STARS

Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019

2012

This Is Just Temporary: A Study Of Extended-stay Motel Residents In Central Florida

Stephanie Guittar Gonzalez
University of Central Florida

Part of the Sociology Commons

Find similar works at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd

University of Central Florida Libraries http://library.ucf.edu

STARS Citation

Guittar Gonzalez, Stephanie, "This Is Just Temporary: A Study Of Extended-stay Motel Residents In Central Florida" (2012). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019*. 2285.
https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/2285

Showcase of Text, Archives, Research & Scholarship

THIS IS JUST TEMPORARY: A STUDY OF EXTENDED STAY MOTEL RESIDENTS IN CENTRAL
FLORIDA

by

STEPHANIE GONZALEZ GUITTAR
M.A. University of Central Florida, 2005
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2002

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillments of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Sociology in the College of Sciences
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term
2012

Major Professor: James D. Wright

ABSTRACT

Motel life has existed in the United States for over 100 years. However, it was not until the HEARTH Act in 2009 changed the federal definition of homelessness that those who live in motels more or less permanently were considered homeless persons. This project utilizes qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 18 families with children who are living in motels to explore their experiences with motel life and social service providers, their housing identity, and identity management strategies. Findings show that most of the motel residents did not identify with the conventional definition or image of homelessness and instead negotiated the term to fit their situation. Although they did not initially self-identify as homeless, when discussing policy recommendations *all* participants adopted a homeless social-identity (i.e., they identified as members of the homeless social category). As members of the homeless community, the participants agreed that homeless families in the area needed more attention and assistance. Participants were aware that outsiders would view them as homeless and during their interviews several identity management strategies were used. Motel residents described a hierarchy of homelessness and placed themselves at the top of it, perceiving themselves to be better people than even other motel residents. The identity management strategies employed by the participants were meant to show how they were good people who were just stuck in a motel because of circumstances outside of their control and how they were deserving of assistance to help their families move out of the motel and obtain adequate, permanent housing.

I dedicate this dissertation to my three children, Gavin, Liam and Ellison.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The journey through my PhD program and the writing of this dissertation were not an individual achievement. It took a village. I would like to thank my village—the people who have provided continuous support and contributed greatly to my ability to complete the PhD program and this dissertation.

First, I would like to thank the social service providers and community members who shared their time, contacts and knowledge with me so that I would be able to collect data for this project. Your work and dedication to the community is inspiring. I also thank the families who volunteered to participate in this project. They opened their doors and shared their stories with me. I learned a great deal from each family not only for research purposes but for my own personal growth and outlook on life.

I owe thanks to my mom and dad, Enid and Joe. I am infinitely grateful to my mother for her life-long support but particularly for her continuous willingness to care for my little ones so that I would be able to complete my coursework and dissertation. I thank my father for teaching 6 year-old me what the three letters, P-H-D, meant. Although he did not get a chance to attend college, he worked hard so his daughters could. Thanks to him, by 4th grade I had mapped out my life and had a goal of completing a PhD on the timeline.

I would also like to thank my cohort buddies, Anne, Wendi, and Tangela. I will always remember our pond side lunches and chats that helped us vent out all of our frustrations and insecurities about being a PhD student and having balance in our lives. I

learned a lot from you all personally and professionally. I look forward to our continued friendship and adventures in the "real world."

As a third-time graduate of the UCF Department of Sociology, I owe thanks to the department for their financial support, and the professors who have guided me through this journey. Though they may not realize it, each conversation we had made an impact on me and made me believe a PhD was possible for me to achieve. I would like to specifically thank Dr. James D. Wright, Dr. Jana L. Jasinski, Dr. Liz Grauerholz, and Dr. Shannon K. Carter for being great role models to me. I want to be like you when I grow up!

I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Jana L. Jasinski, Dr. Shannon K. Carter, Dr. Michael Frumkin and my committee chair, Dr. James D. Wright. I thank you all for agreeing to be part of my committee despite your many other personal, academic and professional commitments. I appreciate your time and your continued guidance. In particular, I thank Jim for offering his endless wisdom and expertise in the field to guide this project.

Last but certainly not least, I need to thank my partner, Nick. There are no words to express my joy over having you as a partner (and in-house colleague and editor). You have been a constant source of support and motivation for me. I am thrilled at what is ahead for us and our family.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF ACRONYMS/ABBREVIATIONS

DCF   Department of Children and Families

DOE   Department of Education

FIT   Families in Transition

HEARTH   Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act

HUD   Department of Housing and Urban Development

SSDI   Social Security Disability Income

SNAP   Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (aka Food Stamps)

TANF   Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

WIC   Women, Infants and Children

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Homelessness has been defined to include everything from the simple lack of shelter (in essence, no roof over your head, "roof-lessness" or "houselessness") to more complex abstract concepts of "home"-lessness or even family-lessness. The definitions of homelessness are as varied as the experiences of those living "homeless." For some, homelessness is a difficult but transitory period in one's life, an interruption in life's routine; while for others, it develops into an enduring career that becomes harder to escape as the days, months and years go by.

Although much attention has been given to the "homelessness problem" in America, what most people do not realize is that until recently there was not a concrete, single, definition of homelessness used at the federal level. In 1987, the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (renamed McKinney-Vento in 2000) was a major piece of legislation that awarded funding for fifteen programs to address homelessness in America (homeless, 2006). These programs were housed under various federal agencies such as the Department of Education, the Department of Labor, and the Department of Health and Human Services among others, and they included services from emergency shelters to permanent supportive housing. Although Title I of the original Act did state a definition of homelessness, it did not mandate agencies that receive the funding to use this definition. Hence, each agency defined homelessness as they saw fit for their respective programs. This created a somewhat disconnected continuum of care for people in need since

individuals and families could be eligible for some programs (e.g. under the Department of Education) but not others (e.g. housing through Department of Housing and Urban Development).

Prior to 2009, there were two main federal definitions of homelessness; one used by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the other by the Department of Education (DOE). HUD defined the term "homeless" or a "homeless person" as:

> "an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, and an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is - a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill), an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized, or a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings" (HUD, 2009).

HUD's definition of homelessness was always more constraining (than the Department of Education's definition given below) because it excluded individuals or families in some temporary housing arrangements such as living with a friend/family member (i.e. doubled-up) temporarily or living in a motel. However, this definition was also the most widely used across service providers and researchers. This means that most of the research on homelessness has focused on the street homeless or the sheltered

homeless, and thereby excluded large proportions of the home-less population as that term would be conventionally understood.

In contrast, the Department of Education defined homeless families as "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" (DOE, 2004). This definition is used by the Department of Education across the country to identify "families in transition" (FIT) who may be in need of special assistance related to education (e.g. transportation from shelter to school). The DOE definition is therefore much broader and more encompassing than the one posited by HUD. Based on the DOE definition, families or youth living in the following situations are considered homeless:

> "doubled-up with family or friends due to economic conditions, living in motels and hotels for lack of other suitable housing, runaway and "throwaway" children and youth, homes for unwed or expectant mothers for lack of a place to live, homeless and domestic violence shelters, transitional housing programs, the streets, abandoned buildings, public places not meant for housing, cars, trailers, and campgrounds, awaiting foster care, and migratory children staying in housing not fit for habitation" (DOE, 2004).

The DOE definition is much more inclusive and comes much closer to capturing the colloquial understanding of who homeless people are. Under DOE, children were eligible for education benefits even though their parents were not considered homeless under HUD's definition. In 2009, President Obama signed the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act which made substantial changes to the

2000 McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (Exchange, 2011). The HEARTH Act

mandated that all agencies receiving funding from the McKinney Vento Homeless

Assistance Act use the same definition. This Act adopted the Department of Education

definition as the standard definition of homelessness. The change in definition means that

now, at least at the federal level, there is a consistent definition of homelessness. Also, it

means that with the stroke of a pen, the homeless population "increased" significantly in

size and changed significantly in composition.

Significance of the Problem

This study expands the current homelessness literature by interviewing a segment

of this "new" homeless population: families who live in extended stay motels. Families who

are stuck living in motels as well as those who double-up with family and friends have

previously been referred to as "the hidden homeless" (Harter, Berquist, Titsworth, Novak,

& Brokaw, 2005; Vacha & Marin, 1993). But because motel residents had been excluded

from the federal homeless definition, little is known about this now homeless population

and how they compare to the sheltered and street homeless populations. Additionally, as a

result of the change in the homelessness definition, more social service agencies will soon

expand their services to those living in motels. This study explores the daily experiences of

extended stay motel residents, including how they perceive their current housing

situation—whether they think of themselves as homeless or not, and their experiences

with social service providers and motel staff.

Data from the current study, which consists primarily of interviews with families

residing in motels, highlight some resounding trends regarding this understudied subset of

homeless persons. The narratives from the qualitative interviews reveal how the motel residents construct and manage their identities—identities that some consider a stigmatized category. The motel residents engage in identity work by constructing their stories to present a positive self-image and perhaps obtain more assistance by demonstrating that, unlike others who do not want to work or earn their keep, they are deserving of assistance. The study also demonstrates that homelessness means something different to each of the participants and it is not always related to whether they have a roof over their head or not. In addition, this study includes interviews with a few social service providers and extended stay motel operators to gain their perspective on changes to the definition of homelessness and understand their perception of families whom they assist and are living in a motel.

The interviews from this study help researchers as well as social service providers better understand the lived experiences of extended stay motel residents with children. The narratives from the providers are compared to the residents' narratives to identify how policies and/or services can be improved to meet the needs of all parties involved. Prior to this study, I was only able to locate one other researcher who had done a study with extended stay residents (Wingate-Lewinson, Hopps, & Reeves, 2010). Part of the lack of research on this population can be attributed to the difficulty locating and accessing them. Unlike those who utilize emergency shelters and are centrally located, motel residents are scattered throughout the region. Additionally, social service providers are typically cooperative with researchers and allow access to their clients whereas motels are businesses who want to protect their image and their guests' privacy. However, as a result

of the change in federal definition of homelessness, HUD will now be required to attempt to locate and survey extended stay motel residents each year during their annual point-in-time surveys (counts) of homeless persons.

