

Case Study Methodology and Homelessness Research

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the potential suitability of case study methodology for inquiry with the homeless population. It references a research study that uses case study research method to build theory. This study's topic is the lived experience of destitute individuals who reside in homeless shelters, and explores the homeless shelter built environment's potential influence on resident satisfaction and recovery. Case study methodology may be appropriate because it explores real-life contextual issues that characterize homelessness and can also accommodate the wide range of homeless person demographics that make this group difficult to study in a generalized fashion. Further, case study method accommodates the need within research in this area to understand individualized treatments as a potential solution for homelessness.

Keywords: Case study method, Homelessness, Homeless families, Homeless shelters, Interior design, Environmental behavior, Pattern matching.

This paper discusses a positive application of case study research methodology and advocates for its use with a specific population—the homeless. While not as ubiquitous as experimental or quasi-experimental approaches to discovery, advocates of case study method suggest there are benefits to this method that typically explores small sample size populations in a deep fashion. This paper will discuss some of these benefits and use an existing case study research project as an exemplar.

1. CONTEXT

There are many different goals of research studies. Some seek to test hypotheses that have been previously developed. Another worthy goal of research, particularly in areas that have not been studied thoroughly, is to develop preliminary theories of how a process or situation might be working so that these ideas might be later tested for their validity. This paper discusses a study that has such a goal of generating theory. Such studies are often called “plausibility probes” [1, p. 350] and can use qualitative or quantitative techniques of information gathering, or a mixture of both of these tactics.

Specifically, this study addressed the applied translation and testing of environmental psychological theory to tangible built space that people inhabit—in this case, homeless shelters. The study explored the potential for supportive architecture to counter adverse effects associated with the sense of helplessness that often accompanies homeless persons. This feeling of helplessness can hinder their ability to find permanent

employment and a stable place to live. The study also springs from existing homeless shelter conditions that are often crowded, lack privacy and may suppress the natural sense of personal control that can aggravate pre-existing feelings of hopelessness. See Figure 1.

The idea of personal control from the psychology field influenced the focus of this study. A sense of personal control over one's life experience may be very important, as researchers generally agree that this feeling is central to self-worth [2, 3]. A sense of personal control “may serve to alter an individual's expectations about the value of voluntary responses and to influence one's self-perceptions as a competent human being” [3, p. 222]. Somewhat less researched is the built environment's role in supporting or suppressing this sense of personal control. Researchers have described that there are no lack of environmental psychology studies, but little work has been done that specifically explores how people use architectural design to cope with less-than-ideal living conditions, including how personal control may come into play [4].

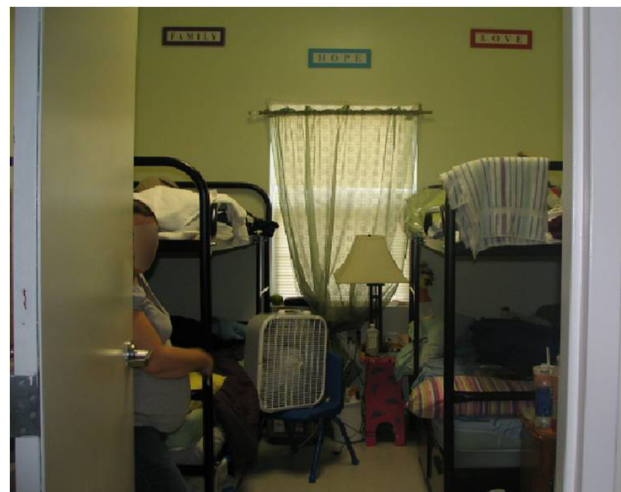


Figure 1. A typical 9' x 12' bedroom for a family of four living in a homeless shelter. Length of occupancy can range from 3 months to a year.

Nonetheless, such studies may be important. For example, some researchers suggest a connection, even identifying that providing people a sense of personal control over their near environment (such as with privacy draperies, a lighting fixture to read by, or other features) may help them better cope with other common undesirable problems, such as small room square

footages that can prompt a feeling of crowding [5]. This and other similar connections between the built environment and sense of control may be a helpful tool in helping designers to understand how to build homeless shelters that help people heal faster. Doing so could assist homeless persons in a moment of particular chaos—when they literally do not have a roof overhead to sleep under or call home.

