fears of stigmatization (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009; Danielson, 2011; Karinshak, 1996; Paden, 2012). Not only are colleges not tracking these students, the U.S. Government has only begun this effort. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) began including a field to indicate homeless status in 2007, and in the 2012–2013 school year, 58,158 students indicated they fit that category (NAEHCY, 2014). However, the NAEHCY indicated that this is likely an underreported status.

As for financial assistance, the MVA as amended in 2009 provides funding at the federal level for services for many groups, such as veterans and domestic violence victims (U.S. DHUD, 2013). In terms of education, the only provisions of that sort are made for students in the K–12 system. Once students are no longer in high school, they may continue to receive services as adults under the Act, but their education is no longer a part of those services. The College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007 and the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 enabled homeless youth who were not traveling with their families to fill out FAFSAs without having to get their parents to fill out financial forms or provide their tax information. Previously, in order to access financial aid, the student would need to become legally emancipated if she or he were unable to provide these forms (NAEHCY, 2014). This allows more homeless youth to access financial aid, but these acts do not provide targeted support akin to the McKinney-Vento Act’s provisions for K–12 students. Unfortunately, the lack of governmental and college identification of homeless students presents barriers to research on these students and their needs, lives, and choices. If homeless college students are essentially invisible, how can services be developed,

and how can these students locate the services that might help them gain stability in their home lives and ameliorate the negative effects of homelessness?

In spite of these challenges, a few studies have been done on homeless college students; however, these studies stem primarily from social work, psychology, and counseling fields. In the adult education field, little research has been done on the experiences of homeless college students. In a search using the term *homeless* with no other limiters in the major journals in my field—*Journal of Developmental Education*, *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, *Adult Education Quarterly*, and *Adult Learning*—only *Adult Learning* published an article about homelessness, and that was in 1996. This article consisted of one woman’s tips on teaching life-skills to homeless students (Karinshak, 1996), but it was not a research article and did not give insight into the lives of those students. Where is the field of adult education’s contribution to the literature on the homeless?

Encouragingly, the Wisconsin HOPE Lab has begun to focus on college students’ housing and food challenges. In 2015, the lab conducted a survey of 4,000 community college students, which indicated, “half of all community college students are struggling with food and/or housing insecurity. Fully 20 percent are hungry and 13 percent are homeless” (Goldrick-Rab et al., p. 2). These numbers include many students who are receiving financial aid. This shows that, at least at community colleges, homelessness is a major problem. This study also showed that the average independent student from the lowest income quartile (\$21,000 median annual income) “pays *more* than his or her *total annual income*” (emphasis mine) to attend community college, even after grant money has been utilized.

The research that has been done on college students by the social work, psychology, and counseling fields resulted in a few studies about traditional-aged students (18–23 or 25) at 4-year

institutions. These students are not usually homeless when they begin college; rather, their homelessness is caused by the students trying to escape domestic violence, losing a job, or their parents being unable to pay fees during their tenure at college (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009; Paden, 2012). According to Paden (2012), these students typically end up couch surfing, living in a car, or camping in the woods near campus. However, they still have the benefits of being part of the university—they can utilize facilities such as the library in order to study and use gym showers. In contrast, Berg-Cross and Green in the article “The Impact of the Recession on College Students” (2009) suggest that for students who are experiencing economic hardship, the 4-year institution should recommend transferring to community colleges. This would help students better afford an education, but Berg-Cross and Green did question how this would affect the life trajectory of the student. For example, the focus in community colleges tends to be more vocational and less on liberal arts. This may funnel students toward lower paying careers than were initially in their life plans. These students also tend to have difficulty navigating the college bureaucracy. Those who are successful create what Crutchfield (2012) terms a *safety harness* of supportive adults, financial aid, and work that supports them in dealing with the extra stressors that they experience.

Additionally, Crutchfield (2012) finds homeless students suffer from a feeling of isolation from both their homeless and their collegiate peers. This isolation is problematic because of the psychological ramifications, but also because the relationships that are developed among the homeless have proven to be beneficial in multiple ways, as shown in the broader literature on homelessness (Dordick, 1997; Ennett, Bailey, & Federman, 1999; Molina, 2000; Smith, 2008). Some of these benefits include those of social interaction—which interestingly can create a safe space away from stigmatization—and locating food, employment, and services.

Research has also been done on youth who are in families that have unstable living situations, with a focus on the youths' engagement in college. Some of these students end up living doubled-up—two families living in the same house. As a result, these students will find extra motivation to attend college if the families are supportive of each other (Hallett, 2010). At the other end of the spectrum, in living situations where there are tensions between the families, these young people become less motivated to continue their educations.

But what about nontraditional students? There is an extensive body of research on nontraditional students in adult education and other related fields such as higher education. Nontraditional students are often identified as being at least 24 years old, employed, with a family, and likely to attend college part-time (Jenkins, 2009). My searches for literature on nontraditional homeless students followed the same pattern as my more general searches for, simply, *homeless* and *college*. Yet again, I did not discover any literature on older homeless students at 4-year institutions. Given that community colleges tend to attract a larger number of nontraditional, minority, and low-income students (Cohen & Brawer, 2003), the rates of homelessness are likely much higher at the community college than at traditional, 4-year colleges. Once more, in searches for *homeless* in community college journals, I did not find what I wanted. These searches resulted in literature that is focused on service learning programs in which the non-homeless students participate and on programs tailored to teach life skills to the homeless (Danielson, 2011), rather than on the homeless population *attending* the school.

The two articles that did mention homeless students were again from the social work field and were research studies on women leaving public assistance and the stressors and coping strategies of single mothers living in poverty. These two studies touched on the role of college in these women's lives. College was seen as a way to gain income because students could receive

financial aid (Gray, 2005). However, according to some of the women in Broussard, Joseph, and Thompson's (2012) study, loans and other social programs are seen by some of those utilizing them as "designed to [put] you in a ditch and not be able to crawl out" (p. 196). Therefore, financial aid may be a short-term solution to some of the dilemmas of homelessness, but in the long-term it may do more harm than good. In my own classroom, I have had students attend class long enough to be officially enrolled, and then they disappear for the rest of the semester. Other students have told me that some of these students did this for the financial aid money. It seems these students were not taking into account the bigger picture of having to pay the loan back or felt the short-term benefits outweighed the long-term detriments of this plan.

However, the importance of social programs in their support of women's academic achievement was borne out by Gray's (2005) finding that "All of the women who received housing assistance were convinced they could not have graduated from college without this help" (p. 319). More encouraging is Rice's (2001) assertion that even 1 year of college reduces the poverty rate by half for minority women. Hopefully, the right assistance and guidance through college can assist homeless students in avoiding the potential financial pitfalls of loans and gaining the benefits of education.

Nontraditional Students and College

While homeless college students have not been extensively studied, many other marginalized populations have been. In particular, the umbrella term *nontraditional students* encompass numerous groups of students who have different experiences, stresses, and needs than the *traditional* student. Even though the nontraditional student literature does not focus on homelessness, homeless students may very well be silently included in these studies because of the methods by which nontraditional students are identified. There tend to be three different

ways nontraditional students are defined in studies. The first focuses on the age of the student. Interest in nontraditional students began after WWII when veterans began attending college (Philibert, 2005). In these studies and those that have come since and have chosen to continue to focus on age in their definitions, traditional students are defined as 18–23 years old (or more recently, up to 25 years old), full-time students who live on campus (Clark, 2012; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Kim et al., 2010; Philibert, 2005). Therefore, nontraditional students are those who are older than the traditional students and who are attending part-time. The second definition tends to focus on the background of the student such as being a first generation college student, coming from a low socioeconomic background, being of a non-white ethnicity, or having a disability (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Kim et al., 2010). The third focuses on the factors that may cause students to stop attending school (Clark, 2012; Kim et al., 2010). In 1996, Horn and Carroll created a continuum that defines students as minimally, moderately, or highly nontraditional based on the number of nontraditional characteristics the student possesses. These characteristics are: delayed enrollment, part-time attendance for at least part of the year, full-time work while enrolled, financially independent in the eyes of financial aid systems, others depend upon the student (usually children), single parent status, and no high school diploma (GED or other high school completion method). Horn's nontraditional student continuum is still often cited and used to identify research participants as well as for statistical analyses of college trends (Horn & Carroll, 1996).

Nontraditional students are entering college at higher rates than traditional college students and are becoming the majority (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Wyatt, 2011). Different aspects of nontraditional students' college experiences have been studied. In general, as a result of their older age and different life experiences (in contrast to traditional college students),

nontraditional students have been found to have more stressors in their lives and role-conflicts that divert their attention from schooling (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2010). Nontraditional students often feel disengaged from college, and this disengagement coupled with other stressors can lead to attrition (Zepke & Leach, 2010). For example, Ishitani (2006) found that first-generation college students as well as students with (a) parents having little education, (b) low socioeconomic status, and/or (c) lack of financial aid negatively impacted their academics and social integration.

However, while nontraditional students are often at higher risk of not completing their college educations because of life pressures and backgrounds, they have also been found to be more intrinsically motivated than traditional college students (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013; Taylor & House, 2010; Wyatt, 2011). Interestingly, families have been found to be both a stressor and a motivating factor for nontraditional students. Wilsey (2013) states, “Although much research on the family lives of adult college students focuses on families as additional stressors, it is important to note that students’ families may also serve as significant motivators for college enrollment and achievement” (p. 209). Even while the increased stressors complicate their lives and make it difficult to continue with their studies, this intrinsic motivation can lead to higher grades than those earned by traditional students. Forbus et al. (2010) found “while non-traditional students were working more hours and dealing with more stress than traditional students, they also had higher academic success levels as measured by GPA” (p. 70).

Social capital. The fact that multiple groups from various backgrounds and with varying characteristics are included under the umbrella of nontraditional student can cause some confusion in the literature. This may be one reason why many researchers who study nontraditional students choose to focus on one or two particular groups. Taking into account

Tierney and Hallett's (2012) research on homeless adolescents and the barriers they experience to entering college, the areas of research that are most relevant to homeless college students would likely be the focus on those who are from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and/or first-generation college students. Students who are nontraditional because of their low-socioeconomic backgrounds or their first-generation college status have the most difficulty in figuring out the college system because of a lack of social and/or cultural capital (Karp, 2011; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Tierney & Hallett, 2012).

As defined by Tierney and Hallett (2012), social capital, "is a framework that enables or disables individuals and groups to accomplish particular goals through network development" (p. 49). Cultural capital can be seen as having a reciprocal relationship with social capital. Karp (2011) explains, "Cultural capital is generally defined and possessed by dominant groups; in postsecondary education that means that upper-class and well-educated elites define 'acceptable' behavior and the rules of the game" (p. 15). Therefore, if a student meets someone who can help him/her understand how he/she is expected to act in class, the student's social capital has helped develop his/her cultural capital. Similarly, if that same student behaves appropriately for the college culture in a class, he/she may make more positive connections with the others in class, thereby further developing his/her social capital. However, first generation, low-income, and homeless students are likely to have deficits in both social and cultural capital in relation to college (Karp, 2011; Pascarella et al., 2004; Tierney & Hallett, 2012). Therefore, those from upper- and upper-middle class backgrounds already know how to make their way through the college system and know what is expected of them. Those from other classes may not be aware of how to act or what is necessary in order to succeed. Karp (2011) also states that the lack of

cultural capital nontraditional students have may “negatively impact their academic outcomes or make them feel uncomfortable enough to exit postsecondary education” (p. 15).

Similarly, in Pascarella et al.’s (2004) study of first-generation college students, they found that these students were often unaware of the culture of college and the importance of college to their futures, particularly in the current globalized work context. However, they also found “the social capital gained through extracurricular and peer involvement during college may be a particularly useful way for first-generation students to acquire the additional cultural capital that helps them succeed academically and benefit cognitively” (p. 278). Unfortunately, first-generation students were also less likely to participate in these kinds of activities because they often lived off campus, worked, and attended school part-time. Likewise, Clark (2012) and Karp (2011) both found that personal connections with staff and faculty were important to the development of cultural capital and the persistence of low-income, nontraditional students.

Thus, this lack of social and cultural capital on the part of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and those who are first-generation college students presents a large barrier to these students’ collegiate success. Homeless college students would most likely fit into these segments of the nontraditional college student population. However, the research has not drilled down within these categories to look at these homeless college students in comparison to those who are low income and/or first generation but housed. Consequently, the adult education research discussion on nontraditional students is ripe for this segment of the student population to be identified. Hopefully, research on homeless college students will shed light on how to make their college experiences better and develop their social and cultural capital so they can succeed to the best of their abilities, while also strengthening the literature on best practices for all nontraditional college students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research on our increasing societal economic stratification and its effects on our society paint a bleak picture. Homelessness is often caused and exacerbated by economic inequality, but increases in educational level tend to be accompanied by increases in annual income. This helps to address the macro-level causes of homelessness, particularly when dealing with the high cost of living in an area. The U.S. Government has responded to the educational needs of homeless students by the creation of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (1987) and its provisions for children living in homeless families, the College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007, and the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008. The children covered by McKinney-Vento (1987) tend to experience a variety of issues that affect their K–12 schooling as well as their abilities to gain entrance to and perform in college. However, the experiences and the existence of homeless college students have been understudied; although, new studies are beginning to give us a picture of how many homeless college students there are and the financial constraints with which they deal. These students fit many of the criteria of nontraditional college students, particularly being from a low-socioeconomic background and/or a first-generation college student. This means they likely experience similar challenges with college, particularly a lack of social and cultural capital that may cause them to become frustrated and drop out. In order to understand who homeless college students are and what college is like for them, more research needs to be done on their experiences of college. This may lead to further research, likely similar to that which has been done on other nontraditional college groups.

Chapter III

Method

I begin the method section with a discussion of the purpose of the study and the research question and follow with an explanation of my reflexivity/subjectivity in relation to the problem, a clarification of my ontology and epistemology, and an exploration of how my ontology and epistemology led me to choose phenomenology as my method. I continue with a description of my participants and how I found them, a discussion of the data collection and data analysis processes I utilized, an account of how I addressed trustworthiness in my study, and end with a conclusion.

As stated in my introduction and literature review, homelessness is increasing amongst college students. These students are taking our classes, but the fact that they are homeless is often difficult to discern. This causes these students' particular needs to be invisible in our classrooms, and if this group follows the pattern of other nontraditional college students, it may be important for awareness to be raised and support to be increased. At this point in homeless college student scholarship, we do not know much about these students other than that they are attending our colleges and dealing with housing insecurity. We need to gain a better understanding of what the college experience is like for these students in order to begin these dialogues.

Thus, the purpose of this research was to describe the experience of homeless students in college. As Karp (2011) stated, "Students create their own understandings of college, and these understandings influence their learning and the ways that they experience attempts to improve their outcomes" (p. 21). A better understanding of the experiences of this population of students may enable us to interact with them, and all of our students, in a more responsive way. It may

also enable us to gain a more in depth view of the effects of growing economic inequality on our students and society at large. Since the purpose of this study was to describe the experience of homeless students in college, the most appropriate method was phenomenology. Creswell (2007) stated “a *phenomenological study* describes the meaning for several individuals of their *lived experiences* of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 57). Therefore, the research question for this study was: What are homeless college students’ experiences of college?

Reflexivity/Subjectivity

In qualitative research, it is important for researchers to be aware of their previous experiences with a group and/or phenomenon in order to be aware of bias and to make sure the research is focused. Hatch (2002) stated, “The capacities to be reflexive, to keep track of one’s influence on a setting, to bracket one’s biases, and to monitor one’s emotional responses are the same capacities that allow researchers to get close enough to human action to understand what is going on” (p. 10). Therefore, in this section I outline my prior experience with homeless college students and how I think this experience influenced my thinking about my research study. This kind of self-analysis enabled me to be more aware of how my reactions and thoughts might have influenced the study.

For 7 years, I have taught remedial reading and writing classes at community colleges in developmental and adult basic education programs (including GED prep). My interest in this topic began when a student approached me about her unstable living environment. She had been informed that she had to move out of her apartment but was unable to find new housing on such short notice. She had been staying with friends and sleeping in her car for the past few nights. She said she wanted to make me aware of the situation because she was going to look at apartments, and she might have to miss the next class to do so. She also wanted to let me know

why she had been distracted and was finding it difficult to complete homework. I was surprised because it had never crossed my mind that someone who was in college might be facing such experiences. My own family background was very supportive, and during my own college experiences, my biggest worries were passing tests and completing papers.

I soon discovered that what I thought was a unique situation was not an isolated incident—about once a semester a student has told me about his/her experiences with homelessness, either as a current worry or an experience prior to returning to school. Their stories were always meaningful to me, and I admired their determination to continue working toward a degree. However, my past experience with stories of students in similar situations created preconceived notions and preliminary conceptions of what the participants' experiences might have been like. Therefore, I continually revisited my conclusions to check for bias and attempt to get to the essence of what my participants are saying, not what I thought I would hear.

My experiences with homeless students affected how I understood and analyzed the data. I have not experienced homelessness myself, so that affected my choice of phenomenology as my method. I wanted to understand what college was like for these students, and I think that phenomenology with its focus on the experience of the participants was the best way for me to begin to gain an understanding. I also think that my status as an outsider may have better enabled me to receive this information from my participants because they needed to more fully explain their experiences to me than if they were explaining them to someone who had experienced college while homeless. Also, I am motivated to make this invisible population more visible to other college instructors in hopes that others will not be shocked like I was when a student opens up to them about the student's housing status. Accordingly, I decided to utilize a

phenomenological method in part because of its fit with the research question I wanted to ask but also because of my research paradigm.

Research Paradigm

In this section, I describe my ontological (beliefs about reality) and epistemological (how people can know about each other, things, or phenomenon) leanings. Along with my research question, these beliefs and ideas led me to choose phenomenology as my method. I then describe why I think phenomenology best fits myself as a researcher in combination with my research question.

Ontology

“The ontological question: What is the form and nature of reality, and therefore, what is there that can be known about it” (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 201)? Under constructivism, there are multiple realities in the universe and both individuals and groups create these realities (Glesne, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Hatch, 2002). I strongly resonate with this. I have lived in many different parts of the United States and in Canada, and in my experience, people live out very different realities in different places. Hatch’s (2002) description of a constructivist viewpoint where, “universal, absolute realities are unknowable, and the objects of inquiry are individual perspectives or constructions of reality” (p. 15) resonates with my experiences. I do think that societal structures have a strong influence on our identity development, but I believe that people have their own ways of understanding their experiences and creating their realities. For Guba and Lincoln (1998), constructivists think realities are “mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature (although elements are often shared among many individuals and even across cultures)” (p. 206).