This study was limited to a specific geographic area in one county in Central Florida. The area was chosen because of the high number of motels that were speculated to have numerous long-term guests as well as my familiarity with the area and local contacts that could aid in the research process. After discussions with the social service providers in the area, it was determined that families with children living in motels would be the most accessible sample as they are the most likely to reach out for services. Most services in the area are restricted to families with children. Participants in this study were limited to extended stay motel families that included children. Considering how service providers target families with children, for this project, family is limited to individual(s) with at least one child who is/are living in a motel room as a family unit. Cohabiting or married couples without children are not included in this definition and were subsequently not part of the sampling frame.

This project contributes to the literature on homelessness by exploring a newly recognized segment of the homeless population and gaining perspective on extended stay motel life from community members as well as the families experiencing it. Furthermore, the study identifies methodological suggestions on how to gain access to this difficult to reach segment of the homeless population. Building relationships with community members, motel staff and offering a financial incentive for motel residents proved to be

crucial in making this project possible. Social policy implications and suggestions for social

service providers are also discussed.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned in the introduction, the definition of homelessness has been contested for decades and it is not until now that we have a unified definition of the issue, at least at the federal level. Because this change is recent, the existing literature does not reflect demographics or the experiences of newly-defined homeless groups, each of which have only recently been included in the definition and thus labeled as homeless. The following literature review details some history of the homeless problem in America, including what we know about the causes of homelessness, who is homeless, and what their lived experiences have been. When possible I situate the literature in the context of the geographical area used for this project. Furthermore, I explore the issues that have been studied from the social service providers' perspectives in relation to homelessness.

Homelessness

It is estimated that, during any given year, 3.5 million persons will experience homelessness in the United States. Homeless families are said to make up 23 percent of the homeless population (Homeless, 2009). The estimates vary by annual count and by study since methodologies are varied and the population is transient and episodic in nature—meaning an individual can be homeless on the day/night of a particular count of homeless persons and housed the next day. It is not uncommon to hear stories of individuals moving from one region of the country to another to live with a relative or friend to avoid street homelessness only to become homeless again when they overstay their welcome.

Homelessness is not a permanent state for most but it can be consistently episodic or situational for low-income or unemployed persons and/or those who lack a support system. In general, the estimates are based on "countable" homeless persons—those who access traditional homeless services such as emergency shelters, food pantries, soup kitchens, and/or are visible enough on the streets to be approached by enumerators in point in time surveys. All of the research studies have acknowledged the sampling limitations that come with studying homeless populations. In essence, the research has "oversampled" homeless persons in emergency shelters, and so there are still pockets of the homeless population that have yet to be researched or researched enough to draw general conclusions about them. For example, annual point-in-time counts of homeless persons have not previously included individuals who are homeless but are doubled-up for the night or are staying at a motel.

Research has consistently referred to the "new" face of homelessness. Historically, homelessness has been an urban, single men phenomenon. Men are more likely to live on the streets than women and also tend to be homeless for longer periods of time (Calsyn & Morse, 1990). Their visibility has made them the "face" of homelessness. In a study of Central Florida homeless persons, Zugazaga(2004) found that single homeless men were more likely to be White, unmarried, homeless for longer periods of time and more likely to be high school graduates when compared to single homeless women or homeless women with children in the same shelters.

In the last 30 years or so, a "new" face of homelessness has emerged and this refers to the increasing number of women and children and intact families that experience

homelessness. Unlike the single men, homeless women, women with children and intact

families are more likely to seek assistance from emergency shelters. Studies of homeless

mothers show that sheltered homeless women with children tend to be younger (and have

younger children), and have lower levels of education compared to their housed

counterparts (E. L. Bassuk et al., 1996; Martha.R. Burt & Cohen, 1989; Johnson, McChesney,

Rocha, & Butterfield, 1996). Also, homeless women with children are less likely to report

histories of substance abuse and mental illness compared to single homeless men

(Zugazaga, 2004). Milburn & D'Ercole (1991) suggest that children can serve as a source of

emotional support for homeless mothers (e.g. children keep them from engaging in self-

destructive behaviors) but they also serve as a constant source of stress since mothers have

to worry not only about providing for themselves but also their children so that they do not

lose custody.

Motels as Housing in the US

Brownrigg (2006) conducted exploratory research on people living in motels across

the nation where she described the evolution of the use of hotels in the United States as

well as the people who use them as alternative housing. Although mainstream media

presents families living in motels as a "new" face of homeless (Bailey, 2012; Santich, 2012),

people have used hotels as residences since the 1790's (Brownrigg, 2006; Groth, 1994).

Beginning in the late 1970's as a result of the visibly increasing homeless population and

overcrowded shelters, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) started

placing individuals and families in hotels (aka "welfare hotels" or SROs; (Brownrigg, 2006;

Rossi, 1989). According to Groth (1994), by 1990 there were from one million to two

million people living in hotels which meant that more people were living in hotels than public housing in America.

Brownrigg's (2006) research revealed that regardless of the type of motel residents that people had become, their stories started off the same—something happened, and they needed a place to stay, so they found a hotel and moved in. Three patterns of hotel residents emerged in her data: the permanent settlers, the sojourners on open ended stays and what she calls "regulars"—those who cycle between a hotel and other housing. Permanent settlers are described as individuals who make a conscious decision to live in a hotel/motel. These individuals have no desire to rent or own "traditional" housing and they are comfortable calling their hotel room their home—they even decorate their rooms. The sojourners have similar stories as the permanent settlers except that for them, their stay at the hotel is temporary. These individuals believe that something will come through that will enable them to move out of the hotel—they are just not sure when that will happen. The last category, the "regulars", includes the labor migrants, those who need housing for a short period of time for work and then return "home", or vice versa where the hotel is their "home base" as they travel between jobs. It also includes those who move into a motel in the winter "because it costs less to stay in a motel room than to heat their rustic wood homes" or live in RV's and stay at motels from time to time (Brownrigg, 2006: 11).

For most cities and jurisdictions, a hotel/motel guest becomes a "resident" when the guest has stayed in a hotel/motel for about 30 days. In Central Florida, there is a disputed "28 day rule" by motel operators, police officers, and motel guests. For some, the "28 day rule" means that a motel guest does not become a resident unless they have stayed at the

motel for 29 consecutive days. However, Florida Statute 509 regarding lodging states that "non-transient occupancy means occupancy when it is the intention of the parties that the occupancy will not be temporary. There is a rebuttable presumption, that when the dwelling unit occupied is the sole resident of the guest, the occupancy is non-transient" (Sunshine, 2012). This point is highly contested by motel operators who argue that their establishment is not a residential establishment and hence they should have the ability to informally evict someone from the premises (by asking them to leave) for non-payment without filing a formal eviction through the court as residential landlords/property managers are required to do. Some motels impose time limits on an individual's stay (e.g. 28 days) to avoid guests attaining "tenant rights" (Brownrigg, 2006)

The majority of motels that end up with mostly long-term residents are motels that were "displaced" when highways or some other construction redirected traffic away from their location, or by what Brownrigg calls "stylistic displacement." Stylistic displacement occurs when properties are not updated, remodeled and kept up for the demands of the current guests. Some of the residential motels today were popular tourist destinations in their heyday a few decades ago. These hotels now "survive by functioning as commercial Single Room Occupancy hotels" (Brownrigg, 2006: 21). This is particularly resonant in the Central Florida region, namely Osceola County where this project takes place. The main thorough way, Highway 192, used to be the gateway to Walt Disney World. But with the expansion of tourist attractions throughout the Central Florida region and the widespread construction of affordable resorts, themed resorts for different demographics, resorts on Disney property as well as other routes/highways to the attractions, Highway 192 lost its

convenience and appeal to tourists. Over the past 20 years, Osceola's loss of tourism to nearby Orange County has left motels in Osceola County little choice but to offer low rates to attract "sojourners" or be forced to close down. The low rates are enough to keep their doors open but limit their ability to care for and routinely update their establishments.

Reasons for Living in Motels

Blau (1992) cites three significant explanations for the increase in the general homeless population in the 1980's: the shift in our economy from an industrial one to a service one, the effort of containing wages (led by businesses), and a government eager to reduce social welfare. The shift in industries had a significant effect since many low-income individuals had trades and skills that were replaced or eliminated by technology. Poor, struggling families do not have the resources to get more education and change careers. Hence, they are now forced into low-skilled, low-wage jobs that, if they are lucky, may allow them to survive but not thrive—thus keeping them at risk of homelessness. In areas where there are few resources such as emergency shelters or subsidized housing for low income families, the motels become a form of pseudo public housing.

Also, various changes in government policies and funding restrictions for social service programs greatly affected low income individuals. During the 1980's, HUD's budget was reduced and their Section 8 (housing subsidy programs) new construction projects and special housing rehabilitation programs were completely cut which meant fewer affordable units would be available for low-income individuals and families (HUD, 2007). Moreover, HUD has placed more and more emphasis on promoting the "American Dream" of homeownership (Fogel, Smith, & Williamson, 2008), particularly for minorities, which

13

has also affected availability or creation of new programs for renters (e.g. programs that offer rental and utility deposit assistance).

An increase in poverty rates during the 1980s coupled with reports of an increasing depletion of housing options have led to the most cited "cause" of homelessness—a lack of affordable housing . "Affordable" is a tricky concept to measure since housing can become "affordable" by multiple means including, but not limited to, an increase in earned income or benefits, a decrease in market rent amounts, and the attainment of housing subsidies (M. Burt, 1991). However, as Cloke, Milbourne and Widdowfield (2002) and Wright and Lam (1987) discuss, homelessness is a housing problem and the number of housing units available was decreasing which meant that the problem would persists and potentially get worse. Burt (1991) found that the number one contributor to homelessness was the proportion of one-person households, followed by cost of living, and then unemployment rates. The proportion of one-person households was important for the supply of housing. If more housing is occupied by a single person then that means there is less housing for the rest of the population in a given area. Burt's (1993) findings support the theory of lack of affordable housing as a significant predictor of homelessness. For the most part, research has concluded that lack of affordable housing and poverty rates are the most significant predictors of homelessness (Choi & Snyder, 1999; Ji, 2006; Wright, 2009).

