

Undertaking Qualitative Research amongst Homeless Populations in the UK – Contrasting Strategies

Paper to Workshop 4. CUHP.

Dr Joan Smith and Dr Megan Ravenhill
Centre for Housing and Community Research
Cities Institute
London Metropolitan University
joan.smith@londonmet.ac.uk
m.ravenhill@londonmet.ac.uk

This paper is in three parts. The first part briefly discusses the impact of qualitative methods on homelessness research in the UK. The second describes a particular ten-year research programme into the family background of homeless young people and discusses the relationship between qualitative research and quantitative research in this programme. The third part describes an alternative approach to researching homeless biographies in which only qualitative methods were used; in this study cover observation methods were used alongside life history interviews.

Part One:

The rise in qualitative research techniques in the United States in the 1960s was immediately reflected in sociological practice in the UK. Within UK there was both a strong ethnographic tradition based in social anthropology departments and a strong neo-Weberian tradition within sociological departments. From both perspectives new approaches that sought 'understanding' of social phenomenon were welcomed as alternatives to social structural approaches and empiricist quantitative research methods. New research approaches and methodologies put forwards in the works of Goffman, Garfinkel and Glasser and Strauss were adopted into practice in the UK as they were published in the United States – particularly by young researchers beginning their careers.

Qualitative research approaches were valued as being:

- Specifically embedded within the research process;
- Able to comprehend new ways of living, new lifestyles in a period of social change;
- Enable the study of minority groups and marginalized populations;
- Enable the study of subjective meaning and everyday life.

In the UK qualitative research methods were discussed and taught alongside quantitative research methods to Undergraduate and Post-graduate students of Sociology and Social anthropology, and during their University careers students in these disciplines frequently used qualitative methodology to undertake small scale research projects. This experience has had an impact on research within the homeless voluntary sector; policy officers employed by voluntary organisations in the UK have been comfortable with commissioning reports based on case studies or in-depth interviews, or using these methods themselves. In the bibliographic survey of UK homeless studies produced under the auspices of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and CRASH (www.crash.org) for the years 1990-2000, 2001,2002,2003 and ongoing, there is a predominance of qualitative research based studies.

Obviously many agencies and researchers adopted qualitative research methods as a method of convenience, using techniques that required less field resources and that could be undertaken by a single researcher or small research team or a researcher working within an agency. The findings of these studies could then either

be used to stand alone, or to inform quantitative studies or to supplement local authority or voluntary sector data. Small scale qualitative studies have been particularly useful in offering new insights into specific groups of homeless people (women, refugees, long-term homeless). However, in many studies a lack of resources led to the field texts produced by qualitative research (whether interview transcripts, case studies or field notes) being under-analysed and under-theorised

Qualitative research methods also have been particularly important in exploring areas that were unexplored, unexplained or subject to false assumptions. In relation to these areas qualitative research methods have been adopted because of their importance to the generation of hypotheses or of understanding. For those researchers who have sought to use qualitative research methods to generate hypotheses there has been a commitment to using qualitative research methods alongside quantitative methods. For those researchers who have sought to generate understanding then qualitative research methods are the sole option.

Researchers committed to the combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies have been facilitated in doing so by various revisionist versions of grounded theory (Glasser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory has frequently been adopted as the perspective that has most easily theorised the work that they actually did as qualitative researchers; the selection of a broad research field to be approached through a preliminary research question or perspective, theoretical sampling of interviewees or observation points, research instruments based on broad topics that produced texts which were interpreted through thematic (rather than theoretical) coding. The subsequent writing up of the field texts produces an understanding that is contingent on further research. These researchers could adopt the main tenets of the practice of Glasser and Strauss – theoretical sampling, thematic coding and a circular, rather than linear, model of the research process – whilst maintaining various theoretical perspectives.

Researchers who have chosen only to undertake qualitative research have usually been committed to one of the specific philosophical approaches of symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and structuralist or psycho-analytical positions or, more recently, phenomenological approaches., and each of these approaches were associated with very different forms of qualitative inquiry. Phenomenological approaches have become equally important in both Germany and the UK particularly in relation to the analysis of in-depth interviews (Wengraf, 2001) .

One can describe both types of studies – bringing together qualitative and quantitative methods, or only applying qualitative methods - as having the potential to apply rigorous standards. However this requires a strong research design with an awareness of the choices available to a qualitative researcher. Flick's text (2002) had identified:

- 12 sampling strategies for qualitative research,
- 10 different interviewing strategies including semi-structured interviews (5), narrative interviews (2) and focus groups (3) and;
- 4 types of observation approaches (following Gold, 1958) across nine dimensions.

Flick has also identified the growing importance of the use of visual data (video diaries, photographs, film).¹

¹ Flick (2002) reports that although observation methods were privileged by qualitative researchers in the United States, German researchers have privileged in-depth interview strategies. This has also been true in the UK with the development of

Alongside issues of research design are issues associated with methods of analysis. How are the texts to be analysed? One of the most important decisions is the method of coding. For researchers who seek to combine both qualitative and quantitative data within an inquiry focussed on a particular research issue or question then the choice must be thematic coding. By comparison, qualitative researchers who approach their study as committed symbolic interactionists or from one of the alternative perspectives, are committed to theoretical coding, which is itself a major research work.² The decision affects which computer programme is used for the analysis.

In this paper we describe two different research studies/ programmes that have been undertaken by members of the Centre for Housing and Community Research, to illustrate the different research decisions taken as these studies progressed. The first example is a programme that sought to combine qualitative and quantitative methods (Part Two); the second is that of a qualitative study designed to understand the homeless experience through narrative interviews (Part Three).

These two research programmes/studies differed in relation to selection of the setting, structure of the interview schedule, selection of respondents, analysis of text (thematic versus theoretical), and the choice of follow-up studies.

Part Two. Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative research – ‘The Family Background of Young Homeless People’/ Risk Studies Research Programme.

Miles and Huberman (1994) identified four types of research design that integrate qualitative and quantitative research methods:

- (1) continuous collection of both quantitative and qualitative data during the life of the study;
- (2) different waves of quantitative data collection feeding into and drawing from continuous qualitative data collection during the life of the study;
- (3) stages of data collection, beginning with qualitative research methods that explore the field, followed by quantitative methods (surveys), and a further stage of qualitative field work that re-explores the research found in the earlier stages;
- (4) stages of data collection, beginning with quantitative methods (surveys), followed by qualitative methods (field study) and then further quantitative methods (experiment).

The Family Background of Young Homeless People Programme has, over the past 10 years, followed the third type of research design. It has been fortunate in being able to do this by accessing different sources of funding: first, research funding from a Trust (Joseph Rowntree Foundation) to undertake the first qualitative study; secondly, research contracts from voluntary agencies (sometimes funded by the Housing Corporation) to undertake surveys of homeless youth living in hostel

biographical interviewing and analytic techniques (Chamberlayne 2000, Chamberlayne et al 2002, Wengraf 2001). Observation methods, including visual observation methods, have been of importance for UK social scientists trained as social anthropologists.

² Open coding can result in hundreds of codes that must be re-interrogated to reveal their inner structure, the construction of categories, and the relationship between sub-categories and categories.

accommodation and living as hidden homeless; and thirdly, research funding from the charitable research programme of the National Lottery to undertake a final qualitative study among young people aged 14 years of age. Thus the studies in this programme have moved from the analysis of text (interview transcripts) to the analysis of data (SPSS files) and will in the future return to the analysis of text. They followed a grounded theory approach but one that began with a specified research problem that has developed as the programme developed.

First Phase of the Family Background/Risk of Homelessness Research Programme:

Contexts of the first study

The first study in this programme began in 1994 and there were three contexts to the study that informed the research question that was asked: a research problem in relation to the family background of young homeless people, a range of perspectives on youth homelessness that led to different assumptions and practices among agency workers, a general question about the moral obligation of parents towards young people.

Research Problem: At the time the first study began (1994) it was known that up to one third of young homeless people were homeless because of their previous experience in institutions i.e. the local authority care system. However this still left two thirds of young homeless people unexplained although at the time the Government assumption was that they were 'runaways'. This research programme sought to explore the family background of young homeless people made homeless from their family home through interviews with both young people and their parent(s). In our introduction to *The Family Background* study we pointed out:

'The various explanations of youth homelessness leave a black hole in our understanding of homelessness actually occurs. Family conflict remains an unexplored area. Do young people leave or are they evicted? What do you people mean when they say they left through 'household conflict'? How do young people who are unemployed and have no resources leave their parental home?' (Smith, Gilford, O'Sullivan, 1998).

