

**Social Networks in Homeless Mothers' Lives**  
Experiences of Conducting a Network Support  
Group in an Emergency Night Shelter

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<p>This study focuses on the network-building possibilities for homeless mothers living in an emergency night shelter in the metropolitan Atlanta area, Georgia (USA). The goal of this study is to examine the mothers' perceptions about networks and network-building as well as assess the network support group process and its possibilities to enhance the network-building of homeless mothers.</p> <p>The study has been conducted by utilizing an ethnographic approach. The data consists of observations of a network support group of homeless mothers as well as individual interviews with selected research participants at the emergency night shelter.</p> <p>The findings illustrate that the complex nature of homelessness considerably affects to a family's life situation including their social networks. Homelessness narrows possibilities and limits time and space to foster and build networks. Even though previous research addresses that networks provide support as well as aid families to escape poverty, the findings of this study indicate the challenges of maintaining and building these networks when experiencing homelessness.</p> <p>Due to the complexity of homelessness, this study stresses that various economical and social challenges that homeless families are facing in their lives should be addressed as a whole. This study suggests that one of the most promising ways to enhance the mothers network-building is to aid families to achieve a more stable life situation. In essence, developing effective social work practices for homeless families requires a holistic perspective to homelessness as well as collaboration of multiple agencies and individuals.</p>			
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# 1 Introduction

In my research, I focus on network-building possibilities for homeless mothers living at Hagar's House emergency night shelter and assessment center, in the metropolitan Atlanta area in Decatur (Georgia), in the United States. Social networks are not only important when considering social support but they can also help mothers to gain access to housing and jobs. Overall, these networks may help them to achieve a more stable life situation. When looking at the client cases where mothers have managed to find a job or/and housing during their time at the shelter, many of them had found these opportunities through various networks. The observation encouraged focus on the enhancement of network-building possibilities for women. Nonetheless, this research indicates the complexity of social networks and barriers concerning network-building of homeless mothers. I argue that the complex nature of homelessness has substantial effects to a family's life situation including their social networks. In essence, homelessness narrows possibilities and limits time and space to foster and build networks that could help the mothers to escape the situation. Therefore, I maintain that effective social work practice involves a holistic perspective to the families' economical and social challenges.

The objective of social work practice research is to build theory from practice and to use that information to improve social work practices. The approach combines research methodology, field research and practical experience. (Uggerhøj 2011, 45.) Besides the practical orientation, another important character of practice research is clients' and practitioners' mutual participation in the research process. In this research, in addition to me as a researcher, other participants included the Hagar's House program manager and the mothers living at the shelter. The research material contains an observation of a mothers' a

network support group and interviews of one client and the program manager. Furthermore, this research illustrates the challenges of enhancing the participation of social work service users that are experiencing a crisis situation. The research consists of five chapters. In the second chapter, I will describe the research environment, Hagar's House emergency night shelter and assessment center. In the third chapter, I will examine previous research and define my research objectives and questions. The fourth chapter focuses on the research process. First, I will discuss the process of defining the topic, and secondly, describe my research methods. In the fifth chapter I will analyze my research results. The discussion concentrates on mothers' perspectives concerning networks and network-building, as well as the assessment of the group work. In the sixth chapter, I will present my conclusions.

## **2 Hagar’s House Emergency Night Shelter and Assessment Center**

### **2.1 Decatur Cooperative Ministry**

Hagar’s House is part of a faith-based nonprofit organization called Decatur Cooperative Ministry (DCM). DCM helps families facing homelessness “to settle into safe, stable homes and build healthy lives filled with peace, hope and opportunity”. DCM was founded in 1969 and has been one of the most active organizations aiding homeless people in DeKalb County and metro Atlanta. The organization grew out of a partnership between the principal of Clairemont Elementary School and three churches in Decatur. Their mutual goal was to address community concerns for children who did not have after-school care. During its first decade, the ministry coordinated the services provided by local churches, identified gaps, and started programs to address these issues. It functioned as a “seed-planting” organization, and once programs were self-sufficient, DCM launched them into independent programs or agencies.<sup>1</sup>

Over the years the organization grew, in the early 1980s, DCM changed its model and began to create and nurture programs geared toward preventing and alleviating homelessness. DCM created three such programs between 1983 and 1990, including its current transitional housing, the shelter, and the homelessness prevention program. Currently, in addition to Hagar’s House shelter, DCM hosts Project Take Charge and Family House, as well as collaborates with Siemer Family Stability Initiative. The Project Take Charge is a homelessness prevention program that provides emergency assistance with rent, mortgage, utilities, and food, as well as case management and financial education. The program serves DeKalb County residents who are at risk of eviction, foreclosure, or disconnection of utility

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.deaturcooperativeministry.org/html/programs.php>

service. The program also provides food through a food pantry and operates two food cooperatives to offer permanent food security to selected low-income households. The Family House program provides housing and support services to move families from homelessness to self-reliance in about 6 months. The program uses single-family houses and apartments throughout DeKalb County. The program is available to both single- and two-parent families, including hard-to-place families, for example, those headed by single fathers or with teenage boys.<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to the collaboration with other organizations, one of the most important partners is the Siemer Family Foundation that has established the Family Stability Initiative (FSI). FSI was developed to help reduce student mobility and increase academic success, and focuses on improving long-term housing and economic stability for families at-risk of homelessness.<sup>3</sup> Currently, DCM partners with several congregations from different denominations, private foundations, universities and schools, government agencies, community groups, the United Way: a national system of volunteers, contributors, local charities helping people in their own communities, The Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), as well as local businesses.

