

# Winter Shelter Research Project

## Synopsis for Homeless Service Providers

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The following is a synopsis of the thesis provided for the University of Southern Queensland honours degree. The synopsis is provided for both Stable One and the Winter Shelter project to provide an overview of the findings contained within the thesis research project. In a departure from the actual thesis itself, this will include observations and conceptual extrapolations made by the researcher while conducting the project and does not necessarily reflect strictly scientific or theoretical underpinnings, but yet maybe found useful for service delivery improvement.

### RESEARCH DETAILS:

A qualitative semi structured interview style research was undertaken in June 2022 with 7 participants at the winter shelter project in Toowoomba, Queensland. The data was analysed using thematic analysis, resulting in the emergence of overarching themes in response to a proposed theoretical framework of self-determination theory.

### MAIN FINDINGS

The analysis generated three main themes: (1) Kindness of Strangers, (2) Inner Journey and (3) Distressful Street Life.

*Themes and sub-themes and exemplars relating to the experiences of those in homelessness*

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Example Quote
Kindness of Strangers	Connection	You know, sit down with strangers at a church having dinner. And it felt like I was sitting there with the family
	Role Modelling	Well, I'm becoming more of the example of the caregivers, showing more care, being more alert
Inner Journey	Self-Efficacy	I didn't see myself changing until, you know, at the end of it, you know, I was like, I was like, you could do anything
	Optimistic Future	Yeah, now I actually feel the same as I did before I was homeless
Distressful Street Life		But it didn't matter what they say. It didn't make me feel bad because I was already downing on myself. You know, I hated the person I was, and no one could hate you more than you

#### 'Kindness of strangers'

This captures the concept of the noble, philanthropic ambitions that motivated project volunteers and how this impacted participants and the development of relationships.

- A common undertone of the conversations centred on the care, interest and authenticity shown by the volunteers to the participants of the project.
- The participants saw the time and emotional investment with a mixture of surprise, confusion, and even suspicion.
- This cautious nature towards those providing assistance became an important point of leverage as relationships deepened during the project, turning apprehension into admiration. On discounting any potential malfeasant agenda, participants quickly recognised the altruistic nature of the shelter service
- The volunteers assisting in Winter Shelter had no agenda for the participants behaviours, there were no obscure outcomes apart from the simple goal of providing shelter.
- The shelter project was perceived as genuine, authentic, novel and without ulterior motive, and opened the door for participants to achieve meaningful personal change.

### **Connection**

In the absence of expectations from the volunteers, participants seemed to willingly accept the role of their own 'saviour', looking to self-regulation of behaviour and thoughts as a means to improve. The shelter produced an intrapersonal environment that permitted self-exploration and introspection, and set the scene for deeper connection.

- Participants frequently identified the non-judgmental and genuinely attentive interactions with the volunteers at the shelter, forming a sub-theme of kindness of strangers. Responses suggested participants felt listened to without judgement and were surprised at the level of curiosity being shown about their homeless experience. Further, they felt that their stories were not being evaluated for merit or value.

- Engagement with the volunteers moved past surface interactions that might characterise a typical encounter with a routine homelessness service, and towards authentic connection epitomised by mutual validation, vulnerability, and respect.
- Participants experienced increased connection among fellow participants, reinforcing the importance of peer support, encouraging an environment that facilitated pro-social behaviours
- Underpinning the quality of this connection was the idea of psychosocial safety, that participants felt they could be authentic and vulnerable. This safe space worked to deactivate any heightened emotional arousal, working to facilitate approach behaviours, and encourage self-reflection and change. It allowed participants' internal narratives to shift, they no longer felt helpless but were active contributors in decision-making

### **Role Modelling**

- Participants felt the volunteers were key to change through vicarious social learning and the development of role modelled behaviours
- The relatability of human experience appears an influential factor in the experience of participants. The proximity between their human experience and that of the volunteers allowed normalising of life's challenges, how to address difficulties and decisions, and closing the gap between being homeless and not, participants could map themselves onto realistic, pro-social role models.