Practitioner perspectives. When the research programme began we identified three types of perspectives on youth homelessness in the UK: first, homelessness could happen to any young person due to unemployment, lack of housing or problems in the 'transition' to adulthood; second, homelessness happened to particular young people either with mental health, drug or alcohol issues, or poorly parented, or who had chosen to break away from their family. Thirdly, although homelessness *could* happen to anyone, it was mostly likely to happen to particular young people and those with particular social characteristics – there were both biographical risks and risks associated with social exclusion.

Moral obligation and family responsibility. In sociological studies of the family in the UK there had been a major study of 'moral obligation' in relation to the care of older people i.e. how were particular family members selected to be the person who gave the most care to an elderly relative (Finch 1989, Finch and Mason, 1993). Therefore the study of young homeless people sought to establish parental attitudes to moral obligation towards their children. Because the area of North Staffordshire was one of very little in and out migration it was possible to reach the parents.

Study design

The study took place in North Staffordshire including the area of Stoke-on-Trent; this area was an old industrial area based on steel (closed), mining (just closed) and the pottery industry (since closed). Because there were no expanding industries

migration into the area was very limited and all young people in the study, except one, were both white and local.

The research instrument was a focussed interview schedule undertaken with young people using a topic list that had been piloted with groups of young people living in hostels. Interviews followed the classic 'arc' pattern with interviewees taking over the interview at different points and offering their own narrative, but they were not narrative interviews as such; each topic on the topic list had to be addressed within the time of the interview which lasted between one and two hours. Young people were paid for their time.

The sample of young people was theoretical or purposive. Agencies were asked if they could introduce us to young homeless people who had been homeless from their parental home, not from an institution. We also recruited young people through 'snowballing'. We interviewed **no** young people with a history of local authority care or who had had a custodial sentence (although they could have been in trouble with the police). We sought interviews with younger homeless people (up to 21/22) and equal numbers of single young women and single young men. In all 56 young people were interviewed.

At the end of each interview we asked the young person if they would allow us to interview their parent(s) and if they would give us their parent's address. Only half gave us their permission – and those who did were more likely to be from non-disrupted families, or from disrupted families where no violent incidents had taken place. It was notable that young men were more reluctant for us to interview their parents than young women. Among the young people whose parents were not interviewed, were those who reported abuse or extremely difficult household relationships or no longer knew where their parents lived, but there were also those where the young person was themselves in the midst of negotiating better relationships with their parents and did not want to jeopardise the contact that they now had. Of the parents contacted who refused to be interviewed some offered similar reasons saying that their relationships with their children were improving and they didn't want to 'bring it all back'. Other parents refused because of conflict with their partner (usually a step-parent) over whether they should be interviewed. Overall it was possible to interview parent(s) of 10 young men (a third of the young men we interviewed) and parents of 12 young women (nearly half of the young women).

Parents were interviewed using a similar topic list to that of the young person. However we found that in their own narration parents frequently referred to their own upbringing or to other issues that occurred before the child was born or while the child was an infant.

It is important to note that in order to preserve confidentiality the interviewer for the parent was always a different person than the interviewer for the young person. Interviewers were always member of the Centre for Housing and Community Research team and they had backgrounds in youth work, mental health work or nursing and all were aged 30 or over.

These interviews with young people and parents addressed one research problem – the family background. However the other major research question - the moral order of the family - had to be addressed in a different way and at this point a more quantitative strategy was introduced. To address this we interviewed 40 households of parents of young people of a similar age to the young homeless people living on two local authority housing estates. We identified these families from surveys we

had undertaken four years previously; by adjusting the age of the children present in the family at that time. Parents on these two local authority housing estates were interviewed about their family structure, relationship with their children and the attitudes to young people leaving home. Young people in these families were also interviewed and the majority of young people were still living in their family home. .

Therefore the overall research design was as follows:

YOUNG HOMELESS PEOPLE	ESTATE FAMILIES
Theoretically sampled; young people without an institutional history	Identified from families previously interviewed on two local authority or Coal Board housing estates
Focussed interview schedule – topic list	Structured interview schedule including ‘vignettes’ of homeless experience
Young People 30 young men 26 young women	Parents of young people 16-25 40 household on two estates
Parents of young homeless people of 10 young men of 12 young women	Young people of 40 households on two estates. 55% response

The interviews in the estate survey were undertaken using a structured schedule rather than a topic list. This was for two reasons. First, from the in-depth interviews with young homeless people and their parents we had extracted the issues we wished to pursue in the estate survey. Second, issues in relation to leaving home would not necessarily be as ‘salient’ with the parents on the estates as they were with the parents of young people who were now homeless, and in-depth interviews would not necessarily uncover similar information.

To explore family obligation in relation to young people we borrowed a method that Finch and Mason had used in the study of ‘care in the community’ i.e. care by the family of elderly or disabled relatives. Finch and Mason (1993) presented members of different households with a series of stories about obligation within families and asked for their response. We adapted this method presenting different family conflict scenarios in separate interviews to mothers, fathers, sons and daughters on the two estates. These vignettes were designed to explore both household conflict and patterns of accepted family obligation towards young people. The vignettes were taken directly from the stories that homeless young people and their parents had told us of how homelessness had occurred. Here are five of the ten vignettes that we used:

3. Janice has two children, a boy and a girl. After a long period of living alone she has found a new partner who has moved in with her. Trouble has arisen because her son does not like him and says he will move out if her new partner stays. Her son is only fourteen and she is worried about him.

What should Janice do?

What if her son was sixteen?

- a. Ask her partner to move out but try and keep the relationship?
- b. Try and keep her son and her partner apart while they both live in the same house.?
- c. Accept that her son will move out?

or something else?

4. Marie is 16 years old and is still at school. Her father says that he wants to know what she is doing and where she is going and that she must come in by 11 o'clock. She says that none of her friends have to do this and she stays out later and there is an enormous argument.

What should her father do?

What if Marie was working and paying board? Should she have to do what her father says?

What if she was a boy ?

- a. Tell her she must do as she is told while she lives at home?
- b. Talk to her about why he is worried.?
- c. .Agree that she can stay out late?

or something else?

5. Ken and Julie have a three bedroom house with one living room. They have three children. The eldest, Theresa, has just had a baby and come back to live at home. She can't sleep with her sister anymore because she needs a room with the baby and the other room was taken by her nineteen year old brother. When she came home she took her brother's room temporarily and her brother slept on the sofa in the living room. Now the Council are saying that they won't house her because she made herself homeless from her last place.

What should Ken and Julie do?

What if Theresa was also pregnant with a second child?

- a. Ask Theresa to find somewhere to live with her baby?
- b. Ask her brother Robin to move out?
- c. Leave Robin on the sofa downstairs?

or something else?

9. Paul is seventeen and has been in trouble with the police since he was fourteen. This time he has been put on probation. His father had said if he was in trouble again then he would have to leave home. The probation officer now wants to know if he is going to be resident at home.

What should Paul's parents do?

What if Paul had stolen from his parents?

- a. Tell Paul to leave?
 - b. Accept him back one last time?
- or something else?

10. Susan is now sixteen and has always got on well with her parents and has done well at school. Now, however, she is going out with Mike who her parents don't like and think that he has a bad reputation. Mike has his own flat and her parents don't want her to visit him and stay out late. Her parents want her to stay with them and have asked her to be in at a reasonable time. Susan is not prepared to listen.

What should Susan's parents do?

- a. Accept Mike in order for their daughter to stay at home?
 - b. Accept that Susan is going to leave but try and remain friends?
- or something else?

Findings of the First Phase: from the *Family Background of Young Homeless People* (1998) study:

Findings of the In-depth Interviews with Young Homeless People and their Parents

One of the purposes of undertaking qualitative research is to build generalised models as described in the work of Glaser and Strauss (1968). The in-depth interviews with young homeless people and their parents produced a distinction between three types of families whose categories were not those of the traditional social survey:

- Non-disrupted families were those who had been stable since the child was quite young and included two birth parents, long-term single parents, long-term step-parents and long-term foster parents.
- Disrupted families were those where there had been a break in the young person's life, or several breaks, from 8/9 years on to 14/15 years. Primarily this could be the introduction of a new partner of their parent into the household or it could be serial partnering on the part of a parent
- Abusive families could be either non-disrupted or disrupted but were more likely to be disrupted.