I believe historical and social structures are very strong influences on who we are and what we believe, but I also believe that, in large part, individuals create their own realities. I see this played out in my classroom every day. In my professional career, the vast majority of my students have been from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and minority ethnic groups. From the stories they share, their life experiences have apparently been very much shaped by their environments and societal pressures. I often leave my classroom believing I am very lucky that I experienced the privilege that I did because it has enabled me to explore my interests while having little fear for my life and safety (other than those restrictions that are put on me by virtue of being a woman). However, I think it most interesting to find out what realities individuals have created in response to societal pressure. Many of my students have overcome great barriers that society has placed in their way. For example, one student had never learned to read and had been cheated by his girlfriend out of thousands of dollars, but he had managed to save up enough money from his job in construction to retire. This is not something I would have expected from someone who was functionally illiterate.

Epistemology

“The epistemological question: What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known” (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 201)? As stated earlier, I think that reality is subjective. Hatch (2002) discusses the “co-construction” (p. 15) of reality that is enacted by the researcher and the participant. Guba and Lincoln (1998) state, “the conventional distinction between ontology and epistemology disappears” (p. 207) in constructivism because of this co-construction of reality. Therefore, as a researcher I worked with the participants to identify and frame their experiences of the college while they were

homeless. By necessity, the themes I found through my analysis were filtered through my own cognitive lenses, but I did utilize methods to enhance the trustworthiness of this study.

Qualitative Approach: Phenomenology

“The methodological question: How can the inquirer (would-be knower) go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known” (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 201)? While I do see benefits to quantitative research (e.g., generalizability and looking at broad societal trends), I am attracted to qualitative research because it sheds light on the experiences of the participants. Hatch (2002) asserts, “Qualitative research seeks to understand the world from the perspectives of those living in it” (p. 7). Therefore, the experiences of people are important to understand in order to learn what shapes a particular group or person’s world. In order to better understand the experiences of these participants, it is best to utilize a qualitative method that enables them to explain the experiences in detail. Interviews, observations, and document analysis are major methods in qualitative research, and they enable the researcher to delve into what people are thinking, how they are acting, and what they are producing (Creswell, 2007).

My interest in the experience of homeless students in college and belief that this experience can be best understood through dialogue with those who experienced the phenomenon, combined with my ontological and epistemological beliefs, strongly led me to a phenomenological study. Phenomenological inquiry is a qualitative research approach that attempts to understand the realities that people develop (Creswell, 2007; Thomas & Pollio, 2002; van Manen, 1990). Hatch (2002) states that in hermeneutic phenomenology, “multiple, socially constructed realities exist and that the meanings individuals give to their experiences ought to be the objects of study” (p. 30). Phenomenology assumes that there are specific elements of a certain type of experience that can be found across different people’s descriptions of that

experience, and this is often in response to societal and cultural frameworks. There is room for difference in experience, but there are certain elements that are in common. Therefore, phenomenology fits well with my aforementioned ontology and constructivist epistemology. I chose to primarily follow van Manen's (1990) method because he is an education researcher and my understanding of how his research affected his pedagogy in the classroom helped me to understand phenomenology's purpose at a deeper level through my own teaching practice. I also utilized Thomas and Polio (2002) to clarify some of the elements in van Manen's method that I felt were more opaque. One example was a clear recommendation of how many participants to include in a phenomenological study. Another example was van Manen's recommendation to analyze the data through, "The four fundamental existentials of spatiality, corporeality, temporality, and relationality" (p. 102). These were distilled and further explained by Thomas and Pollio into "world" (p. 103), "body" (p. 59), "time" (p. 161), and "other people" (p. 84). (These elements are discussed in more detail in the Research Design section.) Therefore, through van Manen's phenomenology, clarified with the lenses of Thomas and Polio, I explored the meaning my participants gave to their experiences in the context of their realities.

Research Design

Participants and Site Selection

In order to locate participants, I engaged in purposeful sampling (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). I looked for those who were homeless while attending college at some point in their college careers. This search took place in a large city in the northwest region of the United States. The aforementioned reticence on the part of homeless students to identify themselves as homeless was somewhat of a problem in finding participants. Half of my participants were former students, three found me through flyers that I posted on a variety of campuses, and the

final one heard about my study from a mutual friend. I had hoped to engage in purposive snowball sampling—participants are found via recommendations from those the researcher has already spoken to, such as gatekeepers and interviewees (Glesne, 2011)—but only one participant fit this description. The majority of my participants came to me because they knew me and had heard me describe my study. None of the participants sent other participants to my study, but they also reported that they did not know anyone else in their situation. There were a total of four respondents to my flyers, and one potential participant did not follow through. While I had a good number of interviews in comparison to my responses, it would have been very difficult for me to find enough participants solely through the flyer method. It was beneficial for me that I already had positive relationships with the five former students, and that relationship seemed to be what enabled them to come forward and identify themselves for my study.

In a pilot of this study, I only approached shelters where I was successful in recruiting participants. However, about half of my sample began homeless but were helped to locate housing through the shelter's programs before attending college. This order of events was in keeping with a shelter's priority of finding its clients housing before assisting with other issues. Therefore, I chose to shift my search to the colleges because I wanted to find students who were homeless while attending college (as some, but not all, of those I found through the shelter were) and to connect with those who were not utilizing shelter services.

To gain initial access, I e-mailed the IRB coordinators at community colleges and 4-year colleges in the large city in the Pacific Northwest to find out what procedures I needed to follow in order to work with their students. After repeated attempts with a variety of colleges, I was only able to gain IRB permission for my study at the community college where I worked. I was

told that the only reason I had permission was because I worked at the college; the other colleges were not interested and/or did not respond to my attempts at contact. Luckily, my college had multiple campuses, so there were different places I could go to recruit participants. Through the IRB permission process, I was able to gain permission to post flyers on the campuses, place flyers in strategic locations such as the tutoring centers, and discuss the study openly. I was not given permission to send out an e-mail to the student body about the study or have it posted electronically anywhere on campus or online.

In phenomenology, sample sizes tend to range from six to 12 (Morse, 1994; Ray, 1994; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). I continued interviewing until “redundancy [was] evident” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 33), and found a total of nine participants. The idea of redundancy means that I repeatedly saw the same things in the data with nothing new that was pertinent to the experience. I gained the consent of the participants through an informed consent form that I discussed at the beginning of every interview.

I did not advertise an incentive for participating based upon advice from my committee and IRB coordinator. I was concerned that if I announced I was providing a monetary incentive, some participants would feel coerced into participation based upon their monetary needs. However, I did want to show my gratitude for their participation in some way. As a result, I chose to give participants \$10 gift cards to a local coffee shop chain at the end of the interviews as a thank you. The cards were not announced or discussed in any way during participant recruitment or at any time until the participant and I said our good-byes. No participants were recruited through word of mouth from past participants, so for all participants the gift cards remained an unknown aspect of the interview until the end.

Data Collection

One tradition in phenomenological research is the use of bracketing. Bracketing refers to identifying the preconceptions that I brought to the table (Hatch, 2002; Thomas & Pollio, 2002; van Manen, 1990). Identifying these assumptions and biases is an integral aspect of phenomenological research. Therefore, I began my data collection with a bracketing essay, where I wrote my assumptions and understandings of homeless college students. I do not believe I could ever fully remove bias, but I do believe it was important to identify the ideas I already had developed about the phenomenon in order to be as transparent as possible.

In order for me to find out what the college experiences were for my participants, and since this is the main method used in phenomenology (Creswell, 2007; Hatch, 2002; Thomas & Pollio, 2002; van Manen, 1990), I conducted interviews. Also, because participants identify the reality, and therefore the importance of the aspects of their experience, the interview was the best method for finding out what the participant *thought* was important. These interviews were open-ended, beginning with the question “What is/was college like for you?” and continued with the information the participant chose to convey (see Appendix A). They lasted from about 45 minutes to a little over an hour. The length depended upon the participants’ schedules. The only other questions I asked were to refer back to something the interviewee mentioned earlier in the interview (Thomas & Pollio, 2002; van Manen, 1990). Finally, I interviewed all participants once. Initially, I had hoped to interview a few participants a second time based upon their interest and availability; however, it was difficult to make contact with the participants after college moved into a new term. I heard from two participants again via e-mail, and I saw one participant again on campus when he came up to me to ask how the writing was going. I mentioned a second interview to two of them, but neither of those came to be and I have not heard from either of

those participants since despite attempts at contact. Even though I only had one interview with each participant, van Manen did make it clear that it was not necessary to engage in multiple interviews, only that it could provide further insight. The only participant with whom I am still in contact is the participant who I found via a mutual friend and have maintained contact with via e-mail. I chose not to interview him a second time because he would have been the only one with whom I would have had that opportunity. Instead, he read my preliminary themes via e-mail and gave me feedback. This, then, was a kind of member checking, which means taking interpretations back to the participants so they can confirm the researcher's conclusions (Glesne, 2011).

I also asked that my participants write a "lived-experience description" (van Manen, 1990) at the end of their interview (See Appendix B). These written descriptions are focused on the emotions and feelings inherent in an experience, and participants are asked to focus on a specific example of the phenomenon. Therefore, I asked my participants to describe a particular event that stood out to them about their experiences as homeless college students. The purpose of this piece was to provide another data set and to engage the participant in reflection in another modality, i.e., not speaking. Van Manen (1990) said writing causes the writer to be more reflective than when talking. My requests for the lived-experience written description from participants were only successful in about half of the cases. Participants were often short on time and reluctant to write. This may have been because I had formerly been the writing teacher for five of the participants. The half who did not write the lived-experience description asked to e-mail it to me at a later date for the aforementioned reasons. I did not receive any lived-experience descriptions via e-mail. This is one limitation caused by the difficulty of maintaining contact with participants who are dealing with housing insecurity.

Third, I asked my participants to fill out demographic forms at the end of the interview (see Appendix C). All participants did this piece, and it helped frame the study by identifying relevant elements of the participants' backgrounds. Finally, I completed field notes about the interviews that recorded my impressions and the behaviors of the interviewees (Creswell, 2007). The way that people talk about their experiences, including their body language, can help researchers to better understand the experience (van Manen, 1990).

Data Analysis

I had the interviews transcribed by a transcription company. Initially, I uploaded these transcriptions along with the lived-experience descriptions, demographic forms, and field notes into NVivo software. I thought that I would find the software to be useful, but instead, I found it to be cumbersome and distracting. In the end, I decided to print out the documents and create themes in Word documents on my computer. This enabled me to initially identify themes and important quotes on paper. Then I found those elements in the original word documents on my computer and cut and pasted them into themes in Word documents that evolved over time.

As for the actual analysis, phenomenological coding asks the researcher to look for themes that stand out from the data, which includes the interviews, lived-experience descriptions, and field notes (Thomas & Pollio, 2002; van Manen, 1990). Van Manen (1990) defined themes as "the experiential structures that make up the experience" (p. 79), while Thomas and Pollio (2002) described themes as "patterns of description that repetitively recur as important aspects of a participant's description of his/her experience" (p. 35). When looking for themes, van Manen suggested the researcher approach the data in three ways: (a) holistically, (b) selectively [What seems essential to the experience?], and (c) sentence-by-sentence. The themes are continually refined until the researcher believes the themes as a whole describe the experience. Van Manen

also stated that phenomenological themes tend to be phrases rather than a single word because phrases “provide a fuller description of the structure of a lived experience” (p. 92). In addition to words and phrases, Thomas and Pollio posited that the researcher should look for metaphors the interviewees use to represent elements of their stories. I followed van Manen’s process and incorporated Thomas and Pollio’s suggestion to look for metaphors. I believe that metaphors are particularly powerful because they illuminate how speakers and writers are making connections; they illuminate schemata. With the holistic reading of the data, I asked myself what stood out about the experience as a whole and to each participant. With the selective reading, I focused on what the commonalities of the experiences were. This was a difficult process at first because on the surface, the participants had very different experiences of homelessness in relation to college. However, by moving back and forth between the holistic and selective readings of the data, the themes emerged. The breakthrough was when I saw that the participants had experiences that could be plotted on continuums. For example, some participants relied upon friends for shelter, whereas some participants self-isolated and lived in cars or outside. This difference in experience was initially difficult to reconcile thematically, but after holistically and selectively reading the data many times, I was able to place these experiences upon the continuum of isolation. All participants were isolated in some way, but some were much more isolated than others. The sentence-by-sentence readings were particularly useful in identifying quotations to use to support the themes, but it also reinforced and at times slightly changed some of the themes by making them more nuanced and clear. Finally, this level of reading enabled me to find some metaphors that were particularly poignant, such as the metaphor of a desert island. One participant discussed homelessness as being stranded upon a desert island because it is quite foreign at first. One has to learn how to live there, but eventually one comes up with ways to cope.

When looking at the themes, van Manen (1990) posited that there are four categories that phenomenological studies seek to address. He states, “The four fundamental existentials of spatiality, corporeality, temporality, and relationality may be seen to belong to the existential ground by way of which all human beings experience the world, although not all in the same modality of course” (p. 102). Thomas and Pollio (2002) called these “world” (p. 103), “body” (p. 59), “time” (p. 161), and “other people” (p. 84), respectively. These are the major ways and contexts within which people experience the world (Thomas & Pollio, 2002; van Manen, 1990). The ways we perceive the world are central to the way we understand and interact with the world in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of phenomenology, and this is described as figure and ground (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). When people focus on one area of a picture or reality, that piece becomes figural and stands out. The background, which we see but do not consciously analyze, is the ground. These elements can change places (e.g., if people look at the leaves of a tree, the trunk and branches become ground). However, if they switch their focus to a branch, the leaves, other branches, and trunk become the ground. Reading for “the four fundamental existentials” (van Manen, 1990, p. 102) enables the researcher to identify themes and the main grounds of the experience. Therefore, I also read with passes that specifically looked for these four categories. My participants primarily explored the world in which they lived (homelessness), the ways in which their bodies interacted with that world and college, and how other people affected that world and college. These elements became figural or ground as the participants focused on different experiences. As for time, there was a sense of immediacy in their narratives because they spent much of their days figuring out where to sleep that night or how to get out of their current situation, but it was not a major focus of their dialogue.

Next, I utilized the idea of a central theme as an overarching theme to which the other themes connect (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). As van Manen (1990) stated, “one theme always implicates the meaning dimensions of other themes” (p. 168). All of the themes connected back to the central theme of college as an escape from homelessness and affected the participants’ abilities to use college in that manner. This helped me conceptualize the connections between all of the themes instead of treating them as disparate themes in isolation from each other.

Finally, I connected the themes to theory in the adult education, psychology, sociology, and economics fields. Since there are very few research studies that have been done with homeless college students in adult education journals, I hope my study will help fill that gap (see my discussion of theory in the Trustworthiness section).

Trustworthiness

My main focus to address trustworthiness was through crystallization. Crystallization is similar to triangulation and essentially means the researcher is looking at the phenomenon through multiple lenses (more than one set of data, theory, or researcher). These lenses help us to see there is enough data to make an interpretation and the interpretation makes logical sense (Richardson, 2000). I addressed this by utilizing four kinds of data (interviews, lived-experience descriptions, demographic forms, and field journals), looking at the data through different theoretical lenses (how different adult education and other theories explain the data), and by having colleagues read my study for coherence.

In particular, phenomenological research studies are thought to be trustworthy if the reader can understand how the researcher reached his/her conclusions (Giorgi, 1975; Polkinghorne, 1989; van Manen, 1990; Wertz, 1983); therefore, I have tried to be as explicit as possible with my descriptions of my method and how I made decisions as I analyzed my data. I

also relied upon on readers such as my chair and my weekly peer work group to relay whether something was unclear and if I needed to be more specific. I have returned to areas in this document that were identified as needing more explanation and clarified my process and thinking.

After I identified the themes, which stemmed from the data and were not a priori codes, I member checked (Glesne, 2011) by e-mailing a draft of my chapter IV to the one participant with whom I had been able to maintain contact. He returned the document to me via e-mail with his comments. I e-mailed him for clarity on one of his comments, but otherwise, his thoughts reinforced my development of my themes. This was in keeping with phenomenology and the co-construction of knowledge that is essential to the constructivist paradigm. In this way, I was able to check that I had interpreted the reality of at least one of the participants in a way that resonated for him. This led to a better representation of the reality that the participants had constructed and lived.

Finally, phenomenology focuses on the experiences of the participants, and there is a strong focus on attempting to be aware of the biases the researcher may bring to the project (Thomas & Pollio, 2002; van Manen, 1990). Therefore, it is very important in phenomenology to not come to theoretical conclusions until after analyzing the data. However, after analyzing the data, it did become evident that multiple theories connected with the findings. (For a more in depth analysis, see chapter V). First, practicality in education was very important to the participants, primarily in that education was seen as providing the participants with a degree that would enable them to find secure jobs. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) indicated that most adult learning respondents in “hundreds of local, state, and national surveys” (p. 62) reported “job-related motives” (p. 62) for their participation in the programs. Next, Maslow’s

(1943, 1970) Theory of Human Motivation connects strongly to the data. All of the participants experienced deficiencies in their first four levels of needs (physiological, safety, belongingness and love, and esteem), and all participants were working to have these needs met. Also, the concept of social capital as defined by Tierney and Hallett (2012) illuminated the participants' lack of social connections and the ways in which the few social connections that participants were able to maintain enabled them to meet some needs. Finally, income inequality was highlighted by this study. More and more research is pointing out the detrimental effects of income inequality (Piketty & Goldhammer, 2014; Stiglitz, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Therefore, the trustworthiness of this study is reinforced by its connection to learning, psychological, social, and economic theories.

Conclusion

This study utilized a phenomenological approach in order to help understand the college experience of homeless students. It was framed within an interpretivist, constructivist paradigm. Essential to this paradigm were bracketing, interviews, and thematic coding, which all ensure the participants' realities were represented as accurately as possible. My study showed trustworthiness through the utilization of multiple kinds of data, multiple connections with theory, and multiple readers and a participant member-check for coherence. I applied theoretical frameworks toward the end of the process because I did not want to color my data with preconceived notions.

The next chapter explores the findings from this study that have illuminated the experience of this marginalized, hidden population. The experiences of these students are important to share with other instructors so they are aware of the experiences of these students who are attending their classes but often remain unidentified.

Chapter IV

Findings

This chapter begins with a report on the demographics of the participants followed by a description of each participant (protected via pseudonym). Next, I explain the contextual ground of the experience and the central theme, “Escaping the Homeless World through College.” Then, I present the main themes—“Meeting Basic Needs,” “Emotional Stress,” and “Isolation”—and their sub-themes. Finally, I end this chapter with a short summary that leads into the Discussion chapter.

