

Policeman or Friend? Dilemmas in Working with Homeless Young People in the United Kingdom

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This qualitative, phenomenological study examined the relationships between residents and staff in hostels for homeless young people in the UK. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 homeless youth (residents) and 10 hostel staff (keyworkers). The interviews focused on how participants perceived and experienced the keyworker relationship. Qualitative data analysis yielded three core themes, or dimensions, describing central features of the relationship: enforcement versus support, emotional involvement versus distance, and resident-centered versus staff-centered practice. The findings highlight some dilemmas and tensions experienced by both residents and staff, and point to effective ways of working with homeless youth. Issues arising in the relationship between keyworkers and homeless young people are considered in the context of other types of helping relationships.

Youth homelessness has been a concern to the public and the authorities in the United Kingdom (UK) for many years. Recent estimates in the UK suggest that one in 20 young people will experience homelessness at some point (Centrepoin, 1999), and that around 25% of people known to be homeless are between the age of 18 and 25 years (ODPM, 2002). Research has shown that homeless young people “run a higher risk of encountering every social, emotional and physical problem affecting their age group” (Bronstein, 1996, p. 129). Yet, despite this situation,

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effective prevention and intervention strategies for this population are not well developed. In an overview of research on homelessness, Toro (1999) noted that homeless adolescents have been one of the least studied groups in the homeless population.

Several studies point to the range of problems that homeless youth experience. Recent figures in the UK indicate that up to two-thirds of homeless young people experience mental health problems compared to a quarter of housed young people (Centrepint, 2000; Craig & Hodson, 1998, 2000; Diaz, 2000). High crime rates, high rates of substance use, a high prevalence of both physical and sexual abuse, and disrupted family backgrounds have also been found in studies of homeless young people in the UK as well as other Western countries (e.g., Craig & Hodson, 1998, 2000; Kipke, Montgomery, Simon, & Iverson, 1997; MacLean, Embroy, & Cauce, 1999; Van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997). Furthermore, this particular group of young people may lack the social networks that can help to ameliorate these experiences (Van der Ploeg, Gaemers, & Hoogendam, 1991).

Whether these problems are causes or consequences (or both) of youth homelessness is difficult to disentangle. Nevertheless, some authors have tried to integrate some of the variables associated with youth homelessness into theoretical models. For example, Van der Ploeg et al., (1991) have proposed that homelessness is an escalating process of being pushed out of society, which starts with a rejecting and abusive family, continues with problems at school, and ultimately results in feelings of isolation and powerlessness. Attachment theory has also been used to explain why some young people become chronically homeless. For example, Stefanidis, Pennbridge, MacKenzie, & Pottharst (1992) suggest that negative schemas formed in childhood may lead to a generalized lack of bonding to society or societal organization. These authors recommend that youth shelters or hostels hire older staff in order to try to form a surrogate parent relationship with the young people, but do not expand on how this relationship might work. Overall, these theoretical models offer only a partial understanding of the problem (Van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997) and there does not appear to be an accepted framework, based on empirical research, for working with homeless youth.

The literature on psychological helping with other populations may provide a useful framework for understanding the potential importance of the helping relationship between homeless young people and those working with them. In particular, psychotherapy research, which has shown that different types of therapy are roughly equivalent in effectiveness, has led some authors to suggest that nonspecific or common factors make an important contribution to outcome (e.g., Asay & Lambert, 1999; Lambert & Ogles, 2004). Exactly what these nonspecific factors are is not clear, but several theorists have made a number of proposals. One important factor seems to be the quality of the relationship between client and helper; helper characteristics such as warmth, empathy and acceptance are

thought to be central (Asay & Lambert, 1999; Lambert & Ogles, 2004; Rogers, 1957). Research on the “therapeutic alliance” has emphasized the importance of a collaborative relationship between client and helper (Bordin, 1994; Horvath & Luborsky, 1993; Horvath & Symonds, 1991). In a good therapeutic alliance, client and helper have a shared view of their tasks and goals, and a positive personal attachment, or “bond,” exists between them. Research into the worker-client relationship outside of formal therapy has also suggested that the quality of the alliance may be a key factor in effective helping (Solomon, Draine, & Delaney, 1995). Indeed, Barker and Pistrang (2002) argue that processes similar to the therapeutic alliance are fundamental to effective helping in a wide range of contexts, including that provided by helpers with little or no professional training.