### **Inner Journey**

This theme encapsulates the internalisation and awareness of self-worth due to Winter Shelter participation. The participants related that they did not previously believe in

their ability to change, which appeared to develop into a self-fulfilling prophecy, perpetuating their situation. The changes undergone by the participants seemed both pronounced, from negative self-evaluation to notable increases in esteem and efficacy, and conscious to the participant themselves, improving self-reflection and an ability to communicate these higher levels of self-awareness.

- Many respondents spoke of increases to their self-worth as a person and within society, and self-belief of what they now felt they might be able to achieve
- The actions of the project volunteers had a significant influence on how participants experienced the need to change their behaviour and thoughts of self-efficacy. Via the mechanism of relationships and authenticity, participants could internalise the positive affirmations of the volunteers, almost as if this was permitting them to think better thoughts of themselves.
- Participants were now being shown and told that they were worthy, which brought about a flood of positive, yet tenuous, increases in their self-belief.
- Participants desired to emulate the altruistic actions of the volunteers at the shelter, indicating the strength of vicarious experience towards behaviour change. Being able to help others could only be achieved by first addressing their own personal situation of homelessness.

### ***Distressing Street Life***

The final theme differed from the preceding themes in that it encapsulated the negative experiences of homelessness. Participants readily expressed how intrapersonal challenges of esteem, worthiness and mental illness were influenced by their interpersonal and social environments, however, they owned their own personal issues

- Common responses centred on negative self-perception, that often thoughts were of a self-stigmatising nature, and these thoughts might not be truly reflective of reality.
- Drug misuse was often cited as both a hindrance and a coping mechanism.
- Participants reported the physical and psychological challenges they experienced because of being homeless, to the point where they faced an almost existential question of what comes after you reach 'rock bottom'. It appears that profound self-evaluation came with painful self-awareness

### ***Faith Based Influence***

The topic of religion was not readily apparent as a stand-alone theme within the data, however, there were some unique facets to how it influenced the experience of those in homelessness.

- it was not the overt act of communicating religious views that had an impact, rather, many appreciated the lack of spiritual assertiveness by the volunteers.
- The religious nature of the volunteers, and even the fact that the shelter was occurring within a church, was minimised to the point of being unnoticed or even disassociated, a distinction was made that it was more about the people than the religion

## FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

### ***Unconditional positive regard***

This term refers to the congruence (or genuineness), empathy and positive regard (or non-possessive warmth) between service provider (volunteer) and participant and is necessary for constructive personality and behaviour change to occur. The establishment of this style of relationship balances social power, facilitates pro-social role modelling and encourages deeper internalisation of an optimistic future. In other words, the participant feels able and competent to make personal change in the absence of reward or punishment and develops a greater sense of autonomy.

Unconditional positive regard style relationships are encouraged through:

Providing choice and input opportunities – an example is demonstrating acceptance of ideas and input from current and previous participant in the design and delivery of service, having previous participants play an active, sanctioned role in service delivery, actively asking for and soliciting advice and questions from participants.

Being informational rather than controlling – an example might be recognition of anti-social behaviour, without judgement, but with compassion and curiosity

Vulnerability and authenticity – an example might be communication of personal challenges, informational gaps or failures and genuine honesty within relationships and to provide this either in absence, or even in contradiction, of a person's anti-social behaviour

Unconditional positive regard creates an environment of psychosocial safety where authenticity and trust is a major characteristic, social power difference is minimised and each member perceives themselves as affectatious to influence their own behaviour and future.

### ***Supportive environment***

The research suggested that the Winter Shelter project provided an environment that facilitated the participants sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Theory supports the connection between achieving these goals and a subsequent decrease in amotivation and feelings of learned helplessness. Furthermore, self-determination, or agency, has been shown to promote motivational styles that are more enduring and resistant to set-backs, vitally important features within a homelessness environmental that is characterised by reoccurring episodes and social challenges. Service delivery designed and implemented with development of these competencies in mind, would therefore stand improved chances of long-term homelessness reduction.