Demographic Information About the Study Participants

Nine participants were interviewed who had self-identified as currently attending college while homeless or having had this experience in the past. Five participants completed the lived experience description (four asked to complete it when they had more time, but they did not return it in spite of multiple attempts at contact), and all participants completed the demographic information sheet. Eight of the participants were interviewed in an available room at the college campus that was identified by the participant as most convenient for him/her. One was interviewed in the participant’s office. The nine participants ranged in age from 18 to 47 and comprised of three women and six men. Of the nine participants, two identified as African-American, six identified as White/Caucasian, and one identified as having multiple ethnicities. Six identified as currently homeless/experiencing housing-insecurity, while three identified as having been a homeless college student in the past. Two of those three had been homeless in the term prior to the interview; however, one participant had experienced college as a homeless student 20 years prior to our interview. The three oldest participants reported having children, and one of those participants needed to consider those children’s needs during her experience of

being homeless while in college. Three of the nine participants had experienced homelessness prior to attending college, whereas the other six experienced homelessness for the first time while they were college students. Four of the nine had stable jobs while they were homeless, but the other five were either jobless or decided to leave their jobs because of the difficulty of maintaining that job along with meeting their other responsibilities. Only one participant stayed at a shelter, but he eventually chose to leave to sleep outside until his financial aid would hopefully arrive in the subsequent term. One other participant reported sleeping outside until he met his fiancé, and then he primarily stayed with her and her mother. Two participants principally stayed in their cars, while a third slept in his car periodically. This participant began on the couch at friend's house, but he later stayed in a girls' dorm at his college in the room of a friend. The three women stayed with friends or family, but one of them felt she was going to be evicted soon. All participants experienced homelessness in the first year of college. The demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Descriptions of Participants (Pseudonyms)

This section presents a holistic picture of each participant in order to provide background and context for the experiences of these participants. These descriptions are important to illuminate the variety of situations and challenges this population faces and to help contextualize the examples provided in the themes.

Zeneb

To study you need to be stable, and you need a place when you go home so you can study.

Zeneb was a 30-year-old, white international student from North Africa who taught preschool during the day in the Pacific Northwest and attended community college. Zeneb became homeless when she had to move out of her apartment and had been unable to find new

Table 1. Demographic Information About the Study Participants

	Participants (Pseudonyms)								
	Victor	Kat	George	Willy	Calvin	Louis	Zeneb	Clarence	Justine
Age	18	18	19	22	24	26	30	38	47
Ethnicity/ Race	White	Mixed	White	White	African- American	African- American	White	White	White
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female	Male	Female
Cares for children	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Job	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Resides	With friend	With friend	With partner	With partner	In car	In shelter & parks	With friend	In car	With family

housing that she could afford and met her criteria. Her housing and roommate criteria were limited by her severe cat allergies and religious beliefs. As a Muslim, Zeneb could not live with men, with women who brought men home, with women who were lesbian, or with women who drank alcohol or smoked. At the time of the interview, she was living with a friend who was married but whose husband lived in Saudi Arabia. Zeneb had her own room at her friend's home, but she chose not to accept a key for fear that it would be taking advantage of her friend's kindness. She expressed a strong need to find her own place and to not impose further upon her friend. The speed at which apartments and living situations were snapped up in her city also made it difficult for her to find housing because advertised places were often taken by the time she called to inquire. She said she was looking forward to visiting her family in Africa, but she did not express an interest in moving back to her home country. Zeneb said homelessness affected her college work a great deal because she was not "really focusing on the studies. Whenever I'm doing something or reading something . . . my mind just goes straight to the main subject in my personal life, which is finding a place where to live."

Louis

You have to really take care of yourself first, you know? And for some people going to school is their route off the streets or out of an abusive home or things like that. It is their route, but it's like a mountain.

Louis was a 26-year-old African-American male from a midwestern city in the United States and was attending community college in the Pacific Northwest. He left home when he was 18 and his mother remarried. Louis initially moved to a city in California and was homeless for a time while he worked in restaurants as a busboy and waiter. Eventually, he secured housing, but he was evicted when he stopped working in food services. He decided to move to the Northwest

and had been living in shelters since his arrival. Before the interview, Louis had recently stayed the maximum-allowable days in one shelter and was sleeping in parks rather than moving into another shelter. He enrolled in community college and was banking on getting financial aid in the upcoming term that would enable him to secure a living situation. Louis was taking a math class and was admittedly not doing the homework but said he learned in the class. He had been taking an art class, but he had to drop it because he could not physically keep or afford the materials. He said he often could not find the motivation to do the homework in his math class, and/or he fell asleep while on campus when he tried to work on it because he was too tired. Louis utilized the college's shuttle to travel from campus to campus and availed himself of campus services like food pantries, lockers, and gym showers. He still went to the shelter to use the computers and talk with others who were homeless. However, he worked hard to dress and present himself well and avoided the shelters where Louis said there were:

a bunch of drugs. A lot of theft and fights and chaos and drama, and I don't want to be a part of that. Then they [people at shelter] see me with my scarf and suspenders and my backpack, and they think I'm rich or something. . . . And it's just because I haven't given up.

Victor

So I had to find a place to live or crash. . . . being 18 . . . it was traumatic, like I didn't know what I was going to do and was not focused on school at the time. It was basically: "Where am I going to live?"

Victor was a 38-year-old white male who was the only participant 20 years past his experience of homelessness while in college. His tuition was paid at a large mid-Atlantic university; however, he became homeless when his stepmother evicted him and his father

refused to financially support him. While he was grateful to a family who offered him a place to sleep on their couch, he felt uncomfortable staying in the middle of their living area. Victor decided to sleep in his car, and he was embarrassed a few times by the campus police waking him to say he could not sleep on campus parking lots. Eventually, a friend suggested that he stay in her dorm room because her roommate was no longer bunking there. Worried about getting caught, Victor was embarrassed to be living in a girls' dormitory. His friend smuggled him food from the cafeteria, but this was also embarrassing for him. He was initially working while attending college, but it cost so much for him to drive to work that he quit. So, he did not have much of an income. However, Victor managed to connect with a series of college officials who helped him complete his freshmen year, receive financial aid, and receive mental health counseling. He continued to see a counselor throughout his time at college, and the counselor also introduced him to a lawyer who did pro bono work to help Victor become legally emancipated from his father. Emancipated from his father, Victor qualified for financial aid and secured housing for his next year in college. But he recalled that he could not do his college work when he was homeless: "I would try to do things like go to the library or find a place to go, but when you're always worried about where you go next, it's hard to really feel settled anywhere."

Calvin

If you don't have that sleep, a good enough sleep, you're not able to pay attention at all, not even if you want to pay attention just with life, period. Because when you're poor and you're homeless, you are not set where you're going to be okay.

Calvin was a 24-year-old African-American male who became homeless when he moved from a city in California to a city in the Pacific Northwest. Calvin said escaping racism at work

and bad influences were among the many reasons he wanted to get away from California. He decided to move to a new city and began college immediately. Calvin chose to stay in his car rather than use homeless shelters and services because he did not want to experience the lack of safety in shelters and associate with people using drugs and suffering from mental illness. He developed strategies and methods for making his car as comfortable as possible, but he admitted he was often tired and cold. Although he had money to get an apartment during his second term of college, his car needed a costly repair that he chose instead. This extended his homelessness for another term until he received his financial aid; at which point, he did find housing. However, he felt that he was one step away from becoming homeless again, and he remained vigilant in the face of that.

He chose to go to college because he wanted a Bachelor's Degree. He felt that if he got one, he would be able to get a job where managers would not be able to fire him or arbitrarily push him out of a position. Calvin indicated that a college degree represents security and stability. He chose not to pursue art school because he saw it as providing a less secure future. Calvin says that another advantage to college was "if you're educated, you can figure out things. . . . I don't think without education you would know how to figure out resources or figure out certain things about yourself, what to focus on and what not to."

Clarence

I started thinking about how much being in school was helping provide [a place to eat, shower, pee] . . . which put an emphasis on school more so because it was no longer providing for some hypothetical future payoff. It was an immediate resource, actually.

Clarence was a 38-year-old white male from the Midwest of the United States. Having left his children and ex-wife in his home state, he moved to the Pacific Northwest for a change of

scene. He did not have a job when he moved to the new city, and he was homeless for the first few months. During that time, he experienced life in shelters and learned a lot about the services that were available to the homeless in that city. However, he quickly decided not to use those services and preferred to live in his car because he was worried about being sucked into the homeless lifestyle. He found a job and a place to live, and he later started school to become a paralegal. Even though he was employed, he became homeless again and put his “homeless plan” back into effect. He knew he needed access to food, bathrooms, and places to sleep. He often stayed in his car, but he took advantage of requests to house- and dog-sit for friends. He would also stay on a friend’s couch periodically, but he tried not to do that too often because he did not want to wear out his welcome. Once he received financial aid at the beginning of a new term, he quickly found a new place to live.

Clarence chose to go to college and become a paralegal because his interest in the law was piqued when he was researching the laws about where he could legally park and sleep in his car. He felt he got better grades during the term that he was homeless than the terms when he was not because he spent most of the time that he was not at work at college. He spent so much time on campus for the safety and comfort, and while there he said there was nothing to do other than work on projects and homework. However, even though he spent more time at school, Clarence felt that he did not learn as much during his homeless term because he was so tired and worried about where he would sleep at night. At the time of the interview, Clarence felt he was better able to focus in class with secure housing, but he did not think he would do as well when it came to grades because he felt he was more likely to procrastinate or choose not to do homework that he does not want to do now that he has his own space. He said he does not really care about grades, and he primarily does enough homework to pass. Clarence never told anyone at work or

college about his homelessness and said, “I actively lied about it. . . . It’s just you feel like people look at you differently.”

George

When I think about it I get really anxious. . . . Because my past worries have always been . . . little things. . . . But now it’s like: “Where am I going to stay, and what am I going to eat tonight?”

George was a 19-year-old white male from a suburb in the Pacific Northwest. Shortly after finishing high school, he became homeless after his father went bankrupt and his parents’ subsequent divorce. George was kicked out of his father’s home and then his mother’s. He went to live with an aunt and her children, but he was asked to leave there as well. George vividly described his experience in a coffee shop when he realized that he really did not know where he was going to sleep or what he was going to do. A girlfriend took him in, and he had been living in her room in an apartment that she shared with roommates. He felt that the realization that he was homeless made him clearly focus on his life, become motivated to better himself, and make some plans for the future.

George chose to go to college while he was living with his aunt, and he said college seemed like something he was supposed to do. Losing his housing and not knowing where he was going to go made him feel very motivated to get a degree. Even so, once he had shelter and became comfortable with his girlfriend, he found his motivation for college and the future waning. He admitted, “education opens doors,” while also acknowledging he was not keeping up with his immediate college assignments. George said that he wished he could recapture the motivation he felt in the coffee shop when he first understood his homelessness because he said

he was not a motivated person: “I just am not. I lack drive. . . . It’s a crazy feeling when you don’t have any safety net to lie back on.”

Kat

So far, college has been a lot more of stressful breakdowns than actual learning.

Kat was an 18-year-old female of mixed ethnicity living in the Pacific Northwest. She became homeless when she, her grandfather, her mother, and their roommates were evicted. At the time of the eviction, Kat’s mother told her that she could no longer support her, so Kat had to figure out housing arrangements on her own. She ended up staying with the family of her best friend, which complicated the relationship with her friend who was away at college. Also, while the family had taken Kat in, they had a lot of conditions that she had to meet in order to stay there. The family insisted that Kat needed a job, health insurance, to attend college, and to pay rent in the near future. She hoped she would be able to save enough money to get an apartment, but she was not sure she would be able to because of the conditions the family was imposing. Kat also did not feel at home there; the family was loud and somewhat unpredictable. However, she was happy to be somewhat of a member of a “normal” family and that they let her keep her cat.

Kat was going to college in part because it was a condition of her living arrangement; however, she was also motivated because she wanted a stable life where she could support herself. She indicated her grandparents were encouraging and proud of her for going to college and that she wanted to be the first in her family to get a degree. But her housing situation was a distraction, and Kat said she “can’t stop thinking and can’t stop everything from running through my mind about it. It just . . . makes you kind of lifeless with stuff, like when you have all that

homework due the next day . . . you're trying to find the motivation somewhere but sometimes you can't."

Justine

So I'm right in the middle of really experiencing these difficulties, and I really can't find a solution. And for school, you don't want to complain to teachers that I don't have housing. . . I don't think that people, unless you're in that situation, have an understanding of the gravity of it.

Justine was a 47-year-old, white woman from the Pacific Northwest. She had two children and was homeless because she left an abusive husband and lost her job. She and her boys moved in with her first husband, the boys' father. Justine's boys shared a room in their father's apartment, and Justine slept on a mat in the living room. However, the boys' father was not very responsible and had not been paying the rent, and at the time of the interview Justine had just learned they were going to be evicted. She had found enough money to stay in the apartment for one more month, but she was not optimistic that they would be able to stay there much longer. Justine's own parents would not take her in; although, she believed they would house their grandchildren if necessary. Justine believed that her parents thought she should handle her own problems, and she did not disagree with them. However, she feared disturbing her sons' lives to this extent and did not want them to have to take on adult problems at their ages. Her greatest fear was that she would have to take them to a shelter.

She was going to college to get a degree and prove to herself that she was smart and capable. She was doing well academically and trying very hard to complete her degree quickly; however, her housing situation had thrown a wrench into her plans. She ended up having to drop one class and was worried that she would not do well in the others. She felt she needed to do well so she could be competitive and earn scholarships; in this way, she would be able to get out

of school with less debt. She worried that if she were to quit school for a term or two in order to get a job and support her children that she would not return to college. She also saw that a college degree would help her get a better job in the long run: “I remind myself it’s not really going to help myself to go to work if I still can’t make enough money to support myself. So it’s not really a solution. It’s a band aid, but it’s still not going to pay the rent.”

Willy

[I’m] still trying to get over the homelessness to transition back into being in a house now. So it’s like harder to keep track of everything homework-wise.

Willy was a 22-year-old, white male from the Pacific Northwest. He became homeless in high school when his mother kicked him out of the house because of his bad behavior. He was unable to go to youth shelters because the workers would call his mother to verify that she evicted him. According to Willy, his mother—someone who has been through homeless shelters herself—told authorities calling to verify her son’s housing situation that her son was able to return home at any time. Therefore, he had slept on sidewalks and in parks for about two years after he dropped out of high school. Willy admitted to having been involved with hard drugs on the street among other homeless people, but he said he had stopped doing those. He was, however, a vocal proponent of marijuana and said he smoked every day in order to alleviate his depression and anxiety.

At the time of the interview, Willy lived much of the time with his fiancé and her mother in their low-income housing apartment. If Willy was discovered living there, his fiancé and her mother could have faced eviction. However, he considered his situation relatively stable since some arrangements had been made with the landlord. Willy wanted to make enough money that he and his fiancé could move out together.

When Willy met his fiancé, she encouraged him to go back to school and get his GED. After completing his GED, she encouraged him to go on to college, which he had just begun. He felt as though she was the positive driving force behind his going to college; however, he did enjoy working with his hands and wanted to be a metalworker. Willy had difficulty finding the ability to focus on schoolwork and said that was “probably a result of not going to school for quite a few years and missing some stuff when I stopped school.” He explained his decision to go to college this way: “Mainly so that I can actually have a career for myself so that way I’m not just stuck at a dead-end job here and there . . . something more stable that I don’t have to worry about watching over my back to where I know I’m not gonna get fired the next day.”

Contextual Ground of the Experience

When referring to van Manen (1990) and Thomas and Pollio (2002), the contextual ground of phenomenological studies are comprised of the “existentials” (van Manen, 1990, p. 102), which together create the “existential ground” of an experience. I did not include the existential of time because the participants rarely mentioned this. The three existentials that were extensively discussed were world, body, and other people, and those existentials are described in the following sections.

World of Homelessness

Even though homelessness was not a literal place, it was a world that the participants carried with them and pervaded all other contexts. This world was one that was different for each participant; some slept in parks while others slept at friends’ apartments. Yet, all participants dealt with the physical and mental effects of homelessness, and those elements continually reminded them that they were in the world of homelessness. The main ways they experienced this world was through their bodies and in relation to others.

The Body

Participants experienced the world of homelessness through their bodies. Even though participants attempted to focus in class or on their schoolwork, their bodies or minds would often distract them and become a higher priority. The body was always present because of the difficulty of meeting their bodily needs. At one end of the spectrum, those participants who had a place to stay did not feel comfortable because they were not in their own spaces. They felt they had to be careful about the usage of the space of others and the corresponding utilities, and they also felt like they were intruding and could not relax. At the other end of the spectrum—when the participant was living on the streets, in a shelter, or in a car—the participant had to deal with even more pressing issues such as bodily functions (where to relieve oneself), maintaining hygiene, and getting adequate sleep. In between those two ends of the spectrum, all participants discussed being distracted in class because of thinking about their situations and planning for their future comfort/discomfort. All of the participants discussed how having a place of his/her own would enable bodily and mental comfort. At times, these discomforts would fade into the background (ground), but they very often come to the foreground and become figural, thereby interrupting the participants' lives and thoughts.

Other People

Participants also experienced the world of homelessness through other people. They were preoccupied with blending in with other college students and not wanting to be like “other” homeless people. The participants did not want to seem different, but other students could make them feel their differences more strongly. Thinking that their classmates did not have the same worries and difficulties as the participants made some of the participants feel very separate from their peers. Also, all of the participants spent time and effort attempting to disguise their

homeless status. They all discussed not wanting to feel different from their classmates; therefore, they did not want their classmates—and often their instructors—to find out about their housing situations. They also were very careful about which family members and friends to tell about their situations for fear of stigmatization or upsetting loved ones. Therefore, participants spent considerable time worrying about how others viewed them. Finally, many of the participants chose not to use services or connect with others who were homeless because they wanted to be different from the stereotypical societal notions of the “homeless” and worried that they might get drawn into the world of homelessness permanently.

Conclusion to Contextual Ground

Therefore, the participants’ bodies and interactions with other people ground the world of homelessness. These “existentials” (van Manen, 1990, p. 102) combined to create the “existential ground” of this experience. The following themes were viewed in relation to that ground. I begin this section with the central theme that envelops the rest of the themes. The other themes are all ways in which the participants were being held back or distracted from achieving their goal of the central theme: Escaping the Homeless World Through College.

For further clarification, see Figure 1 for a visual representation of the Contextual Ground of this study.