Associated with these three types of families were differences in patterns of family conflict. In the first type of family – non-disrupted – it was frequently the case that the behaviour of the young person caused the conflict; one parent was re-hospitalised in a mental hospital through worry, another was attacked, another had their special

possessions stolen. In the second type of family – disrupted – it was more frequently the case that the parent's choice of partner caused the conflict; a new male in the household could be controlling and dominating. In the third type of family young people were frequently at risk from parents who themselves had mental health issues. The incidence of self-reported mental illness among young people - overdosing, self-harming - was higher among those from disrupted families and most high among those who came from abusive families.

The results of the study were summarised in a 'Circle of Risk' for young people in relation to becoming homeless. These risks included both the biographical risk and the risk of social exclusion given changing social structures and social welfare networks. This was a first construction of a model that was linked both to Beck's theory of risk and also to theories of Social Exclusion. (see over)

Findings of the Estate Survey:

The interviews with parents and young people on local housing estates produced findings pertinent to the *social fabric* of the lives of young people who subsequently became homeless compared with young people living at home on local authority housing estates.

- Seven parents or step-parents of young homeless people were working or had worked in the armed forces compared with only one parent on the estate and this reinforced findings elsewhere of the impact of this occupation on family conflict and family disruption. There was also a prison officer among the step-parents of the homeless youth.
- It was also the case that young homeless people came from a wider range of social backgrounds. Four of the parents of young homeless people were professionals (further education teacher, teachers, social worker) compared with one on the estate. Half of the parents of young homeless people were owner-occupiers compared with one third of those living on the local authority estate (one third had bought their properties).

The history of the estate parents compared with the estate young people also established the differences in changes in the social fabric in which the young people were now living. Estate parents were a generation for whom both jobs and housing (from the local authority) were available; all except three of them living with both birth parents until they left home, usually to establish a family of their own. Estate young people were more likely to go from school to a youth training scheme rather than a job or into a succession of low paying jobs. Only four young men found the sort of employment that their fathers had found.

The major difference between the homeless and estate young people were in family backgrounds and school histories. (a) Four fifths of young people in the estate sample had been brought up in by both birth parents or a long term lone parent compared with only one third of the homeless sample. (b) The majority of young people who subsequently became homeless were in difficulties at school at least by the third and fourth year of secondary school (14/15) and for some these difficulties had begun much earlier. Only a quarter of the estate young people reported having the same difficulties at school. (c) Estate young people were less likely to be unemployed after leaving school although the employment available to them was equally low paid and with little prospects. (d) Similar patterns of early relationships and leaving home were found among homeless young women and young men and women living on the estates. Nearly half of the young people living on the estate had left home (28) but nine had returned. Some young people had been thrown out from the homes on the estate but had subsequently returned.

Findings from the Moral Attitudes part of the Estate Survey :

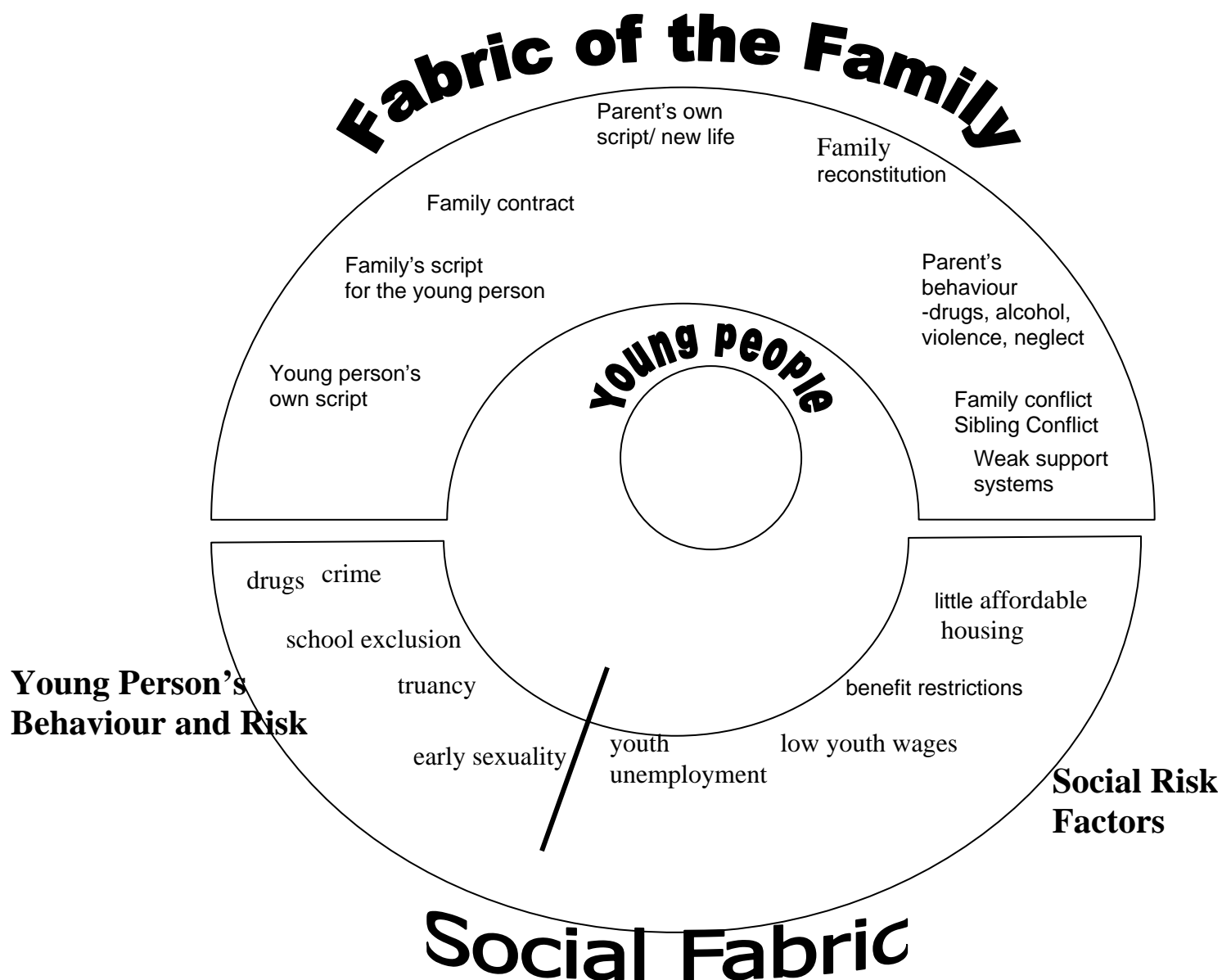
The most important finding of the estate survey in relation to our second major research question - the moral obligation of parents towards their children – was that parents in the estate sample frequently accepted the actions of the parents of young homeless people and reported that they would have done the same.

- Vignette 3 described a common occurrence in the life of young homeless people from disrupted families. Vignette 3 presented the story of Janice whose new partner was not accepted by her 14 year old son and estate parents were given three choices for her – either the partner moved out, both stayed, or she accepted that her son should move out (Vignette 3). When the son was 14 years of age, then only a few parents thought that her son should move out (only one mother thought this) and nearly one half that the new partner should. But if the son was 16 years of age then only four parents thought that the partner should move out rather than the child. It was accepted that under these circumstances, and when the young person was 16 years old, parents had a right to rewrite their lives.
- Vignette 10 presented the story of Susan, who is sixteen, gets on well with her parents and has done well at school, but is now going out with Mike whom her parents don't like. In this case half of both mothers and fathers said that her parents should accept that she should leave home. Only one third of parents on the estate agreed with the response that Susan's parents should accept Mike in order that their daughter would stay at home, although mothers were more likely to agree with accepting Mike than fathers.
- Another story (Vignette 8) presented the case of a household with several children where the older son was found with drugs in his room, which he said was his first time of use. Only one estate father said he should be asked to move out to a hostel and another that he would 'break his neck'. Over four fifths of the mothers (85%) compared with two thirds of the fathers said that they would seek the help of a doctor but did not agree that they would move him out for the sake of younger children. Only a small group of parents, two mothers and two fathers said that he should be told he had to give up drugs to stay at home.

There were three interesting results from responses to the vignettes. First, estate parents supported the action of other parents who asked their child to leave if the parent had created a new partnership or if there was conflict over a new relationship of the young person's. Second, there were still different rules for young women and young men (comparing Vignette 10 and Vignette 8 – this difference was also apparent in the responses to Vignette 9 which described a young man in trouble with the police). Third, all parents had difficulty resolving conflicts between siblings, frequently supporting the older even if they were causing difficulty for the younger, or a conflict over resources such as when the older girl came back to live with her baby.