Other studies have pointed to the decrease in single-room occupancy (SRO) units as a significant factor in the loss of affordable housing in the US (Brownrigg, 2006; Groth, 1994; Rossi, 1989; Wright, 2009; Wright & Rubin, 1991). Commonly found in urban areas SROs were an affordable alternative for many low wage workers. SROs are rooms with a

private or shared bathrooms (dorm style), sometimes without a kitchen, that were typically occupied by single individuals but could also house small working class families (Brownrigg, 2006). In the mid-1970's, cities began eliminating these long-standing residential hotels either by demolishing them or converting them to tourist hotels. Groth, (1994:10) points out that some viewed these conversions as positive developments because it meant the "removal of substandard housing and unwanted neighbors," whereas others recognized the effect the elimination of SRO's would have on the homeless population. These opposing views have persisted to this day. In Central Florida, where this project takes place, there are current initiatives to change zoning laws and enforce code statutes in an attempt to cease extended stays at motels located in areas that are considered viable for tourism. According to criteria outlined by Ross and Jang (2000), sections of the Highway 192 corridor would be considered ones of physical disorder. "Places with high levels of physical disorder are noisy, dirty, and run-down; many buildings are in disrepair or abandoned; and vandalism and graffiti are common (Ross & Jang, 2000). Some view the rezoning as a positive business strategy for the local economy while homeless advocates worry about the effect it will have on the dislocated families. Ironically, the "business friendly" rezoning would negatively impact many motel owners since the extended-stay clientele of motels along 192 enable them to remain in business.

Although media reports estimate a significant number of excess vacant housing units in the US (1.8 million as of April 2010, according to (Insider, 2011)), the supply is not affordable to those at the bottom of the earnings scale. During the height of the housing market, numerous apartment rental complexes were converted into condominiums (to be

sold, not rented) and that depleted more affordable housing options for low-income individuals (Studies, 2010). As a result, there is still a housing "crisis." The National Low Income Housing Coalition (2011) reports that over three-quarters of extremely low income (0-30 percent of area median income) individuals and very low income individuals (31-50 percent of area median income) had at least one housing problem during the years 2005-2007. Even worse is the fact that 63 percent of extremely low income households and 28 percent of very low income households pay over half of their monthly income toward housing costs (rent and utilities). These families are considered to be severely housing cost burdened and are at a heightened risk for homelessness compared to those who are not housing-cost burdened (National, 2011). Motel residents who live on fixed incomes such as social security or social security disability (SSDI), are severely housing-cost burdened sometimes paying 80 to 90 percent of their income on housing.

Standard room rates for extended stay motels hover around $800 per month (Wingate-Lewinson et al., 2010). Motel operators are able to keep the rates affordable by limiting the services (e.g. limited or no housekeeping, fewer linen services) offered to their extended stay clients (Brownrigg, 2006). The reasons individuals and families "choose" staying in a motel over an apartment or an emergency shelter have been attributed to low-wages and loss of affordable housing stock (Wingate-Lewinson et al., 2010; Wright & Lam, 1987). For individuals and families who work minimum-wage hourly jobs that do not guarantee a set number of hours per week or those who have a fixed income such as social security, there are very few housing alternatives outside of motels. Motels offer additional incentives that apartments or landlords are unable to offer low income families—there are

no rental deposits, no utility deposits, no leases, no criminal records checks, and no credit checks (Brownrigg, 2006). Although $800 per month sounds not far off from what a "regular" apartment rent would run, the motel rent is all inclusive of utilities and it does not require deposits to move in. Rental and utility deposits are a significant, if not paramount, barrier for families trying to obtain permanent housing. For those who have bad credit, criminal records, large families, eviction histories or no rental histories, deposits can equal an extra two to three months of rent in advance which is nearly impossible to save up if your only source of income is fixed or minimum wage.

Living in a motel, especially one that is in an area of physical disorder, has its social and emotional drawbacks. Ross and Jang's (2000) study of neighborhoods in Illinois shows that residents of neighborhoods with perceived disorder report higher levels of fear of victimization and mistrust in others than residents of neighborhoods with perceived social order. This means that residents do not feel safe when at home and hence could isolate themselves from others in order to avoid being victimized. This finding could mirror the feelings of those in motels since, by definition, they are not residential zones and are characterized by physical disorder. However, in that same study Ross and Jang (2000) found that "informal integration with neighbors buffers the effects of perceived disorder in one's neighborhood on fear and mistrust in all models" (p.410). In other words, when people informally interact with their neighbors—by talking, visiting and helping each other—it buffers the effects of living in a less than ideal neighborhood. In essence, it makes them less fearful about their surroundings. For motel residents, there are different factors that may impact their feelings about their "neighborhood." Some motels are closer to the

touristy areas that are well-kept while others are in the more run-down areas of town and typify the image of the cheap motel. Some have a dozen rooms and others have hundreds of rooms. These factors are later explored in the data presented here.

Identity Work Among Homeless Individuals

Many researchers have written about the stigma that is attached to lower social positions in our society such as being poor and/or homeless (Boydell, Goering, & Morrell-Bellai, 2000; Farrington & Robinson, 1999; Osborne, 2002; Reutter et al., 2009; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Wardhaugh, 1999). Stigma occurs when we believe individuals possess attributes that make them different from others, making them less desirable --- less of a person (Goffman, 1963). In other words, stigma can be conceptualized as the difference in what one believes oneself to be (personal identity) and what others believe one to be (social identity, (Goffman, 1963; Reutter et al., 2009). This is particularly salient for homeless individuals- or individuals who are perceived as homeless- because homeless individuals are categorized as "being neither likeable nor capable" (Massey, 2007). Homeless individuals belong to a "despised outgroup" (Massey, 2007) along with atheists and certain others, and as such, may actively engage in identity work more often than most to attempt to present their "true" self to the public and in the process affirm their positive personal identity.

Snow and Anderson's (1987) work is perhaps one of the most popular scholarly studies of "identity work" among street homeless persons. Identity work refers to the physical and social activities 'individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept" (Snow & Anderson,

1987, p. 1348). In their ethnographic study they focused on how homeless individuals verbally constructed their social identities and asserted their personal identities. They referred to this process as "identity talk." Generally, homeless individuals and low-income individuals understand that others who belong to higher socio-economic groups have a negative view of them; they understand their social identity is negative (Reutter et al. 2009). Snow and Anderson (1987) identified three patterns of identity talk (distancing, embracement and fictive storytelling) the homeless individuals in their sample engaged in to manage the stigma of their social position.

Distancing refers to talk focused on distancing themselves from other homeless persons and/or organizations serving them as a result of these not aligning with their perceived self-concept. Individuals create categories and/or a hierarchy of persons (Massey, 2007)and place themselves above others to make themselves feel better about themselves and create a positive self-image. Embracement refers to the acceptance of their social identity as homeless. Fictive storytelling included embellishments about their past or current life or fantasizing about their future selves and their "escape" of homelessness.

Farrington and Robinson (1999) also studied identity management strategies among street homeless individuals through a participant observation study. Their data suggests that identity management strategies change as individuals spend more time on the streets homeless. Their model shows homeless individuals progressing through identity phases as they spend time on the streets: "aspirant exiters" (less than 1 year homeless), "deniers" (14-18 months), "subgroupers" (2-4 years), and Phase 4 (over 3.5

19

years) which includes: "careers and sharers", "family", and "typicals" (Farrington &

Robinson, 1999, pp. 184-185). Individuals at first do not identify themselves as homeless

and believe they will soon exit homelessness. As time progresses, they experience denial

where they deny the label of homeless and make negative comments about those who are

homeless. Later on, the comparison groups shift and although they may not identify with

the label of homeless, they begin to identify with the people around them and make

positive social comparisons and form positive relationships. As individuals spend years on

the streets they begin to accept their reality and their social and personal identity as

homeless. Farrington and Robinson's (1999) research presents a logical model for identity

management with temporal cut-offs for each phase. Given their small sample size, and the

fact that people progress through the stages at different rates, it is difficult to say whether

these temporal cut-offs are relevant across homeless populations. This shortcoming relates

particularly to those who bounce in and out of homelessness for long periods of time or

may be on the edge of homelessness but not identify as homeless as in the case of motel

residents.

Motel residents who deny the homeless label and identity may still engage in

identity work to manage the stigma that is associated with poverty or inadequate housing

for families. Low income individuals typically believe that higher income individuals do not

understand their plight, think they do not help themselves and abuse the system, and hence

deserve their misfortune (Reutter et al., 2009). The participants in Reutter et al.'s (2009)

study avowed their positive personal identity by describing how hard they work because of

their poverty. The participants rebutted the stereotypes by describing situations where

20

they are more resourceful and resilient than higher income individuals. Also, some described how they were willing to help others in need even though they are not necessarily viewed as being in a position to help (Reutter et al., 2009). Low income individuals like the homeless participants in Snow and Anderson's (1987) work used distancing (physical and cognitive), and like those in Farrington and Robinson's (1999) research, denied and/or created sub-groups within the label. In general, studies of homeless individuals have found that participants described reasons for why they believed they were different than other homeless persons (Boydell, et al., 2000b; Choi & Snyder, 1999; Osborne, 2002) or how they do not utilize services for the homeless to support their belief that they have self-respect/reliance (Osborne, 2002). Hence, there are consistent patterns of identity management strategies among homeless individuals that are also evident for low-income individuals. Based on the literature on identity work and homeless individuals, I expected some of the identity work themes that emerged from the participants in this study.

Stress Under Poverty and Homelessness

Individuals who experience poverty, homelessness in particular, experience multiple stressors at once. According to Milburn and D'Ercole (1991), homelessness is a stressor in itself as well as an accumulation of other stressors such as eviction, unemployment, and/or victimization. Stress associated with homelessness stems from the worry of not having a stable roof over your head but also from the worry about stigma management they should or should not engage in for survival. For example, Averitt (2003) found that homeless women debated whether to disclose their housing situation to others

such as employers, teachers, friends or family. Some felt there could be some benefit from disclosing their situation in the form of assistance while others feared prejudice and discrimination as a result of people labeling them homeless and preferred to keep their situations private (Averitt, 2003).

Family hardships and stress are more pronounced in families with children. Homeless mothers are more likely to report feeling depressed than housed mothers (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1998). Homeless mothers are also more likely than housed mothers to report living in areas with high crimes, having little to no social support, being abused by a partner, having income problems, overcrowded housing, inability to afford basic necessities for their children and being behind on their monthly bills (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1998). According to Banyard and Graham-Bermann (1998), "stress and coping process may not be different for homeless and housed mothers, they experience it at different magnitudes" (p. 485). This could be as a result of the housing itself. For someone who is homeless living in a shelter, the surroundings are a constant reminder of their lack of housing and hence serves as a constant stressor whereas those who are struggling financially renting an apartment are not surrounded by misfortune and could potentially "tune out" their struggle and pretend life is somewhat normal.