Central Theme: Escaping the Homeless World Through College

All of the participants discussed the central theme of “Escaping the Homeless World Through College.” No matter the length of their time in the homeless world, all participants saw college as aspirational; it was what would enable them to escape and keep them forever out of the homeless world. However, it was also an immediate way to escape the physical and mental elements of homelessness. Physically, it provided bathrooms and a place to rest, and financial aid

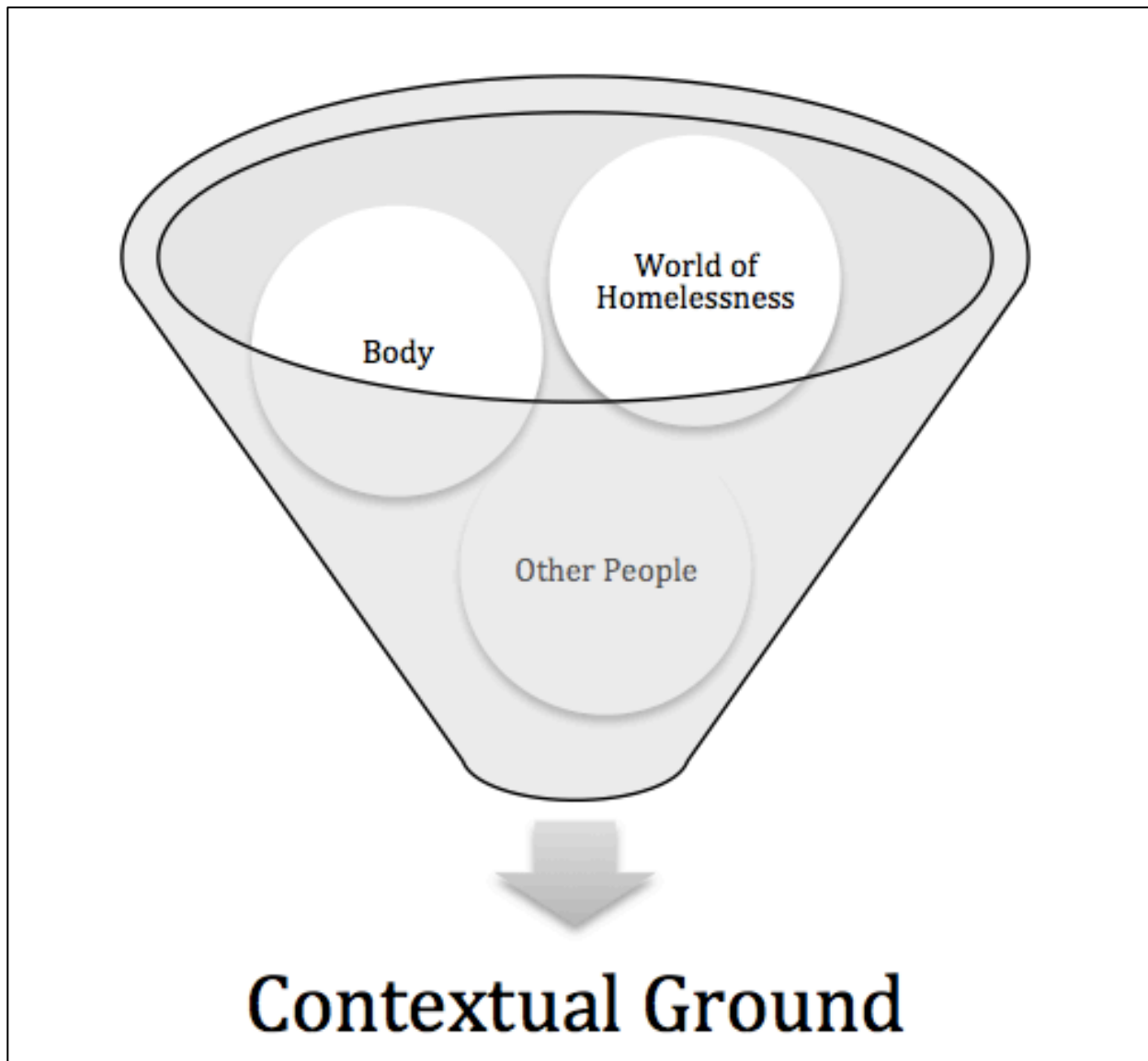


Figure 1: Contextual Ground

enabled some participants to gain apartments of their own. Mentally, it enabled participants to distance themselves from other homeless people and buoy their self-esteem and sense of self. The central theme had two subthemes: long-term escape and immediate escape.

Subtheme A: College as Long-Term Escape

School ties in with success (George).

For the participants, college was seen as a way to escape homelessness and gain stability and comfort. For example, to participants college seemed to guarantee financial and career stability. As Kat stated, “I wanna be able to like have a salary for my kids and like you know be able to provide for my family and be able to have a house of my own.” Kat did not have any children and was not married at this point in her life, but she saw college as a way to ensure that she could take care of herself and her hypothetical future family.

Participants also discussed the necessity of having a degree. Sometimes this was in the context of something to check off of a list: “I just started thinking about my future more than ever. I was like, ‘Well, I need to get this done. I need to get a good degree’” (George). George did not explore what that degree would mean for his life, other than stating, “education really opens doors. It’s just basically a good tool to have. It’s like a key that just opens doors.” George did not elaborate on where those doors would lead, just that it was desirable to open them.

For other participants, a degree was seen as opening doors connected to employment. It was what was necessary in order to get a good job:

I mean I didn’t know really what I wanted to do, and there was kind of like this element of, “school is important, if you want to get a decent job” or . . . neither of my parents were college educated, but . . . I was still aware that we lived in a different time, even though I was still young. Where I can see that jobs and certain jobs are just harder to get

without a college degree. How am I going to be successful or how am I going to even have stability [without a degree]? (Victor)

A “good job” meant something that gave the participants financial stability, but it also meant something that was interesting and not mundane. As Kat described, “I can get a job you know that’s better and major in something that I’m interested in.” Similarly, Victor saw college as a place to figure out what he was interested in and then be able to engage in a career that he would like. In contrast, Clarence had researched his field before entering college. He found it had “decent job prospects according to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics and whatnot and it’s a really interesting field for me. And I don’t have to do any more school than that.” Therefore, some participants assumed college would help them refine their interests and find a career while others had thought through their college paths before entering.

In looking at the kinds of careers for which college could prepare a person—jobs that were interesting and secure—participants contrasted the jobs they were currently able to get with the future job they would have after college to show why college was important. Willy said he went to college because:

that way I can actually have a career for myself so that way I’m not just stuck at a dead-end job here and there . . . “Oh, you have a job,” then lose the job a couple days later or something like that. I just want something more stable that I don’t have to worry about watching over my back to where I know I’m not gonna get fired the next day. Exactly like that.

The kind of job security described by Willy was appealing to many of the participants. In fact, some participants felt that if a person chose his/her college path well, he/she would be “guaranteed a job and stuff” (Calvin). This connected to the idea that an education would make

one self-sufficient: “I don’t ever wanna feel like I have to count on anybody ever again, you know? I wanna be more independent” (Justine). Calvin echoed this feeling of a desire for self-reliance by stating, “That was the main reason why I stuck with my education because nobody could fail me but myself.”

Therefore, to the participants, college was sometimes an amorphous step to take toward success without much exploration of what that would actually look like (as in the case of George) and sometimes a very deliberate, well-thought out plan of exactly how it was going to meet the participant’s needs (as in the case of Clarence). However, in all cases, college was seen as something that at the very least would result in a “good” job that would provide financial stability. At the most, college would enable one to explore one’s interests and enable one to find a job with job security, financial stability, and job satisfaction.

Subtheme B: College as Immediate Escape

It was no longer providing for some hypothetical future payoff. It was an immediate resource, actually (Clarence).

Along with college’s perceived ability to provide long-term benefits to participants, it was also seen as a place that provided routine, stability, and resources that could make a person more comfortable in the short term. At a basic level, college provided access to resources. For instance, three of the participants specifically mentioned the availability of showers. Clarence discussed the importance of finding places to shower, pee, eat, and sleep when a person is homeless. He discussed at length how long it could take during the day simply attempting to meet those needs. In addition to those, Louis mentioned the importance of being indoors, “I’m just happy to be warm and actually have like some kind of place to go, you know.” Plus, the college that the majority of participants attended had a food bank that participants could and did

utilize; although, it was limited in the number of times one could go there. And college-provided lockers were a break from having to carry around all of one's belongings. Thus, college was a way in which to achieve a physical break from many of the physical demands of homelessness.

College was also helpful in providing a literal "place to be" (Clarence), which was useful physically, financially, and mentally. For example, both Clarence and Louis discussed the monotony of being homeless and stated that college provided them with purpose. Clarence elaborated:

[College] was actually really helpful. One of the main challenges of not having [a place] is just finding places to be, and I had places to be. I mean, I always had a place to be until the building closed at 10:00, so I could be here working on homework. Had Wi-Fi, and things to do. It was like weirdly expensive being homeless because if you wanna sit somewhere, you'd pay for coffee, pay for beer. Just like to be somewhere you have to generally pay, but I had like a purpose and stuff.

Louis echoed this by stating, "I'd much rather be on campus all day than like sitting in a day room and just sitting there while everyone is just being loud and making a mess everywhere and I'm just sitting there and just kind of like in a daze." Therefore, on a basic level, college provided a space that was safe in which a participant could go to spend time that did not tax their resources.

College was also able to provide momentum, and routine was seen as being "good when other things are not" (Clarence). Louis in particular discussed his routine at length, and he focused on the motivation that the routine was able to provide:

Small things now that kind of motivate you, you know. That's pushing you further and further towards the goal, and it's just about surviving on a day to day basis, you know, just 24 hours at a time. And so that's really the big motivators for me now.

By having a purpose and things to do during his day, Louis was able to keep going from task to task, which distracted him from thinking about his situation or feeling depressed.

Even more than a distraction, this routine and schedule caused participants to feel as though they were doing something worthwhile and industrious like making their way through homework, rather than sitting in a park or waiting in line for a shower. As George stated, “[College is] really nice, and it feels like I’m doing something productive with my day.” Clarence similarly stated that he was “doing homework to distract myself from the nothing that I’m otherwise doing.” Kat even described college as feeling more like home than her living situation and it being “comforting” to be at school. Consequently, participants found being on the college campus to be a literal escape and distraction from the realities of the homeless world.

Finally, college enabled participants to boost their self-esteem by taking on the label of “college student,” which was preferable to taking on the label of “homeless.” All of the participants took on the label of homeless by virtue of self-identifying for the study. Simultaneously, however, all participants spent time rejecting the label of homeless to some extent. For example, Zeneb communicated that she did not realize she was technically homeless until she heard the researcher describe the research project. She found this realization difficult to accept and made it very clear that she refused to accept government support. That refusal of support was a point of pride, and she did not want to feel that she was like the people who did use it. Similarly, Justine was sleeping on the floor of her ex-husband’s apartment; however, she did not truly consider that to be homeless (in spite of the governmental classification that she was

doubled-up or couch surfing). She thought of herself as homeless only because they had been served with eviction papers.

Participants also thought of themselves as distinctly dissimilar to other homeless people. In particular, Calvin, Louis, and Clarence discussed the differences between themselves and other homeless people who were not attending college. Calvin placed a lot of the blame for others' homelessness upon the individual. For example, he stated that if "you have a bad habit, you're not gonna make it . . . you just gonna be homeless. . . . I don't feel bad for those people. But I'm pretty sure there's a few other people out there that are going through the same thing [as I am]." In contrast, Louis accepted that he was homeless, but he took pride in working to get out. He explained that a lot of homeless people spent all of their time planning out a system of services to utilize, and he had done this in the past. However, he was proud of his attempt to make change and get out of those systems. He said, "You see homeless people, like they have just given up on themselves, and I haven't given up on myself." Therefore, while the participants did accept that they were homeless in some way, they felt they were a different kind of homeless than one might see on the street "talking to himself" (Clarence). There was always the danger of giving up and slipping into that lifestyle, but participants felt that they were distinctive because they were making concrete steps toward a college degree that would get them out of the homeless system.

Finally, participants spent energy and time trying to make sure that other people, particularly other students, would be unable to detect their homelessness. As Willy put it, "I'd rather just say, 'Yeah, I got a place and whatnot.'" Clarence concurred and said, "I would actively lie about it. I guess I don't really know why. It's just you feel like people look at you differently." In order to avoid detection, Louis described his process for keeping his clothing

clean and having a tidy appearance. His appearance actually caused some friction at the shelters because other homeless people would accuse him of being “rich” or not even homeless. He said it just meant, “I haven’t given up. I still have faith in myself.”

Participants would even lie to friends and family members, using college as a cover for their situation. For example, Louis related a conversation he had with his mother:

My mom called me when I was standing in a line, you know, for registration and she is like, you know, “Oh how you doing?” Things like that. I was like “Oh, I’m good. I’m signing up for school right now.” And she’s like, “You’re not homeless are you?” And I was just like “No, no, I’m not homeless Mom, because if I was homeless, going to school will be the last thing on my mind, you know.”

These deceptions enabled the participants to connect themselves with the positive connotations of college student while rejecting many of the negative connotations of homeless.

Thus, college served as both an envisioned long-term escape from homelessness because of the promise of a college degree and the better job that would come along with that and as an immediate escape from the practicalities of the homeless world and the emotional toll that being homeless could take on a participant. As Louis stated, “You have to really take care of yourself first, you know, and for some people going to school is that is their route off the streets or out of an abusive home or things like that, you know. It is their route, and but that’s . . . it’s like a mountain.”

Themes

Louis’s “mountain” metaphor showed how daunting the route of college could be to someone experiencing homelessness. Even though participants generally described college positively, there were three themes in the participants’ interviews and lived experience

descriptions that illustrated these difficulties. Participants were attending college in an attempt to escape the world of homelessness, yet there were elements that kept drawing them back into that world in spite of their efforts. These elements were the necessity of “Meeting Basic Needs” (Theme 1), “Emotional Stress” (Theme 2), and “Isolation” (Theme 3). These themes all stemmed from the central theme of “Escaping the World of Homelessness Through College” because they were the ways in which participants were distracted from their goals.

Theme 1: Meeting Basic Needs

It's like being on a stranded island or something (Calvin).

In the first theme, participants described the difficulties and encompassing nature of attempting to meet their basic needs such as food, shelter, sleep, and urination/bowel movements. As Justine put it, “A fundamental bottom of everything is having a place to live.” For many of the participants, particularly those who were experiencing homelessness for the first time, they needed to figure out how to deal with these new, but foreign, living arrangements and how that affected meeting their basic needs. Participants were at different stages in this journey: some participants were still figuring out how to deal with their new living situations at the time of these interviews, but some described how they had learned to meet their needs to the best of their abilities while on these new “islands.” For those who had been homeless prior to their school experiences, they had often figured out much of their “island,” but even then meeting their basic needs were often time consuming and superseded their school responsibilities. Therefore, each participant had a different “island” to learn and with which to interact and respond, but it was tiring and took a lot of time for all participants.

Some “islands” were more comfortable than others, and the first major element that it affected was their sleep. For example, Justine, Kat, Zeneb, George, and Victor were staying with

friends or family members, but only Victor and Zeneb complained about a lack of sleep as a result of their living situations. However, all participants did have a lack of sleep due to their jobs or stress: “I work from like 5:30 at night until like 1:00 in the morning. . . . So by then the end of—like end of the day I’m just so tired. You know I have to go home and like do homework and all that” (Kat). Kat lived with her best friend’s family, worked nights in order to save money for an apartment of her own, and attended school during the day. She had trouble finding time to do her homework and found herself tired and having trouble concentrating in class.

Neither Kat nor Justine liked having to rely on friends and family for shelter, but Victor and Zeneb felt particularly uncomfortable. In Victor’s first living arrangement, he stayed on a friend’s family’s couch, but he did not like that because it was a communal space. He ended up leaving that situation and staying with a friend of his in her dorm room in the girls’ dormitory on campus. This was awkward because he was not supposed to be there and the room was small. He did have his own bed, and his friend was happy to have him there; however, he often only came to the room at night to sleep. In contrast, Zeneb did not have her own key to her friend’s apartment, and she felt her comings and goings were being constantly monitored. This caused her to feel like it was urgent for her to get out of that living situation, in part because she was only getting “3 hours, 3 hours and a half” of sleep.

Another common place to sleep was the participants’ cars. Victor would periodically sleep in his car, particularly when he was feeling uncomfortable about being in the girls’ dorms, but campus police embarrassed him. He said, “I mean I was just sleeping in my car because I didn’t have anywhere to go or to feel like I didn’t want to put anybody out, you know.” Calvin and Clarence also stayed in their cars, but they chose to stay there for extended periods of time rather than go to shelters or stay with friends/acquaintances. Their reasons for this will be

explored in more detail in the following themes, but they both discussed the physical difficulty of sleeping in their cars. Calvin stated, “That takes a lot from you if you don’t have the right sleep. I remember sometimes I would just come into the school, and then just go to like the soft chairs down there and just pass out.” Eventually he developed some strategies for sleeping in his car that made it more comfortable (e.g., wearing layers, sleeping with his legs up the back of the seat); however, his sleep could still be disrupted by the elements. Clarence did not focus on the physical discomfort of sleeping in his car, but he did discuss being awoken by sounds, police, and other people. Sometimes the police would roust him in the middle of the night and tell him he needed to move on, and he described one particular incident in which it seemed that a man he did not know was going to punch him through his car window. Clarence also relied upon friends for house/pet sitting jobs that would enable him to take a break from sleeping in his car. This was a sharp contrast from Calvin’s relationships with friends and acquaintances. He had a few offers to stay with some people he met, but he was suspicious of their motives and always turned them down, preferring to stay in his car.

The most uncomfortable “islands” were those of shelters and sleeping outside. Interestingly, all of the participants, except Louis, chose to avoid shelters. Louis stayed at shelters until he felt he was close to getting financial aid and thereby enough money to get his own place. He had run out of his allotted time at one shelter, and he chose to sleep outside rather than put in the effort to get into another shelter because of the long waiting lists and the time involved in going through the processes to get a bed. Even so, he was able to get better sleep in a shelter than when he slept outside: “It’s so cold and if I’m not indoors . . . like at _____ they have, you can get a mat for the night. If I’m not indoors, then it’s usually a pretty hard night.” In Willy’s case, he had been unable to get into a shelter as a teenager because his mother would

always tell the social workers who called that he could come home at any time; even though Willy reported that this was not the truth because his mother had told him he could not return. As an adult, he chose not to sleep in shelters because of the stories he had been told about what they were like. For instance, he thought he would have to stay awake all night to watch his belongings if he was in a shelter. Nevertheless, sleeping outside had its own difficulties: “It would be rough because when you’re sleeping out there, cops aren’t very nice to you. They kinda kick you and move you outta the way. I’ve been hit quite a few time for no reason from sleeping out there” (Willy). Willy also complained about the noises outside, and ended up turning to marijuana to help him sleep because “it made it to where I could go to sleep at night because of the all the cars that would come by. It’d be hard to go to sleep ‘cause you have to focus on every sound.”

Participants also discussed feeling tired while at school. In the most extreme case, Louis stated, “I don’t get adequate sleep. It’s . . . I’m just pretty much just like falling asleep everywhere I sit for any amount of time, you know.” He made sure he changed chairs often to stay awake, and he rode shuttles between campuses in order to sleep during the day. Consequently, meeting the basic need of sleep was particularly difficult for all participants because they either reluctantly had to rely on others for space and shelter or they had to sleep in uncomfortable locations (such as cars, outside, or in shelters).