## **2.2 The functions of shelter**

Hagar's House is an emergency night shelter that hosts approximately five to seven families at a time. Residents are limited to mothers with children. Families are usually female-headed and have approximately 3-5 children. Children's ages vary from 0 to 18, and include boys and girls. Hagar's House is the only shelter in the area that hosts teenage boys. Principally, all five

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.decaturoperativeministry.org/html/programs.php>

<sup>3</sup> <http://familystability.org/about-us/about-us>

families get an own room. However, in the case there are small families (1 to 2 children), families might need to share a room with another small family. Families can be from a different city, county, state, or country. The shelter program is designed to provide 30 to 90 days nights of shelter, breakfasts and dinners, case management, and additional services depending upon the extent and expertise of volunteer and collaborative support. Families must be off the premises by 7:30 a.m. on weekdays, by 9:30 a.m. on Saturday, and 8:30 a.m. on Sunday. During the day, mothers are expected to work, look for work or participate in training, while children are expected to attend the day care or the school.

Currently, the staff consists of the program manager and two overnight staff persons, one for weekdays and another for weekends. Otherwise, the shelter is assisted by volunteer support. For instance, all household items and furniture are donated. Every night, a dinner group will cook and serve a dinner for families at the shelter. Volunteers also aid with childcare and offer homework help. Additionally, depending on the professions of volunteers, they may offer special services. For example, some volunteers have offered assistance with job search and finding housing, as well as medical and psychosocial services.

### 3 Previous research of family homelessness and the research objectives

#### 3.1 Family homelessness in the United States

When it comes to the overall situation of homelessness in the U.S, according to the 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 610,042 people were homeless on a given night<sup>4</sup>. Most (65 percent) were living in emergency shelters or transitional housing programs and 35 percent were living in unsheltered locations. Moreover, homelessness has declined by almost 4 percent (or 23,740 people) between 2012 and 2013, and by 9 percent (or 61,846) since 2007.<sup>5</sup> According to the findings from the Volume I of the 2012 Annual Homeless Assessment Report, Georgia was one of the five states that accounted for nearly half of the nation's total homeless population: California (20.7 percent), New York (11.0 percent), Florida (8.7 percent), Texas (5.4 percent), and Georgia (3.2 percent).<sup>6</sup> It also needs to be noted that homelessness disproportionately affects minorities. In 2009, of all sheltered homeless persons 38.1 percent were White (Non-Hispanic), 11.6 percent White (Hispanic), and 38.7 percent Black or African American<sup>7</sup>.

When it comes particularly to family homelessness, on a single night in January 2013, there were 222,197 homeless people in 70,960 families, representing 36 percent of all homeless people on a single night. Moreover, people in families comprised nearly 50 percent of the total sheltered homeless population, and nearly one-quarter (23 percent or 138,149) of

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<sup>4</sup> In 2013, the population of the United States was 316,148,990. US Census Bureau. <http://www.census.gov/popclock/>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.onecpd.info/resources/documents/AHAR-2013-Part1.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.onecpd.info/resources/documents/2012AHAR\\_PITEstimates.pdf](https://www.onecpd.info/resources/documents/2012AHAR_PITEstimates.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Of the 2008 U.S. Population, 65.4 percent were White (Non-Hispanic), 9.6 percent White (Hispanic), and 12.4 percent Black or African American.

<http://www.huduser.org/portal/publications/pdf/5thHomelessAssessmentReport.pdf>

all homeless people were children, under the age of 18. Ten percent (or 61,541) were between the ages of 18 and 24, and 67 percent (or 410,352) were 25 years or older. Nonetheless, people in families were much more likely to be sheltered (86 percent) than unsheltered (14 percent). Furthermore, since 2012 the number of homeless people in families has declined by 7 percent (17,206 people) and the number of family households declined by 6,197 households or 8 percent. According to the report, the decline in the number of unsheltered people in families is entirely responsible for the overall decline. In 2012, the number of unsheltered people in families decreased by 37 percent (or 17,781 people). Since 2011 (the last mandatory unsheltered count), the number of unsheltered people in families declined by 38 percent or 19,073 people.<sup>8</sup>

When in Nordic countries the government benefits contain numerous life areas and situations that prevent people from falling, for example in homelessness, in the U.S. there are considerably less preventive policies. In his classical study, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (1990), Gøsta Esping-Andersen examines three main welfare regimes in advanced capitalist democracies through their arrangements between state, market and the family. He states that the first model, the “liberal” welfare state is typical for example for the U.S, Australia and Canada. According to Esping-Andersen, the liberal model associates with means-tested assistance, and modest universal transfers and social-insurance plans. He addresses that the progress of social reform has been connected to traditional, liberal and work-ethic norms, which have created strict entitlement rules that are often associated with stigma. Moreover, he argues that benefits are typically modest in this model. (1990, 26-27.)

Therefore, compared to Nordic countries, it is relatively easy to end up being homeless in the U.S. In the clients’ stories there recur similar, but ordinary challenges that numerous

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.onecpd.info/resources/documents/AHAR-2013-Part1.pdf>

people face in their lives, e.g. unemployment, health problems, divorce and challenges in the family relationships. Moreover, escaping homelessness and achieving stable housing is very challenging after a homeless period. Homeless families may have harder time finding employment and may either or both face tenant barriers and prejudices from potential tenants when looking for housing. Additionally, shelters are mainly supposed to act as a short-term solution, and it is expected that the family will use their shelter time to find and access needed resources and services to get back into housing (DeOllos 1997). However, in several cases families need to move from one shelter to another. Additionally, if succeeded in achieving more permanent housing, it is unsure whether the family is financially able to maintain the housing. For example, unfortunates in employment or health may cause severe financial difficulties, and the family might end up losing the housing again.