When asked what aspects of homelessness are most stressful, typically families respond with their worry over their children's safety and well-being (Averitt, 2003; Choi & Snyder, 1999; Ryan & Hartman, 2000). Parents worry about how the instability will affect children in the long run. Homeless children tend to move often (Rog & Buckner, 2007), change schools often, miss school, be behind in grade work, and are more likely to be held

back as a result of the missing work (Averitt, 2003; E. Bassuk & Rubin, 1987; Rubin et al., 1996). Parents stress not only about their children's academic progress but also about their emotional well-being including how others may react and treat their children if they found out they were homeless. According to Averitt (2003), children who grow up in homeless shelters are open to ridicule in schools. But principally, the instability and frequent moves that homeless families sometimes are forced to make, which can mean frequent changes in schools and hence the children's social networks, can have a great impact on children's feelings of insecurity.

Although children are stressors, they also provide emotional support which serves as a motivator and coping mechanism for their parents (Milburn & D'Ercole, 1991). Studies of homeless families found that when parents were asked what kept them going through the hard times, they often replied that their children and their hope of a better future for them made them push through the difficult times (Milburn & D'Ercole, 1991; Ryan & Hartman, 2000; Vandsburger, Harrigan, & Biggerstaff, 2008). Also, homeless families often accredit God, their faith or prayer for getting them through difficult times (Milburn & D'Ercole, 1991; Ryan & Hartman, 2000; Vandsburger et al., 2008).

Social Support

Social networks refer to the number of social relationships one has whereas social support typically refers to the function or the quality of these relationships. Depending on the field of the literature there are different terms for types of social support. For this project, I use Cohen and Wills (1985) description of two types of social support: emotional and instrumental. Instrumental support refers to providing "material" support or action

compared to emotional support which is just "being there" for someone (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Snow and Anderson's work (1987) suggests that length of time spent homeless affects how and who the individual perceives as their social support. As individuals spend more time on the streets, they distance themselves from their previous roles (e.g. father, friend) losing their connections to those identities while creating a new identity based on their homeless experiences (Wu & Serper, 1999). While it may be the case that homeless individuals do not have as much social support, at least instrumental support from family members, they still report a comparable sized network of friends compared to housed persons (Wu & Serper, 1999).

Although family and friends are two separate social networks, there is a social connection that links access or perception of each. Those who report having social support from family members, also report being able to count on their friends whereas the opposite is not the case (Wu & Serper, 1999). This could be related to the reason for homelessness in the first place since some individuals become homeless as a result of avoiding their family due to abusive relationships or by burning up bridges with relatives. Also, the social support of homeless persons is directly related to the time spent homeless. Therefore, transitional or episodically homeless persons (homeless for less than 12 months) report more social ties than those who are chronically homeless (Wu & Serper, 1999).

Among the homeless (or even the poor), instrumental support would seem as the most beneficial type of support for them and one that could potentially prevent longer-

term crises. However, that does not seem to be the most common type of support received.

Ajrouch et al. (2010) found that among low-income African-American women, the

availability of instrumental social support did not guarantee any relief to situational

stressors. In fact, it can even affect the perception of overall support available. For

example, if a family member or a friend offers some type of instrumental support like child

care, it could increase the expectations for more or continuous support to be offered but if

that support does not materialize then it negatively impacts the individual's perception of

support available to them (Ajrouch et al., 2010). It can also be the case that if the type of

instrumental support offered (e.g. child care) is not the support the individual is hoping for

(e.g. cash) then the support is not perceived as support.

Emotional support seems to have its benefits. It can serve as a buffer in tough

situations, reducing stress and contributing to better mental health, including a reduction

in suicidal thoughts (Schutt, Meschede, & Rierdan, 1994; Turner & Lloyd, 1999).

Fitzpatrick (2007) found that having social ties to housed individuals makes individuals

feel better about themselves and can buffer suicide ideation. Having connections outside of

homeless circles can provide resources not available within their current circles. Ward and

Turner (2007) found that informal networks were an important predictor for not relying

on welfare benefits. However, it is not clear whether the numbers of social networks are

serving as a substitute to welfare benefits or whether the numbers of social networks are

related to ineligibility for TANF benefits.

There are still gaps in the literature on social support and homelessness. For

example, most of the studies discussed have focused on street homeless individuals. Now

that the definition of homelessness has expanded to include those in less precarious housing conditions, research is needed to determine how social networks and support operate within the new circles of homeless individuals. Brownrigg (2006) found the motel residents come from different socio-economic backgrounds and as such it is difficult to identify general patterns in their social networks and how they join or distance themselves from communities of residents. In her research she found that some avoid contact with others as a way to protect their privacy and anonymity while others form or join social groups within the hotel ("cliques") or socialize with others outside the hotel (Brownrigg, 2006, p.60). The function of these "cliques" was not explored beyond the obvious social aspect that would be categorized as emotional support.

Across studies, it seems that although homeless individuals are not as socially isolated as they are sometimes believed to be, their networks are not composed of people who are in a position to help them very much. The colloquialism "blood is thicker than water" would suggest family would be willing to provide more support than friends or acquaintances. Hence, in the case of friends or acquaintances, they may not feel it is their role or their obligation to offer instrumental assistance to others who are not their kin. However, although homeless individuals' social networks may be comparable in size to those of housed individuals, their networks are more likely to be made up of friends rather than family. As the length of time homeless increases so does this type of network over family ties. Friends or acquaintances may replace their pre-homeless social ties by providing the emotional support needed as they progress through their period of homelessness, but those social ties are not in a position to provide instrumental support

(Eyrich, Pollio, & North, 2003). This aligns with the observed pattern across the general population where our social networks are made up of others similar to us.

Furthermore, some research has noted that individuals may feel as if they are more socially supported by the agencies that serve them compared to their family and friends. This follows the findings from Shinn et al. (1991), which showed that those who become homeless have already exhausted their existing resources within their social networks. Therefore, it only makes sense that they would perceive the staff/workers of the institution that is offering some kind of assistance to them as their only or more important social support at that time. However, perceived social support varies by gender. Stovall and Flaherty (1994) found that homeless men had higher perceived social support than homeless women and notably, felt more support from social service agencies than their female counterparts. Perhaps, this is a result of the widespread belief that there are more services available to women, especially women with children, and so women entering the shelter system may have higher expectations of support than the single men. In turn, they would be more likely to be disappointed with the support (or lack thereof) provided by the agencies compared to the men.

Among some researchers (and even the public), there is a perception that minority groups tend to have stronger family ties than non-minority groups and this serves as a buffer from negative experiences such as homelessness. The widespread belief that Latinos have strong family ties was used to explain why rates of homelessness were proportionately lower among Latinos, even in traditionally high Latino population areas (Baker, 1996). The "Latino Paradox" (Baker, 1996) in the context of homelessness,

referred to the contradiction that although Latinos and African-Americans both have high

poverty rates, low incomes and education, Latinos are not disproportionally represented

among homeless populations whereas African Americans are. Molina (2000) found that

the networks of homeless English-speaking Latino men and African-American men

consisted primarily of "associates", informal networks made up of other homeless who

provide emotional support, and leads for jobs but also provide access to alcohol. These

types of informal, loose social contacts can be a necessity for survival on the streets, and

the longer the period of homelessness experienced the less likely they are to have access to

housed individuals in their social networks. Molina (2000) did find that Spanish-speaking

Latino men tended to have "better" networks in that they were more likely to be connected

to housed individuals and their networks were very work-oriented.

The literature on social support of homeless individuals, although extensive, has

focused on sheltered and street homeless persons. The dynamics in social networks and

support may differ for those who are living in motels and perhaps still have strong ties to

their housed social networks since they may still consider themselves housed and not

homeless as providers identify them. This project aims to contribute to the social support

literature on homeless individuals by exploring the social networks and support of families

living in motels.

Social Service Providers

The literature on social service providers tends to focus on work strain, compassion

fatigue and/or burnout. A few studies have focused on how social service providers

perceive their clients. In regards to homeless individuals, it has been noted that social

service providers tend to infantilize their clients---that is, treat them like children (Hoffman & Coffey, 2008). Homeless individuals have reported negative experiences with providers that include being treated like children, with disrespect, treated as if sub-human (Choi & Snyder, 1999; Hoffman & Coffey, 2008).

Social service providers can serve as a social support net for homeless families, especially those who have no family or have broken ties with their kin. Typically, the expectation from homeless individuals is that social service providers are there to help, to listen to their story and provide solutions in the form of assistance and guidance. Some homeless families have suffered disappointment when encountering social service providers. Among homeless mothers in shelters, Averitt (2003) found that mothers expected staff to have a caring and empathetic attitude but instead found them to be uncaring. Furthermore, the mothers at the shelter felt the staff exerted power over them by providing strict rules and guidelines for them and threatening to kick them out if they did not abide by their instructions (Averitt, 2003).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS AND DATA

The literature on homelessness has been primarily characterized by surveys of sheltered or street homeless persons. Such studies have offered great insight into the quantifiable aspects of homelessness such as demographics of particular homeless populations, frequency of utilization of services, and length of time spent homeless. Some researchers have ventured into qualitative studies of homeless persons, particularly for discussions of homeless identity, the conceptualization of privacy and personal space, as well as exposure to violence (Jasinski, Wesely, & Wright, 2010; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Walsh, Rutherford, & Kuzmak, 2009). Hoffman and Coffey (2008, p. 208) suggest that "one way to enhance solutions to complex problems of homelessness is to consider the qualitative experience of interaction between providers and clients." Following their suggestion, this project includes one-on-one interviews with homeless families living in motels as well as interviews with social service providers and motel operators for better context of the homelessness issue in this area.