However, establishing a “therapeutic alliance” with homeless young people is not likely to be easy or straightforward. Given that homeless youth often come from families where neglect and abuse are common (Craig & Hodson, 1998), it would be unrealistic to expect them easily to develop a relationship of trust with other adults. Furthermore, the high rates of mental health problems and substance use among homeless youth (Craig & Hodson, 2000; Diaz, 2000) also may make it difficult for them to engage with services. Therefore it is important to ascertain how staff working with homeless youth can cultivate productive helping relationships.

The broad aim of the present study was to investigate the nature of the helping relationship between homeless young people and those working with them, within the UK context of hostels for homeless youth. Hostels are a major form of provision for this population in urban areas of the UK, and are similar to “youth shelters” or “runaway shelters” in the US. Operating within the voluntary sector, they provide not only accommodation (ranging from one night to many months), but often various types of support, such as help with employment and education, planning for the transition to independent living, and emotional support. In many hostels, each resident has a “keyworker” who takes responsibility for coordinating their care.¹ Keyworkers (who are analogous to case managers, case workers, or care coordinators in the U.S. and other countries) usually have no professional qualifications and typically receive little specific training for their work. Although their role is open to considerable interpretation by workers within and between

¹ The concept of the keyworker originated in British social work in the 1970s and was subsequently adopted by a range of organizations providing health and social care (Department of Health/ Social Services Inspectorate, 1989; Rodway, 1979; Wagner, 1988). The idea was that each client would have an individual staff member who took special responsibility for their care and ensured that their individual needs were met. The keyworker role was defined in terms of several functions, including establishing a working relationship with the client, drawing up and monitoring individual care plans, maintaining records, and ensuring support was in place after the client left residential care (Residential Care Association/ British Association of Social Work, 1976). In practice, the keyworker role has often been ambiguous and interpreted in different ways (e.g., Bland, 1997; Douglas & Payne, 1980; Payne & Douglas, 1983).

settings, they are often central in providing hostel residents with both practical help and emotional support.

This study specifically aimed to describe how residents and staff in hostels for homeless youth experienced the keyworker relationship, and what particular aspects of the relationship they perceived as more and less helpful. Because little is known about the relationship between homeless young people and hostel staff, a qualitative, discovery-oriented approach seemed appropriate (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). The study adopted an in-depth, phenomenological approach, allowing participants to describe their experiences from their own perspectives (Willig, 2001). Moore, Canter, Stockley, and Drake (1995) have drawn attention to the rarity of psychological studies of homelessness that focus on the experiences of individuals, and have called for an understanding of homelessness at the level of the individual in his or her social context. In adopting a phenomenological method of inquiry, we aimed to obtain individuals' accounts of their experience of one aspect of hostel care, from the point of view of those receiving and those providing it. Ultimately, such descriptions have the potential to inform our understanding of how best to help homeless young people and how to improve services for them.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 homeless young people resident in hostels ("residents") and 10 hostel staff ("keyworkers"). The interviews focused on resident and staff perceptions of the keyworker relationship. An approach known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003) was used to guide both the data collection and analysis.

Participants

The participants were recruited from two hostels for homeless young people in central London. The hostels, which were managed by a registered charity, were targeted at "vulnerable and disadvantaged" homeless 16- to 25-year-olds. One hostel had 9 residents and 4 staff; residents were permitted to stay for up to six months. The second hostel had 15 residents and 6 staff; residents could stay for up to a year. Both hostels aimed to provide "medium support" for the residents and a requirement of staying in the hostels was that the young person had regular meetings with their keyworker. Neither hostel had any explicit written policy on the role of the keyworker.

Residents. Residents were invited to participate in the study if they had been in the hostel for at least one month and had been meeting with the same keyworker during this time. Residents who were not fluent in English or who were judged by hostel staff to be too disturbed to participate were not approached.

Forty-five residents were invited to take part. Twenty-one (47%) agreed, but five did not turn up to the interview and four had left the hostel before the researcher was able to set up an interview. Reasons for refusal included being “too busy,” “not wanting anyone to know my business,” “not wanting to be taped,” “not being paid for it,” and “not getting anything out of it.”