### **3.2 Social networks in homeless families' lives in the United States**

Social support networks may provide a safety net for families at risk of becoming homeless, and consequently help to maintain these families permanently housed (McChesney 1992). Moreover, support provided by family, friends, and social service agencies may be crucial in aiding homeless families' return to self-sufficiency (Leticq, Anderson, and Koblinsky 1996). In this chapter, I will reflect the program manager's experience on the existing literature regarding networks in homeless families' lives. First, I will focus on the characters of the social support systems of homeless families. Second, I will concentrate on cases, where during their time at the shelter families have managed to build new networks; families either had connections to the community or built relationships with other clients. Third, I will

discuss about family reunification as well as those families' cases that have had strong support system.

When I interviewed the program manager, according to her experience, clients seldom have a strong social support networks, or in her words, "social support system". She emphasized that clients may have patterns that tend to be generational, and therefore, challenging to break. Sometimes the program manager has served a family with a mom, the daughter and her children. Many of the clients have had challenges in their childhood; for example, they might have been in foster care placement, experienced poverty or homelessness. Furthermore, according to the manager, their parents might currently be in a difficult life situation. Therefore, clients' families might not be in a position to help the mothers financially, for instance offering them housing or money. Moreover, in some cases, they are not able to offer them social support due to a difficult life situation that they're going through themselves. Additionally, according to the program manager's experience, in several cases family relationships are fragmented. In these situations, families might not keep in touch or know about each other's situations.

When I compare the program manager's experience about the characters of the families' social support networks to previous research, they are mostly consistent. However, some research indicates opposite results. According to Letiecq's, Anderson's, and Koblinsky's findings, homeless mothers had less contact with friends and relatives on a weekly basis compared to housed mothers. Moreover, homeless mothers had significantly fewer people they could count on for help and had significantly fewer people who would be able to aid them with child care (1996, 268). The results revealed that the more time mothers had spent homeless and the less time they resided in their current shelter or temporary residence, the

less help they received from their support network (271). Letiecq's and others' study was conducted in the Baltimore-Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Also Zugazaga (2008) found similar results in her study concerning homeless single men, single women, and women with children in Florida. According to Zugazaga, the results indicated the more social supports homeless person had, the fewer homeless episodes they experienced. Therefore, she emphasizes the importance to develop ways to strengthen existing social supports or to establish alternative social support networks.

Bassuk and Buckner (1997) pay attention to childhood predictors, independent risk factors, and protective factors of family homelessness. According to their results, childhood predictors of family homelessness include foster care placement and a mother's use of drugs. Independent risk factors in adulthood included minority status, recent move to the area, recent eviction, interpersonal conflict, frequent alcohol or heroin use, and recent hospitalization for a mental health problem. Protective factors include being a primary tenant, receiving cash assistance or a housing subsidy, graduating from high school, and having a larger social network. Consequently, various factors presented in Bassuk's and Buckner's study are consistent with the program manager's perceptions.

In turn, the results from Shinn's, Knickman's, and Weitzman's (1991) study conducted in New York City held adverse implications. According to them, compared to housed mothers homeless mothers were more likely to have had recent contact with parents, other relatives, and friends. However homeless mothers felt they benefited less from their networks regarding their housing needs. The researchers state that more than three-fourths of families seeking shelter had already stayed with members of their social network in the past year. Moreover, according to the results, the mothers had used up potential sources of support before turning

to public shelter. In addition, Goodman's (1991) research that centers in two New England cities indicates that except in network orientation, which differed substantially between the two groups, there were no differences between the housed and homeless respondents on any of the social support variables. By network orientation Goodman describes the degree to which respondents expressed trust in their social networks. Based on her results, Goodman states that social isolation may reflect more a consequence than a cause of family homelessness.

When it came to building new networks, according to the program manager, some mothers who have not had strong family connections have been able to reach out to community and build new relationships and friendships. For example, one client had connected with a local church and stayed connected with it after her stay at the shelter. However, she was not able to escape homelessness and ended up coming back to the shelter later. Besides, some mothers have connected and stayed in touch with each other after their time at the shelter. However, they also have not been able to escape homelessness and had to return to the shelter. When I compare these experiences to previous research, according to Cook-Craig' and Koehly's (2011) findings concerning social support networks of homeless families living in a shelter, mothers' informal (bonding) ties tended to be named only a single time, which indicated that the relationships were relatively short. Examples of these relationships were, for example, ones made with the shelter staff and volunteers in the churches. These results are consistent with the program manager's experience.

Last, the program manager highlighted that she aims to enhance family reunification every time it is possible. However, sometimes mothers' families have been unwilling to connect with them due to various social reasons, for example shame. According to the

manager's experience, approximately 1/10 of mothers have strong social support system and good family connections that can help them in a positive way. On the opposite end, occasionally family connections might be harmful for the clients. For instance, mothers' families might have substance abuse problems that can affect women and their families' well-being. When it comes to the cases where mothers have had strong and helpful family connections or they have succeeded in reunification with their families, according to the manager's experience, they have been able to move on very well in their lives. For example, in certain cases siblings have combined resources that have helped every sibling's situation. However, in some cases sticking together has been challenging. Nonetheless, in the cases siblings have stuck together, according to the program manager's experience, the cooperation has been valuable. In some cases, mothers and grandmothers have been very helpful to women regarding both financial aid and social support. Moreover, some mothers have been married or have boyfriends. According to the program manager's experience, the women who have been married and then moved out from the shelter have been able to move on well. When it comes to boyfriends, situations have varied. For example, some mothers at the group expressed that their boyfriends have offered mainly emotional support.