The Setting: Kissimmee, Florida

Data collection for this project was geographically limited to Kissimmee, Florida. Kissimmee is the most populous city in Osceola County which shares its northern border with Orange County—home of the tourist capital of the state, Orlando. Osceola County was chosen for this study for a variety of reasons. The main reason is the sheer number of extended-stay motels in the area due to its proximity to the local tourist attractions. The

local economy relies heavily on hospitality and retail which are both marked by low-wages. Osceola County used to have an economy based in cattle ranching until Disney and the subsequent theme parks and tourist attractions set up shop in the region over the past four decades. These developments led to a rapid increase in population—from 49,287 in 1980 to over 268,000 in 2010—increasing 55.8% over just a single decade (Census, 2010). In 2010, 25.4 percent of Osceola County's labor force worked in the leisure and hospitality industry, which is the largest employing industry in the county (Florida, 2011). This dynamic acts as a double-edged sword for the local residents who work in these industries: work is plentiful but at a very low wage. It is difficult to move up the ranks in these types of jobs, especially since the majority of positions are part-time and employers do their best to keep them that way to avoid paying benefits. As a side effect of the population growth due to the "Pixie Dust" or "Disney effect"—when individuals uproot their families and move to Central Florida thinking it's the land "where dreams come true"—when the economy went into recession and developments came to a halt, it also put a lot of construction and trade workers out of jobs (Wright & Donley, 2011). A sign of this is the fact that two of the three day-labor sites in the Osceola County closed within the last three years.

A local report by a non-profit organization states that in 2006, Osceola County was ranked in the top ten least affordable counties in the state based on its housing affordability index (Vision, 2008). A housing affordability index of 100 means that a family who earns the median income can afford to purchase a single family home at the median price (higher scores = greater affordability). The housing affordability index in Osceola County decreased from 108.42 in 2003 to 55.71 in 2006 (Vision, 2008). As of 2009, 31

percent of Osceola County households were housing cost burdened (paying more than 30

percent of their income towards housing) and 13 percent were severely cost burdened

paying more than 50% of their income towards housing (Clearinghouse, 2010).

In a "Call to Action" meeting hosted by the Department of Children and Families

(DCF) in January 2012, it was reported that 13 percent (7,507 children) of Florida's

homeless youth live in the tri-county area of Central Florida which is made up of Orange,

Osceola and Seminole Counties. Of these, 24 percent live in hotels/motels, which amounts

to about 1,800 children (DCF, 2012). According to the school district's McKinney-Vento

Homeless liaison officer in Osceola County, there were 2,600 homeless children registered

for school in Osceola County at the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year, of which 1,002

(38.5 percent) were living in motels (Griffin, 2012). The number of motel residents tends

to be higher in Osceola County than in other counties because there is no emergency

shelter in the county and motels act as a pseudo shelter for families in need. Osceola

County's 2009 population was 270,618 compared to 1,086, 480 in Orange County (Census,

2010), and Orange County only reported 1,200 homeless children (Personal

Communication, 2009). This figure gives some indication as to the number of families that

utilize motels as a housing alternative but also to the disproportionate number of homeless

families in Osceola County. Further, these figures do not paint the whole picture since this

number is based on school children and motel residents might be individuals, couples or

households with no children or no school-aged children.

Recruitment

 Motel Residents

Participants were originally recruited through the use of flyers that were distributed to a few service providers including churches with food pantries open to motel families. Representative sampling was never an option as there is no current mechanism for systematically listing or sampling the regional homeless population.   I found that the flyers were not as beneficial as having direct contact with families living in motels in the motel common areas or during outreach events. Motel residents with children try to not disclose their personal information to just anyone out of fear they will be reported to DCF, be investigated and potentially lose custody of their children simply because they are "homeless." Therefore, I had to become a familiar face to them by volunteering at outreach events at motels, delivering groceries to the rooms weekly, and serving lunches to children at motels in order to send a message to the families that my intentions were good and I was not out to get them. In addition, a $25 financial incentive was offered to the families who participated in the study.

Most of the interviews were the result of a direct referral from a participant. As such, snowball sampling proved to be extremely useful. Most participants referred only one or two other participants, so I encountered no major issues such as the oversampling of a particular network of people. A total of 18 families were interviewed. Five of these interviews were conducted with both adults in the household and the rest were only with

one parent for a total of 23 participants. The participants came from seven motels along the main highway (192) in Kissimmee. Some of these motels were in better condition and had better reputations than others, although every motel resident reported having hotel-hopped at some point during their journey as a motel dweller. The initial plan was to conduct interviews in a public location chosen by the participant but due to transportation and child care restraints this was not always possible. Five interviews were conducted outside of the motel and the rest were conducted in the participant's motel room. Zussman (2004) states the benefits and importance of studying people in natural settings because it allows the researcher to not only be "alert to what people said not just in interviews but also *in vivo*. Interviewing slops over into observation" (p.360). Being in the room with the participants opened my eyes into their world, and gave me much more context than I would have had simply by their description of their living quarters. As one deputy sheriff told me in reference to a particular motel, "you've got to smell this place." Spending time in the motel room with the families was beneficial for my understanding of the families' narrative, experience and frustrations.

All interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed into Microsoft Word documents for analysis. As a bilingual researcher, I had the ability to conduct interviews in English and in Spanish. Three interviews were conducted fully in Spanish and two interviews were bilingual. These interviews were transcribed and later translated. To protect confidentiality, the participants' names mentioned here are pseudonyms—some were chosen by the participants themselves, the others were assigned by me.

Service Providers & Motel Operators

Service providers and motel operators were recruited for face-to-face interviews through direct contact either in person, by phone or via email. Osceola County does not have an emergency shelter for homeless individuals and families so there were no exclusively "homeless" service providers in this area. The service providers in the area include the county human services office (the housing authority is under this office), a few non-profit organizations, the health department, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and various faith-based groups or churches that do regular outreach to those living in motels. I also relied on the motel residents to provide information about the agencies and/or faith based groups that they had contacted for assistance so I could include those in the sample as well.

A total of twenty service providers representing eleven agencies and five motel operators were interviewed. Some of the interviews were formally conducted, in a chosen setting, where they were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Others were conducted in the field during outreach events where audio recordings were not appropriate. In those instances, detailed field notes were taken and later transcribed for analysis.

Motel operators were the most difficult group to recruit for participation. I received a lot of negative responses from some motel managers and owners. At the time of data collection, a CBS *60 Minutes* news story about children living in motels in Central Florida had aired on national television. Although the motel staff never explicitly told me why they did not want to be interviewed, I suspect at least part of the reason was the recent focus on

the number of people living in motels in this area. Most of these motels are not "licensed" as extended-stay establishments and therefore are violating city or county ordinances by allowing people to stay at their motel for extended periods of time. In addition, it is commonly known in the area that some of these establishments are hubs for illicit activities such as drug dealing and prostitution. When I called one motel to see if I could schedule an appointment with the manager, the manager did not understand why I would need to interview her and in her broken English told me, "we only do lodging, no prostitution, no drugs, only lodging" and she did not grant me an appointment because she said there was nothing more to say. I assume that the hesitation on the part of staff comes from fear of their establishment becoming publically outed as one such hub of illegal activity. (I later learned from other motel managers and police officers that the motel that turned me down has had a history of drug deals and prostitution.)

The reality is that most of these cheap motels are struggling to stay open and hence, some do not have the money to upkeep the place as they should. Consistently I heard complaints of roach infested rooms all along the Highway 192 strip, so again, I suspect the motel staff is aware of these issues and feared public disclosure- even though I identified myself as a student researcher, provided them with a legitimate business card, and told them everything was confidential.

Participation from motel staff was only achieved by engaging in the community and first making contact as a volunteer for another agency. I volunteered with an organization that delivers food to the motels once a week. This allowed me to meet motel staff members that were cooperative and willing to work with the community. More often than not, these

staff members were free of the types of fear and distrust exhibited by motel owners. The formal interviews that were conducted were all with motel staff who were working with this organization and/or had agreed to host outreach events for those living at their establishment. Hence, their "identity" as extended stay was already public and they were not afraid to talk to me about it. During the data collection period I also did a ride-along with a deputy officer, where I spent a 12 hour shift riding along west Highway 192 where these motels are heavily concentrated. The Deputy was able to introduce me to a couple of motel staff members in between calls. At first I was hesitant to do this because I did not want the motel staff to associate me with the sheriff's office and fear that I would report them for illegal activity. However, at that time I felt I had exhausted every other way of reaching out to the motel staff and had not been successful. Fortunately, the Deputy I was assigned had good rapport with some motel staff members and I was able to make contact and speak to some managers whom I had not been able to reach otherwise. In this case, these managers were not formally interviewed—meaning I was unable to sit down with them, ask them the full list of questions and audio-record the interview. Instead they answered questions on the fly as they were doing their job or giving a statement to the officer in some cases. A total of five managers were interviewed. Although the motel staff talked to me from their perspective as a motel employee, four out of five managers I interviewed lived on-site in the motel so they were also motel residents. Two of the motel staff I interviewed lived on-site with their partners and young children because they were related to the owner. The others were single individuals who had no relation to the owner, but had lived in the motel prior to becoming an employee of the motel.

Description of Participants

The participants in this study consist of members of families with children who were currently living in a motel along the west Highway 192 corridor in Kissimmee. Table 1 shows the demographics of all the participants. Fourteen of the families interviewed were intact families with mom and dad both living in the motel room. All but one of the households interviewed had children living in the motel room with them at the time of the interview. Ten of the 18 households (56 percent) were Latino. Two families were non-Hispanic Black and the rest were non-Hispanic, White. The high proportion of Latinos in this sample is representative of this particular region. The City of Kissimmee does have a minority majority—58.9 percent of their population is Latino and the county population as a whole is 46.3 percent Latino (Census, 2010).

The majority of the participants (12 out of the 18 households) came to the area from out of state, mostly from northern states and Puerto Rico. They came specifically to Kissimmee looking for a better life for their families. Some had visited the area in recent years and believed it to be a viable solution for their families' financial situation and quality of life while others simply relied upon word of mouth and/or their perception of the area to make the decision to uproot their families to the area. The length of time living at the motel ranged from having moved in two weeks prior to the interview to a little over three years with an average length of stay of 11 months for the entire sample. Besides the couple without children, the smallest household was made up of three persons and the largest were seven in one room (3 families had 7 members each). The median household size was four members per room. Most of the families had young children which presented a

barrier for employment for the mothers. All families paid relatively similar weekly rates regardless of the motel where they resided or the number of people in the room. The rates ranged from $160 to $190 per week.

Studies of homeless families in emergency shelters have noted that families typically move often to avoid homelessness—from family member to family member/friend, from one overcrowded living arrangement to another until they wear out their welcomes and have to resort to the shelter (Rog & Buckner, 2007). For these motel residents this was not the case. Most of the residents lost their housing and moved directly into the motel albeit some traveled across state lines to get here to move into the motel. None of them reported coming from an overcrowded housing arrangement with family/friends directly prior to moving into the motel.