There may be another payoff for building homeless shelters more thoughtfully with regard to personal control features. One researcher connects the sense of personal control to one's ability to successfully find housing and permanent employment, which in turn are key to helping a person escape homelessness altogether [6]. Burn puts this equation in perspective, stating "...before we can realistically expect homeless people to keep trying to change their life situations, we may need to change the design of homeless shelters and increase the probability that their efforts to find housing and employment will be successful [6, p. 1172].

In summation, the study that serves as the topic of this paper sought to respond to the call for new treatments that use architecture as a healing tool. Doing so may address what one homelessness expert described as "perhaps the most important new frontier in research on the homeless... the identification and evaluation of effective interventions" [7, p. 128].

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The study altered a homeless shelter bedroom, adding environmentally intimate control features such as personal ventilation fans, radios and bed draperies for individual family users. See Figure 2. The researcher then interviewed the resident (a single mother with two children) about her experience with the room, and her perceptions of the room's usefulness and associated emotional qualities. This discovery was coupled with quantitative questionnaire measures and photo-documentation by both the mother and the researcher at various intervals. A second mother with two children who resided in an unaltered bedroom was also queried. The study's comparison was not between the two families, but rather, each family's unique experience was compared to what was expected based on psychological research. In this way, the study adopts what is called a pattern matching approach [8].

3. CASE STUDY METHOD FOR HOMELESSNESS INQUIRY

Case study method and its qualitative approaches may be particularly suited to understanding perceptions and influences affecting homeless persons for a variety of reasons. Indeed, a number of researchers have selected case study methods for their studies in this arena. For example, Hill used ethnographic case study to explore the meaning of home to homeless women [9] and Niemeyer used case study to explore the meaning of place with homeless shelter residents who moved from one shelter location to another [10]. There are a number of reasons why case study research methods may be particularly helpful to exploring issues of homelessness. Six of these reasons are discussed below.

First, case study method is suited to explore a "contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" [11, p.13].



Figure 2. The improved family bedroom within a shelter used in the study. The added privacy drapery, shelving, bulletin boards, marker board, personal fan, clock radio and personal lighting are shown.

In the case of this study, for example, it is difficult to untangle specific aspects of human-built space effects from many possible variables. That is, there may be many reasons why homeless persons do not feel empowered that do not involve the built environment. The question here, however, was whether an altered shelter personal environment can be assistive toward empowerment while allowing other factors to simultaneously exist. This speaks to the heart of architectural inquiry and theory building that holds inseparable the complexity of the human contextual relationship to inhabited built space. Simultaneously, examining the 'squishy' contextual factors of homeless persons' experience echoes homeless experts' stated need for a broader, ecological perspective in research methodologies and questions that can "consider both social and other contextual factors, in addition to individual vulnerabilities, when developing interventions" [12, p. 129].

Conversely, an experimental research approach for this project would have been difficult, as it would require management of the many potential variables at play. It is also difficult to address potential causality connections between homelessness and other related factors. Regrettably, it's challenging to examine the causes or consequences of homelessness in an experimental/causality fashion because

1. One cannot randomly assign persons to homelessness; and,

2. One cannot assign supporting factors such as poverty, substance abuse) that might cause it.

Instead, correlational methods must usually be relied on to "understand the important questions" about homelessness [7, p.

127]. Such goals are often in alignment with case study methods.

Secondly, researchers generally agree that compromised populations such as the homeless are prone to alter their responses in research study data collection, as these persons may sense their access to programs and services may be adversely affected unless they answer in a way that may satisfy researchers. This issue can manifest itself as misinformation, evasions, outright lies or fronts [13]. Thus, case study's allowance for mixed methods that encourage crosscheck triangulation can facilitate "a crucial combination of the cooperative and investigative methods" [13, p. 56]. This study triangulated its data gathering methods through quantitative and qualitative questionnaire, observation, environmental photography and interview.