In their research, Cook-Craig and Koehly (2011) emphasize that especially informal networks provided valuable and stable support to families in their challenging life situation and aided them to move towards more established living. According to Cook-Craig and Koehly, the mothers who participated in their research received support from a variety of individuals during their shelter stay, but the most of the relationships existed before they entered the program. Therefore, they address the importance of examining the ways in which these networks can be sustained, supported, or revitalized in case the networks include people

to whom homeless mothers will likely return for support after they have entered a shelter. Nonetheless, Cook-Craig and Koehly do not discuss the situations where families did not have social support networks available. Indeed, as the program manager illustrated, this is the case with the majority of the shelter clients at this shelter, and applies to the current clients too. Many of the mothers have moved to Decatur from another city, state, county or country. Therefore, many of them do not have family, relatives or friends living in the area that could support them in the stressful life situation they are going through. In several cases, their previous networks are fragmented. Particularly, network-building can be challenging to foreign clients. Thus, my research objective is to discuss the ways to broaden homeless mothers' networks and enhance their network-building.

### **3.3 Research questions**

In my research, my aim is to examine the mothers' perceptions about networks and network-building as well as to assess the group process. Moreover, I will assess if the group sessions could be effective when it comes to enhancing the network-building of mothers living at Hagar's House. My research questions are: 1) How do the mothers living at Hagar's House perceive networks and network-building in their lives? 2) How can a network support group aid in enhancing homeless mothers' network-building?

## **4 Research process**

### **4.1. Defining the research objective**

The idea about researching networks rose from an experience of a current challenge regarding networks and network-building of the shelter clients, in particular, foreign clients. However, the approach narrowed along the research process. During the research process, I discussed with the program manager and the clients about their perspectives, needs and wishes about network-building that helped me to define further my research objective. According to my first research plan, my aim was to collect information of various formal networks in Decatur and Atlanta area that could support families living in Hagar's House and help them to integrate into the community. These networks could be for example churches, organized communities, groups or other non-profit organizations. Within this plan, my intention was to offer an overview of these networks and to analyze their possibilities to aid clients in their network building, and furthermore, perhaps find a job or housing. Finally, my aim was to provide a small handbook to clients that would present these networks.

However, after visiting the first potential network place, I soon found out that collaborating between Atlanta and Decatur is rather challenging. Unfortunately, many organizations offered their services only to people living in Atlanta. This observation forced me to narrow my focus to organizations in Decatur. However, since there are only limited amount of organizations in Decatur, I decided to concentrate on churches, and particularly on the ways to enhance the current collaboration between the shelter and the churches.

Furthermore, the program manager suggested establishing a network support group in partnership with the local congregations. Some congregations expressed interest in the idea but unfortunately, due to a tight time schedule, organizing a group together in the fall 2013

would have been challenging. Therefore, we decided to organize the group first only with the clients at Hagar's House and try some of the ideas we discussed with congregations in this group. This experiment would help us to see if there would be more interest among clients to continue this kind of group work perhaps in the future. The idea for the form of the group aroused from certain local congregations that had explored the Getting Ahead program. The key idea of the program is that people in poverty are viewed as experts on their own situations. Furthermore, they can be empowered to take control of their lives and make good decisions about themselves and their families.<sup>9</sup> Getting Ahead program is developed by aha! Process, a professional development company that works in many levels of a community. Moreover, the company's aim is to address the root causes of poverty, support individuals while gaining resources, and achieve a sustainable community that support everybody's well-being.<sup>10</sup>

After getting familiar with the Getting Ahead program I explored their material and found a group exercise that focused on networks and network-building. I modified the exercise to be more suitable for our purposes. Finally, the exercise consisted of two sessions. The first session was aimed to focus on the idea of "social capital," and we were supposed to draw a personal social capital map (see Attachment no. 1) and reflect on these maps and existing networks. Furthermore, our aim was to discuss advantages and disadvantages of networks particularly when it comes to finding jobs and housing. In the second session, we were supposed to aim to find ways to strengthen the existing networks as well broaden the networks outside our usual circle. The program manager agreed with the exercise, and we

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.ahaprocess.com/solutions/community/getting-ahead/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.ahaprocess.com/>

planned a timetable for the sessions. In the following section, I will describe the group process.

### *The group process*

When it came to the group work, the program manager and I led the discussion, but the main focus was on the mothers and their ideas. The goal of the sessions was to help the participants to become more aware of their existing networks and the ways to strengthen and possibly broaden these networks. After the sessions, the participants were supposed to discuss possible learning experiences and assess the effectiveness of the group sessions. My aim was to use this assessment as well as my notes of the group sessions as my main research material. In the evening of the first group session, I informed all the mothers about the group and my research project. All the mothers showed up. After the general discussion, I described more comprehensively my research project and my objectives. I emphasized that the participants' identities would be confidential and expressed that my aim was to focus on the mothers' perspectives as well as their assessment concerning the group work. I informed the mothers that their participation was voluntary and they may stop their participation at any time. After presenting and discussing about the research project, all the mothers stayed and we started the group.

First, we discussed the idea of social capital. We defined two aspects of the social capital: bonding and bridging. The program manager described the differences between these two aspects and gave an example relating to the job search. For instance, the bonding-capital friends will usually have the same contacts and knowledge of job opportunities as we have. However, someone outside our usual circle may have many other contacts that we don't have, which might be helpful when it comes to a job search. Furthermore, if we tend to stay only

with our closest circles, we might not be able to see other opportunities. Therefore, the group's aim was to focus on building new networks. After this introduction, the group members' task was to form a map of their networks, both bonding and bridging ties. I shared a form for this network map with the group members and explained the instructions.