Of the 12 residents who participated in the study, seven were female and five were male; their average age was 18 (range 16–23). Seven residents described themselves as “White UK or European,” three as “Black UK or European,” and two as “Black African or Caribbean.” They had been in the hostel for a mean of 12 weeks (range 4–32 weeks). Half of the residents had been “in care” (residential arrangements in which children are looked after by an adult *in loco parentis*, e.g., foster homes), and 10 of the 12 had previous experiences of having a keyworker. In terms of these sociodemographic characteristics, the sample is similar to those in other studies of homeless youth in London (Craig & Hodson, 1998, 2000).

Keyworkers. Hostel staff were invited to participate in the study if they had been working in the hostel for at least three months and had been a keyworker for one or more residents on a regular basis for at least one month. Twelve staff were working in the hostels during the course of the study. Two of these were not invited to participate because they had been working in the hostel for less than three months. All staff who were invited to participate agreed.

Of the 10 staff who took part in the study, six were female and four were male; their average age was 32 (range 19–52 years). Eight keyworkers described themselves as “White,” one as “Black Caribbean,” and one as “Black Polynesian.” Five staff had university degrees; none had a professional qualification. Only one participant had any specific training in keyworking (a two-day workshop), four had some training in related areas (counseling or youth work), two had been on “in house” training days, and three had no relevant training. Participants had been working in the hostel for an average of 11 months (range 5–24 months) and had been working with homeless young people for an average of 31 months (range 5 months to 12 years). Most worked full-time, covering both day and night shifts in the hostel; the majority of their time was spent in face-to-face contact with residents.

Semi-Structured Interview

Each participant was interviewed by the first author, who had previous experience of working in hostels for homeless young people. The interviews, which took place in a private room in the hostel, lasted from 30–60 minutes and were tape-recorded.

Following Smith’s (1995) guidelines for semi-structured interviews, the interview schedule covered several broad areas, but allowed flexibility for the interviewer

to explore issues raised by the participant. The aim was to allow participants to describe their experiences of the keyworker relationship in their own words and from their own perspective.

The resident and staff interview schedules were very similar, addressing the same topics but with the phrasing of questions adapted to each group. The questions covered three domains: (1) structural aspects of the keyworker relationship (e.g., when and where keyworkers and residents met and how sessions were arranged); (2) perceptions of the role of the keyworker (e.g., how residents used their meetings with their keyworker, and how keyworkers defined their role); and (3) experience of the relationship (e.g., the extent to which residents could talk freely to keyworkers, and ways in which the relationship was helpful or not).

In order to ensure that the interview data were detailed and focused, participants were asked to describe a current keyworking relationship, rather than keyworking relationships in general. Because most staff were working with more than one resident, they were asked to describe their relationship with either (a) a resident who had participated in the study (so that we could obtain “parallel” data; this occurred in six instances), or (b) a resident with whom they had a “typical” keyworking relationship.

Analysis of Qualitative Data

Verbatim transcripts of the audiotaped interviews were analyzed using the method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA aims to explore in detail participants’ perceptions or experiences of their personal world; in this sense it is phenomenological. It recognizes, however, that this process is complicated by the researcher’s own conceptions: In order to make sense of another’s world we inevitably engage in “a process of interpretative activity” (Smith & Osborn, p.51).

IPA has much in common with the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and other types of phenomenological research (Barker, Pistrang, & Elliott, 2002). It takes a systematic, but flexible, approach to identifying themes that capture the essential features of participants’ accounts. Drawing on the grounded theory procedure of “constant comparative analysis,” it explores similarities and differences between aspects of the data set, both within and across cases. Unlike grounded theory, however, IPA does not aim to generate a single overarching theme or theory.

The analysis was conducted primarily by the first author and followed a number of steps that are generic to phenomenological approaches to qualitative research (Barker, Pistrang et al., 2002). The first stage involved a detailed reading and re-reading of each transcript in order to identify the ideas and meanings being expressed; tentative labels were generated to capture the essence of each idea. The second stage involved clustering similar ideas into themes; this was carried out

for each individual transcript, and then common themes were identified across transcripts. Theme labels were then refined and each transcript was coded in order to identify all instances of each theme. Initially, the resident and keyworker interviews were analyzed separately, but because there was considerable overlap between the themes from each data set, the two were merged in this second stage of the analysis. The third stage involved integrating and making connections between themes: Related themes were grouped together, resulting in a small set of superordinate themes that aimed to capture the essence of the participants' accounts. At every stage of the analytic procedure, links between all themes and participants' own words were carefully documented.