As for other basic needs, participants had varying levels of difficulty in meeting them. Participants who stayed with friends did not mention any difficulties in finding showers, other than Victor’s discomfort in taking showers in the girls’ dorm. However, keeping clean was a common theme among those who stayed in their cars or slept outside or in shelters. Louis and Clarence both discussed the need to plan where they would be able to go to shower during the week. Clarence felt lucky that he had housesitting jobs during his most recent experience with

homelessness, but both he and Louis were happy to discover that they could use the college's showers in the gym.

Those who had jobs did not mention having many difficulties with procuring food; however, Clarence and Calvin, who both had jobs, discussed the difficulties of not having anywhere to cook. Clarence explained that it was more expensive to buy things that he could make without a kitchen or microwave, so he felt lucky that he had some friends who would sometimes let him come over and use their kitchens. Calvin discussed that both his lack of access to a kitchen and his dietary choices caused him to pay for more expensive but more nutritious food because he was worried about staying healthy. The most difficulty participants reported in getting food was when they were without a job, such as Willy and Louis. Willy mentioned that he "would go 2 to 3 months without food" until he realized he was eligible for food stamps. Louis relied upon shelters and the college's food pantry, which, along with gym showers, was another benefit of attending college. As a result of his limited food intake, most of Louis's day was planned out to make sure he was optimizing his energy. He stated he would "try not to burn too much energy—unnecessary energy, because I might not have access to my locker until Monday and it has some food in it, you know, just small amounts of food."

The final major bodily need of urination/bowel movements were only mentioned by Clarence. This discussion was in the context of the benefits of attending school. He stated,

When I knew what was coming, I knew exactly what I needed, and I had it down to a homelessness list. "Well, I'll need a cooler. I'll need a place to shower. I need places to pee." And then I started thinking about how much being in school was helping that and helping provide for that, which I guess put an emphasis on school more so 'cause it was

no longer providing for some hypothetical future payoff. It was an immediate resource, actually.

Therefore, the college's services of food, showers, and bathrooms were often a benefit, particularly to those who were without income and without any support from friends or family. However, all of the participants had difficulty focusing in school and doing what they needed to do to learn.

Subtheme A: Lack of ability to focus on studies. *It's kind of hard to study when you're like starving* (Louis). Since the participants had difficulty meeting some of their basic needs, they also had trouble paying attention in school. As Calvin put it, "If you don't have that sleep, a good enough sleep, you're not able to pay attention at all, not even if you wanna pay attention, just with life, period. Because when you're poor and you're homeless, you . . . it's not set where you're gonna be okay." Similarly, Louis, who was suffering from lack of sleep and thought he was not getting enough daily calories, said "it's kind of hard to study when you're like starving" and went on to discuss his inability to complete a simple math problem:

Just earlier today I was trying to do some math. I got like a mock test and it was more difficult this time around, because my mind was like really foggy and I was having trouble with something else. It was a really simple problem that I was having trouble with, and so that kind of really didn't help me focus. So yeah, and then I'm just kind of just like falling asleep and then try to stay awake.

Louis's physical needs were not being met, and that got in the way of his daily functioning and his ability to perform at school.

Often, doing tasks to meet basic needs such as Clarence's housesitting so that he had a place to sleep, shower and cook; Zeneb's meeting with potential roommates/landlords; and

Victor's meetings with financial aid and his lawyer (who was working pro bono) would necessitate prioritizing those chores above going to school or getting homework done. Similarly, Kat described her work and how much it cut into her ability to get enough rest and get her homework done: "I work from like 5:30 at night until like 1:00 in the morning. . . . So by then the end of, like end of the day I'm just like—so tired. You know I have to go home and like do homework and all that. But yeah it's been really hard to keep up with work, or homework is what I meant." One condition of her living situation was that Kat was to both go to school and work; therefore, she had to maintain this schedule or be without a place to stay. The stress levels and mental states of the participants also affected their schoolwork, but that will be discussed in Theme 2.

Interestingly, in Clarence's case, even though he felt that did not learn as much during the term when he was homeless, he also felt that his grades were better during that term because he was forced to be at school more often. He explained that now that he had his own apartment, "my grades won't be as good because I won't be doing homework to distract myself from the nothing that I'm otherwise doing. But I'll retain more this term for sure." When Clarence was living in his car, he would come to campus and spend all day in the library because he did not have anywhere else to be. Therefore, he completed homework that he would not have completed otherwise.

Conclusion to theme 1. In general, most participants experienced some negative effects of the practicalities of attempting to meet their basic needs and/or the consequences of not fully meeting those needs. The most prevalent issue was that of sleep; participants complained of difficulty sleeping in their different situations because of psychological and physical discomfort. This lack of sleep affected other elements of their lives, including their abilities to focus in

school. Other basic needs such as food, showering, and using the toilet were experienced to greater and lesser degrees based upon the participant's shelter. Staying with friends and family tended to make things easier physically, if not necessarily emotionally, and at the other end of the spectrum, sleeping outside and not having any source of income caused participants to experience the most extreme physical effects. As Louis stated, "I can't wait until I get to that point, you know, to where I have all my basic needs covered and I can just focus solely on school, and that's going to be a great point."

Clarence summed up how difficult meeting one's basic needs while homeless and attending college could be:

Like just the basics of taking care of yourself. It's more difficult in your car. If you didn't wanna brush your teeth that morning, then you got like morning mouth, but you got it 'til like noon, and that's pulling focus. And you smell, and that's pulling focus. It pulls focus if you're interacting with humans, especially, 'cause then you're like [*makes mumbling noises*]. And then just the lack of sleep. There's so much lack of sleep. There'd be nights where it was 2 or 3 hours, which is not that uncommon, anyway if you like to live. Right? But it was much more frequent, especially in the summer when it was hot. On those days when it was really, really hot and you're like, "Ugh." There was no way in hell you could sleep. And if you'd get to sleep and then people would sometimes start yelling at each other in parking lots and stuff. Yeah. . . . Other than that, it's mostly just normal stress, just more of it and more often."

Theme 2: Emotional Stress

I'm not focusing. I'm not learning (Zeneb).

While participants had various levels of difficulty meeting their basic needs, they all experienced emotional stress that affected their lives in totality and specifically affected their abilities to learn. On a broader level, all participants discussed the emotional stress of needing to manage the details of homelessness, which included meeting short- and long-term basic needs. Participants expressed being overwhelmed, feelings of anxiety and depression, and in a few cases, thoughts of turning to substances to calm those feelings. The emotional stress that the participants experienced affected the quality of their learning and performance at college.

In particular, for those who were experiencing homelessness for the first time while being a college student, the shock of their new situation was extreme. Justine's situation was exacerbated by the fact that she had two teenage children who relied upon her. She stated:

My attitude was so great and it was kind of frightening because when I started school I thought, "Wow you know I have never been excited, I never thought I'd go to college." And I hit this point earlier this year where it suddenly came to me, like I really, really wanna go to college. First time in my life and I really committed to it. I really, I'm gonna do it. I have total faith in it. And I thought there's, I was so on top of it, I thought, "There's no way you're ever gonna get me to change my mind about it," and then this all happened and it's like within 24 hours, you know you're ready to just say, you're so overwhelmed I was ready to say, "Fuck it. I can't handle this."

Justine was not only shocked by how her housing situation made her feel, but she was also shocked that she could so quickly be discouraged from her chosen course. And, not only did she have two children's physical and mental well-beings for which to care, but "I have to keep a

smile on my face all the time. No matter what.” She had to expend the extra energy to put up a positive front for her children, which was difficult.

Even 20 years later, the emotions connected to his homelessness were so indelible that Victor could still feel the emotions of his experience. He stated, “I didn’t need to have to deal with something like that at that age was just like I don’t know, it’s just like, thinking about it just makes me want to cry. Like it’s just, it’s too super overwhelming, like I mean it was just too much.” This was his first experience of homelessness. Feeling that he should be an adult at 18, which to him meant that he should have been able to fully take care of himself, exacerbated the emotions he felt. Like approximately one-third of the participants, Victor’s parents had knowingly and purposefully given up responsibility for his well-being while he was still a teenager, which abruptly made him solely accountable for his own welfare. Having to deal with food and finding a place to live was difficult enough, but Victor had the added stress of the necessity of becoming legally emancipated from his father because Victor could not receive financial aid without this legal separation. Therefore, many of the situations that the participants ran into were beyond what they felt prepared to handle.

The extreme nature of and lack of preparation that the participants felt for their situations led some participants to experience depression and/or anxiety in relation to their homelessness.

Kat expressed these feelings the most. Three of her most telling statements were:

1. “It feels like you just have like water up to here [gestured above her head] or something, like you’re just, you’re full,”
2. “Just like depressed I guess, like completely, I don’t know how to explain it, like . . . there’s just like a constant like hole in your chest like it almost feels like—I don’t know how to explain it. Like you don’t really know until you’re there,” and

3. “It’s so strange when everything’s happening, like affecting you emotionally, but physically like your body is just like tense and you can feel like your heart like aching. . . . It felt like just like the walls were coming in on me.”

Kat used oppressive—walls coming in, sinking in water—and emotional imagery—a hole in her heart—to convey the feelings she had of being overwhelmed and depressed. Those feelings permeated her interview along with feelings of surprise and shock about her situation.

A few participants described that these depressive and anxious thoughts made them feel as though turning to drugs or alcohol would potentially be a relief and an escape from their realities. For example George was sober at the time that his homeless experience started, but dealing with the situation was becoming a trigger for him. He stated, “Yeah, drinking, I really—at times, I’m like, ‘I really want to have a drink right now.’ But I know that could be the end of it.” Similarly, Justine talked about her desire to use sleeping pills and alcohol to deal with her emotions:

I was ready to just you know pop as many sleeping pills as I could and just forget about it, you know what I mean? Sleep for a few days. I don’t have a few days. Luckily I had my head on straight enough and I had enough people that I talk to and I just kind of, and it’s my style, I kind of melted down for 24 hours and then I regrouped and just did my again compartmentalized, do one thing at a time, you know? Then I kind of convinced myself that I can only do what I can do and move forward and make decisions the best I can.

In both cases, George and Justine decided that using these substances would not be productive. As Justine said, she had thought “‘You know I’m just gonna go to a bar and have a drink and forget.’ But you’re so close to being on the edge and I am, I’ve always been highly responsible.

More so than a lot of people. I mean if I was that close, how many other people are gonna completely fall apart?” Both George and Justine had, up to that point, resisted the urge to turn to these substances for the temporary escape they would provide. However, they both acknowledged that they could see the attraction of this path.

Similarly, in their discussions of “other” homeless people, Louis, Willy, Clarence, and Calvin described not wanting to be like the homeless who were not working toward a goal. In so doing, drug use was designated as something that made the participants different from the “truly” homeless. For example, Louis stated,

And so that’s kind of the importance of me kind of like to stay in that part of the lifestyle instead of the other part of just kind of like wandering around, just a bunch of drugs . . . a lot of drugs, you know. A lot of like theft and fights and chaos and drama. And I just don’t want to be a part of that.

The one participant who admitted to current drug usage was Willy, but he thought of his marijuana use as something that alleviated his anxiety and enabled him to function. He had been homeless before attending college and alluded to some harder drug usage in the past. However, he had found that the drugs he used to do were limiting him, so he:

just stuck to smoking weed, throughout the homelessness, because it helped ease my pain, the depression, and it made it to where I could go to sleep at night because of all the cars that would come by it’d be hard to go so sleep ‘cause you have to focus on every sound. It just made it to where I could sleep, eat, and whatnot, just helped a lot with it.

Therefore, while drug use was a temptation because it could distract from the emotional stress of homelessness, it was also seen as something that could drag a person into more permanent homelessness. The participants were very aware of both of those aspects, and they chose to avoid

all drugs (except Willy and marijuana) in order to maintain their positions as college students and continue to move toward their goals of a degree.

Unfortunately, the emotional stress of homelessness caused all of the participants to have difficulty focusing in class. All participants specifically spoke about an inability to focus on their studies both inside and outside of the classroom because of the stress of their living situations. While it did not always reflect negatively on their grades, all participants felt they were unable to learn and explore college to their full potentials because of everything they were juggling. For example, three of the participants spoke about their general inability to focus. As Victor put it, “There was no room for creativity, or insights, or of thinking deeply about anything.” Louis echoed this sentiment: “When you’re in a position like I’m in, the last thing on your mind is school.” As did Justine: “I mean mentally, once I just kind of fell apart mentally there’s nothing I could do. I could not do any work or anything so everything just sat.”

Furthermore, Zeneb went into greater detail about her feelings of distraction and stress. She stated she was:

not really focusing on the studies. Whenever I’m doing something or reading something, I just—my mind just goes straight to the main subject in my personal life, which is finding a place where to live . . . and then I’ll try, like, “okay, let’s keep this away for now and just focus on studies and do this, this, this,” but it’s always getting in and it’s a lot of stress.

Zeneb also discussed her inability to focus in the classroom. She was constantly worried about her living situation, and she felt that she had to keep checking Craigslist and her phone just in case a potential living situation became available. Likewise, other participants discussed this phenomenon. For example, Kat stated, “I like would just sit in class and stare and just think

about like what I had to do next.” Consequently, participants had difficulty fully participating in class and absorbing information.

As a result, participants also discussed how much easier school was for those who did not have to worry about their living situations. For example, George stated, “When you don’t know what you’re gonna eat that night, you’re not thinking about school and just thinking about the process like that. You need to figure out things right now. I feel like school is for the wealthy.” George came from a relatively wealthy family that had lost its money in a bankruptcy. That family had subsequently broken up—his father and mother divorced—and both of his parents refused to support him or allow him to live with them. George seemed particularly aware of what he perceived to be the advantages other students in his classes had because they did not have to worry about money like he did. Similarly, Justine felt the added stress of caring for her two sons and the necessity of worrying about their welfare. She said, “If it was just me this would not be stressful. It’s because I have kids that this thing is so stressful.” Therefore, participants were aware of their disadvantageous situations in relation to other students.

Interestingly, Clarence thought that his homelessness had actually contributed to the best grades of his college career to that point, even though he did echo the sentiment that he did not learn much because of his need to mentally focus on his homelessness during class. At the time of his interview, he was living in an apartment during the first term after his stint as a homeless college student. He said:

It [homelessness] affected concentration a lot at work, at school. Now a lotta times when I was in school, I was a little tuned out, more so than I am now, for sure. Like I said, my grades won’t be as good because I won’t be doing homework to distract myself from the nothing that I’m otherwise doing. But I’ll retain more this term for sure ‘cause like I said

before, the amount of occupation you have with mundane tasks and getting things like that accomplished is like, that's a significant portion of your time and your energy and everything else. And, yeah, and it does. You're sitting in class and your mind's wandering wondering where you're gonna sleep. So you're actually accomplishing things mentally that is not what you're supposed to be doing at that moment.

Clarence actually made the Dean's List during the term when he was homeless, but he said it was due to the fact that he spent most of his time in the library. It was warm and had Wi-Fi, so he felt comfortable there. Nevertheless, he was so bored spending 10 hours a day in the library that it made him put considerable time into his assignments, which enabled him to get good grades. Yet, he maintained that he did not get much out of the classes and assignments because of the mental energy he had to put into maintaining his lifestyle.

Others, however, had a very different experience than Clarence when it came to grades. In particular, Victor stated, "I was pretty much an A student, once I was stable, but that first year, it was just, I couldn't focus on school. I mean I was showing up and trying to do it, but I just, I couldn't." It seemed that those who had not experienced homelessness before college were more likely to feel that they were unable to succeed in school. Conversely, Clarence had been homeless before and had a "homelessness plan" in place. While the stress of managing his homelessness was definitely extreme and affected his life in a myriad of ways, he seemed better able to meet the expectations of college than those who had not been homeless before, even if he felt he was not getting everything out of it that he wanted.

Conclusion to theme 2. Participants felt pride in their status as college students and motivated to earn a degree. However, the emotional stress of the homeless world pervaded their college lives and made it very difficult for them to fully experience the intellectual elements of

college. In some situations, participants were able to appear as though they were succeeding in college (e.g., Clarence's ability to make the Dean's List), but in all cases participants felt they were not learning what they should or working to their full potential. This statement by Victor described these feelings:

I was so busy scrambling to figure out what I needed to do or investing all my emotional energy to how am I going to stay in school and where am I going to live? So I was spending a lot of time doing that like even, you know, and spending a lot of time like just worrying about stuff like just ruminating thoughts about where, you know, and just I mean it was depressing, you know. So I mean, being in that and kind of being like in that more depressed state, I mean it's kind of draining . . . like more tired too . . . like the emotions, like how they affect like physically affect your body too. So it's like I might have been resilient and trying to stay at school, but it was just so draining just to figure it out, like trying to figure it out. That, I mean, there was no room for creativity, or insights, or of thinking deeply about anything. It was more just school became like a chore, like just a chore or like how just I need to get this done, you know, and there was . . . like it was so hard to have physical time to get it done, and then also the emotions were affecting me where even if I did have time, it was really hard to do it. It was really hard to do it.

Theme 3: Isolation

The relationship you have with yourself [is most important], 'cause that's all you have . . . everybody else is just holograms or something (George).

Isolation was a major theme for all of the participants. Some were almost completely isolated and chose to disconnect from others, while some did keep friends and seek out

assistance. The amount of assistance and support a participant received tended to make the difference between sleeping on the street and sleeping in a bed. However, most of those who sought out and accepted assistance felt uncomfortable when receiving that help. Finally, in all of the cases, they experienced one form or another of parental abandonment, whether it was a parent telling the participant that he/she could not stay with them any longer or a parent being unable to help and the participant protecting the parent from knowledge of the participant's situation.

On one end of the spectrum, Louis used a lot of assistance from shelters and the college, and he relied on classmates to lend him school supplies; however, he did not mention any friends or romantic partners. In fact, he only mentioned a couple of acquaintances. He stated, "I kind of prefer to be alone, you know. I like to travel alone and just be by myself because it's much more peaceful than having to deal with, you know, having to worry about someone else's feelings or someone else having to eat, things like that." Even though Calvin had established some friendships, he said, "You can't really tell people [that you're homeless]. Who wants to be with somebody that's homeless?" Thus, he did not tell anyone about his housing situation and definitely did not try to find a romantic partner. Clarence was somewhat more connected; he had developed a few friendships that enabled him to housesit and visit some friends. These relationships allowed him to shower and get a break from sleeping in his car. Louis, Calvin, and Clarence all eschewed deep connections with others, but would occasionally rely on friends or services for some help.