Third, case study methods permit a focus on literature-supported *a priori* research questions of an exploratory nature that may lead to the development of foundational theory. As previous literature on the impacts of personal environmental control features specifically in shelter environments is scarce, this study's case study method permitted and in fact encouraged findings that could not have been anticipated, and that emerged naturally from its inquiry. Some of these findings potentially proved to be among the most important of the study.

Fourth, there are many different subgroups within the homeless population that can vary widely in their perceptions, concerns and needs. Indeed, the umbrella term "the homeless" includes such disparate categories as families with children, destitute veterans and AIDS survivors [14]. Case study methods' specific approaches can help address unique circumstances, teasing out specific discovery with finesse. In actuality, the ability to detect specific needs of niche user groups is precisely what is required in homelessness research at present. Uncovering this differentiated information can both help improve the services offered to the various groups of homeless individuals and also determine if the causes of homelessness are changing over time [14].

Fifth, a case study method permits in-depth, extended engagement with individuals, which may have extended advantages. As Gerring explains, there may be micro-macro links in social behavior. That is, there are times when "in-depth knowledge of an individual example is more helpful than fleeting knowledge about a larger number of examples. We gain better understanding of the whole by focusing on a key part" [1, p. 1]. Indeed, pursuing discovery at the intimate level of individual persons fulfills the need identified by homelessness experts for "...interventions...at multiple levels of analysis, from *individually-focused treatment* to large-scale social policy" [italics added] [7, p. 129].

Sixth, applied inquiry that explores what happens when built space is constructed and inhabited is inherently expensive -- and naturally limits the study's sample size that can be observed and queried. For example, this study required \$8000 of construction funds to install 20 new features such as built in shelving, lighting, personal ventilation fans, radios and enhanced storage within a single homeless shelter family bedroom. This financial state of affairs supports case study methods that celebrate the advantage of single or small sample sizes that can be feasibly studied within these small-scope facilities.

4. STUDY CONCLUSIONS

The homeless shelter research study described here facilitated a number of emergent conclusions, and some of the most important of these were not anticipated at the outset. This helped established theory that might be pursued further in later studies that would serve to validate these ideas appropriately:

- Crowded, low-control family bedrooms in the transitional shelter can compel teenage children to spend as much time as possible away from the shelter campus. This is likely not conducive to healing, but rather to scattering of the family, and with it the potential for unfavorable outside influences that may impede children's positive development.
- Parents reported that their children misbehaved more in the unaltered shelter bedroom than in the altered room with the added personal control features. This suggests that such features may stimulate and engage children more fully, providing further interest that is beneficial to their mental growth. See Figure 3.



Figure 3. A child living in the study's unimproved bedroom reportedly got into trouble more often, potentially because there were fewer acceptable opportunities for stimulation than in the altered bedroom.

- The altered bedroom reportedly provided the single parent with the means to exert enhanced authoritative control over her children, primarily through her ability to withhold 'fun' privileges within the room. The mother's sense of control over her near environment may have served to enhance her self-perception of empowerment at a time when parents often feel ashamed of their circumstances with regard to their children.
- The mother and children in the altered room exhibited territorial behavior such as space claiming and boundary setting whereas the family in the unaltered room did not. Researchers suggest that territorial behavior is linked to a sense of personal control and is thus a positive quality. See Figure 4.



Figure 4. Example of territorial behavior shown by a child inhabiting the study's altered bedroom.

In summation, this research study, aided through its use of case study methodology, revealed potentially key points for homeless shelter environments and links between built space and sense of personal control. Further follow up of these ideas may lead to guidelines for future shelters that provide enhanced comfort to homeless persons at a time of particular crisis in their lives. In short, it made sense to start with small samples to determine potential foundation-level theory that case study makes possible, then build on these initial findings through subsequent studies. The flexibility and usefulness of the case study method was central to the study's outcomes, and more broadly for investigation of issues concerning this compromised population.

5. REFERENCES

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