In accordance with methodological canons of good practice in qualitative research (Barker et al., 2002; Elliott et al., 1999; Stiles, 1993), "credibility checks" were undertaken throughout the analysis. At an early stage, several transcripts were coded independently by the two authors, who then discussed their ideas and came to a consensus on the theme labels before analysis proceeded further. Several additional transcripts, which included the first author's notations of the themes, were also audited by the second author. As a further check, two more transcripts were coded independently by, and discussed with, a third researcher familiar with the IPA method. The later stage of the analysis, involving the relationship between themes, was audited by the second author; ways of clustering the data were discussed, and modifications were made before finally reaching a consensus on the final set of themes.

Results

Hostel staff and residents expressed a wide range of views about how they worked together and described varied experiences of their relationships. Some residents seemed to get on well with, and felt helped by, their keyworkers, whereas others had less positive experiences. Some keyworkers felt comfortable with, and confident in, their role, whereas others seemed less certain about what they should be doing or felt frustrated with particular limitations or demands of the role.

The interpretative phenomenological analysis yielded three core themes, or dimensions, which describe central features of the keyworker relationship as seen by staff and residents: enforcement versus support, emotional involvement versus distance, and resident- versus staff-centered practice. For some participants, these dimensions represented tensions or dilemmas within the keyworker relationship; others described the keyworker relationship at one particular point along the continuum. These dimensions are largely conceptually independent, but there is inevitably some degree of overlap. Each dimension is described below and is illustrated by quotations from the participants (K indicates a keyworker and R a resident, followed by their research identification number).

Enforcement Versus Support

“On the one hand you’re a policeman. On the other you’re a rent collector. On another you’re asking them to confide in you and trust you and then you’re saying to them ‘Where’s your rent? We’re going to evict you.’ Oh, my God, it’s such a kind of conflict, you’ve got to be everything. It sends different messages.” (K5)

“It was trying to get that balance between still trying to be there, and being in that supportive role, but at the same time, almost having to, not tell her off, but having to enforce the rules as well. And I think that’s the hardest thing about being a keyworker.” (K3)

“[I felt I was] being two different people – the policeman and the friend – talking about two different things on two different levels.” (K9)

Many keyworkers experienced a central tension in their role: the need to enforce rules and, at the same time, to provide emotional support to the young people in their care. These conflicting demands meant, on the one hand, a relationship with residents which was characterized by control and power and, on the other hand, a relationship based on mutual trust and respect. For many keyworkers, negotiating these different aspects of their role was a major difficulty and frustration. However, some keyworkers felt that it was possible to combine both.

The hostel residents also recognized these two aspects of the keyworker role, and to some extent also struggled with the question of whether their keyworkers were agents of control or sympathetic allies. They expressed both negative and positive views about keyworkers being rule enforcers. Some reluctantly complied; as one young woman put it, “[I] had to listen to [the keyworker] ‘cause [I] was on order” (R12). For one young man, however, the keyworker’s authority provided a sense of safety. He described an incident where another resident had become very aggressive and a keyworker had intervened: “[I] wouldn’t know how to handle it without the staff” (R8).

From the residents’ point of view, what seemed essential for a good keyworking relationship was respect: It was acceptable for keyworkers to enforce rules if they also behaved respectfully towards the residents. Several young people described keyworkers who were able to “be on a level” with residents, resulting in the residents feeling better about themselves. In contrast, a perceived absence of respect from keyworkers could have detrimental consequences. One young woman described her experience of a previous keyworker who she felt had been dismissive and condescending towards her, saying it had “made [me] feel dead low” (R6) and resulted in her going back to the street.

Some residents recognized that their own behavior and attitudes influenced the development of respect and trust. As one resident put it:

“If I’m being rude to them and telling them to shut up and everything, they can’t feel comfortable around me. The whole point of it is a keyworker and a key client should be feeling comfortable around one another so they can discuss things openly, and at the end of the day the only thing that can come out is helpfulness.” (R2)

Another described a “brilliant” staff member, who he felt responded appropriately to the residents’ behavior:

“He would treat us like what we were. He would treat us like what we were acting. If we were acting like children, he would treat us like children. If you acted like an adult, you would be treated like an adult.” (R7)