The education level of this sample paints a picture of a struggling background and future for these families. Nine of the participants (of the 23 total participants) did not complete high school, two of which dropped out in middle school. Five of the school dropouts were male and four female. Seven participants reported having "some college." Only two participants (both women) in the sample reported having a college degree, although as later discussed these may not be traditional four-year degrees but more likely associate's degrees or some technical school certificate program.

Only one household had no employment or income at all at the time of the interview. That family had moved into the motel and used up their savings to pay the motel rent and when the money ran out they had been relying on charity from faith-based

groups to pay for their daily rate (for 2 weeks at that time). Eleven of the households had one unemployed adult—the other adult either was either employed or receiving disability income (SSDI) and in one case the partner was a full-time student. In those cases the family had hopes of fulfilling their income potential once the other adult became employed. One participant who is a single father survived on his SSDI monthly check. The rest of the households (5) had two adults working either full- or part-time. Not all income was earned through a legitimate employer. In a couple of cases, the jobs or side jobs were done under the table for cash pay. I categorized these individuals as "employed" because they reported a steady stream of paid work even though it was tax-free and untraceable. The employment and/or employment histories of the motel residents were concentrated in three industries: construction (for the men), hospitality, and retail. Within the intact families, women were more likely to stay at home caring for the kids, but they still talked about having worked or looking for work in hospitality or retail. These industries are characterized by low hourly wages and seasonal/part-time work which plagued the families in this study.

Table 1. Demographics of Extended Stay Motel Residents in Osceola County

Name	Age	Type of Household	# people in room	Children's Ages	Ethnicity/ Race	Household Employment & Industry (FT=full-time PT=part-time)
Inocencia	32	Single parent	3	6/8	Hispanic/ White	FT Hospitality
Laura	31	Two-parent	4	10/2	Hispanic/ White	Laura: Student Partner: PT Retail
Mara	32	Two-parent	5	13/12/6	Hispanic/ White	Mara: PT hospitality Partner: PT construction
Luis	36	Two-parent	3	11 mos	Hispanic/ White	Luis: Temp work Partner: FT retail
Yanira/ Julio	28/ 37	Two-parent	6	8/6/5/2	Hispanic/ White	Both unemployed
Sunny	46	Two-parent	7	18/17/15/12 / 10mos	White	Sunny: SSDI Partner: FT retail
Jack/ Marge	41/ 44	Couple, no kids	2	N/A	White	Both FT hospitality
Aida/ Joey	30/ 34	Two-parent	4	4/ 2	Hispanic/ White	Aida: Unemployed Joey: PT construction
Donna	51	Two-parent	4	18/ 13	White/ Hispanic/ White	Donna: PT hospitality Partner: Cash PT construction
Jennifer	27	Single/ Extended	5	15/4	Hispanic Black	Unemployed
Natalia	18	Two-parent	3	2 mos	Hispanic/ White	Natalia: Unemployed Partner: Cash PT landscaping
Debbie	33	Two-parent	7	13/11/6/4/4	White	Debbie: Unemployed Partner: PT construction
Jackson	49	Single parent	4	5/2/6mos	Black	SSDI
Jane/ Mike	25/ 26	Two-parent	6	7/4/3/2/ pregnant	Hispanic White	Jane: Unemployed Mike: SSDI
Ellen	27	Two-parent	6	17/5/4/2	White	Ellen: Unemployed Partner: FT homeland security
Jeanette	23	Two-parent	4	4/1	Hispanic/ White	Jeanette: Unemployed Partner: PT hospitality
Joe/ Orphee	47/ 37	Two-parent	4	15/6	Black	Joe: SSDI Orphee: Unemployed
Dee	38	Two-parent	4	6/1	White	Disability/Unemployed

Table 2. Participants' Reasons for Moving to Florida and Motel

Participant's Names	Where moved from?	How long ago did they move?	Length of time living at motel	Reason for move to Kissimmee, if applicable	Reason(s) for living in motel
Inocencia	Puerto Rico	2 years	2 years	Jobs/Better quality of life	Insufficient Income
Laura	Pennsylvania		3 months	Job transferred, better quality of life	Eviction, Insufficient Income
Mara	Connecticut	13 years	6 months		Eviction, Insufficient Income
Luis	New York	13 years	2.5 yrs off & on	Followed family's move	Eviction, Unemployed
Yanira/Julio	Puerto Rico	2 mos	2 months	Better quality of life	No income, lived off of savings and now charity
Sunny	Michigan	4 mos	4 months	Jobs	Insufficient Income
Jack/Marge	New Jersey	3 years	1.5 years	Jobs	Lack of transportation
Aida/Joey	Puerto Rico	8 years	3 yrs off & on	Better quality of life	Insufficient Income
Donna	Native FL	-	3 months		Family Conflict, No savings
Jennifer	New York	2 years	1 year	Moved with parents	Eviction/Unemployed
Natalia	Native FL	-	3 yrs off & on	N/A	Family conflict/Unemployed
Debbie	Indiana	3 mos	3 months	Jobs	Insufficient Income
Jackson	Las Vegas	2 years	2 weeks	Medical Treatment	Eviction, Fixed income
Jane/Mike	Rhode Island	1 year	1 year	Better quality of life	He's on fixed income, She's unemployed
Ellen	Jacksonville, FL	2 mos	2 months	Job transfer	Insufficient Income, Need money for deposits
Jeanette	Puerto Rico	7 years	7 months	Moved with parents	Family Conflict, Insufficient Income
Joe/Orphee	South Carolina	6 mos	6 months	Jobs/Better quality of life	He's on fixed income, She's unemployed
Dee	Colorado	6 mos	6 mos	Weather/better quality of life	She's on fixed Income, Husband's unemployed

Analytic Strategy

Each interview with motel residents was audio-recorded and transcribed for ease of coding and analysis. I personally conducted and transcribed each of the interviews which allowed me to make notes as I transcribed on the non-verbal communication that may have occurred during the interview. The interviews were semi-structured to allow me to prompt for additional information as necessary. All interview questions were open-ended. For the main research question of this study—whether motel residents identify as homeless (see Chapter 4)—a social constructionist perspective was used to analyze the data. Social constructionism refers to the idea that knowledge and the meaning that we attach to things, experiences, and statuses are all constructed from our surrounding cultural and historical contexts, experiences, and interactions (Burr, 2003).

I used social constructionism to identify the ways in which individuals constructed their identities as persons of low standing and without traditional housing. The participants' narratives are stories of the past and present based on their individual recollections of those times and as such, are constructed or re-constructed during the interview. In doing so, "individuals construct past events and actions in personal narratives to claim identities and construct lives" (Riessman, 1993, p. 2). These narratives are "works of history as much as they are about individuals, the social spaces they inhabit, and the societies they live in" (Riessman, 2002, p. 697). I chose social constructionism as the framework for analysis for the identity theme discussed in Chapter 4 because of the widespread assumptions regarding what it means to be homeless. For the most part, the general population tends to view homeless persons as people to blame for their own misfortune as a result of not working hard enough—someone who is dangerous and should

be avoided, or a substance abuser (Jasinski, 2011). Aware of the broad cultural assumptions others may carry, individuals found themselves negotiating ways around this image and public perception to create an identity that they deemed worthy and positive.

Although my initial research question—which revolved around identity construction—utilized a constructionist framework, the remainder of my data was analyzed using an interactionist perspective. Following the recommendations of Silverman (2006), the open-ended design of my interview questions was necessary for me to develop a symbolic understanding of the experiences associated with living in motels. The questions that comprised the first half of my interview schedule solicited a general description of the participants' experience living in a motel in order to break the ice and build rapport with the interviewees. It was through these general questions where the themes outside of the main research question (identity construction) for this project emerged from. Hence, I analyzed these data from a symbolic interactionist/emotionalist perspective (Silverman, 2006).

The analysis consisted of open coding—breaking the data apart into chunks of similar categories, then axial coding and comparative analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). First, I read through all of the transcripts making notes related to the main research question (i.e. any mention of the word homeless, home) as well as other themes that seemed important to the participants. Examples of these initial themes identified are: identity, motel life, judgments, social support, mental health, and service providers. I then copied and pasted the excerpts from these themes into separate Microsoft Word documents for further analysis. As I read through the quotes from each theme, sub-themes

became apparent. For example, under the identity document, it was easier to note the number of instances that a participant discussed their situation not being their personal choice. I read through each document and continued to identify sub-themes and separate them into documents for ease of analysis and comparison. Each sub-theme presented here is represented by at least five participants. The themes are also presented in descending order from most prevalent to least prevalent.

Methodological and Ethical Considerations

As a former director of programs for a transitional housing program for homeless families, I have been aware of the debate over the federal homeless definition and the advocacy to change it to make it be more inclusive for several years. As the date where the official definition change neared, I became more excited for this project. Because of my familiarity with the area and experiences with homeless families in the area, I believed this project would be easier for me to conduct than it really was. Although I took measures to make the research as sound as possible, there are some limitations, methodological and ethical concerns to consider when reading the findings.

The geographic location, like in any other research study, presents a limitation in that the experiences of the motel residents in Kissimmee, a relatively rural yet tourist driven region, may not be representative of motel residents in other areas of the country. The reasons for moving to a motel in Central Florida may be different than in other locations, as suggested by Brownrigg (2006). However, there are indications by mainstream media that there are other regions in the US where families are living in motels

as a result of low wages and lack of affordable housing, similar to the experiences of the families in this study (Burge, 2012; Eckholm, 2009; Toner, 2011).

Out of personal comfort and convenience, this study was limited to families with children. There is one couple included in the sample who was referred to me via a social service provider who misunderstood the eligibility requirements and suggested this couple for the study and arranged a time for us to meet. After traveling to the interview site and realizing they did not meet the criteria I decided to proceed with the interview so as not to have wasted their time and travel money. Besides them, the interviews were limited to families with children in order to allow for comparisons among their experiences.   Based on my interview with the couple who had no children, I understand that the experiences of families with and without children are different in some respects and should be noted as unique. In addition, the experiences described in this study are self-reported by the participants and are described as they constructed their situation at that particular point in time and in the context of the interview. Without longitudinal data, we cannot clearly know whether their experiences, feelings, and perceptions of motel families are consistent over time and what the effects of those factors are on their life satisfaction, mental and physical health.