After sharing the form, many mothers expressed frustration and feeling that they are not able to complete the map. Some of the women expressed that they do not know whom to place in their map. Some said they had a rough week and they are too tired to do the exercise. Two mothers left the group and said they are not willing to participate in the group at the moment. The rest of the group stayed in the room and continued the discussion. After a while, another mother decided to leave the group. We still continued the group, because some of the mothers wanted to express themselves and share their experiences concerning networks. After finishing the group, I talked with the mothers, asked their feelings about the group, and apologized if the exercise had hurt their feelings. All of them said they felt all right. However, many of the mothers expressed tiredness and unwillingness to do the exercise. Some of the mothers said they were tired at the moment, but wanted to discuss about networks later in person. After the group, I interviewed one of the mothers and did the group exercise with her. In addition, I interviewed the program manager.

## **4.2 Research methods**

In my research, I utilized an ethnographic approach. Hammersley and Atkinson describe ethnography as a social research method that “usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal

interviews, collecting documents and artifacts – in fact gathering whatever data is available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry” (2007, 3). According to Geertz, the ethnographer aims to write a “thick description” of what he or she is doing (1973, 7). In essence, writing is a vital part of the ethnography. Hammersley and Atkinson state that for ethnographers, writing is not only an analytic method, but also a way to reflect in thoughts (2007, 19). Geertz (1973) describes that the ethnographer “inscribes” social discourse, and writes it down. Consequently, he turns it from a passing event that exists in its own moment of occurrence, into an account that exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted. (19). Nevertheless, ethnography should be viewed as a process, where analyzing starts already in the field. Furthermore, Lahelma and Gordon remind that field time is a holistic experience, and during one’s time in the field, the researcher is present with all his or her instincts; officially, unofficially and physically (2007, 45-43).

When I reflect on my position as an ethnographer, I need take into a consideration that by the time we conducted the group session, I had worked with the mothers at the shelter three months within another position. Therefore, in the group session, I did not only represent them a researcher, but also a staff member, and particularly, in their words “a future social worker.” In her research regarding family professionals dealing with family violence, Keskinen emphasizes the dialogue between the researcher and the research participants. Moreover, she discusses the challenges and the barriers of the dialogue. Particularly, she considers different power relations that may occur from the researcher’s high education and the position as a facilitator challenging (2005, 132). Consequently, I was not only in a different position due to my job at the shelter, but also as a researcher.

When it comes to the unequal power relations, Keskinen addresses that when doing the

independent part of the research – defining the research questions, analyzing the results, and writing – the researcher can raise the research participants’ perspectives into discussion. Furthermore, Keskinen reminds that the researcher needs to reflect one’s ethical responsibility as a researcher and consider how to discuss painful experiences without offending the research participants (136). I find these aspects important regarding my research. The group discussion raised strong emotions and potentially painful memories. Therefore, in my research, I aim to discuss these issues responsibly and promote the mothers’ voices and participation.

## **5 Results**

### **5.1 The mothers' perceptions about social networks**

In the group session in particular, discussing about bonding capital raised many strong emotions. Some mothers said that they feel alone in their situation and have no one to support them. They expressed that building networks are particularly difficult for homeless people. Some of the mothers expressed that due to their fragmented family relationships, it is not easy to build new ones. One mother described that she doesn't "even bond with my own children," which would be her first objective when it comes to networks. Some of the mothers emphasized that networks are a personal issue and it would be difficult to talk about it. One of them also said that she feels she does not have plenty of networks, and this fact makes it difficult and uncomfortable issue to discuss. Moreover, she did not see the point trying to build networks or their benefits in her life situation. Furthermore, some mothers expressed that as homeless people, they may face prejudices from other people when trying to build new networks.

Within the group, our main aim was to focus on fostering or broadening existing networks, and moreover, building new networks. Nonetheless, we were not able to discuss that much about these questions, because the discussions centered mainly on the current situation and related challenges. When there are few close networks, broadening or building new networks can be very difficult. Additionally, some of the mothers expressed that discussing about networks is a sensitive topic, because they raised bad memories regarding previous networks. These observations raise three challenges. First, if a person relates negative implications to one's previous networks, it requires re-building trust to other people. For example, families have experienced traumatic situations, fights, loneliness, and the lost of

support regarding their previous relationships. Therefore, it is understandable that the idea of creating new relationships may be frustrating. Secondly, this process is connected to finding confidence to approach people. Given if a person has few existing networks, it can be challenging to achieve courage to meet new acquaintances. Moreover, as some of the mothers stated, the fear of prejudices can prevent from reaching out to the community. The third challenge concerns finding time and space, in other words, a stable life situation. Building new networks requires finding a comfortable space to meet other people as well as time to be with the people. When a person is in a crisis situation, it is likely that there is no time to focus on building new relationships that may be unsure or may not directly offer them help. Thus, even though it is important to recognize that individualism depends on a person's personality, I maintain that homelessness encourages homeless persons to sustain an individualistic perspective. I assess this observation through the following example.

In the group session, one of the women described her current life situation as “my battle” and that she needs to survive herself. Moreover, she gave an image about the American football, where the goal is to have a home. She described that she is rushing towards the goal and cannot look anywhere else but forward. Furthermore, she needs to push people from her way, not to stop for them. She related:

“It’s a playground and my goal is to get a home – I’m rushing towards the goal and if you can’t help me you need to move away. I’m just moving on to reach that goal, there’s nothing else right now. It’s my war. I need to be strong.”

The observation that homelessness directs person's thinking to have a home receives support from Mullainathan's and Shafir's recent research *Scarcity: why having too little means so much* (2013). The authors argue that scarcity – having less than you feel you need – captures the mind. According to their study, if we experience scarcity of any kind, we become

absorbed by it. Mullainathan and Shafir give an example of healthy male volunteers who participate in a hunger experiment. According to the findings of the experiment, previously capable healthy men became captured by hunger that started to dominate their thinking and attention. As hungry, their minds focused in a way that transcended their practical benefits. The men did not only concentrate intensively on the food that they received, but also became obsessed about food-related topics and items such as careers as restaurant owners, cookbooks and menus from local restaurants. In other words, Mullainathan and Shafir address that when experiencing scarcity, people's minds orient automatically and powerfully toward unfilled needs. (4-7.) For homeless, this need is a home.