In order to visualise the situation we created a Circle of Risk, that described all the risks that either young people or their parents had described to us.

Figure 1: From the Family Background of Young Homeless People (1998)



This Circle of Risk then informed the next stage of our research which was undertaken with young homeless people and young local people living in London. The purpose of this research was to identify risk factors that could be used to select young people for programmes designed to prevent youth homelessness.

Second Phase of the Family Background/Risk of Homelessness Research Programme

The Taking Risks Study

The research into '*Family Background of Homeless Young People*' undertaken in the North Staffordshire area with both homeless young people and families living on estates formed the basis for a quantitative study of risk of homelessness undertaken through structured interviews. The *Taking Risks* study compared two groups of young Londoners aged 16-19 years, 198 living in homeless hostels or supported housing and 152 young people living in deprived areas, but still living with their family. The purpose was to identify more precisely the particular risk factors that led to youth homelessness in order to guide the identification of young people at age of 13 or 14 who might become homeless. Having identified young people at risk they were to receive services under a newly established prevention programme in eight London boroughs under the 'Safe in the City' programme.

The '*Taking Risks*' study undertaken in London built on the 'Circle of Risk' findings from North Staffordshire. It was not designed to quantify the risk factors of age, sex and ethnic group, but to quantify the factors associated with family background, family violence and other individual factors.³

The two groups of Londoners were not sampled through a representative sample. The purpose of the research was to understand the risks of homelessness facing local young people i.e. young people from London, for whom services could be provided while they were still at school, or of school age, and to identify the types of service required. Therefore, hostels that accommodated young homeless people in London were asked to introduce us to young homeless people who either were from London or had spent at least part of their secondary schooling in London and considered themselves to be based in London, who were aged between 16 and 19 years of age. Only a proportion of any hostel fell into these categories in relation to local origins and age. The questionnaire also screened young people to establish whether they met these criteria. These restrictions ruled out majority of young people in some hostels but did provide a sample that was half young men and half young women, because young women were more commonly found among the younger hostel dwellers.

We had no information that could identify young people still living with their parents on local housing estates therefore estates were chosen that were located in areas of similar deprivation to the areas that the majority of young homeless people identified as being their last settled base with parent/carer at age 16 years or, if homeless at that time, immediately prior. Enquiries were made at all households as to whether anyone aged 16-19 was living there; this strategy was not entirely successful as it resulted in a local sample that was, on average, a year younger than the hostel sample. In this sample we also identified some young people who had been living as homeless – they were not included in the survey.

The information collected from the two London samples produced a measure of difference between currently homeless young people and those living at home. The data from both sets of interviews were put together and then the prevalence of particular factors was measured against whether the young person was currently

³ The second 'risk study' in Birmingham based on 350 interviews with homeless young people (living in both hostels and as 'hidden' homeless) was part of a study that did quantify risk factors in relation to age, sex and ethnic group in that city based on a Culhane type count of all homeless applications to any agency

homeless or not. This comparison produced odds ratios that are summarised in Table 1.1. From the odds ratios it was apparent that young people were thirteen times more likely to be found in the homeless group if they did not get on with your mother than if they did and so on. Overall the odds of being homeless were at their highest if the young person: didn't get on with their mother, had moved house more than twice, had a younger mother, was badly off as a child, was not living with either a sole birth parent or both birth parents at age twelve, had been hit frequently during the course of an argument, had shared a bedroom, had lived in rented accommodation, had no car in their household, had been school excluded.

Table 1 Odds of being in the Homeless Sample.

London 'Safe in the City' Survey 1998

Variable	Odds Ratio
Didn't get on with mother/ got on with mother	13:1
Moved house more than twice/ less than twice	11:1
Mother aged below 25 years at first child/ mother older	6:1
Badly off as a child/ not badly off as a child	5:1
Living with foster parent/care, step parent, or relative at 12 years/ in two birth parent or one birth parent family at 12 years	5:1
Hit frequently in course of argument/not hit, not hit frequently	4:1
Shared bedroom at 12 years/ not shared bedroom at 12 years	3:1
In rented accommodation at 12/ in other tenure	3:1
No car in household/ at least one car	3:1
Excluded from school/ never excluded	2:1

Of course there was a relationship between many of these variables. For example homeless young people not living with two or one birth parents but with a step-parent or other situation were more than twice as likely to have been school excluded. Therefore we also ran a discriminant analysis on all the young people to see which variables, and their weights, best differentiated all the respondents into the categories of currently homeless and not currently homeless (our local sample). Using seven variables it was possible to place 82% of the homeless sample into the correct category. The variables in that equation showed that living with a step-parent, foster-parent or other relative has an effect on the probability that a young person will be homeless, that was independent of poverty, school exclusion, relationships with mother or violent arguments. Similarly moving house more than twice had an independent effect.⁴

⁴ **Probability of Being Homeless. Regression Equation** London 'Safe in the City' Survey 1998

Variable	Co-efficient
<i>Constant</i>	-0.578
Didn't get on with mother/ got on with mother	+0.658
Moved house more than twice/ less than twice	+1.242
Mother aged below 25 years at first child/ mother older	+1.112
Badly off as a child/ not badly off as a child	-0.896
Living with foster parent/care, step parent, or relative at 12 years/ in two birth parent or one birth parent family at 12 years	-0.639
Hit frequently in course of argument/not hit, not hit frequently	-0.375
Shared room at 12 years/ not shared room at 12 years	+0.668
Excluded from school/ never excluded	+0.471

This research into the risk factors of becoming homeless was used to identify young people who then received particular help in order to prevent youth homelessness through the Safe in the City programme in eight London boroughs. This programme was based on three different types of support services:

- Family support
- Skills and employability
- Personal development

And is described in the booklet '*Safe in the City: a practical approach to preventing youth homelessness*' 2002 (www.safeinthecity.org.uk). The 'Safe in the Cities' programme has now ceased with loss of funding. But the programme itself has now been expanded into a national pilot scheme by the Foyer Federation called 'Safe Moves', and the findings of the Risk Studies have been used to inform the services and the selection of young people.

Subsequent Risk Studies in Birmingham, Cotswolds and North Staffordshire : In 1999 a similar interview schedule was used in a study of 210 young people living in Birmingham hostels aged 25 years and under (and also 195 living as homeless but not in hostels). The responses of young people living in Birmingham hostels were compared to the responses London young homeless living in hostels to see if they shared similar risk factors. Young homeless people in both London and Birmingham were very similar. Both groups came from more disrupted and poorer families than the London local reference sample, despite the London local reference sample being drawn from similarly deprived areas. Relationships within the family were much more frequently violent and young people were much less likely to get on with their mother in both the London and Birmingham homeless samples than in the local London sample. Young homeless people in both homeless samples reported higher rates of school exclusion than the local sample.

Overall therefore the risk factors that were identified in London were ones that young homeless people in Birmingham shared. This was also found to be true in a smaller study of 61 young people aged 16-25 years living in homeless hostels, with friends, and sleeping rough in the Cotswolds, a rural area between London and Bristol. A final risk study, undertaken in North Staffordshire in 2001, seven years after the first qualitative interviews, found that these young people also shared some but not all the risk factors.

Table 2 reports key risk factors in relation to all four risk studies – of London, Birmingham, Cotswolds and North Staffordshire – compared to our **only** local reference sample in London. In the Tables quoted here all five samples (4 homeless and one local) report risk factors in relation to homeless young people aged 16 to 19 years only (older young people in the Birmingham and Cotswolds studies have been removed from these samples for the purposes of comparison). All interviews took place over a six- month period and were offered to all young people available in the hostels at the time. In all areas interviews included homeless young people known to the Probation service or staying in bail hostels.

Considering Table 1.2, a key risk factor, *not getting on with mother*, is true for about the same proportion of young people in North Staffordshire as in Birmingham and the Cotswolds, although all three are lower than in the London homeless sample. However, among those still living at home in London only 4% reported not getting on

with their mother so all four results are extremely high when compared with local young people.

A second risk factor was higher in North Staffordshire than in the other homeless samples. Only a quarter of young people in North Staffordshire who subsequently became homeless were *living with two birth parents* and one in six (17%) with *one parent* at age 12 years. Thus only four out of ten young homeless people in North Staffordshire were living in a two or sole birth parent situation at age 12 years. Six out of ten of homeless young people in London, Birmingham and the Cotswolds were living with two birth or a sole birth parent at age 12, and nine out of ten in the London local sample.