The importance of a mutually respectful relationship was echoed by staff: Respect was seen an essential ingredient of both the “enforcement” and the “support” roles of keyworkers. One keyworker spoke about how simply “speaking to the resident in a nice way [made the resident] feel special,” as she was “so used to being bullied” (K4). Several spoke of the importance of listening to the residents, giving them an opportunity to talk and express their feelings. One keyworker spoke passionately about the need to keep the lines of communication open, and how this was made difficult by having to report infringements of the rules and issue warnings of eviction:

“Keep talking to them. That’s what I’d rather do, is keep talking to them and not so much this threat of warnings. . . I’d like to address it [infringement of rules], but with a rapport. And that’s what I’m not able to do. I’m not able to talk about it because if I talk about it with them, then I should be writing it down somewhere, or reporting it back. . . And to have acceptance—okay they smoke dope, but they’re not robbing banks or killing old ladies.” (K5)

A supportive relationship with the keyworker seemed to play a key part in boosting residents’ self-confidence and helping them to feel empowered. Several residents described the benefits of having keyworkers who recognized, and helped them to build on, their abilities and strengths. For example, one young woman, who had been helped by her keyworker to obtain a place on a college course, expressed pleasure in having developed confidence in herself: “I’ve got the ability to do something and I know I can do it when I’ve got my keyworker backing me up” (R6). Another resident described how his keyworker had helped prepare him for the future:

“Before you make a move you’ll think, “Wait a minute; how did we do that in our keyworking sessions?” ‘Cause [the keyworker] doesn’t just do things, she shows me what she does. That means I know what she does to do whatever for me . . . like all that housing benefit things and things like that, I learned that through her taking me through it.” (R2)

In these instances, the keyworker seemed to act as an enabler, and the result for the young person was a sense of empowerment.

Emotional Involvement Versus Distance

“If I was a counselor I wouldn’t get involved in their lives . . . whereas we do get involved in their lives here because we live with them. . . we see them looking bored in front of the television. . . we see them in their night-gowns.” (K3)

“She doesn’t patronize you like a teacher would. And it’s not like a counselor because that’s getting really impersonal. You see them all the time. You see them cooking and stuff. This is your home really isn’t it? Sometimes they’re like substitute parents in a way, a bit. You don’t have your parents around and you’re still a teenager anyway.” (R3)

Both keyworkers and residents seemed to be grappling with the issue of how intimate or personal their relationship should be. Comparisons were drawn with parents, teachers, counselors, and friends; the keyworker relationship seemed to contain elements of all of these, but was not quite like any single one.

Some residents clearly valued the emotional closeness they experienced with their keyworker. For example, one young woman, who was about to move to less supportive housing, said that she would miss being “special” to someone:

“You see [the keyworker] like maybe every other day and get to know them really well. Like when I leave here I’ll miss [the keyworker]. I’ll be moving on to shared housing and there’ll be loads of people like me. When I go to the next place there won’t be as much one to one. They’ll say “How are you doing at college?” and that’s it really . . . I’ll miss just talking.” (R3)

In contrast, some residents wanted to keep an emotional distance and were quite clear that they would not “go too deep” with their keyworkers. For example, two residents described their keyworkers’ efforts to talk about personal topics as intrusive:

“. . . sometimes, when I’m feeling down and depressed and [the keyworker] tries to ask what I’m down and depressed about and I don’t like speaking to people about that stuff. So I don’t find it helpful in that way.” (R 9)

“I found that [meetings with the keyworker] seemed to me more like a counseling session. . . Or like trying to be into your personal life rather than looking at your housing. I mean to me he was my housing officer and that’s what I felt I needed. . . I didn’t really find it helpful. . . They tried to delve into private things, personal things that maybe you don’t feel comfortable talking about or that.” (R7)

Staff questioned whether their aims as a keyworker—in particular, addressing emotional issues—matched those of the residents. For example, one keyworker expressed a concern that she could be intruding, and that her “help” was neither wanted nor useful:

“You do worry generally with people and keywork whether you’re just interfering with people and forcing them to come and speak to us when they don’t really want to or if you’re actually doing something good.” (K2)

Another view, however, was that there was a gap between what the residents expressed and their underlying desires:

“They like to think they’re strong tough and street. Just because you’ve stayed on the streets for a couple of weeks doesn’t make you tough. They feel that emotional problems don’t need to be addressed. But behind all that “Yeah I’ve slept on the streets, I can do anything I like,” behind all that aggression and attitude there is a need to be listened to and heard – they’re hurting inside.” (K4)