Additionally, the example of the football field reflects elements of individualism and a cultural norm that holds an idea that individuals and families have to survive independently with their income and networks. Regarding the comparatively modest financial government benefits in the U.S (Esping-Andersen 1990, 26-27), it is likely that in addition to employment, social support networks offer social security to individuals. Therefore, having few social support networks in the U.S might have crucial causes to individual's social and financial well-being. Particularly, according to Letiecq, Anderson, and Koblinsky, having no financial safety net, homeless mothers may feel especially powerless when also perceiving an absence of adults who could offer them emotional support (1996, 270). In fact, one of the women expressed that "if I had networks I wouldn't be here [at the shelter]." Thus, she described that one of the reasons she is homeless is the fact that she doesn't have enough networks. She said that she feels that she doesn't get much social support. Furthermore, she pointed out that the program manager has been an important support to her as well as her social worker.

According to previous research, it has been argued that homeless families seek shelter because their networks are exhausted (DeOllos, 1997). Moreover, the mother's perspective regarding the meaning of the networks supports the affiliation/disaffiliation perspective that is often discussed when analyzing homeless families' networks. According to this view, networks are regarded as anchors that reduce the risk of long-term consequences associated with homelessness. (Eyrich, Pollio, & North 2003). Particularly, *disaffiliation* has been utilized to describe the absence or attenuation of affiliative bonds that link settled persons to work a network of interconnected social structures (Jackson-Wilson & Borgers 1993, 363).

On the other hand, many women mentioned that they had networks. According to the mothers' discussions, the most common networks were family, friends, churches, and community centers. In a personal interview, I discussed with one mother about her networks and her views concerning network-building. She assessed her closer networks and found many supportive relationships not only among her family and friends, but also outside her close circles. First, she described her relationship to her mother, cousin, husband, and friends. She expressed that she might occasionally get support from her mother, but according to her perspective their relationship is somewhat challenging. Nonetheless, she found her cousin supportive, because she had faced a similar situation. The mother also had a husband who could offer her financial security. However, she expressed that she and her husband might have different views concerning her current life situation and challenges. Furthermore, even though she was sorry that all her closest friends live far away from her, she found them important in her life.

Outside her family and friends, particularly, she named church as an important network in her life. In addition to attending services, she told that she has also participated in

coffee talk sessions held after the services. She expressed that she had found discussions pleasant and useful regarding meeting new people. Besides, she mentioned that the church offers different types of groups that she might consider participating in. Moreover, she expressed a wish to build relationships with other church members and find friends from the church. However, she emphasized that the church offers her spiritual and social support, but not so much for example financial or counseling help. Regarding her financial needs, she mentioned a faith-based community center as an important network. The center offers services and counseling concerning e.g. job search and housing that she finds beneficial. However, she believes that because the center offers more individual help, it might not lead to meeting other people.

In general, the mother found networks as an important part of her life and believed in their positive impacts. When she evaluated her closer relationships, she found them mainly positive and significant. However, she pointed out that unfortunately many of the people were living quite far away from her, which she found unfortunate. On the other hand, she also said that the idea that they would support her in various life situations and knowing that they care for her comforts her. As negative sides, she pointed out that when facing a difficult life situation, the other people might not always understand the issues or her experiences. Therefore, she expressed that these challenges might change their relationships. For instance, according to her, sometimes these issues can create challenges for maintaining the networks or building new ones. Furthermore, when she assessed the meaning of the networks regarding her future, she found networks important especially for her future employment, because her plan was to begin as an entrepreneur. Moreover, when it came to approaching new people and

creating new networks, she emphasized that being open-minded, unprejudiced, and having courage to approach people straightforwardly is valuable.

When it comes to fostering these networks, Cook-Graig and Koehly (2011) address that practitioners and shelters should aim to recognize the importance of the informal networks in mothers' lives and take this aspect into consideration regarding the shelter practices. Similarly, Seikkula, Arnkil and Eriksson (2003) emphasize that practitioners should recognize the significance of a person's networks and enhance mutual dialogism in psychosocial work. In practice, Cook-Graig and Koehly suggest that shelters could host "family nights," when shelter clients could invite extended family to the shelter to visit. Moreover, they stress that the shelter should adopt principles of family conferencing, discharge planning, and create a plan that would enhance the mother's chances of not becoming homeless again. Moreover, in this plan, the possibilities of the informal support networks should be recognized. Lastly, Cook-Graig and Koehly present that when exiting a program, a shelter should invite the family to a group meeting (204-205; about network meetings see also Seikkula, Arnkil, & Eriksson 2003). In particular, the personal interview reflects the importance of churches in the mothers' networks. In her assessment, the church represented a safe place both to have spiritual support and meet new people. I discuss this observation further in the chapter 5.2.2 relating to the possibilities and challenges of the mothers' network-building.

Finally, when it came to the other mothers at the shelter, in the personal interview the mother pointed out that generally, forming long-term relationships can be challenging since she feels that she will only know the others for a limited time in her life. She also said that for this reason she was not that comfortable sharing her own personal experiences with the others in the group. However, she mentioned that in some cases, women can be helpful for each

other. For instance, they can learn specific skills, e.g. art and crafts, from each other that might be useful later in life. Additionally, she said that if she “clicks” with somebody, she might form a longer-term relationship with the person. These perceptions are valuable regarding the assessment of the group. As the mother described, not feeling comfortable to share own experiences and perspectives about personal networks with the other mothers at the shelter might have impacted on the group process and discussions. Therefore, I will focus on this perspective more closely in the following chapter.