Three participants completely isolated themselves except for one or two important personal relationships. For example, Willy developed a deep relationship with his fiancé, but he did not want to maintain many other relationships. He stated, "I cut off a lotta ties from a lotta

friends, so I just mainly choose family over friends to help me out, and they really did help. [With] places to stay and whatnot ‘cause we lost our place a couple times and my family, a couple friends would help out, and then things would turn south.” Even though Justine was no longer in a relationship with her ex-husband, she ended up staying with him because she had nowhere else to stay with her sons. The fact that her ex was her sons’ father connected him to the family, and she had initially thought this was a good situation until she could afford a place for herself and her sons. She explained, “I thought it would be good for everyone if we lived together ‘cause he could help raise the kids and I wouldn’t have to worry about housing.” Unfortunately, her ex was unreliable and did not pay the rent, so they were facing eviction. This kind of behavior seemed to be a pattern for him; she described him as a “Disneyland dad,” and she had always taken on primary responsibility for the practicalities of her and her sons’ lives. Justine did have family who had some money, but she thought she could not rely upon them for help unless she was on the street. Even then, they would likely only help her kids, “You know they want me to continue to be responsible for myself, but certainly they’re not gonna let their grandchildren be homeless.” Therefore, her support was limited to one unreliable person. Finally, George only had his girlfriend to rely upon, and he was staying with her. He had lost most of his friends due to ignoring them in favor of a previous girlfriend: “I had a ton of friends, and I just lost them all.” So, by the time he became homeless in college, he had no one to turn to other than his girlfriend. Even though he had his girlfriend as a primary support (he was living in her apartment and not paying rent), at the end of the interview he described the moment when he realized he was homeless (before finding out he could live with his girlfriend), and he continued to describe his current thoughts about other people:

I was scared because I felt completely on my own for the first time. It really brought up every man for himself almost, and then I was really like, “Wow, you really . . . I think we really do die alone completely with ourselves.” There’s nobody else, really. It’s just meeting new people, everybody else. Other people are just . . . it’s nice to talk to ‘em, and it’s nice to build relationships. But really, it doesn’t really matter, honestly. The relationship you have with yourself, ‘cause that’s all you have. That’s completely all you have. It’s like everything else is just . . . everybody else is just holograms or something. It’s just you, and you’re trying to get through this videogame almost. I like comparing it to that. You’re like a first-person shooter just trying to get through this videogame, and everybody you meet on the way is just part of the levels. But you have to keep moving on, obviously, to beat the game. Yeah, it’s scary, just the realization of that all, of all that. That’s what was the scariest.

For George, even though he did have a girlfriend who filled the role of friend, romantic partner, and financial support, he did not have any family whom he could rely upon, nor did he have any friends. His experience of homelessness made him feel that he was always completely alone in spite of his girlfriend’s support.

In contrast to the six participants above who did not have many friends they could rely upon, Victor, Zeneb, and Kat relied on friends with whom they were close for help. Victor seemed to have a generally positive experience relying upon friends, other than feeling embarrassed by the necessity. He initially lived with a friend’s family on their couch and later stayed with a good friend in her dorm room. Without their assistance, he would not have had anywhere to go. However, he did not discuss any negative change in his relationship with these friends or think there were uncomfortable power dynamics at play. In contrast to Victor, Kat’s

acceptance of help from a friend's family drastically changed her relationship with that friend. She was staying with her best friend's family while that friend was away at college. This caused friction between her and her friend, who appeared to be jealous that Kat had taken her place in the home. Similarly, Zeneb had a few offers of places to stay with friends, and she took one of them up on her offer. Zeneb felt that her friend was continually judging her, and she really wanted to live on her own. She said, "you know that you're not with family. You're just by yourself." Zeneb was particularly upset when she found out her friend was discussing Zeneb's actions and behavior with the friend's husband (who was living overseas). For instance, they discussed what time she came home, etc., and Zeneb felt like she was under a microscope. Later in the interview, Zeneb talked about how uncomfortable it can be even to live with family, so living with a friend and not paying rent seemed to particularly pain her.

While friends assisted some of the participants, in all cases parental figures had chosen to remove support or were unable to provide support. None of the participants had parents who were able and/or willing to assist them through college or out of homelessness. Many of them had been kicked out of the house and/or told they could not live with their parents any longer. George, Victor, and Willy were told they could no longer live with their parents because of their behavior. However, Willy's mother had actively thwarted his attempts to enter a shelter when he was a minor; the social workers at the shelters would call his mother and she would tell them that Willy could come home at any time. He stated that this was not true because she had kicked him out. Their relationship remained a difficult one into his college and adult life. In the cases of Kat, Calvin, and Louis, their mothers were unable to financially support them, which meant they had to fend for themselves. Their fathers did not seem to be in the picture, and Calvin discussed his disdain for fathers who abandoned their children because that is what he experienced. He also

felt he had to deal with a situation that was not of his making: “My mother had me. I didn’t have my mother. So it’s like I’m a product of what was something I had no control over in the beginning.” And as discussed in the “Emotional Stress” theme, Justine’s parents would not help her because they thought she should be able to take care of herself and her children because she was an adult.

This disconnection from parental figures led to some participants’ beliefs that they should be able to “figure things out.” Victor said repeatedly that he thought that since he was 18, he should be an adult; therefore, he should have been able to support himself and known how to navigate college on his own. Kat echoed this after her mother told her she was on her own. She said, “And it just kinda like broke my heart to see her [her mother] lie to me and you know like let it all happen and say, “Oh sorry. You can figure it out and go move somewhere else.” Her mother told Kat that she needed to take care of herself. Similarly, Justine’s parents made it clear to her that she needed to suffer the consequences of her actions, whatever they may be.

In some cases, participants did not feel abandoned by their parents; rather, participants felt they needed to take on the role of parent in the parent-child relationship. Louis and Calvin both lied to their mothers about their homelessness. Calvin even wanted his mother to move to the Pacific Northwest so he could help her out with her physical ailments. Both men rejected the possibility of moving back home to their mothers—not because the mothers would not take them in, but because they felt their mothers could not afford to do so. Similarly, Kat described feeling as though she often had to take care of her mother, even when she was in high school, but she still felt surprised when her mother told Kat that she could not help her with a living situation any longer. She still worried about her mother and knew that her mother was living on the street, which upset her.

However, in some cases, the participants did have people who were pushing them to succeed in school. Kat's grandparents were excited by the idea of her becoming the first person in the family to have a college degree. Also, Willy's fiancé had talked him into going back to school to get his GED, and his main thoughts of college were connected to her. He said, "She helps me a lot. She brings up my spirits. She helps me with a lot of the homework that I have and whatnot." While Justine's children did not push her to go to school, they were a major reason why she was there. She described wanting to be a good role model for them.

Finally, some participants reached out to community services and people at college. Louis extensively used services in both the community and at the college. Those services, like the college's food bank, enabled him to meet some of his basic needs. Justine and Victor focused some of the discussion on college services, and both of them spoke to counselors. Justine was not sure that the college could really help her much with her immediate problems, but because Victor spoke to someone at the Financial Aid office and told her of his situation, he eventually was able to gain funding for his second year of college. The Financial Aid Officer sent him to a school counselor whom he saw throughout his time at college. This counselor connected him with a lawyer who was instrumental in helping him resolve his financial predicament:

I remember being like the lawyer was really supportive. I mean I didn't even have to pay him any money, so I don't even know how. . . . I'm just really fortunate. I don't know how many lawyers would do that for somebody, you know, to help them write the letters, you know, to help a student out. So yeah, I was really lucky and even then it was still like really hard and way too much to deal with.

Victor's father made too much money for Victor to qualify for financial aid; however, Victor's father would not give him any more money or pay for his second year of college. Therefore,

Victor had to become legally emancipated from his father in order to receive financial aid to pay for his second year of college and a place to live during that year. The lawyer's help and the counselor's support enabled Victor to gain housing and continue in college; without that help he would have had to quit.

Other participants relied upon financial aid funds to get out of their homeless worlds. Clarence and Calvin both found apartments once their financial aid came in; however, they both had to wait until a new term started to receive the funds. Calvin even had to stay homeless for an extra term because he had to use financial aid money to repair his car. Similarly, Louis was in his first term of college, and he was hoping that the financial aid money would enable him to get an apartment. Financial aid is the least personal and connected way of receiving assistance that the participants experienced, but it was a vital part of many of their plans for escape from homelessness.

Subtheme A: Independence. Another element of isolation was the desire on the part of the participants to be independent. For those who accepted shelter from friends (Kat, Victor, and Zeneb), they felt ashamed of the need to accept this help and that they “should” be able to take care of themselves. As Victor put it:

We kind of have this broader cultural idea of, you know, when you're 18 you're an adult.

So when I felt uncomfortable, it was not . . . it was my realization that I can't do this on my own, but thinking I'm supposed to be able to without people like offering me support.

So it just felt really uncomfortable like I was putting it a lot on me like I was failing.

Even though Kat and Zeneb felt the living situation actually changed the way they interacted with their friends and Victor did not, all three of the participants felt uncomfortable taking this assistance and felt that they needed to be out on their own.

Even George, who was relying upon his girlfriend and seemed to be satisfied with that for most of the interview, stated that his goal was: “I just wanna have income, and I wanna make enough money to pay for a place. That’s what I really wanna do. I don’t wanna lean on anybody anymore. . . . It doesn’t matter if I have to work two or three jobs.” These participants all recognized their desire to be independent, but they also recognized the necessity of accepting help to get there.

On the other end of the spectrum, some of the participants saw their homelessness as a way to be independent. As Calvin put it, “[being homeless] was a choice of either be independent or not. That was exactly what that was about.” He had a few choices:

1. He could have returned to his home city to live with his mother again, but he felt that would be going back to the bad neighborhood and he would be stuck;
2. He could have accepted help from services or someone he met, but this would mean that he would be giving in to his situation and he might get taken advantage of; or
3. He could live by himself in his car and be self-sufficient.

He chose the latter. He felt that it helped him continue with his goal of getting a degree and a career.

Conclusion to theme 3. A major factor contributing to the participants’ homelessness was their isolation. All participants had been rejected or abandoned by their parents—some were abandoned completely and some were only abandoned financially if their parents could not afford to help—so none of the participants had family upon which to depend. However, those who stayed connected with friends were able to maintain shelter; those who did not slept in their cars, in shelters, or on the street. Thus, connections with others, even if it was uncomfortable to accept help, seemed to enable participants to alleviate some of the worst consequences of

homelessness. And in the case of the one participant, Victor, who was far removed from this experience, the connections he made with college staff enabled him to get the financial aid he needed to remain enrolled and find housing for his second year of college.

Summary

Participants in this study lived in a world of homelessness that they experienced through their bodies and their interactions with others. They all had the goal of escaping the homeless world by attaining a college degree. Participants saw this degree as a guarantee of a “good,” stable job that would keep them financially secure and intellectually engaged. However, their basic needs, emotional stress, and isolation affected their abilities to succeed in, explore, and learn from college. In particular, lack of sleep, depression and anxiety, and disconnection from others by choice, embarrassment, or rejection interfered with their daily lives and attempts to do schoolwork. However, college did provide some immediate and long-term relief from the homeless world in the forms of safety, warmth, food, and money for apartments. It also afforded them with the positive self-image of being a college student, which replaced that of the image of a homeless person for crucial moments in their self-assessments. This enabled them to feel as though they were moving forward with their lives and bolstered their self-esteem. Unfortunately, most participants described being unable to do their best work, and it was unclear how that would affect their abilities to reach their goals.

In conclusion, Figure 2 portrays the thematic structure of the analysis.

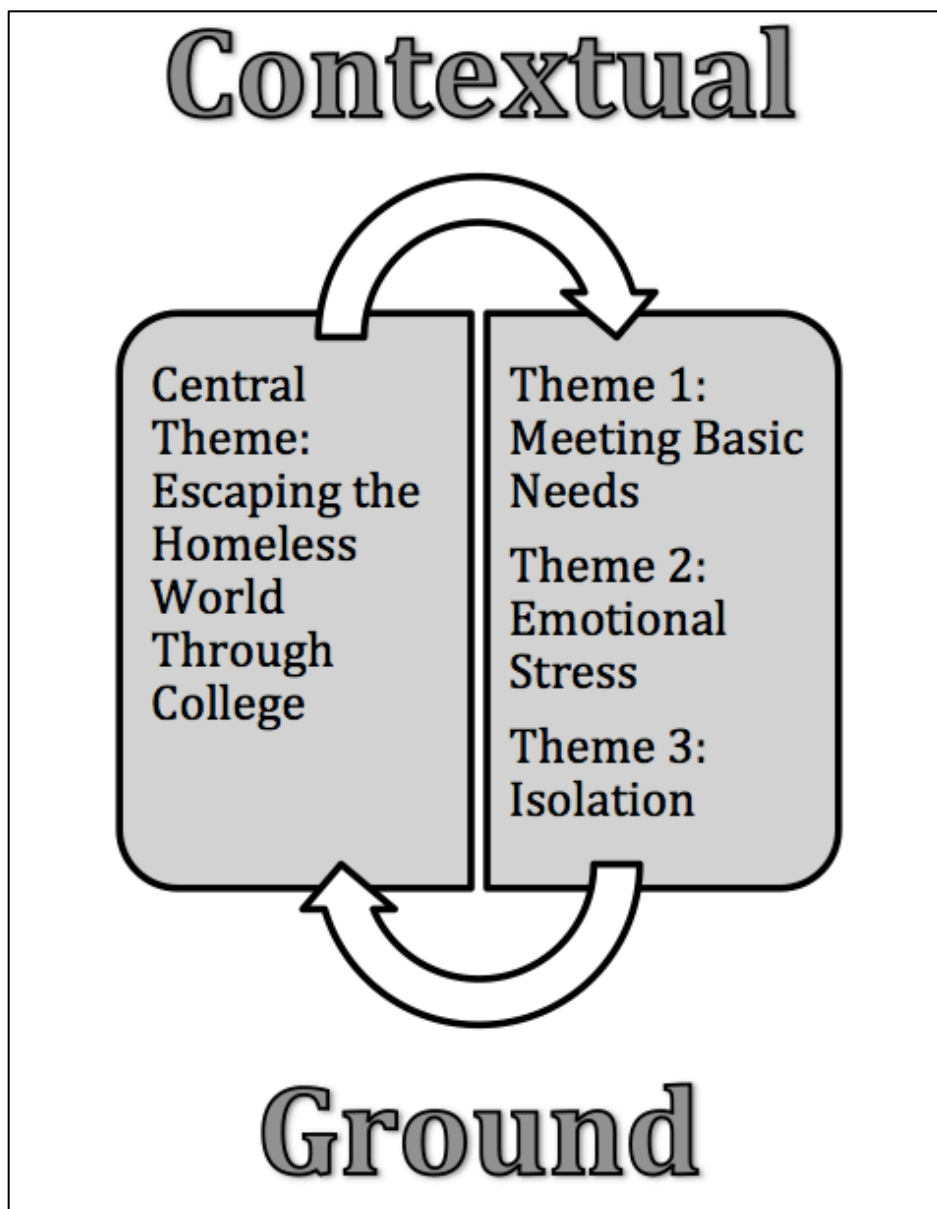


Figure 2: Relationships of Contextual Ground; Central Theme; and Themes 1, 2, and 3

Chapter V

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to describe the experience of homeless students in college. Using a phenomenological approach based on the works of van Manen (1990), I wrote a bracketing statement to identify my preconceived notions and suppositions about this population. I subsequently conducted nine interviews with participants, and all participants were asked to describe what college had been like for them. Participants were also asked to complete lived-experience descriptions and demographic forms; approximately half of the participants chose to participate in the writing of a lived-experience description, but all participants completed the demographic form. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed utilizing a hermeneutical approach described by van Manen (1990) because of his focus on education research. I also included some terminology based in Thomas and Pollio (2002), which I found helped to clarify some of van Manen's ideas, and Thomas and Pollio's focus on metaphors during analysis. Each interview and lived-experience description was examined within the context of all of the interviews and lived-experience descriptions.

The participants described experiences ranging from 20 years in the past to being immersed in the experience of homelessness at the time of the interview. The clarity and emotion with which the participants described their experiences suggest that the instances they shared with me held personal meaning. All of the participants reported the difficulties inherent in attending college while homeless and also identified college as a way to meet long- and short-term needs and desires. They described the world of homelessness and its relationship with college through personal experiences. A thematic structure developed from the shared themes of the interviews and lived-experience descriptions that provided new insights into the experience

of attending college while homeless. Since there is very little research about homeless college students and only one other study that focuses on the experiences of this population (albeit only homeless youth and the study had a focus on student services), this study illuminated an experience that currently is not well understood. In this chapter, these findings and relevant research will be discussed.

As of the writing of this chapter, the issue of the homeless attending college is coming more to the forefront of our national consciousness. For example, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* is in the process of publishing a series of articles under the heading, “Does Higher Education Perpetuate Inequality?” This series identifies many of the financial barriers to successful college completion, including the homelessness that the participants in this study discuss (Carlson, 2016; Fischer, 2016). Also, in December 2015, the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s HOPE Lab published a report based upon a survey of 4,000 community college students that centers on food and housing insecurity (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2015). However, there is still a dearth of research on and with homeless college students in adult education, in part as a result of their reluctance to self-identify (Paden, 2012) and a lack of college tracking (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009). In fact, the one article I found in an adult education journal was an opinion practice piece written in 1996 (Karinshak, 1996). The little research on homeless college students has been conducted from the fields of educational leadership, social work, and sociology.

One of the few studies about homeless youth (ages 18–24) in college was done in the field of educational leadership. Crutchfield (2012) completed a “basic qualitative study” (p. 81) that explored homeless youths at college and their experiences with networks and supports to see how the academic and administrative structures and policies at a 4-year college affected her

population's self-reported ability to succeed. Also, Crutchfield recruited from drop-in centers and service providers; therefore, her participants were all working within systems for assistance with their situations. As such, her study differs from mine in the age spread and help-seeking behaviors of the participants (only one of my participants was utilizing community services for the homeless) as well as the method and purpose of the study. Yet, there were quite a few areas of overlap in our findings, and these connections support the findings of this study.

In the following sections, I explore the contextual grounds and themes of this study and connect them with the research that has been done in relation to this population and the theory that best frames the findings. Some of this research was used to frame this study in chapter II, and I refer back to it here. However, once the findings emerged, I identified additional studies and theories that related to the findings. These are also included in this chapter. I end with suggestions for future research and the implications of these findings upon the field of adult education, followed by a conclusion.

Themes and Existing Research

Contextual Grounds

When assessing my preconceived notions of this study and the population, I realized that I expected the participants' experiences to be grounded in the world of college; however, upon analysis of the interview transcripts and lived-experience descriptions, it emerged that the participants almost constantly existed in the world of homelessness. College was seen as a path to escape homelessness in the short- and long-term (central theme). However, participants were continually pulled back into the homeless world through their bodies (themes of meeting bodily needs and mental exhaustion) and their interactions with other people (theme of isolation). The

homeless world also carried the ever-present threat of pulling participants in on a more permanent basis.