A major reason why the proportion living with two or a sole birth parents at age 12 years was lower in the North Staffordshire sample than the others was probably associated with the young age of the mothers of young homeless people in North Staffordshire. One of the risk factors reported for London was the odds of having a mother aged under 25 years at the birth of her first child; the odds for this was six times higher for homeless young people than for the local reference sample. However, in North Staffordshire all but two mothers were aged under 25 years of age at the birth of her first child.

Table 2. Risk Factors among samples of young homeless people in North Staffordshire, Birmingham, the Cotswolds and London compared with the London local reference sample.

Risk Variable	London – Local not homeless 1998* YP: 16-19	London Homeless Hostels 1998* YP:16-19yrs	Birmingham Homeless Hostels 1998-9** YP: 16-19	Cotswolds Homeless 2000 YP: 16-19 yrs	North Staffordshire 2002 YP 16-19
Didn't get on with mother	4%	37%	25%	31%	28%
Lived two birth parents at age12	56	26	35%	22%	23%
Lived one parent	36	32	24%	41%	17%
Badly off as a child	10%	35%	18%	26%	39%
Arguments led to hitting-frequently	1%	31%	34%	9%***	28%
Shared room at 12	22%	44%	35%	41%	37%
No car in household	26%	47%	35%	19%	33%
School excluded	31%	52%	45%	31%	57%
Total respondents	154	195	119	32	52

*Source: Bruegel and Smith (1999) *Taking Risks. An analysis of the risks of homelessness for young people in London*. Published by Safe in the City (see bibliography).

** Source: Smith et al (2000) *Routes in and out of Homelessness among young people in Birmingham*. Centre for Housing and Community Research.

*** In the Cotswolds there was a reluctance to discuss hitting. 47% said that it only happened 'sometimes', a higher proportion than the sometimes figure elsewhere, and this partly explains the low rate for 'frequently'.

N.B In this table only young people aged under 20 years are reported for Birmingham and the Cotswolds in order to make the direct comparison with North Staffordshire.

By the end of the four risk studies it was possible to say that there were particular factors that agencies should be aware of when assessing the risk of homelessness for young people aged 12 years on. These findings were written into a document used to inform the 'Safe Moves' programme working with young people at risk of homelessness.

The third of the four Risk Studies also provided qualitative data that informs the third stage of this research programme. Alongside the interviews with 61 rural homeless young people the drama students at the local college created a play about the risks of youth homelessness based on their meeting and interviews with local homeless people. The play was filmed and a documentary was also made about the filming. Following this the documentary was shown to local school students aged 14-15 years who were then interviewed in focus groups. From the responses to the documentary and film of the play, or the play itself, the focus groups began the discussion of their perception of homelessness and their perception of risk. The third stage of the research programme is now building on that work, as well as focus groups undertaken by the researchers of the 'Safe in the City' policy team.

Second Phase of the Family Background/Risk of Homelessness Research Programme : The What is Homelessness? Study

The third phase of this research programme has now begun and has moved back to qualitative research methods. The aim of this stage of the research programme is to research the understanding of the risks of homelessness among 14-15 year olds and parents/carers of 14-15 year olds. It is based on a detailed exploration of young people's and their parents'/carers' perceptions and knowledge of homelessness, leaving home and 'running away' or moving out of home, across three different groups (a) young people attending school, (b) young people 'at risk' of later homelessness, and (c) young people already engaged in running away.

The methodology to be adopted for young people attending school and young people at risk is focus group interviews – and similarly for parents of these two groups. There are several reasons for choosing focus groups. First, it is much easier for young people to respond to broad questions in a group; groups are able to focus on issues that would leave one young person tongue-tied. Second, young men in particular respond better to group interviews than individual interviews. Third, parents/carers respond better to broad questions in a group. They are less likely to discuss individual cases and more likely to be prepared to discuss their general understandings of the lives and experiences of young people

The SAMPLE for Phase 1 and 2 is young people aged 14-15 years old living in four London boroughs (Greenwich, Lambeth, Hackney and Tower Hamlets) and cover the three categories of young people:

- (1) young people, and their parents/carers, attending schools in boroughs where programmes exist to work with young people but who themselves are not engaged with preventative programmes;
- (2) young people, and their parents/carers, attending school but also engaged with preventative programmes;
- (3) young people not attending school and not engaged with preventative programmes.

In all twenty-eight focus groups with young people will include up to 200 young people. Groups will be organised to ensure that among them there are some male and female only groups, Black African, Black Caribbean, White and Asian only

groups, as well as groups with mixed gender and ethnicity. Twelve focus groups with parents will include up to 86 parents.

The third phase will be narrative interviews undertaken with 24 young 'runaways' and 12 parents.

Therefore the research programme will have completed a circle from qualitative to quantitative to qualitative research methods. It will report at the end of 2006.

The next section of this paper describes a research project based entirely on qualitative research methods.

Part Three. Qualitative research methods and the understanding of the homeless experience.

This research project, 'Homelessness: An Ethnography' did not pretend to be an objective analysis of rooflessness or homeless culture. It is an abstracted account that attempts to define some of the dominant features and describe the homeless process into, through and out of rooflessness. It attempted to understand the process, the trigger factors and people's interaction with life events to explain why rooflessness persists and how the homeless culture continues to exist. This research was conducted over a period of 4.5 years on a part-time basis between October 1997 and July 2001 for a Ph.d at the London School of Economics, London University.

The thesis sought to look at homelessness from a Structure-agency (structuration) theoretical perspective, examining homelessness as a social and structural phenomenon alongside the everyday reality of being homeless. To achieve this and to look afresh at homelessness there needed to be a rupture with the conventional methods for viewing homelessness. A new way of seeing needed to be found (Berger 1972). The research needed to move away from the comprehensive surveys that neutered and diluted the true meaning of homelessness. It needed to understand the way roofless people viewed the world and interpreted it and themselves in terms of what they saw (e.g. Berger 1972). The processes involved in becoming roofless, being roofless and leaving rooflessness needed to be understood alongside the social construction of the individual's reality (e.g. Berger and Luckmann 1967). This reality involved choices, decisions and actions that needed to be made in an ever-changing political and social world (e.g. Beck's 1992; Risk society). For Giddens (1991), this can produce ontological insecurity. Insecurity that can become so severe that it affects the individuals' ability to function within the society in which they live (e.g. Croft 2001).

If we assume that those with the most knowledge about rooflessness and the homeless culture are those who have lived that life-style, then the research methods employed needed to treat roofless people as knowledgeable experts within their field. By treating roofless people as actively constructing their own identities and social worlds, the thesis aimed to gain information about their conduct and the conduct of others within their world (individually and collectively). By using a combination of life-story interviewing and observation the thesis aimed to discover how individuals interacted within the social structures of conventional society and the homeless culture, plus their motivations and reasoning for making choices/decisions. The aim was to gain some understanding of the complex and interconnected nature of the homeless process.

The following steps of the research work demonstrate the iterative nature of the project, moving between data sources, checking researcher findings from different

stances, viewpoints. They also show the importance of developing each person's timeline.

Step 1 - Hypothesis.

As a rule grounded theorists prefer not to start their research with a formal hypothesis, as the main aim is to not prejudice the data by holding preconceived ideas, but to see what emerges from the research. As this research was for a PhD a very broad and general hypothesis was held from the outset. Namely, why is it that despite the fact that previous research appears to have established the causes of homelessness and formulated solutions to homelessness accordingly, which have been implemented, homelessness still persists? This was grounded on my previous research, voluntary work and a thorough review of the literature both prior to the research and throughout its duration.

Step 2 – Potential areas for investigation

Prior knowledge through volunteer work indicated potential areas for examination, which at the start of the research, had not been examined and led to a number of questions that informed the design of the research. Among the questions that the thesis investigated were the following: How do childhood experiences and life events affect people who become homeless? Do they contribute to the cause of their homelessness? What are the causal trajectories of homelessness? What could be done to prevent people from becoming homeless? What are the exit trajectories from homelessness? Does the homeless culture act as an umbilical cord that prevents some people from exiting homelessness? Are there specific coping mechanisms or strategies that mean some people are more likely to succeed than others? Although these were underlying questions that informed the structure of the research, extensive observation and participant observation enabled far more data to be gathered. Thus a much broader range of significant issues emerged.

Step 3 – Choosing a combination of methods of investigation - Triangulation of methods

The thesis uses a combination of methods within the grounded theory paradigm with a heavy emphasis on ethnography. These include observation, participant observation, life-story interviews, in-depth unstructured and semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. The aim was to get a thorough incite into rooflessness from different perspectives, e.g. roofless people, voluntary sector and local authority organisations.

Life-story interviews: with roofless, homeless and ex-roofless people resettled into housed society (48).