## **5.2 Assessing the group**

When it comes to planning a group session, there are always some issues that could not be predicted or monitored despite careful precision. For example, it is impossible to predict how the situation and discussions flow with specific people in a specific situation. Nonetheless, it is important to aim to build new ways to approach diverse issues, because they can create workable practices. When it comes to possible alternative options regarding the group work, I will first assess the practical, and second, more substantial questions. Lastly, I will discuss the ways that aim to broaden the mothers’ networks and present the program manager’s ideas regarding enhancing the mothers’ network-building in the future.

### **5.2.1 Reflections on the group**

Comprehensive informing is one of the most important features of workable practices. Therefore, it would have been significant to improve the informing, and for example, give the exercise to the participants beforehand. Moreover, even though I discussed with several clients concerning the group, and they expressed willingness to discuss about networks in the group, I should have been more specific about the approach. The timing could have been

better, because during the evening there had been conflicts between the clients at the shelter, and the atmosphere was already tensed before starting the group. On the other hand, it is difficult to determine when the “good” timing is. This perspective is also related to voluntary participation. The mothers can naturally feel tired in the weekday evenings after spending a day in work or looking for work, which may affect their interest in participating in the group. Nevertheless, even though the mothers would not feel like joining the group, they might feel obligated to do so. For example, they might want to express interest towards different activities offered at the shelter, because it can be considered to give a more positive impression of them.

When it comes to the more substantial questions, I will discuss about the form and facilitation of the group. The mother I had the personal interview with pointed out that she found it interesting to discuss about networks, but she preferred a personal discussion. Also, she expressed that she was very tired during the group and not in a mood for a group discussion at that time. However, when I asked about the social capital map exercise, she found it positive and it reminded her that she has networks around her. However, I got the impression that she did not find it that useful compared to discussing about networks in general. From my perspective, her positive comments concerning the exercise reflects the negative outcomes of the group. If a person, who participates in the exercise, does not have a strong social support system, the exercise may end up emphasizing the feeling of loneliness. Moreover, the group may raise bad memories that the person does not want to reflect in that situation. In the other way, this may make the participants who have social support networks unwilling to share their experiences.

On the other hand, networks are an important topic regarding job search and finding

housing. It is true that networks are a sensitive topic, but there are also many benefits that group discussions can offer when dealing with the issues. For example, participants who have been able to form new networks could share their experiences and offer significant help to the others. Moreover, a group can offer a great opportunity for peer support and possibilities to have mutual learning experiences. Nonetheless, as one of the women said, under the shelter circumstances and stressful life situation, it may not be comfortable to share one's experiences with the others. Moreover, the women may not choose the people who they live with at the shelter, and they might not always get along well together.

When it comes to the essence of the group, it might be useful to change the approach within the topic. Instead of a general approach, it might have been more successful to discuss about networks first from a practical perspective, for example the job search. As the mothers described, they are going through an extremely stressful life situation. When regarding behavior in a crisis situation, thinking about something that is not completely relevant can be particularly exhausting. Therefore, if shelter practitioners aim to conduct an effective exercise, it is important to remember this perspective in planning. For instance, when introducing a topic to group members, practitioners need to find ways to link the topic to issues that touch group members' lives. Optionally, the group could relate more directly to essential issues, for example job search and finding housing. If the group appears to be successful, the group can continue the discussions and focus on more general issues. Furthermore, it is important that the group members can make suggestions of discussion themes and direct the discussion in the group.

### **5.2.2 Possibilities and challenges in expanding the network support group**

When it comes to developing the group to extend, for example, to the community, in accordance to our first plan, one possible option would be fostering the collaborating with the local congregations. Outside of their family and friends, the most common places of networking for the mothers were different churches. Collaborating with the churches would also be a natural choice concerning the background of the shelter. In addition, churches are easily accessible since they are situated close to the shelter. Moreover, as some of the women stated, churches appear to be suitable places both to seek help and meet new people. It is relatively easy to approach churches, but still the person usually does not need to commit to church's activities.

Nonetheless, there are some challenges relating to churches as networks. Because the churches offer both help and a place to meet people, it can create a difficult situation both to the church and the mother. According to the program manager's experience, some families have connected with the local churches during their time at the shelter. However, in some cases, the families' situations have become too difficult for churches to manage. In these situations, the churches have aimed to help families but might have run out of resources or not have tools to help families. After these kinds of situations, churches have had to contact for example a shelter or programs or agencies to ask their help in the situation.

In addition to the difficult position of churches, the negative outcome can reduce the mothers' confidence to approach churches again. Additionally, participating in churches' activities, for example services, groups and other events, is not workable for the mothers, who do not feel comfortable approaching churches due to religious reasons. It is also possible that in certain situations the mothers can feel pressure to accept the religion or be unsure about the

commitment to the church community.

According to the manager's experience, if the women connect with the churches, they tend not to stay in touch with them after their time at the shelter. This issue leads me to reflect on the difficulty to build stable relationships in the crisis situation that homeless families experience. If life is constantly on a survival mode, the idea of relationships might change. As me and the program manager discussed this observation further in the interview, the manager said that in a crisis situation, instead of forming long-lasting relationships, the person might feel the need to focus on the benefits of the relationships that can be helpful in that specific life situation. This feature might be a disadvantage regarding the aim to form new networks.

When it comes to other network possibilities, different types of clubs, sports activities, YMCA, community centers as well as technical and community colleges can be useful options. However, all these network places require commitment, and therefore, are related to the same challenge as churches. Moreover, some of these network places require payment, which can be unreasonable for homeless families.