I am aware that my mere presence as an interviewer influences the outcome of the interviews via reactivity. It is impossible to ignore the power and class differentials between myself and the participants. As a young Latina who is widely perceived as white, my middle class background, sex, education, and overall social position stand in stark contrast to those of the participants in this study. However, there were points in some

interviews where the participant assumed I was "one of them", particularly among those families who considered themselves "just struggling" middle class folks.

As a result of the difference in social positions and education levels between myself and many participants, some participants did not clearly understand my role as a student and a researcher. Prior to beginning an interview I gave the participants an Explanation of Research form, which some just put aside and others looked like they were at least skimming it. Then I verbally explained the nature and purpose of the study, told them about the topics we would discuss, gave them an idea of the questions I would ask, explained it was voluntary and they could stop at any time, and finally asked if they were comfortable participating. Neither the participants nor I discussed or asked about the financial incentive or what would happen if they quit before all the questions were asked prior to beginning the interview. This was not done on purpose on my part, I honestly just did not think to explain that at that time and after a couple of interviews I had formed a mental script to follow without much thought. Although I believed I was thorough in my explanation and role, at the end of the interview some participants asked something along the lines of "so what is this for?" which made me realize they either did not understand what I had said or did not care at the beginning because they were only interested in the incentive. Then there were those who did not understand that I was only a student and could not provide any more assistance beyond the $25. Multiple families used me as a directory for area resources and asked me if I knew where they could get assistance or asked me directly for things. A couple of times participants made comments saying they knew I could not help them directly but I could be their "voice" because people would listen to me rather than if they asked for something themselves. Although it was beyond my

scope, I did carry a local resource guide so I could provide the families with contact information for some agencies. At the beginning, I also utilized my personal contacts to get families immediate assistance (e.g. food, motel rent). This additional assistance took place after the interview was completed, and it bore no impact on the data.   This was early in the data collection period and I had to do some personal reflecting on what my stand would be when people reached out to me for help. At that point I realized that as word spread and I would meet more families in need, I would not be able to offer them direct help so when asked I began deflecting to the local agencies. Two of the families I helped continued to call my cell phone asking for further assistance and this provided me with great guilt. I could not provide any more assistance and eventually they stopped calling. Throughout the remainder of the study, I did not offer any further assistance beyond referring people to service providers.

The financial incentives were a double edged sword. I had attempted to recruit participants without a financial incentive and was not successful. Once I advertised the financial incentive and did one interview, the word spread and I was able to conduct a number of interviews in a relatively short amount of time. The incentives present issues of data quality but some would argue that it presented an ethical issue as well. Most participants were referred to me by other participants. I assume that they communicated to other people that they would receive $25 cash if they participated. No one asked about it once I showed up to do the interview. One participant did contact me and in her voicemail message stated that she needed money for diapers and could use $50 so she wanted to schedule an interview. She was under the impression that the incentive was $25 per person and I could interview her and her husband. Two other individuals contacted me

after data collection was over wanting to schedule interviews and when I informed them

the study was done, they asked if there were any other studies they could participate or if I

knew of any other ways to earn money. After some of the interviews, some participants

made comments as to what a blessing the money was and what they planned to do with the

money. This presents another ethical concern, whether participants gave consent freely to

participate in the study since they were in such a position of need for the money. The

amount of the financial incentive is the standard amount offered to participants in previous

similar research studies (Reid, 2011; Wingate-Lewinson et al., 2010).

CHAPTER FOUR: HOMELESSNESS AND IDENTITY

The main research question in this dissertation is whether individuals who live in motels consider themselves homeless, as the new federal homeless definition states. For the majority of the participants in this study and the public abroad, the image that comes to mind when they hear the word homeless is a disheveled homeless man on the street. This was true even for the ones who were aware that the county and local school district now considers those in motels homeless just the same as street homelessness. Each participant explained their situation in comparison to those who are on the street and in doing so categorized different types of homelessness and homeless persons. Some placed themselves in the hierarchy and others totally excluded themselves from the homeless category. This chapter discusses the negotiated terms for homelessness that participants constructed as well as their homeless identity management strategies they used during the interview in order to present a positive self- and social identity.

What does it mean to be homeless?

Participants were asked direct questions about whether they identified as a homeless person, what they perceived as homeless, and what it means to be homeless. Everyone at some point during the interview talked about the "homeless man behind the building" as their image of homelessness. In some cases, they were literal references as there are known homeless men who live behind two of the motels where interviews were conducted. In others it was the generic reference to street homelessness, the disheveled

homeless man with no place to go and no one around. For these extended stay motel

residents, homelessness was constructed as something other than just roof-lessness.

In this sample there were a number of participants who completely identified as

homeless. They had no hesitation to say they were indeed homeless. Though they were

paying tenants and had been able to maintain the roof over their heads for some time, they

still felt as if they lacked something and did not feel like the motel was their "home." They

had a roof and four walls, but no home.   Sunny, a recent Michigan migrant to Florida, was

the most direct and outspoken about her situation.

> Sunny: Yeah, I don't hide it. I don't ….cover it or candy coat. I, I'm not ashamed of
>
> being homeless, I'm not ashamed of where I live, I, if people want to see how I live,
>
> come see how I live, you know. I'm not going to lie to myself. I want people to know
>
> what it's like to be homeless.

To her, the motel fits the definition of homelessness and denying that it does would be lying

to herself. Throughout our conversation she made comparisons between the motel and a

shelter but unlike another participant who thought living in a motel was the same as a

shelter, Sunny did view the motel as a step above the shelter. For Sunny, living in the motel

allowed her independence and freedom from rules that she did not agree with. However,

she still considered living in a motel as living within the scope of homelessness because of

her inability to leave and find adequate housing with enough space for her family of seven.

Other participants tried to explain why they felt as if they had no home even though they

had a room to go to.

> Aida: Well, home, like, everyone says home is where your family is at, it doesn't
>
> matter where you're at but it DOES matter. How do I say this? The home is your

family but you still need that room, you need your own space, your children need their own space, they need to have their own room to play in, their own bed, it's healthy, it's just healthy….

Ellen: My husband's like we have a, I'm like we don't have a home, we have a freaking room. Makes me mad. He gets mad when I'm like "we're going back to the room" and he's like "it's our home right now" but it's not home. That is not home.

Laura: Not just without a home, but uhm, without a root. Without, you know, it's not just a building, ugh, I mean I don't know how to explain it. A Home. A Home. A home is where you walk into and you feel comfortable and you wanna "aahhh, relax" and all that and feel welcomed, feels like home and homeless….no matter, if it's not yours it doesn't feel like you're home…

Just as Watson and Austerberry (1986) described in their book, there is a significant difference between having a roof over your head and a home. There are tangible things such as decorations and the ability to surround yourself with belongings that you choose as well as intangibles such as comfort, stability, and peace that are components of the place we choose to call home. Clearly, the experiences of the motel residents suggest that home is not just where the heart is as the common saying goes. You need the heart *and* ample space to get away from those you love if need be, in order to feel at home.

When it comes to identity and feelings of home, there is potentially a sub-set of individuals who, even though they are living in a motel with children, may feel adequately housed and content with their situation. Although not formally interviewed as part of the

sample for this study, I spoke with a couple with two children who had lived at various motels for five years and they viewed their last move to an extended stay suites motel as an improvement in their housing. The room they were staying in was more spacious than a standard motel room, had a kitchen, and featured a separate bedroom with a door. In essence, these "rooms" could be seen as studios or even small one-bedroom apartments. This particular family said to me, "it's like living in an apartment" because they had to pay a $125 deposit to move in, had their own private bedroom separate from the kids (who slept in a fold-out sofa in the living area), and the manager even allowed them to bring in their own furniture because in their words, "he knows we're trying to do better so he helps us out." This family felt they had a home, a nice home to "come home to," and the convenient proximity to their work, grocery store and pharmacy made it all the better. Although I did not get the opportunity to talk to any other families at this particular motel, the conversations with this particular family present a different outlook on living in a motel from the families in my sample. Hence, it is possible that families can find adequacy and happiness living in a motel that offers a more traditional housing layout. Although this family qualified and took advantage of the benefits offered to "homeless" motel families, they did not feel homeless at all and that showed in their enthusiasm to share their story and their living space with me.

Homelessness = Financial Instability

It was evident that all of the families at the motels were suffering from great financial instability. Each and every one mentioned the worry of "what will happen to us if we don't have the money to pay this week." Even though most of the participants said they would actually identify as homeless, they constructed homelessness differently than what

they believed to be the conventional image of homelessness. They certainly did not see themselves on the same level as the "homeless man behind the building" but they were aware of their proximity to him. Most talked about their homelessness as their financial instability and imminent risk of street homelessness.

One particular participant, Inocencia, had done a bit of introspection on her situation. Inocencia, a two year motel resident, said she did not identify as homeless for a while. She explained that the first time she was asked whether she was homeless was at her daughter's school when she went to enroll her for the school year and the staff recognized her address as one of a hotel. Prior to that incident, she had never even considered the word "homeless" to describe her situation. Inocencia had already made mention of her homelessness to me earlier in the interview so I asked her why she did not consider herself homeless at the time (almost 2 years ago) and she replied: "Because it was something painful. That word, homeless, to me meant abandonment. . ." She explained how she came to cope with the term for herself:

> Inocencia: Because it's ok. I'm homeless but I am happy. I have a life. I have a family. I have a home, which is really what it meant most to me. That home, give it meaning. It's ok that we don't have a house that is ours, that is in my name but we have this room that we are paying and inside it we are going to learn and hold on to everything we need so that one day we can have a home.

At the same time, at another point during the interview she said the reason why she is homeless is because of her financial instability, "yes, because you don't have the economic resources that maintain, that help you maintain your own roof that is not a hotel." She understood that she was living at the edge and could fall off the cliff with just a little bump.

This feeling resonated across many of the participants. The majority considered themselves homeless as a result of their financial instability; not knowing how or if they would be able to pay today or this week's rent. When asked, do you consider yourself homeless, these were some of the responses:

Mara: Of course. Because he [partner] couldn't pay for everything sometimes, in fact, sometimes we were behind with the office at the hotel, can you imagine that?

Jane: Because we don't know what's going to happen next month. God forbid something happens, what if an unexpected anything happens and we have to you know give money to something else, we're gonna have what, maybe 3 weeks of rent, maybe if that. If not, we're going to be on the street just like everyone else. He only makes $700 a month. If you get one little unexpected bump in the road, you're on the street. And these hotels they don't care, they're a business, they will kick you out right on the street, doesn't matter if you have kids or not, they're not a landlord. They have the right to kick you out.