The world of homelessness was grounded in the participants' bodies. As discussed in chapter IV, participants were continually reminded of their existence in the homeless world because of their bodies. The physical demands caused by their homeless statuses, such as physical exhaustion as a result of lack of sleep and mental exhaustion experienced by the necessity of problem-solving their ways through each day, were ongoing physical reminders of their situations.

The world of homelessness was also grounded by their experiences with other people. As discussed in chapter IV, participants' relationships with others enabled them to make connections that assisted them with their housing situations and college experiences. Conversely, a lack of connection with others, which was often at least a partial choice of the participants attempting to hide their homeless status, frequently made it more difficult for participants to find and receive help. Finally, interactions with other students who apparently did not have the same financial and housing difficulties made some participants more aware of their lack of privilege and support.

Central Theme: Escaping the Homeless World Through College

The contextual grounds of the study set the scene and framed the themes. The central theme of the study, "Escaping the Homeless World Through College," represented the overall connection and purpose of college in the lives of these homeless students. This was seen both in long- and short-term benefits. Participants saw college as a path out of homelessness to a stable and secure future. As Victor asked, "How am I going to be successful or how am I going to even have stability [without a degree]?" Crutchfield's (2012) participants had similar feelings about

the purpose of college: “Despite the challenges that impact their experiences in college, most of the youth felt that staying in college is the way to make it out of poverty” (p. 126). This view can be reinforced by research on the benefits of higher education. For example, Baum et al. (2013) examined the correlation between educational attainment levels and benefits to both the individual and society. Some of their findings about those with higher levels of education include higher earnings, greater likelihood of employment, employer provided health and pension benefits, and increased chance of social mobility. They also found that the gaps between wage earnings, particularly between those with bachelor’s degrees and those with high school diplomas, are increasing, which indicates that it is becoming more and more important to earn a bachelor’s degree for one’s financial stability and comfort. However, these studies also show that attaining a degree is much less likely for students from low-income backgrounds (Baum et al., 2013). Studies further suggest that challenges faced by homeless college students may also negatively affect completion (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2013; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2015).

Along with perceived future benefits, participants also found practical immediate benefits to being in college, such as a safe space, a place to be, a provider of food and showers, a way to gain access to money (financial aid), and momentum. As Clarence described it, “College was actually really helpful. One of the main challenges of not having [a place] is just finding places to be, and I had places to be.” While there was no discussion in the literature of the idea of a “place to be,” a couple of studies (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2015) discussed the aforementioned benefits homeless students can experience, such as showers and a library in which to study. In relation to financial aid as an economic benefit of college attendance, two studies of women who left public assistance and went to school identified financial aid as both an attraction to attending college and an eventual negative (Broussard et al.,

2012; Gray, 2005). First it was seen as a way to gain an income, but it was later seen as a trap because it was difficult to pay off. However, the primary focus of both of these studies (and others) was on the ways that colleges could be more responsive to their low-income students and the ways in which the current structure alienates those same students. Although not identified in other studies, the benefits of the “routine” provided by the structure of college seems to be a unique perspective from participants of this study.

Finally, college offered the psychological benefit of an alternate label for the self; instead of taking on and prioritizing the label of “homeless,” participants were able to take on the positive label of “college student.” This meant the homeless label only came to the forefront when it was unavoidable. When participants did acknowledge the homeless label, they described themselves as a different kind of homeless than other homeless people. In order to maintain the “college student” label over the “homeless” label, participants spent time and energy attempting to hide their situations from the college and other students. These findings support Crutchfield’s (2012) findings; in particular, her homeless youth participants felt “they were unique among their shelter and transitional living peers in that they show determination, willingness, ability, and have opportunities to further their education” (p. 112). As one of her participants put it, “I’m a different type of homeless person” (p. 112). Therefore, the ability to describe the self as a college student and not “just” a homeless person seems to encourage a sense of pride and self-esteem in college students across a variety of ages and levels of societal backing who are dealing with homelessness. Also, these findings support the idea of homeless college students as an “invisible population” in colleges because of the shame that can be attached to that label; students do not want to be identified as homeless (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009; Hallett, 2010; Paden, 2012). As Berg-Cross and Green (2009) stated, “Homeless students share the shame, isolation, and fear of

being ‘outed’ common to many homeless groups” (p. 9). Many of the participants in this study indicated that they felt they should have been able to support themselves, and their inability to do so was seen as a personal failing. Belcher and Deforge (2012) traced this stigmatization and feeling of personal failure to our broader societal structure and capitalism. They stated, “society focuses on the individual as the cause of his or her own state of homelessness, blaming the victim rather than focusing on the larger antecedent social and economic forces, such as unemployment, limited affordable housing, and breakdowns in kinship networks” (p. 929). Therefore, the participants in this study have internalized this social narrative. Thus, it is understandable that homeless college students would prefer the label of “college student” to the label of “homeless” in order to be seen in the best light by themselves and others.

Using a phenomenological approach enabled this study to delve more deeply into what participants felt they were getting out of college. However, each of the three themes contained in the central theme provides insight into the ways that participants are pulled out of their college experiences and back into the homeless world in spite of their best efforts and intentions. The idea of college provided participants with purpose and self-esteem, while simultaneously asking more of students than they were often able to give, as evidenced by the following three themes: meeting basic needs, emotional stress, and isolation. In these themes, participants described barriers to their college success and showed how difficult it was for them to continue attending college and moving toward their goals.

Theme 1: Meeting Basic Needs

All of the participants experienced difficulty in meeting their basic needs. Shelter was the main problem area for the participants; however, many of the participants also struggled with hygiene and finding food. In all cases, participants were unable to find acceptable housing (in

their eyes), even those who had jobs. This meant participants stayed with friends or slept in their cars, shelters, or outside. Those who had to rely on friends felt very uncomfortable with that arrangement, and it affected their emotional states and relationships. Those who did not rely upon others for shelter often felt proud of their independence, but they tended to experience the harsh elements and a more difficult time meeting their other basic needs. All of the participants also experienced trouble sleeping, no matter where they slept. This caused participants to feel sleep deprived and tired at college.

The effect of these unmet basic needs developed into a subtheme: lack of ability to focus in school. As Louis put it, “It’s kind of hard to study when you’re like starving.” The participants experienced physical exhaustion that caused them to have difficulty paying attention in class and completing assignments. There were also many tasks that needed to be completed in order to maintain their precarious situations or to better their lots, such as prioritizing a dog-sitting job over going to class so that a participant could have access to shelter and a shower. Another example was answering text messages during class to set up appointments to see apartments.

The theme of an inability to meet basic needs is echoed in the research, and the potential consequence of students shouldering these burdens is discussed at length. For example, Paden (2012) stated, “A student who struggles to meet basic needs such as food, jobs, housing, and maybe even child-care, is not likely to be able to focus on studies and may even be forced to drop out of school” (p. 672). Similarly, Hallett (2010) warned that diverting focus to meeting basic needs would likely distract students from participating in programs that may be of benefit and from completing tasks that are necessary to be successful students. Finally, Goldrick-Rab et al. (2015) cautioned that community colleges are significantly underestimating the living costs

incurred by their students, which causes students to receive less financial aid and have more difficulty in meeting their needs.

Theme 2: Emotional Stress

All participants also experienced emotional stress related to their housing situations. Those participants who had experienced homelessness before facing homelessness in college had more systems in place, but those who were new to homelessness often felt emotionally drained and/or shocked. However, for all participants, the emotional stress caused by dealing with their housing situations, attempting to meet other basic needs, managing school, and juggling relationships was extreme. Participants were often surprised by how much they were affected by their housing situations. Some of the participants described heightened anxiety and/or depression as a result. This connects with Goldrick-Rab et al.'s (2015) survey of 4,000 community college students that found "food and housing insecurity can contribute significant stress and distress, which might in turn impair students' abilities to access supportive resources and break out of this cycle" (p. 13). Their study also uncovered a strong relationship between food insecurity and mental health problems. This was not borne out in the reports of the participants of this study; in fact, those who discussed anxiety and depression the most were participants who had not reported food insecurity (except for one participant), and those who had reported food insecurity did not discuss mental health much. However, this does not necessarily undermine Goldrick-Rab et al.'s findings but could suggest the limitations of this study's sample size and participant-driven interview methodology.

Another element of these findings is that students may not have the time, money, and/or access to healthcare in order to be effectively treated for their mental illnesses, which means they would be more likely to drop out or be asked to leave (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009). Untreated

mental illness may also lead some students to self-medicate. Some participants indicated that the extreme emotional stress caused by their situations made them feel as though they wanted to turn to drugs or alcohol to dull their emotions. As Justine in this study reported, “I was ready to just you know pop as many sleeping pills as I could and just forget about it.” However, they also stated that they had decided not to go down this path at the point that I spoke to them in the study. Also, the use of hard drugs was seen as something “other” homeless people did—those who had given up and accepted their fate as homeless. In broader homeless literature, studies have found “one-half [of the homeless] abuse drugs or alcohol” (Quigley et al., 2001). The one participant, Willy, who admitted to marijuana usage, thought of it as a minor drug, and he stated that he used it to treat his depression and help him sleep. However, he was clear that he did not use any “harder” drugs. Stigmatization may be one reason why participants chose not to utilize drugs and alcohol to cope. While drug and alcohol usage is not mentioned in the limited homeless college student literature, it is likely that untreated drug and/or alcohol usage would cause further attrition.

All of this emotional stress made it difficult to focus in class and on studies. Louis stated, “When you’re in a position like I’m in, the last thing on your mind is school.” The participants saw college as their way out of homelessness and into a life of stability and comfort; ironically, the emotional stress of their living situations combined with the energy and time expended attempting to meet their basic needs caused the participants to be unable to truly focus on and learn from college. One participant, Clarence, actually reported that he received better grades during the term he was homeless because of all of the time available to complete homework, but he felt that he did not learn as much during that term as he did during the terms he was housed and more stable. Crutchfield reported similar findings, “When they do not have stable housing,

they cannot concentrate on school” (p. 127). Paden (2012) and Goldrick-Rab et al. (2015) concurred, emphasizing that focus on school can become a struggle because of the other demands upon the students.

Theme 3: Isolation

Isolation manifested for the participants in many different ways. This is supported by the Crutchfield (2012) study. As she reported, “Almost all of the youth spoke about feeling alone in college and often in the world as a whole” (p. 114). Similarly, in the broader homelessness literature, isolation is a common theme (Quigley et al., 2001; Swick, 2006). All participants in my study were isolated from their families to a certain extent. Those who maintained a connection with their mothers protected those parents from the participants’ homeless status, in part because the participants felt their mothers could not assist them and the knowledge of the participants’ homelessness would make their mothers feel badly. All participants knew they could not rely upon their parents for assistance in dealing with their situations whether or not the parents had the financial ability to help. Those who were not protecting their parents from the realities of the participants’ homelessness had been abandoned or rejected by their parents.

The participants who maintained a few friendships relied upon those friends for assistance during their struggles with housing and school. Those friends or the friends’ families took in the participants and gave them shelter and other supports. However, the necessity of relying upon these friends was emotionally stressful for the participants. In contrast, other participants who had fewer friend relationships, often as a result of being in a new city, chose to self-isolate. Some participants limited themselves to one close friend/partner, but others chose to only maintain casual friendships. For example, one participant, Calvin, chose to tell no one about his situation until he had found housing. Part of this lack of a wide friend base may be a result of

participants' feelings of embarrassment and stigmatization held about their housing status. Some participants even reported that being surrounded by students going about their lives made them feel further isolated and different from the other students. Louis stated, "Seeing other students in groups that have all their supplies for class, looking happy and well rested makes me feel little." These feelings of isolation were again echoed in the Crutchfield (2012) study. She reported: "The loss of a connection with family and friends impacts their experience in college. As they described their college experiences, being alone, because of a variety of traumas and disappointments, exacerbated their feelings of solitude, betrayal and abandonment in school environments" (p. 121–122).

The majority of the participants chose to not utilize community supports such as shelters and food banks, with one exception (Louis). Citing that they were unable to find services that seemed to apply to them or out of a need to feel self-sufficient and not accept help, few participants connected with college services that were useful in helping them to meet their needs. The one service that many participants utilized was financial aid, and it enabled a few participants to gain housing after a term or two of homelessness.

A sub-theme of independence emerged from this theme. Participants either felt guilty when accepting help because they felt they "should" be able to take care of themselves, or they chose not to accept help because they did not want to feel dependent upon anyone. For example, Calvin in particular worried about the ulterior motives of people who offered him help. Some participants even saw homelessness as a way to be independent. In this way, they did not have to rely upon anyone for anything.

This tendency toward social isolation may be partially explained by Hallett's (2010) finding that "social expectations create high levels of stress" for homeless students (p. 11). He

also asserted that these students “divert attention away from educational and social development to ensure they have food and shelter” (p. 12). The participants in Hallett’s research were students coming from families who were homeless during their high school years and who were attempting to transition to college. Therefore, those results are likely more extreme for his participants than for mine, most of whom had been housed in some fashion during high school and prior to their experience of homelessness during college.

Implications for Theory

As the themes emerged from the data, some theories and research became inescapable in trying to understand participants’ experiences as they reported them. These were Maslow’s (1943, 1970) Theory of Human Motivation, Wlodkowski’s (1999) Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching, and social and cultural capital as they relate to these participants.

Maslow’s Theory of Human Motivation

All of the themes that were barriers to college participation/completion (meeting basic needs, emotional stress, and isolation) are elements that Maslow (1943, 1970) theorized were necessary to self-actualization, which he argued is the goal of learning. In Maslow’s Theory of Human Motivation, there is a hierarchy of needs that must be met in order for a person to be self-actualized and learning to his/her potential. The lowest level consists of physiological needs, followed by safety, belonging and love, and self-esteem. The hierarchy culminates in self-actualization. While Maslow (1943) stated, “the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need,” needs can express themselves simultaneously across the hierarchy. Also, all of the needs are interrelated. However, it is difficult to reach self-actualization and meet those needs when needs are not being met at the bottom of the hierarchy.

In this study, so many of the participants' basic physiological and safety needs were not being met that it follows that their higher level needs would also not be met. By virtue of self-selecting for the study, participants volunteered that their shelter needs were not being met to their satisfaction. Some participants did have access to shelter via their friends or basic shelter via their vehicles or community shelters. However, in all of these cases, the lodging they had found was not seen as acceptable because it was not a place of their own. For example, Zeneb was staying with a friend, but she stated, "It's not like your own place or you're paying the rent . . . so, it's more like, 'oh, I need to get out of this place.'" At the other end of the spectrum, Louis and Willy slept outside and complained about the negative physical and emotional effects of that necessity. Yet, shelter was just one of the physiological needs that were not being met. Participants also dealt with food and hygiene needs to varying degrees and all experienced unsatisfactory sleep.

As for the second level need, safety, some of the participants felt relatively safe, if uncomfortable, because they accepted friends' assistance. Others, particularly those sleeping outside or in shelters, often felt unsafe, as did those sleeping in their cars. For example, Clarence recalled a situation where someone menacingly came up to his car and seemed poised to punch him through his open window. The attacker luckily was distracted, but this incident stuck with Clarence as an example of how vulnerable he was even though he was inside his car. As he put it, "You're really putting yourself out there. I don't have a castle. You could get over my gates really quickly." Another safety need that participants did not believe was being met was that of stability and security. All of the participants were actively seeking security and stability; in fact, that was the main reason participants gave for attending college. Consequently, none of the participants felt that they were stable or secure, and most participants reported feeling that they

could slide down into permanent homelessness at any point. The precarious nature of the systems they had developed to address some of their needs made them feel unsafe. Even after some participants gained housing, they felt that they were not really secure. Homelessness could always happen again, and emergencies could happen that would cause participants to use more money than they had available.

As for the higher levels of the hierarchy, very few of those needs were being met. Some participants had found some sense of belonging and love with a significant other or friend—but in general, all participants were isolated from family and from having multiple friendships. They also felt isolated from their peers at college and did not truly feel that they belonged with the other students. George used the metaphor of life as a video game to describe his view that every person is truly alone and “everybody you meet on the way is just part of the levels.” In fact, other students’ seemingly normal lives made some participants feel even more isolated. Louis described imagining what other students’ lives were like, and George further emphasized his isolation from his peers by stating, “I feel like school is for the wealthy.” He thought that only wealthy students could really learn because they could focus on school. This statement implied that school was not for him because he was homeless.

Participants also struggled with self-esteem needs, and this can best be seen in their attempts to reject the label of homeless and cling to the label of college student. Participants intellectually knew they were homeless, as evidenced by their self-selection for this study, and would take on the label when it was the center of the conversation. However, when they described themselves, they focused on their statuses as college students or at least a different type of homeless person from the social stigma. In their view, the truly homeless were those who were mentally ill and/or drug addicts and who lived outside. As Louis said, “You see homeless

people, like they have just given up on themselves, and I haven't given up on myself.”

Participants described themselves as motivated and working toward a degree that would set them up for a comfortable life after college. So, attending college enabled them to meet some self-esteem needs, but reminders of their housing situations could bring their self-esteem back down again. Multiple participants reported that they felt they “should” be better equipped to handle their situations, even at young ages, and that this inability to fully provide for themselves caused emotional distress.

Finally, participants thought self-actualization needs, the pinnacle of Maslow's theory (1943), were going to be met through college. However, this was not occurring in practice. Participants viewed college as a path to a career that would be stable and fulfilling. Many of the participants discussed a desire to find a career that was interesting, and they saw college as the path to that career. However, all participants reported that they were not learning much in their classes. They were either too distracted by attempting to meet their physiological needs or were too mentally or physically exhausted to fully participate. Victor reported, “I wasn't really in a place to just feel safe to explore or explore myself or my interests or things that are important to me, you know, outside of just feeling safe and secure.” Victor felt that he did not experience self-actualization during the time he was homeless and in college because he did not have the mental energy to really “explore” the ideas to which he was being exposed. Therefore, participants were searching for self-actualization and a career that would be intellectually stimulating, and they saw college as the ticket to self-actualization. However, the fact that many of their lower level needs were not being met got in the way of achieving the “primary goal of learning” (Merriam et al, 2007, p. 283), self-actualization, while they were homeless.