Depth interviews: with roof/homeless people (21), key people working within the homeless industry (33), and people who had never been roofless despite having experienced several triggers of rooflessness (14). There were also telephone interviews with key people working within the homeless industry (24). In addition there were 77 informal interviews/long conversations with a similar group of people.

Observation: covert observation on the streets predominantly in central London, Bedford, Exeter and Wimbledon (approximately 764 hours).

Participant observation: predominantly as a volunteer worker at Merton Anchorage Trust (approximately 225 hours). Plus smaller scale participant observation as a researcher at hostels/daycentres in London, Exeter, Reigate and Bedford.

Documentary analysis: of the life-story scenarios of homeless people used in the literature (e.g. annual reports, promotional/fundraising materials) from a variety of voluntary sector organisations working within the homeless industry. In all, 152

organisations were contacted, of which 90 replied. Of the 90, 75 used some form of biographical scenario of roof/homeless people within their literature. This generated 99 scenarios for analysis.

These methods were chosen to ensure a variety of data from different contexts. They also created a means for cross-checking the information gathered. Thus, for example, the information gained from the life-story interviews could be checked and interpreted in the light of the ethnographic observation and participant observations. The interpretation of the observations was cross-checked through informal conversations and depth interviews. By using grounded theory analysis all the information could be laid out and systematically coded and analysed.

Step 4 – Choosing where to conduct the research – area representativeness and oversampling women

To ensure a comprehensive coverage of the field, more than one location was used. A combination of county towns, coastal areas and suburbs were used to show homelessness in places other than just central London. Research was conducted in Bedford, Exeter, Merton, Reigate, and various inner London boroughs. This facilitated a view of rural, coastal, inner city and suburban roof/homelessness and their co-dependency and interaction. With the life-story interviews, the thesis sought to use a large enough sample from which broad inferences could be brought. Thus it was important that equal numbers of males and females were interviewed across a wide age range (Hence female only hostels were included in the sample to raise the number of women contacted). Similarly, it was important to capture people's experiences at various stages through the homeless process to ensure recently recalled data was available. To achieve this observations and interviews were conducted in drop-in day centres, hostels and in people's own homes. It was not possible to gain a sufficiently racially diverse group in this research. Furthermore, to balance the information gained from roofless people, interviews with people who had never been roofless but had experienced several triggers of rooflessness were also conducted.

Step 5 – Developing a picture

The documentary analysis gave an indication of the stereotypes of homeless people used by charities and the voluntary sector and the way homelessness was constructed as a social issue. These are important because stereotypes tend to be the main platforms from which funds are raised, general public opinions are manipulated and in some cases policies are formed. A tick-box spreadsheet was created containing topics and issues mentioned and raised within the scenarios. This created a quick frame for frequency analysis to determine the most commonly mentioned subjects and facets of homeless people's lives. From these dominant issues, the broad stereotypes used emerged. The statements forming the tick box spreadsheet were incorporated later as part of the coding schedule for the observations and life-story interviews.

Observations began on the streets. This generated information about where people congregated and why, information on patterns of behaviour, interactions and group formation. This also generated new ideas previously not considered. For example, how outsiders were incorporated into the homeless community, humour, gender roles and the general public's reactions.

At the same time organisations were interviewed and gate-keepers organised for the main body of the research. This gave a different slant on what was happening in the homeless community. More importantly it gave insight into the dynamics of interagency co-operation and the construction of social problems as policy issues. It

also highlighted the impact of funding on the homeless community and the type of help on offer.

Step 6 – Checking the picture's accuracy and making adjustments

Participant observations were carried out. These allowed the researcher to ask direct questions, observe people at a far more detailed level, enter into conversations, jokes and other activities. Much of this stage was carried out while I was pregnant which led to interesting insights into homeless men's attitudes towards their children, sexual relationships on the street and the role of women in homeless culture.

Asking questions at this stage meant that the validity of the information gained from the covert observations and that being generated from the interviews could be questioned, authenticated or given less credence. It also indicated more areas to probe for in the life-stories and depth interviews as well as further questions to ask organisations.

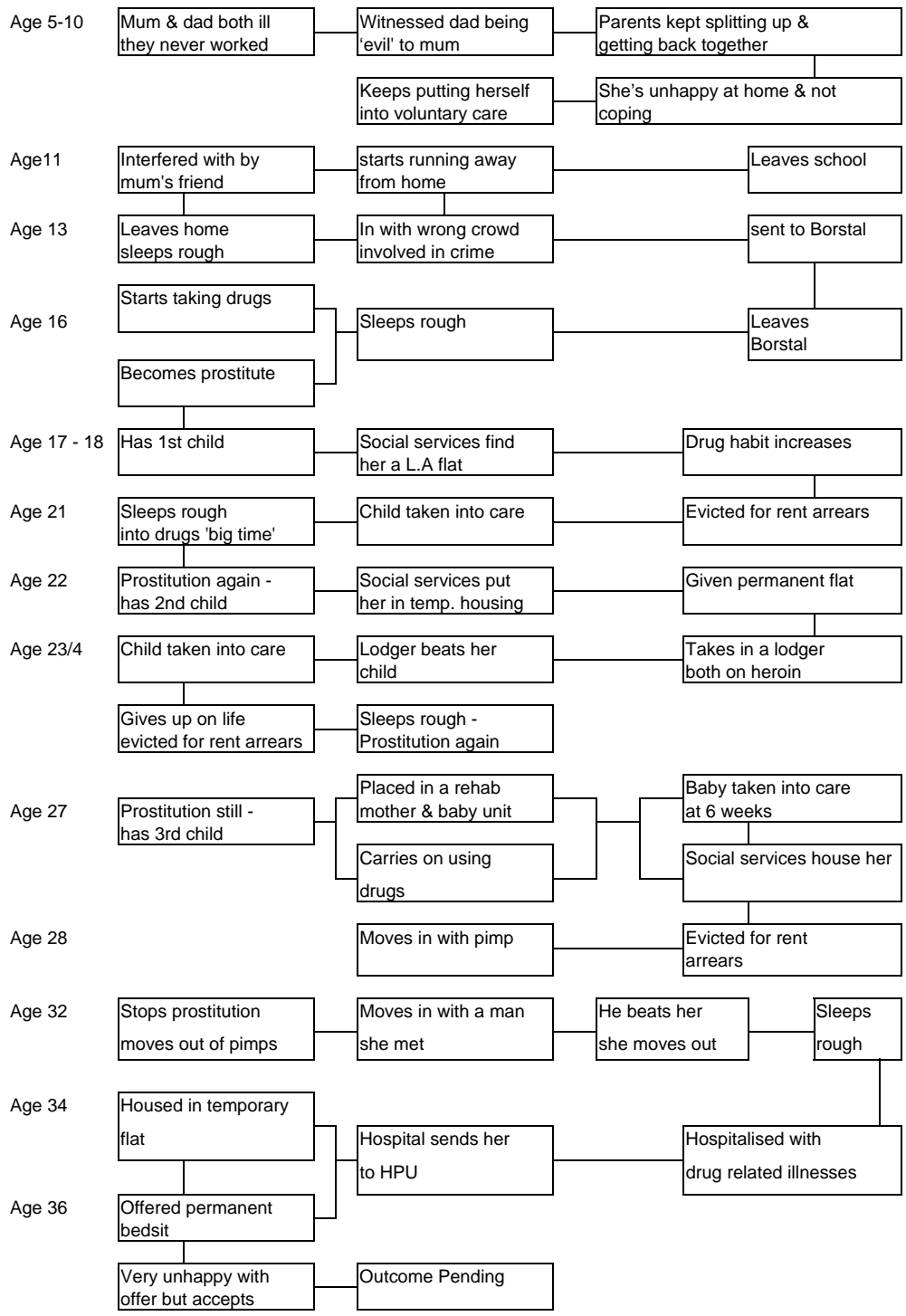
Step 7 - Interviewing

By using life story interviews, the intention was not to place too many preconceived ideas into the interview. Thus people were initially simply asked how they became homeless. This allowed the interviewee to talk about their own life events without too many superimposed facts. Probes for more information on specific topics such as experiences of schooling and parents employment were asked towards the end. These generated more information but also generated comparisons between this research and existing research.

This type of research meant that people rarely recounted events in true chronological order, they frequently skipped from one era to another and back as they recalled details on a thematic basis and/or as one memory triggered another. In an attempt to chronicle their life-stories, interviewees from the outset were asked to give some indication of the date, their age or some national event so as to give some idea of time-scale (Humphrey 1993; Brown 1990). This was later ordered into chronological order using life route-maps. These also served to give an idea of process over time.