Staff working in the same hostel could have very different interpretations of what residents wanted. One keyworker stated that “none of the residents here want to get involved – it’s very much ‘them’ and ‘us’ (K10), whereas another felt that “a lot of the young people who come [to the hostel] are very lonely. . . they’re looking for a friend” (K3). Expectations about the aims of keyworking also seemed to vary across hostels. One keyworker contrasted her role in her present hostel, where she was unhappy, with the hostel where she worked previously:

“I think the residents have got the idea that keyworking is only about housing. Where I worked before it wasn’t at all like that. It was about getting to know people. It was about their lives.” (K8)

Several keyworkers felt hesitant about addressing emotional issues with the residents because of their own lack of training and expertise. They felt that they were not equipped to deal with “a lot of psychological things that people are carrying, specifically the way they’ve been treated by their families and where there’s a history of some kind of abuse” (K2). One keyworker said she would not avoid such issues with the resident but “wouldn’t go too deep . . . just [giving] basic emotional support” (K4). She went on to say that in such instances she would refer residents to an appropriate service such as a qualified counselor.

Finally, several keyworkers raised the issue of the appropriateness of self-disclosure: To what extent should keyworkers reveal personal information about themselves to the residents? Some keyworkers felt that self-disclosure was an important part of establishing a good working relationship with the residents, while others felt less comfortable with this. However, most were quite clear that the relationship had to have “boundaries”:

“Obviously there are boundaries, you can’t open up and start talking about your problems. . . But I do say things like, ‘Oh my boyfriend took me out for dinner’ and ‘I did this.’ It’s sort of giving a part of yourselves, because you can’t expect it to be all one way. . . I’m expecting her to tell me a lot of things that are personal to her. And I think you have to give a bit as well. It’s a two-way thing. And obviously you can’t tell them lots of personal information, but there’s a lot of things you can tell them, to make them feel like, ‘Yes she’s all right, I can talk to her.’” (K3)

Resident- Versus Staff-Centered Practice

“Whatever [the residents] talk about is important because they obviously feel the need to tell you.” (K2)

“[The resident] would come several times a week asking for keywork sessions, but he didn’t actually want a keywork session. He wanted to sit and have a general conversation. He just wanted someone to talk to. He wanted reassurance. But he didn’t want to work on anything. I gave him stuff on budgeting and various other things. He would never fill his questionnaires in or fill in a budget sheet or anything.” (K7)

These two staff members took sharply contrasting approaches to working with the young people. For the first, the individual needs of the resident were paramount;

the keyworker felt happy for the resident to determine the focus of their meetings. The second keyworker had clear views about what should be accomplished in keyworking sessions, and he felt frustrated by the resident's lack of cooperation. Keyworkers thus varied along the continuum of resident- vs. staff-centered practice.

Being accepting of, and responsive to, the residents' needs was often described as the heart of a good keyworking relationship. Several staff emphasized the importance of being flexible and adaptable, pointing out that different residents had different needs:

"I think with every person you keywork the relationship will be different. Although you're the same person yourself, you have to adapt and be flexible. I think it's not good to go in to see a new person and already have decided what you're going to be doing because they're going to be totally different with you. I think the keywork relationship grows. . . You have to. . . let the person develop." (K8)

The majority of residents also described "good" keyworkers as being flexible and responsive to their needs. Several young people were particularly appreciative of not being "forced" to meet with their keyworker:

"Here at this hostel you go [to keyworking sessions] when you need to. I don't agree you should be forced to meet. It's just not beneficial to anyone. If it's made a chore then you're not going to appreciate it and use the service." (R7)

When keyworkers seemed to be unresponsive, or had their own agenda, the residents found it hard to make use of their meetings together:

"A couple of times I've been talking about things and [the keyworker's] just totally changed the subject, trying to get on to something else. And half the time when he does it I just say, 'Oh, look at the time, I've got to run.' I just feel totally uncomfortable, so I run away." (R11)

Several staff suggested that a fundamental objective of keyworking was to help the young people develop a sense of self-esteem, which took precedence over the development of specific skills. For example, one keyworker felt that the hostel offered residents a "last chance" for gaining self-respect:

"[It's] the last place that might give [the residents] something that will help them to feel respected and acknowledged and understood as people so that they can go out and have some self-esteem and be that way with other people. . . Forget if they can cook a meal or change a plug. All those things are very learnable." (K6)

Sometimes keyworkers experienced a tension between the aim of helping residents to develop self-esteem and what they perceived as an organizational aim of imparting skills. For example, one keyworker felt she was required to assess whether residents could cook or budget, but that to ask about these "can almost feel a bit patronizing" (K9).