There have been many criticisms of Maslow, but his hierarchy (1943, 1970) is still often used and cited. In adult education, along with other fields, Maslow's theory has been very influential (Merriam et al., 2007; Wlodkowski, 1999). It places motivation to learn within the student, but that motivation can only be developed and expressed when more basic needs are met. Wlodkowski (1999) is one of the few researchers/theorists who focused primarily on adult motivation in relation to education; in fact, the majority of educational motivational research has been conducted with children. Wlodkowski criticized Maslow's hierarchy for having a lack of empirical support; however, he conceded that the two needs at the bottom of the hierarchy (physiological and safety) are supported by empirical research. Wlodkowski stated, "People do need to feel physically well and personally safe before they can commit to learning. Once these two needs have been satisfied, people respond to the rest of the needs in the hierarchy as well as others on a situational and cultural basis" (pp. 33–34). Thus, while there may be valid criticism of Maslow's theory, the adult education field still values the bottom two needs in Maslow's hierarchy, and it is understood that those needs should be met in order for learning to occur. Consequently, Maslow is still relevant to this study because the participants were not meeting their physiological and safety needs. Participants' narratives themselves rarely evolved beyond discussion of these basic needs, with college completion remaining merely aspirational and seemingly out of reach.

In reality, very few of the participants' needs were actually being met at any level of Maslow's hierarchy (1943, 1970). If self-actualization is the goal of learning for us as a society, this means many of our students are not able to experience quality learning. However, there is also a shifting focus toward job placement as the primary goal of higher education (Edmundson, 2014; Nash & Murray, 2010; Robinson & Glanzer, 2016). If that is the case and students will be

more motivated to persist if a practical job focus is the primary goal of education, perhaps self-actualization is not as important as making sure that these students learn enough to find a job after college.

Underpinnings of the Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching

Wlodkowski's (1999) ideas about motivation support the idea that job placement may be more important than self-actualization to adults. The main elements that influenced Wlodkowski's Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching are the students' desires to be treated as responsible adults (ability to be self-directed) and that adults want to learn things that fulfill a need. Thus, "adults are highly pragmatic learners" (p. 11). As a result of this pragmatism, adults usually seek out learning that is practical, so that learning tends to be related to the workplace or reaching a goal that will help with their lives. Therefore, "The usefulness of what is learned generally is a greater influence on adults' motivation to learn than its intellectual value" (p. 12). This strongly connects with the primary goal of attending college as expressed by study participants: to get a stable job that will provide security.

However, college is not necessarily the most practical choice for students struggling to meet their physiological and safety needs. Therefore, the pragmatic adult student might logically decide to quit college in order to meet other needs. Participants in this study discussed thoughts of dropping out and were enticed by the idea of making enough money to be stable. However, at the point when I spoke to them, participants expressed a determination to remain in college in order to achieve their long-term goals. Also, there were some practical immediate reasons to remain in college.

Beyond Maslow's theory (1943, 1970), the pragmatic needs of adult students may offer some insight into why homeless people are attending college. The short-term practical benefits of

college participation, such as financial aid and a safe, warm place to be could motivate homeless people to attend. In studies of women leaving public assistance and going to school, one of the attractions was financial aid because it was seen as a way to gain an income; however, it was later seen as a trap because it was difficult to pay off (Broussard et al., 2012; Gray, 2005). More broadly, the participants responded to the cultural narrative and empirical research that tells them a college degree is necessary to have a “good” stable job (Baum et al., 2013) and that the economy is creating jobs primarily for college-educated workers (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). Therefore, the practical thing to do is go to college in order to get those jobs.

Consequently, the main value of their education is in the outcome rather than in the experience itself (except for some students like Victor who craved self-actualization). However, even those participants who voiced a desire for intellectual stimulation in their educational experiences expressed a desire to find a “good” job after college and saw a degree as the way to meet that goal. This suggests that the perceived practical benefits of finishing a degree provide enough motivation to attract homeless students and for them to attempt to persist even in the face of unmet physiological and safety needs. Consequently, if all else remained static, more streamlined pathways to graduation and courses that show practical benefits would likely be useful for this population. The more they could see the utility of a course and thought they were progressing through their programs, the more likely they would be able to persist (so long as the physiological and safety needs did not become too overwhelming).

Social and Cultural Capital

Social capital has been defined as “a framework that enables or disables individuals and groups to accomplish particular goals through network development” (Tierney & Hallett, 2012, p. 49). In contrast, “Cultural capital is generally defined and possessed by dominant groups; in

postsecondary education that means that upper-class and well-educated elites define ‘acceptable’ behavior and the rules of the game” (Karp, 2011, p. 15). Social capital and cultural capital are usually intertwined and mutually supportive: people who have social networks can develop cultural capital in a new context through their networks, and people who have cultural capital can develop social networks through their understanding of how to act and behave in a context.

The majority of the participants in this study lacked both social and cultural capital in relation to college and homelessness. In both arenas, the participants’ tendency to self-isolate maintained their limited social capital or actually reduced it. Participants who did not utilize much social capital during their homelessness tended to be more likely to be living in their cars or sleeping outside, and some of those participants used what limited social capital they had to temporarily stay at a friend’s house (Clarence) or to find out about the rules of a shelter or other service (Louis). However, those who had more social capital were able to stay with friends for extended periods of time while they looked for places of their own. Therefore, social capital outside of college enabled participants to mitigate some of the more deleterious effects of homelessness, such as sleeping outside and lack of access to food. However, these participants had enough cultural capital to feel discomfort when accepting help in this way, and they worried about overstaying their welcome.

As for social capital at college, those who made connections with others were able to learn where to go for assistance (cultural capital). For example, Victor explained his situation to a Financial Aid Officer, who connected him with a counselor, who connected him with a lawyer who worked for him pro bono. This final connection was essential to his continuing in college. Making the right social connections was vital to Victor’s ability to become emancipated from his father and receive financial aid for the following year.

However, many participants expressed bafflement about where to go on campus for assistance or if such assistance even existed, which demonstrated their lack of cultural capital. Their lack of cultural capital may also be seen in the lack of concrete descriptions about how they would achieve their degrees. All of the participants—except for Clarence, who explained his cultural capital knowledge of the degree process through his work history at a college—talked about their educational trajectories in vague terms. Most described their purpose at college as being to get an interesting job, but it was not clear what steps they would need to take to get there. Purposefully self-isolating from other college students would not enable them to develop more social capital at college, and that would likely limit them in their development of their knowledge of the college process (cultural capital).

This study reaffirms the importance of social and cultural capital to lubricating students' movements throughout the college system and the broader world. Those with more social capital had the opportunity to stay with friends rather than sleep outside or to connect with services at college that were useful. The social capital developed at college was instrumental for some in developing the cultural capital to understand where to go to find services that could help them alleviate the negative effects of homelessness or maybe even get them into housing. As the only participant who was interviewed years after his experience of homelessness as a college student, Victor's navigation of the system suggested that social and cultural capital were instrumental in his ability to return to college the following fall with housing. Since his physiological and safety needs were then met, he was able to be successful in college, earn a degree, get a "stable job," and is currently finishing a doctoral program.

Even though this is one case of success when social and cultural capital was fortuitously developed, this study supports the research that has been done on social/cultural capital and

nontraditional students, including homeless students, who have been found to be likely to have deficits in both kinds of capital when it comes to college (Karp, 2011; Pascarella et al., 2004; Tierney & Hallett, 2012). Homeless college students may have further deficits in social capital on a broader scale because of their tendency to self-isolate. Karp (2011) also states that the lack of cultural capital nontraditional students have may “negatively impact their academic outcomes or make them feel uncomfortable enough to exit postsecondary education” (p. 15). This study and the research about social and cultural capital and how it affects nontraditional students indicate that homeless college students have more stacked against them than their lack of ability to meet their physiological and safety needs.

Implications for Future Research

Since there are so few research studies done on or with homeless college students and these students are a growing population in college, all future research of any type is welcome. Using this study as a springboard, there are a few directions that would be important to deepen our knowledge of this population. First, replicating this study in other areas of the country and at other colleges would deepen our understanding of the homeless students’ experiences of college. Second, further broad-scale, quantitative research that builds upon Goldrick-Rab et al.’s 2015 survey of 4,000 community college students to better understand food and housing insecurity would help clarify the scope of homelessness at college. Third, action research and/or critical research with the population would enable researchers and practitioners to understand what kinds of interventions are most effective and what this population truly needs in order to be successful at college. Finally, a longitudinal study would help us better understand the college trajectories of these students. My study is a snapshot of these students at this point in time. Considering the findings of this study, looking at the population through the lenses of Maslow’s (1943,1970)

theory of human motivation, Wlodkowski's (1999) ideas about adult motivation, social and cultural capital, and the research on nontraditional students, it would appear unlikely that many students would persist in the face of the disadvantages they bring to school. It would be beneficial to the field to understand what actually happens to these students over their college careers.

Implications for Adult Education

Given the scant research in adult education about the homeless college student population, there is still much to learn. This study, though limited in size and scope still suggests some useful avenues for further investigation. In this section I discuss what would be useful for this population based upon the findings from this study. First, this study and the literature indicates that the homeless college student population is difficult to identify because of a desire to avoid the stigma of homelessness and a lack of attention by colleges (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009; Danielson, 2011; Karinshak, 1996; Paden, 2012). However, colleges and the country at large are starting to pay more attention (Carlson, 2016; Fischer, 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2015). Even so, discussions about housing and food insecurity need to become more visible and frequent, along with better and more centralized student resources. Participants in this study mentioned feeling as if they were the only ones going through this experience and that they did not personally know anyone else who was in the same situation, even if some stated that they intellectually knew others must be. A few participants did seek out assistance through the college, but it often took a lot of time and effort to identify with whom to speak. A campus dialogue about these issues and better visibility of the available services would have enabled these participants to seek more help in a less stigmatizing environment.

In the broader campus dialogue about housing and food insecurity issues, it would also be beneficial if there were recognition of the resiliency and creativity of those experiencing homelessness, rather than a tone of pity or censure. The participants in this study had internalized much of the “blame” for their situations and felt they should be able to take better care of themselves. This was reinforced by Belcher and DeForge’s (2012) connection between capitalism’s emphasis on the individual and personal responsibility to the stigmatization of the homeless and others in poverty. Making it clear that this population is fighting against tough odds and that they should be admired for that would encourage homeless college students to identify and seek support, and it would also help remove some of the emotional stress that they are self-inflicting with those negative thoughts.

Along the lines of a broader campus dialogue, some of the participants suggested that a support group would have been of benefit to them. They wished they could have met others in their situation and shared ideas/problem-solve. This is echoed by Hallett’s (2010) recommendation that “safe spaces are needed where students can openly discuss their experiences and receive guidance navigating the barriers that inhibit their ability to fully engage in the educational process” (p. 11). Those participants who indicated that a support group would be useful acknowledged that such a group would be difficult to market to students, primarily because of the stigmatization inherent in the term “homeless.” This may deter students from participating in such a group; however, vague terms to disguise the purpose of the group may make it difficult for students who need the group to find it. Hallett also acknowledges the difficulties inherent in the naming of services directed toward homeless college students. Hallett recommends avoiding the term “homeless” and using subcategories instead, such as “couch surfing” or “doubled-up” that may better connect those services to “aspects of the federal law

[that] may be used to support each subpopulation differently.” He also suggests that students may be more likely to “self-identify as belonging to one of these subcategories” (p. 16).

However, in my experience with the participants of this study, a few of them did not realize they were “homeless” until hearing me describe the potential sub-categories. Hallett primarily researches students who have had experience being homeless during K–12 and then continue into college; therefore, his population would likely have more experience with the governmental terms defining homelessness since K–12 schools are required by law to support and track their homeless students. So, the problem remains; support groups and other targeted services would be useful to students like those in this study, but terminology that simultaneously lacks stigmatization and identifies the purpose of the services so that this population could become aware of them is problematic. Yet, it is an important challenge to meet.

Finally, increasing the services that are already in place for nontraditional and other marginalized groups is important. For example, the nontraditional student literature shows that there is a large swath of the college population that lacks social and cultural capital for college (Karp, 2011; Pascarella et al., 2004; Tierney & Hallett, 2012). In studies of low-income, nontraditional students and first-generation college students, extracurricular activities and personal connections with faculty and staff were shown to assist these students in the development of social and cultural capital and increase persistence. Therefore, presenting all students with opportunities to explicitly develop social and cultural capital upon entrance to a college would be a non-stigmatizing way to help homeless college students develop the connections and understanding of college that may help them to persist and find housing.

Conclusion

In a perfect world, no student would have to deal with homelessness while in college. Frankly, better housing assistance for college students and financial support in meeting their other basic needs would be the best ways in which to assist these students in their educational goals. Meeting the physiological and safety needs that are currently unmet in these students would enable them to more fully focus on learning. As Victor reported, the years he was stably housed were much more intellectually fulfilling and he was able to do his best work. However, short of major economic and political change, adult educators have to work with the system as it is, while advocating for our students more broadly. Therefore, more research needs to be conducted on and with this population in order to better understand their needs and experiences. Adult educators need to work with them to advocate for institutional and social changes that could be beneficial to them. And, we need to make the current services that are available more transparent and visible so that homeless students can find and utilize them. In these ways, we can begin to support this invisible population in its climb up the educational mountain.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Pseudonym: _____

Introduction: Thank you for participating in this study. During this interview, you will have the opportunity to share with me your personal experiences of college while being homeless or after having been homeless within two years before attending. I want to remind you that your identity will remain confidential. So, I want you to feel free to speak openly about your experience. Will it be okay for me to record the interviews?

Once I get these interviews completely transcribed, I might ask you to look at the themes I have found and review them for accuracy and further discussion. Would you be willing to do that for me? Before we begin, I want to give you the opportunity to ask me any questions pertaining this study or information you would like to learn about me.

Interview: Experience of College

Time of Start Interview:

Time of End Interview:

Date:

Location:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Open-ended Question:

1. What is/was college like for you?

Appendix B

Lived Experience Description

Think about an experience in college that stands out to you. Please write down that experience, with a focus on how it made you feel.

Appendix C

Demographic Form

Demographic Questions:

1. Age:
2. Major:
3. Year in college:
4. Ethnicity:
5. Gender:
6. Do you have any children that you take care of?
7. How long were you homeless?
8. Where did you stay? If you stayed with someone, what relationship did they have to you?

Appendix D

Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Homeless Students' Experiences of College

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Valerie K. Ambrose, a Doctor of Philosophy candidate from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The results from this study will contribute towards a doctoral dissertation.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you identify as a current or former college student who was homeless during college or within two years prior to attending college. You must be aged 18 or older to participate. Your participation is voluntary. Please take as much time as you need to read the information sheet. You may also decide to discuss it with your family or friends. You will be given a copy of this form.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to understand homeless students' experiences of college. The voices of students dealing with housing insecurity are missing from literature. This study will give you the opportunity to share your stories about your personal experiences of being homeless and attending college. The goal of this study is to provide educators and social services providers a better understanding of this population.

Response to the interview questions will constitute consent to participate in this research project.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

You will be asked to participate in one in-depth interview (approximately 90 minutes) during the Fall 2014 or Winter 2015 term. During that interview, you will also be asked to write about an event or experience related to college and homelessness that stands out for you. Also, you may be asked back for additional follow-up interviews. In the first interview, you will be asked a series of questions related to your past experiences with homelessness as a college student. In order to get a complete account of your experience, each question will be built on the next. All interviews will be digitally recorded and notes will be taken. The interviews will be conducted at a location that is public and convenient for you, but quiet and enclosed enough for privacy (such as a study room at a library). All interviews will be transcribed. After the interview, you may be invited back to review the themes that were found for accuracy and further discussion. Additional questions may be asked at this point for clarification. You will be given a false name (pseudonym). Please remember your pseudonym, since all of the data collected will be associated with this pseudonym.

_____ Participant's initials

RISKS

There are no anticipated risks to your participation; you may experience some discomfort during the interview while you are discussing your past experiences as a homeless college students. You may skip any questions that may make you uncomfortable. You may discontinue your participation in this study at anytime. All information is strictly confidential, including your identity, which will remain anonymous. If any discomfort or uncertainty occurs, you can stop the interview.

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The Principle Investigator is currently a _____ employee. However, her work does not, and will not impact _____ student grades, financial aid, or any other college services in any academic or personal way.

BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

You will not directly benefit from your participation. However, your participation in this study has the potential to increase society's awareness of college students who deal with housing insecurity. Your stories may help inform educators, social services providers, and policy makers in shaping policy and practices to improve the quality of life and access to higher education for future, current, and former homeless college students.

CONFIDENTIALITY

There will be no information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you. Your name, address or other information that may identify you will not be collected during this research study. The information collected about you will be coded using a fake name (pseudonym). You will have the right to review/edit your interviews and written "lived-experience descriptions" upon request. All handwritten notes and data will be stored and locked in the office of the principal investigator (Valerie K. Ambrose). All data and audio files stored on a computer will be secured by a password. When the results of the dissertation are discussed, no information will be included that would reveal your identity. All audio files and data will be stored for 3 years after the study has been completed and then destroyed. Your name will not be published or shared with anyone outside of the research, including the faculty, staff, or administrators at _____.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact the principal investigator, Valerie K. Ambrose, by telephone at (267) 391-9534 or e-mail at vambrose@utk.edu. If you have questions regarding your rights as research subject, contact the University of Tennessee Office of Research Compliance at (865) 974-3466.

_____ Participant's initials

PARTICIPATION

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from the research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

Your alternative is to not participate. Your grades or other services at _____ will not be affected whether or not you participate. Your decision whether or not to participate is not academically related so your decision will not impact you academically. Participation in the study will not be part of your experience in any academic program.

CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Vita

Valerie Karen Ambrose was born in Saskatchewan, Canada. As a child, she lived in both the Pacific Northwest and the Northeast of the United States. She received her BA in English Literature in 2002 from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Valerie worked in academic book publishing during college and for a year afterward. She decided to return to Queen's in order to finish her Honours BA; these are completed in order to enter graduate school in Canada. In 2006, she completed her MA in Reading and Language Arts at Rider University in Lawrenceville, NJ. While she was working on her MA, she began a Graduate Level Teacher Preparation Program at Rider University, which she completed in 2008. Later that year, she moved to Portland, Oregon in order to teach high school language arts. In the fall of 2009, Valerie began her career in adult education at Portland Community College and Mount Hood Community College as a Reading and Writing Instructor. In 2011, she began her doctoral program at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. During Valerie's tenure in Knoxville, she was a Graduate Research Assistant for the Adult Learning program, and she also taught reading and writing at Pellissippi State Community College. In 2013, she returned to Portland, Oregon where she finished her comprehensive exams, proposal, and dissertation. She also returned to teaching reading and writing at a community college. In 2015, she began a full-time Reading Instructor position at Shasta College in Redding, CA. She also became the Co-Director of the Commission for Adult Basic Education and Literacy (CABEL), which is part of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE). Upon acceptance of her dissertation in 2016, Valerie will have graduated with a PhD in Educational Psychology and Research from The University of Tennessee at Knoxville with a concentration in Adult Learning, and she will have earned a certificate in Qualitative Research Methods in Education.