Some researchers appear to fear this research method, noting that you can never get a persons' entire life history. But is that what is needed? Others find the research too subjective. But isn't all research subjective. The information gained from the research was influenced by the parameters set out at the beginning of the interview (e.g. Gardner 2001). Interviewees knew that the interview was a life-story, thereby indicating the amount of information required and the time-scale of events. They were asked to talk about how they became homeless, thus limiting their life to a specific context. People discussed events which they felt were pertinent to their route into, through and out of rooflessness. Life-story interviews are examples of (re)lived experiences through which people explained how they became roofless and the retrospective significance and meaning of events/actions either by them or affecting them. Moreover, contained in their explanations and interpretations of events and processes is vital information about how they perceive their situation and what is happening to them. These perceptions are an important part of understanding why existing services succeed or fail. It is for these reasons that Dixon (1998 in Jones 2001) argues that the combination of biography and theory makes both elements stronger especially when theory emerges from the lived experiences of groups of individuals.

Figure 2 Example of a route map, or time line
TESSA'S ROUTE-MAP



HPU = Homeless Persons Unit
 LA = Local Authority

The act of interviewing is an important part of the research. The art of interviewing, therefore, involved adopting a Goffman-style actors' role and learning and transmitting the rules of a game called interview that two actors were about to play. By playing the part of a confident competent researcher that had clearly been researching for years(!), the illusion was created of someone in control of the interview. This meant that the interviewee could relax in the safe knowledge that someone was in charge and play the role of information giver. The game continued. The researcher needed to communicate enough interest and understanding in what was being said to elicit detailed information, but not so much understanding that the interviewee assumed that a common set of meanings existed between the two. In this way the aim was to stimulate dialogue without impeding it. This was a lengthy game as interviews lasted at least an hour.

Step 8 - Method of Analysis

The method of analysis needs to be considered at research design stage. The method of analysis chosen affects the choice of research methods, the format of data gathered and the types of questions asked. The method of analysis used for this research followed a basic grounded theory analysis model (Kelle 1997; Straus and Corbin 1990; Glaser and Straus 1967). Qualitative data analysis is necessarily time consuming and labour intensive. It involves the systematic coding of the texts before analysis can begin and is the pre-requisite for systematic comparison between texts. The codes are initially used to identify specific segments of text on a thematic or topological basis. The texts are examined line-by-line for content and meaning and coded accordingly. This involves considerable time reading, re-reading, interpreting and later comparing similar texts. The comparison of texts within each theme or topic generates a second layer of codes that form the construction of basic concepts, types and categories. These become the basic building blocks of theories (Kelle 1997). Often there are several layers of codes that cause abstraction from the data and gradually build theories (e.g. Glaser 2002). In this research Atlas/ti (version 0.4) computer assisted qualitative analysis software was used. The codes were organised initially in hierarchical networks, then grouped into families based on themes. This acted as filtering mechanisms that facilitated simple code-and-retrieval of relevant texts for comparison. The definition of codes was recorded initially in an alphabetised notebook and finally within the Atlas/ti memo function. This built into the analysis an element of rigour and accuracy. As the coding progressed comments on the data and hypothesis were also recorded and linked to the data. The actual coding procedure followed 6 stages:

Table 3

Coding System

	Coding stage	Examples of Codes	Description and Use
Stage 1	Specific variables (attached to whole documents)	Age, gender, nationality, current housing status	Systematically comparing e.g. men with women or age groups
Stage 2	Thematic coding	Route in, Slept rough, Way out,	Broad categories that break the information into segments. These can be filtered so that, e.g. all coded information relating to routes in can be analysed
Stage 3	Coding paradigm/ heuristic concepts (applied to text)	Social class, education, institutionalisation, kinship networks	Using existing theoretical concepts to create a skeleton for further analysis
Stage 4	Code categories or indexing	Education: Qualifications, Hostel: conditions, Crass comments by officials,	Open codes (derived from commonsense knowledge) and in vivo codes (used by interviewees). These included subdivision of the initial coding paradigm
	First order constructions	Jungle drums (information passed on the street), Homeless peoples theories: advice to others	Theories of the members of the culture studied. Usually common sense knowledge known to its members. Coded using both open and in vivo codes
Stage 5	Typology building (the first stage of theory building)	Positive social networks, Negative social networks,	Codes were divided into, for example, negative vv positive attitudes or experiences
Stage 6	Concept formation (emerging theories)	Inverse hierarchies, Fright and flight, Victim-martyr, Copy cats	Labelling patterns of behaviour, stereotypes or processes.

Stage 1-3 involved pre-determined commonsense knowledge codes applied to the text (axial coding). Stages 4-6 involved generating codes directly from the content of the text (open coding; e.g. Kelle 1997). It was these stages that allowed new insights to emerge. The aim of the thesis was not to become too theoretical and so abstracted from the data that the day-to-day grim reality was lost in a conceptual discussion. One of the thesis' main findings was that homelessness is complex and its triggers and solutions are many and varied. Thus it would have been counterproductive to continue analysis and coding and to condense and theorise the issues into patterns and stereotypes. This would have rendered the data meaningless in this context.

In terms of time-scale, the act of initial coding (before analysis begins) took an average of 4 months for each source (documents, observations and life-story interviews). The analysis then took a further 4 months.

It is worth noting how easily this qualitative research could be used as a spring-board into the more qualitative research so often required by policy makers. All the initial observation and participant observation work could easily be used to prepare a survey style questionnaire. Existing surveys on homelessness appear to be based on existing research designed to either put statistics to known facts or to explore specific issues that funders, the voluntary sector or academics want researching. By using qualitative research and grounded theory in particular there is a whole range of issues unearthed that could now be included in surveys and quantified.

The information coded and placed in qualitative software packages can also be reused in quantitative analysis. The codes (both conceptual and theoretical) can be exported to SPSS for quantitative analysis. This means that the wordy answers given to open questions, which are normally so difficult to quantify can be coded and themed, then exported to SPSS for further analysis.

This entire research project raised particular issues in relation to:

- Life Story Interviews and
- Observation methods.

Life-Story Interviews

The life-story interview is a qualitative research method that uses face-to-face depth interviews to gain biographical retrospective and current information. It is usually recorded and analysed in a chronological format (e.g. Parry et al 1999). It is not a commonly used method within social policy or sociological research, for a variety of reasons including questions regarding the accuracy of the information gained. However, the accuracy of people's recollections has been shown to be reliable even after a substantial number of years have elapsed (Parry et al (1999). Chamberlayne et al (2000) argue that biographical interviews are a rich source of information from a historical, present-day, social policy and individual (agency) viewpoint. Furthermore, biographical-style research is useful when attempting to relate the personal to the social and structural (Giddens 1984) and generates insights both into social processes and the individuals understanding and reaction to those processes. It shows how these intersect and are mutually dependent. Life-stories are useful for understanding the choices that people make in the light of the constraints and assumptions placed on their lives (Chamberlayne et al 2000). For Thomas and Znaniecki (in Faraday and Plummer 1979) the life-story is the 'perfect type of sociological research'. They recognised that there are enormous problems with checking the validity of the information, and problems inherent with analysing a massive amount of material. However, they still conclude that if social scientists are to research any kind of happenings accurately, they need to take into account the life histories of those individuals involved.

The life-story method is also part of case study research, it is used to evaluate causes along side the effects of time (Robson 1993). In case-study research it becomes a useful tool for pattern-matching, looking for patterns that emerge and comparing them to those already in existence in the literature as a means of proving or disproving a theory. For May (1993) it is a means for exploring the 'truth', by finding out what people actually did and what actually happened instead of what experts think they did or think happened to them. By discussing how they felt at the time the interviewee can give 'personal meaning and value' to particular events or activities that may otherwise have been missed (May 1993).

The main criticism of life-story interviews and interviews in general is that people may lie or tell the interviewer part truths (e.g. Gardner 2001). Similarly by omitting details this may change the slant of the information gained. For Gardner (2001) this is because the interviewee may present a Goffman-style actors front-stage presentation of themselves. That is the interviewer sees the self that the interviewee wishes to be seen in public. This may be a sanitised good self, a victim-martyr self⁵ or a fictitious imaginary self. The interviewer rarely gets to see the backstage self with all its contradictions, unpleasantness and deepest insecurities (Gardner 2001). By recording 48 life-story interviews and at least 32 in-depth formal and informal interviews, the thesis aimed to get behind the presented persona to find a more

⁵ Short paper on theoretical perspectives – UK.

accurate picture of what the roofless process really meant for individuals. The aim of the research was to draw out dominant themes/topics that emerged from numerous accounts/sources of information. The replication of information given in life-stories and other interviews suggested that this information was more likely to be accurate. Furthermore, the thesis used observation and participant observations to capture some of those 'backstage' personas usually hidden in interview, thus facilitating a more reliable picture.

