



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

Changing Families,
Changing Food.

Photograph: © Alex Morrice (www.morrice.info)

ABERDEEN PUBLIC SOUP KITCHEN

(No) family (No) food

Researchers

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Summary

The project explored the ways in which food is used by both homeless people and their carers to construct fictive kin and family relationships. The project drew upon earlier research (Smith, 1997) which indicated that discourses about food and feeding amongst both staff and homeless were underpinned by a number of

ideological perspectives, including those that were reminiscent of earlier formulations of the deserving poor, the family as a shelter in a hostile world, food as charity, as well as more recent developments, including the provision of food as dividing professional bodies from clients' bodies.

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The Leverhulme Trust

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Research questions

- What are the connections between food, family and ideology (including body/self image and charity) in the narrated memories of homeless people and voluntary workers and paid staff in a homeless charity?
- What role do constructions of food and family play in the relationships between homeless people and staff and volunteers in a homeless charity?
- What changes can the research identify in such constructions?

Research design

The project collected and analysed life history and semi-structured interviews with homeless men and their carers in a national voluntary organisation, as well as re-analysing an earlier and similar set of interviews from a project conducted in the mid-1990s.



Key findings

- While the life stories of homeless people are often marked by despair, on closer examination there is evidence that the integrity of their life stories is often a source of pride. Integrity seems to be achieved by the emphasis placed on the ways in which their lives are led as autonomous individuals. This is a somewhat surprising finding given that through theories of human development despair and integrity are normally posited as opposites.
- Our research recognises that the experiences of being homeless in Britain have changed in the last decade, with major policy developments reshaping homelessness. However, there are continuities in the relationships between homeless people and residential care and resettlement staff. This includes close relationships between staff and older, long-term homeless men in particular.
- We have explored the complexities of care and resettlement in a supported housing setting and focused on how support is given by staff to residents and between residents. Significant networks of care, fictive familial relationships and dynamics of power and vulnerabilities have been identified. It would seem that bonds of care are constructed by recreating an ideal 'family' and 'home', with the formation of fictive 'families', 'home' cooking, and a 'homely' atmosphere all important in making such bonds. The preparation and serving of food in this context has ideological, idealistic implications, as well as playing an important part in reproducing familial-like relationships. The family structure of mother, father and children are replicated with peers and staff, which is interesting considering that residents and some staff describe their own familial backgrounds as risky and even dangerous.

Publications

Smith G, Nicolson P and Brown R (2009) Food and family in the narratives of homeless people, in P Jackson ed. *Changing families, changing food*. Palgrave-Macmillan, in press.

Smith G, Nicolson P and Brown R (forthcoming) Despair or integrity? Older homeless men's accounts of their emotional trajectories from social psychology and oral history perspectives, *British Journal of Social Psychology*.