According to the program manager, the best way to collaborate with the community would be to establish a network of several agencies that could provide all basic needs for families. These needs would be housing, employment, childcare, transportation, and benefits. For instance, one agency would offer housing, another employment and so on. In the best case, these elements could be combined. For example, Initiative for Affordable Housing in Decatur offers holistic social services and housing for homeless families, affordable rental housing, and employment/job training through three programs. One of their successful programs is a re:loom weaving project that provides employment and job training for

homeless and at-risk individuals who have limited job skills<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, churches could be part of the basic needs offering spiritual help and a meeting place. Furthermore, one of the Decatur Cooperative Ministry's goals has been to educate and inform churches about ways to help homeless families. DCM has aimed to strengthen the partnership and offer some tools that could be helpful when aiding homeless families in the community. Moreover, according to the program manager, one of the challenges would be to foster churches' outreach to the community that could help in developing new networks.

Nonetheless, as a next step, instead of moving families from the shelter directly to permanent housing the program manager suggested establishing a transitional housing program (also known as rapid re-housing) for families while they are living at Hagar's House. Particularly, according to her perspective, offering a facility to the women who have found employment during their time at the shelter would be beneficial. This would help the mothers to move towards more stable life situation without losing all the support. The manager emphasized that the process of becoming homeless is usually complex and tends to be a long-term issue. Thus, escaping it does not happen fast and easily. Also, once a family has achieved permanent housing, they might need support to maintain that situation. For example, even if a client would achieve employment, their working hours can be reduced or they may encounter some other challenge, which can again lead to losing an apartment and becoming homeless. Consequently, fostering and maintaining a support system along the way to more stable housing would be valuable. The manager believed that the current system of agencies does not provide enough support for this aim. Indeed, she stated that due to complexity of homelessness, it is important to build a tier level network system of multiple layers that could holistically support the families.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.affordablehousingatl.org>

If I compare these aims to previous research, achieving a transitional housing program would prevent from the risk of “shelterization,” in which homeless people have adjusted to the demands of the shelter setting (Cook-Graig and Koehly 2011, 193). For example, certain shelter regulations that control visitors can create challenges to maintaining social networks. Moving towards more independent housing might be beneficial to families that have close family and friend relationships. A more stable housing situation might help families to gain confidence to connect with the community, because the mother knows that they know that they are not staying only temporarily in the area. Altogether, transitional housing would serve as one leg in the process aiming towards permanent housing.

## 6 Conclusion

This research indicates the complexity of social networks and network-building in the lives of homeless mothers. According to the findings of this study, family homelessness is connected to few social support networks. Even though some of the previous research addresses the importance of fostering the existing social networks, the results from this study indicate that the majority of current shelter clients feel they do have limited social support systems. Furthermore, there are numerous challenges that make broadening existing networks or building new networks difficult for homeless families. Consequently, I argue that homelessness encourages homeless persons to sustain individualistic perspective that may cause difficulties regarding homeless mothers' network-building possibilities. Therefore, as it is possible to see from the program manager's suggestion of the approach to the network-building, one of the most promising ways to enhance the mothers network-building is to aid them in achieving a more stable life situation. In other words, this research indicates that even though networks are claimed to help people to escape homelessness and poverty, it is challenging to maintain and build these networks when experiencing homelessness.

The research also illustrates challenges of practice research to collect and utilize the experience and knowledge of the clients who are facing a crisis situation. Therefore, researchers and practitioners need to develop ways to aid these clients to participate in research that takes into consideration their challenging life situation. For example, the idea of co-researching may be challenging regarding this group. The principles of the co-researching approach are acting within a relationship, voluntary participation, empowerment, equal and open expertise, trust, cooperation and co-planning, influencing, and ethics<sup>12</sup>. One of the major

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.socca.fi/files/2834/Young\\_developers\\_a\\_new\\_method\\_to\\_increase\\_participation.pdf](http://www.socca.fi/files/2834/Young_developers_a_new_method_to_increase_participation.pdf)

challenges is finding time to participate in research. As I stated earlier, when experiencing a crisis situation, it might be frustrating to focus on activities that seem irrelevant at the moment. Therefore, I find important that researchers and practitioners aim to reach 'survivors': former homeless people and shelter clients, who would be willing to share their expertise and knowledge in order to improve current social work practices (see more about survivor research Sweeney et. al. 2009).

Moreover, I suggest that these former homeless persons as experts by experience could form a group that would focus on developing practices that aim to enhance network-building possibilities of homeless families. On one hand, the group would offer formerly homeless persons a place to share their experiences regarding the meaning of networks in their lives, and how these networks could be fostered. This could offer valuable information to social work research and practice. On the other hand, if focusing on former homeless, the group would lose its aim for direct helping, because it would no longer focus on aiding the participants escape homelessness. However, I suggest combining these two groups in order to develop workable social work practices and share knowledge and experiences of homeless survivors when simultaneously aiding current homeless people. Furthermore, I find this kind of a combined expertise model potential approach regarding future practice research.

To conclude, the complex nature of homelessness affects comprehensively to a family's life situation including their social support networks. Therefore, various social and economical issues that affect to families' well-being should be addressed as parallel processes. Thus, developing effective social work practices for homeless families requires a holistic perspective to homelessness and collaboration of multiple agencies and individuals.

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## Attachments

Attachment no. 1: Social Capital Map

### Drawing Mental Model of Personal Social Capital

1. Thinking of the circles as a pie, there're eight pieces in the pie. Write the following labels in boxes outside of the larger circle: *Household, Other family, Friends, Work, Religious/spiritual, Schools, Clubs, and Agencies*. The center of the circles represents you.
2. In each section of the pie, put the initials of the people who are in your life. Those with bonding relationships will be in the inner circle, while those with bridging social capital will go in the outside circle.