Although the residents appreciated help with practical tasks, it was clear that they greatly valued keyworkers who also took the time to get to know them as

people and understood their particular needs. For some residents, the experience of having someone who was “there” for them—who focused on what they needed as individuals—was a rare one:

“I’ve found that they’re helpful towards me in finding my housing, my college and even working or a job. I need someone who can advise me for me. I need someone that’s looking after me. . . . The keyworker works for you really. It’s the only person, apart from my mother or any of my family as it goes in the outside world, that is helping me for me, yeah.” (R2)

This sense of being known and “looked after” by someone who held the young person’s interests at heart, seemed to be a vital part of good keyworker relationships.

Discussion

The complexity of the relationship between the young people and their keyworkers was evident in their respective accounts. For many staff, two seemingly conflicting aspects of their role presented a dilemma: How to enforce rules and at the same time provide emotional support. Residents, too, grappled with the question of whether their keyworkers were agents of control or allies. Similar dilemmas have been reported in studies in other settings. For example, young people with anorexia and clinicians responsible for their care have reported tensions between controlling the adolescent’s eating and providing a supportive, therapeutic relationship (Colton & Pistrang, 2004; Jarman, Smith, & Walsh, 1997). Similarly, in a study of a drug dependency unit, the extent to which staff could fulfill the role of “counselor” was constrained by clients’ perceptions of them as the “gatekeeper” to methadone (Lilly, Quirk, Rhodes, & Stimson, 1999).

In the present study, the qualities that seemed to be most important in managing this tension were mutual trust and respect. It seemed that in trusting, respectful relationships, the roles of rule enforcer and supporter could be successfully combined. Identifying and building on the strengths of the young person appeared to be effective in boosting their confidence and helping them to feel empowered. This may be particularly important to this group of young people, whose previous experiences with adults have often focused on their weaknesses. The findings thus suggest the utility of a strengths-based approach; this accords with the work of Pollio, MacDonald, and North (1996) with older homeless street people.

Varied accounts were given about the degree of emotional involvement between residents and keyworkers. Some residents and keyworkers described quite an intimate, personal relationship, resembling that of a parent or friend, whereas others described one which was much more distant and impersonal. Although most residents felt that it was important to have someone they could talk to, they varied in the extent to which they wanted to discuss personal topics with their keyworker. Keyworkers, too, expressed various views about the appropriateness

of addressing emotional issues, such as a difficult family background or a history of abuse; several expressed concern about whether such “help” was wanted by the residents. This raises the issue of the match between keyworkers’ and residents’ expectations of working together, which was also central to the theme of resident-versus staff-centered practice.

Two contrasting approaches were evident in both the residents’ and the keyworkers’ accounts of how they worked together. For some keyworkers, instrumental tasks, such as ensuring that the young person had the appropriate life skills to move on to more independent accommodation, were seen as the primary focus; these staff had a clear agenda for their meetings with residents. Others took a more resident-centered approach, viewing residents’ individual needs as paramount and allowing residents to determine the focus of their meetings. From the residents’ perspective, “good” keyworkers were described as being flexible and responsive to their needs. It was clearly detrimental to the keyworker relationship when residents and staff had different expectations. For staff, it caused frustration. For the young people, it sometimes resulted in avoiding or dropping out of meeting with their keyworker altogether. Hence, it would seem essential that staff and residents who are having difficulties in working together discuss their aims, in order to reach a shared understanding of what they are doing. This is in line with research on the therapeutic alliance, which shows that agreement on the tasks and goals of therapy is associated with a positive outcome (Asay & Lambert, 1999).