For Clifford and Marcus (1986) this would demonstrate that accounts could only ever be partial truths. However, it should be accepted that life-stories will always be biased and partial as memories are often repressed or merged with others (Parry et al 1999). People remember things that are of significance to them, many things are forgotten (Gardner 2001). The fact that events are merged or omitted does not necessarily mean that their experiences and interpretation of their life is any the less accurate (Hubbard 2000).

Observation and Participant Observation

The act of conducting observations is an important part of the research. The observations were covert. This meant that the researcher had to disappear within the scene so that they could see and observe without being seen. Although this was voyeuristic in style it was a useful way of gathering information about street life without influencing it by researcher presence.

Disappearing within the scene required staging another Goffman-style role. This included dressing appropriately for the scene and assuming a character (e.g. tourist, worker on a tea/lunch break, passenger waiting for a bus/train). By not drawing attention to their presence the researcher can move close enough to clearly hear conversations and watch actions and interactions without drawing attention to themselves or alerting people to the fact that they are being watched. The gaze becomes an important part of observation. If the aim of the observation is not to be noticed it is essential not to make eye contact or look directly at the people being observed. Furthermore, the researcher cannot make notes at the scene. Thus all observations need to be remembered and transcribed later. For critics of this form of grounded theory (e.g. Charmaz 2000) this style is too fuzzy and they prefer direct contact with people allowing questioning. For this purpose participant observations were used. Thus there was a combination of covert observation that allowed the researcher to simply see and observe and participant observation that allowed the researcher to observe again, but clarify some of the observations.

Participant observation allows the researcher to observe the actions, behaviour and language used by people in their natural setting. The researcher participates in the everyday life of people for a period of time. During this time they watch what is happening, listen to what is said, observe reactions and interactions, ask questions and generally collect whatever data is available that might shed light on the issue being researched (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). For May (1993) it is an inductive rather than a deductive method. That is, it allows ideas to emerge from the research, rather than superimposing existing theories and ideas on the subject and testing or validating them. Emerging ideas and theories can then be pursued in interviews. Conversely, Hammersley and Atkinson's (1983) note, the main criticism of this method is that it is highly subjective and rarely inductive as it is based on impressions of what is happening not rigorous analysis. Clifford and Marcus (1986) argue that this subjectivity is not weakness but strength. Rich descriptions and narratives on specific topics or time periods, form a bridge between branches of qualitative research and/or quantitative research.

Participant observation was a vital part of this research. A lot of information was gained from just spending time with homeless people, learning how they think and feel, how they interpret their world, what matters, what makes them laugh and what hurts. An important aim of the research was to ensure that the roofless were not devalued to the level of statistics or just another interview.

Part Four

The two research studies discussed in depth were produced separately by members of the Centre for Housing and Community Research Team. As can be seen from the description they involved very different decisions in relation to:

Setting (one area versus many)

Structure of the interview schedule (focussed versus life)

Selection of respondents (purposive versus comprehensive)

Analysis of text (thematic versus theoretical).

Follow-up studies: quantitative versus further qualitative.

Further differences in perspective will be explored in the Short Theory Paper

Joan Smith/ Megan Ravenhill. September 2004

REFERENCES

Alexander K and S Ruggieri, 1998, Changing Lives. Crisis. London

Alsop CK, 2002, 'Home and Away: Self-reflexive Auto-/Ethnography'. Forum: Qualitative Social Research. September 2002, Vol.3 No.3. Online Journal <http://qualitative-research.net/fqs>

Beck U, 1992, Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity. Sage. London

Berger J, 1972, Ways of Seeing. Penguin and British Broadcasting Corporation. London

Berger P and T Luckmann, 1967, The Social Construction of Reality. Penguin. London

Bruegel I and Smith J 1999 Taking Risks. An analysis of the risks of homelessness for young people in London. Published by Safe in the City (see www.safeinthecity.org)

Brown NR, 1990, 'Organisation of Public Events in Long-Term Memory'. Journal of Experimental Psychology. Vol.119 No.3 p297-314

Chamberlayne P, 2000, The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science: Comparative issues and examples. Routledge. London

Chamberlayne P, Rustin M and Wengraf T eds, 2002, Biography and Social Exclusion in Europe: Experiences and Life Journeys. Policy Press, Bristol.

Charmaz K, 2000, Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods. In Denzin N K and YS Lincoln Eds, Handbook of Qualitative Research. 2nd Edition. Sage. California

- Clifford J and GE Marcus, 1986, Eds. Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography. University of California Press. London
- Faraday A and Plummer K, 1979, 'Doing Life Histories'. Sociological Review. Vol. 27 No 4 1979 p773-798
- Fetterman DM, 1998, Step by Step. Applied Social Research Series Vol. 17. Sage: London
- Flick U, 2002, An Introduction to Qualitative Research, Sage, London, New York
- Finch J, 1989, Family Obligations and Social Change, Policy Press, Cambridge
- Finch J and Mason J (1993) Negotiating Family Responsibilities. Tavistock/Routledge, London
- Gardner G, 2001, 'Unreliable memories and other contingencies: problems with biographical knowledge'. Qualitative Research. Vol.1 No.2 August 2001 p185-204
- Giddens A, 1984, The Construction of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration. Polity Press. Cambridge.
- Giddens A, 1991, Modernity and Self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age. Polity Press. Cambridge
- Glaser BG and A Straus, 1967, The Discovery of Grounded Theory. Hawthorne. New York
- Glaser BG, 1998, Doing Grounded Theory: Issues and Discussions. Sociology Press. California
- Glaser BG, 2002, 'Constructivist Grounded Theory?' Forum: Qualitative Social Research. September 2002 Vol. 3 No.3. Online Journal <http://qualitative-research.net/fqs>
- Hammersley M and P Atkinson, 1983, Ethnography: Principles in Practice. Routledge. London
- Hodgson I, 2000, 'Ethnography and Health Care: Focus on Nursing. Forum: Qualitative Social Research. January 2000 Vol. 1 No.1. Online Journal <http://qualitative-research.net/fqs>
- Hubbard G, 2000, 'The Usefulness of Indepth Life History Interviews for Exploring the Role of Social Structure and Human Agency in Youth Transitions' Sociological Research Online. Vol.4 No.4. www.socresonline.org.uk
- Humphrey R, 1993, 'Life Stories and Social Careers: Ageing and social life in an ex-mining town'. Sociology. Vol.27 No.1 p166-178
- Jessor R, A Colby & RA Sweder, 1996, Ethnography and Human Development: Context and Meaning in Social Inquiry. University of Chicago Press

- Kelle U, 1997, 'Theory Building in Qualitative Research and Computer Programs for the Management of Textual Data'. Sociological Research Online. Vol.2 No.2. www.socresonline.org.uk
- May T, 1993, Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process. 2nd Edition. Open University Press. Buckingham
- Miles M.B. and Huberman A.M., 1994, Qualitative Data Analysis. A sourcebook of New Methods. (2nd Edition) Sage
- Parry O, C Thomson and G Fowkes, 1999, 'Life Course Data Collection: Qualitative Interviewing using the Life Grid'. Sociological Research Online. Vol.4 No.2. www.socresonline.org.uk
- Robson C, 1993, Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers. Blackwell. Oxford
- Smith J, Gilford S and O'Sullivan A (1998) The Family Background of Young Homeless People. Family Policy Studies Centre, London, and Joseph Rowntree Foundation. York. UK
- Smith J (2000) Routes In and Out of Homelessness: Informing a Youth Homeless Strategy for Birmingham, Centre for Housing and Community Research, Staffordshire University.
- Smith J, Ing P, and Ing M (2001) Making Youth Homelessness Visible Centre for Housing and Community Research, Staffordshire University.
- Smith J. (2003) Who is at risk of homelessness in North Staffordshire? A study of young homeless people and their pasts. Centre for Housing and Community Research, Staffordshire University.
- Straus A and Corbin J, 1990, Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques. Sage, USA
- Tyler S, 1986, 'Post-modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document'. In Clifford J and GE Marcus, 1986, Eds. Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography. University of California Press. London
- Wengraf T, 2001, Qualitative Research Interviewing, Sage Publications.