For many of the young people, the sense of being “known” by, and feeling “special” to, a member of staff was a particularly valuable aspect of the keyworker relationship. At the heart of good relationships was the residents’ sense that keyworkers had taken the time to get to know them, listened to them, and understood and accepted them. Again, this is consistent with findings from psychotherapy research, showing that qualities of the therapist and of the bond between client and therapist are important (Asay & Lambert, 1999; Lambert & Ogles, 2004). Also, from the perspective of attachment theory, it would seem important that hostels provide an opportunity for the young people to form emotional bonds with staff (Stefanidis et al., 1992). However, one potentially negative consequence of this special relationship between resident and keyworker was raised by two young people in the present study: They were concerned about the impact of separating from their keyworkers in the near future, and anticipated a sense of loss. This issue, which has been raised in another study of keyworker relationships (Mattison & Pistrang, 2000), deserves further research and could usefully be addressed in staff training.

The findings of this study need to be considered in light of a number of methodological limitations. The first concerns the representativeness of the sample and the generalizability of the findings. The young people who participated were a self-selected sample, and over half of those who were approached declined to participate. Although those who participated recounted both positive and negative

experiences, most thought that, in principle at least, having a keyworker was useful. It is possible that residents who did not participate had greater difficulties in forming good relationships with staff and had a less positive view of the keyworker relationship. It is also possible, however, that some young people declined to participate because they were more independent and spent less time in the hostel. Unfortunately, it is difficult to establish whether participants and nonparticipants differed in any systematic ways because we did not have access to any files or records. In terms of the setting of the study, the residents and keyworkers came from two hostels managed by one organization, and thus the findings may not represent the experiences of young people and staff in other hostels in the UK. Such issues of generalizability often arise in studies using in-depth, qualitative approaches; qualitative methodologists (e.g., Silverman, 2000; Willig, 2001) have suggested that the aim of such research is to illuminate a phenomenon and generate understandings that subsequently can be tested in other settings.

A second limitation is that social desirability factors may have played a role in the interviews with the young people. It is likely that in the minds of the residents the researcher was aligned with hostel staff, or at least was seen as a figure of authority. Although residents were assured that what they said would be confidential, given their histories of difficult relationships with adults and authority figures, they may have been concerned that their keyworkers would find out what they had said. This may have led some residents to be cautious about expressing negative views about their keyworkers.

Finally, the small sample size of this study did not allow for the investigation of variables which might impact on the relationships between residents and staff. For example, keyworkers' previous experience or training may be important. Although residents in the present study did not seem to be more satisfied with more experienced staff, such variables need to be examined systematically in future research. Characteristics of the residents might also play an important role. Although recent research has shown that various subgroups of homeless young people have similar profiles of psychological problems, it is not clear how their various backgrounds affect their ability to form relationships (MacLean et al., 1999). It has been suggested that poor attachment histories may cause current difficulties in forming relationships and that this is related to chronic homelessness (Stefanidis, et al., 1992). In the psychotherapy field, some research has indicated that clients' ability to form a sound therapeutic alliance is related to their ability to trust others and form secure attachments (Eames & Roth, 2000; Mallinckrodt, Coble, & Gantt, 1995; Satterfield & Lyddon, 1995). Future, larger-scale research is needed to investigate the impact of attachment histories on the formation of relationships between hostel residents and staff, and how the formation of a good or poor relationship is related to future homelessness.

Despite these limitations, the present study points to some issues concerning service delivery that go beyond the specific setting studied here. Given the lack

of consensus in the literature regarding the best way to address the difficulties of homeless youth, the variability in the provision of services is likely to continue for some time. The accounts of participants in this study suggest the overarching importance of homeless young people forming a trusting relationship with those responsible for their care. Yet, clearly, fostering such a relationship can be difficult. For staff with little or no professional training, it may be particularly hard to know how best to respond to the emotive nature of the problems that homeless youth may disclose to them. Furthermore, the tension between control and support seems to some extent inevitable in working with this population: Negotiating the difficult balance between “policeman” and “friend” is not a simple matter. Ensuring that those working with homeless youth are given opportunities to discuss and reflect on the issues and feelings arising in their work would seem essential; such “reflective practice” has been advocated in other settings where practitioners are faced with complex problems (Schön, 1995).

In conclusion, the use of a qualitative, phenomenological approach in the present study allowed a detailed examination of a central relationship in the lives of homeless young people, from their own perspectives. Although it is not unusual to hear the views of homeless youth in the media, and homelessness agencies often consult people who are homeless, this has tended to have had little impact on policy and strategy development (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1997). Research that takes an in-depth, systematic approach to representing the views of homeless young people (and those working with them) can potentially provide a sound knowledge base upon which better services can be developed.

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