Yanira: Well, in part YEEESSS, when they ask me I say it, I am homeless in the sense that I don't have a fixed place for my kids you know what I mean. If I don't have $40 to pay for this day in this motel then I have to go out on the street and look for one that's $30 or $20 you know so I'm still on the street. Yeah, I consider myself homeless.

Joe: Well, in a way we are. We are. But now, what if I wouldn't have any income, where would I be? You know. You know, we it is because that's still like a rope where they got me, how much can I do? You know. We don't do what we agree, you miss one of the things we agree on within that month, we'd be messed up. Messed up. It's all about survival. That's all it is. Knowing how to survive.

Clearly, these families were all aware of their vulnerability and risk of street homelessness. Most still perceived homelessness as roof-lessness and they were aware that although they had a roof over their head, they were closer to the homeless man behind the building rather than a housed family. Yet, one sees in the quotes from Yanira and Joe a bit of hesitation in identifying themselves as homeless. They both start off their responses with qualifiers, "In part" or "In a way", suggesting they are different than the "true" homeless people. Jack and Marge were clear about this sentiment. They did not view themselves as homeless because they were not living behind the Publix.

Jack: Like we see people out on the streets, in their cars, we see a lot of homeless people behind the Publix and things like that. We're borderline, we're right there. I mean it could be next, tomorrow we could be, that could be us. . . .I believe that. When you're that close, you might as well say it. You know. I'll say I'm homeless I guess. . .Me and Marge are kind of borderline. . .we're doing pretty well. We're pretty lucky.

Jack clearly struggles with the word a bit. At one point he resigns and says he'll call himself homeless "I guess" as if to say if that's what you want to call me alright, but then he reverses to saying he is borderline and lucky to not be on the streets. In this particular case, I believe his hesitation to accept the label stems from the fact that he knows the only

56

barrier he has for what we would refer to as permanent, stable housing is transportation.

Their only reason for being in the motel is they could not find housing on the bus line quick

enough to move in when they needed to find a place. Their finances are stable and so they

are not experiencing the additional stresses that other families, particularly those with

children, are experiencing.

Then there's Jennifer who does not consider her and her family homeless because

they pay for rent each week. What is particular about Jennifer is that she compares herself

to those who are in a shelter, which have always been included in formal definitions of

homelessness. For her, the responsibility and ability to pay a fixed rent each week for

accommodations is enough to shun the homeless label and identity. Although she knows

their family is at risk or "close to it."

> Jennifer: Uhm, we're not really homeless, close to it, basically in like a shelter….. like
>
> in NY, in the shelter, you gotta pay, you gotta pay, if you're working you gotta pay to
>
> be in the shelter. I know people who's lived in a shelter and they have to pay.

The participants' continuous descriptions of their financial instability as their reason for

homelessness suggest that their view of homeless persons is one of flawed individuals who

have made bad decisions in their lives and are now homeless as a result. Hence, the

participants focused on their personal financial shortcomings as structural barriers, not

individual flaws.

Homelessness = Not Having Enough Space, Privacy, or Amenities

Besides their financial instability, participants made consistent and frequent

references to their lack of space, lack of privacy and amenities. These were also markers

for the families that made them feel homeless. This section describes the physical space

limitations that were a constant source of frustration for participants and made them think of themselves as not having a proper home or homeless.

There were a total of six families (including Jack and Marge and Jennifer's family mentioned earlier) who denied being homeless when I asked them directly. When I asked Jackson if he considered himself homeless, he simply stated, "No" and then added, "right now, this is home [chuckles]… for right now." Throughout the interview he never called his place a room; he always referred to the motel room as the "house" and the hallway in front of his room as the "porch." Other motel residents often complained about the lack of space, and cited that as the reason they did not feel at home. Not Jackson. His room was the most cramped space I have ever been to, he had everything he owned inside that room and had carved a straight path from the door to the bathroom yet the issue of space only came up once during the interview in passing. I asked him what was the hardest aspect of living in the hotel and that's when he said "not enough room, not being able to cook properly" and he continued talking about how he can cook just about anything for the kids but it's just inconvenient. Although Jackson never clearly stated it I suspect he does not think of himself as homeless because 1) he had only been at the motel for a week when I interviewed him and 2) he paid his weekly rent and had the privacy of a room rather than live out of his car. Like Jackson, other families did not see themselves as homeless because they had the amenities and conveniences that allowed them to be comfortable as compared to homeless persons on the streets. Donna did not consider herself homeless but did not consider the hotel "home" either. Below is her explanation:

Donna: You know, they do consider living in a hotel homeless, that's what the county said, I don't at a time consider it a homeless for some people because *they* have a

roof over their head, *they* have electric, and *they* have food in their stomach, I don't

consider that homeless. There's a gentleman here, and his mother and him had a

fight, gentleman lives in a tent in the back of the hotel, that's homeless. Where he's

gotta come in and people help him out and give him showers, or people help him out

and feed him, that's homeless, living in a tent. . .Some people say you live in a hotel,

"that's cool." . . .Uhm. . .I know, I don't want to be here, I don't want to live here but I

do have a place to come home to, I do have a bed, I do have A/C, where some people

don't have that, and I do have a TV where I could watch all my programs so I can't

consider it a homeless, I consider it just not my home. You understand that.

[emphasis mine]

For Donna, the fact that she had amenities like a TV and air conditioner and a bed meant

that she was not homeless-like the guy behind the building. But she also did not want to be

grouped with "the homeless", notice how she used the word "they" to describe people in

the motel instead of "we" since she has lived there for three months.

Natalia, a motel resident for three years off and on, also described her amenities and

did not think she was homeless because she had those tangible things. She said, "I don't

think of me being homeless because I do live somewhere, I do sleep on a bed, you know. I

do have a refrigerator even though it's not big enough, but uhm, it's just a temporary, it's

temporary." There were several references to having a roof, a pillow, a bed, a shower, and

a bathroom as reasons why they do not consider themselves homeless.

Only one motel resident explicitly told me her "homeless identity" is selective. Dee

said, "well, it depends on who I'm talking to. I tell my kids we're not homeless, this is our

home…… And then if I'm talking to you, I'd say we're homeless, yeah, because we don't have

stability." A social service provider had warned me that the motel residents may present themselves to me as homeless and in great need even if they were not, because it was their survival strategy to try to get as much help as they could. The provider told me they would do so even if I told the participants I was only a student and could not help them because to them they never know what each person can offer to them so they present the worst case scenario hoping to get something that may improve their situation. And in part that social service provider was correct. When it came to any kind of assistance, the families said they identified as homeless because they were aware of the community initiatives such as food pantries, grocery deliveries, housing assistance programs and even expedited applications for food stamps that were targeted to homeless families. They had learned either first hand or through word of mouth which programs would help families living in motels and which did not.   But I also noticed instances when the individuals flip-flopped during the interview, using single pronouns and distancing themselves from homeless persons yet anytime we talked about social policy recommendations they would group themselves with "the homeless." This aligned with Zufferey and Kerr's (2004) findings where homeless individuals distanced themselves from a homeless identity but at times when they "took on a social action role, they embraced the homeless "community" (p. 347). Phrases like "they need to do something to help people like us" or "you can't ignore us anymore" asserted their relation to the homeless community.

I also noticed parents tried to shield their children from their reality. Although not originally my intention, several interviews were conducted inside the family's motel room with their children present. When the homelessness identity question came up, a couple of parents asked their kids to turn the TV louder while they talked to me and one parent gave

their back to the kids and lowered their voice to describe to me their feelings. Another

parent covered her 7 year old's ears while she mouthed the words to me explaining how

bad of an environment the motel was for her family telling me about the drug

paraphernalia she had seen around the hallways to convey to me why that place was not a

home and why they needed an actual home.

Prior to starting this project I had hypothesized that motel residents would not

identify as homeless. If the motel residents did not identify as homeless, they would not

seek assistance for housing since they would feel "at home" already. However, this was not

necessarily the case for this sample. This particular sample consisted of families with

children (all but one couple) and within this sample, although the parents may have been

okay or content with their living arrangement, the predominant feeling was that if it was

just them, it was ok but it was not ok to have the children in that environment. Therefore,

these families did consider themselves homeless, did seek assistance and tried to look for

housing elsewhere. There were a few barriers to assistance for some of the families such as

lack of knowledge about the area, lack of knowledge or misinformation of housing

assistance available, lack of transportation to reach assistance centers and/or lack of

computer access to search for assistance in the area. Although some had not searched for

assistance at the time of the interview, they explained that they are very much interested in

receiving assistance; they just do not know how to get it or where to go. In some cases,

families were selective about the type of assistance they would apply for. It is as if they had

built a scale and drew the line at a particular point where below that line was help for the

"real poor" and above it was acceptable for them to take. In Ellen's case, she felt that her

family was well off enough to not apply for food stamps, register as a "family in transition"

at the school district, or receive weekly groceries because she felt there were families who needed that more than she did and she did not want to take away from the truly needy in her mind. However, she commented on how there should be assistance given to families living in motels for rental deposits and utility deposits and that she was searching for programs who could help her financially to move out of the motel.

As presented in some of the cited quotes in this section, some parents attempt to shield their kids from their reality. Jane covered her daughter's ears and Laura and Dee both explicitly mentioned they don't tell their kids they're homeless. The parents have little to no hesitation when applying for assistance but some of them were hesitant about letting their kids' school know about their situation. Families who identify themselves as homeless or living in a motel when enrolling their kids through school become known as "Families in Transition" (FIT). As part of this program, mandated by the McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act, families are eligible for out of zone school transportation if they moved to a motel outside their child's home school zone. They are also eligible for additional services like tutoring and assistance with school uniforms and supplies. Even though there are benefits, some families were hesitant and unsure about whether they should or would (in the cases where the kids were not in school yet) let the school know out of fear that their children would be treated differently than the other children. The parents did not mind bearing the label "homeless" but they certainly did not want their children to be labeled such.

Then there were Jack and Marge, a couple with no children, who claimed to live somewhat comfortably in the motel compared to those who had children. They were still looking for somewhere else to live and were not happy about the environment they were

living in, particularly the noise, crime and "lack of respect" from other hotel guests. They were one of the families who commented on not knowing where to look for help in the area but also mentioned that help is reserved for those with children so they were not optimistic about being able to receive assistance to move out of the motel. They were not counting on getting any help and based their plans with only what they could do for themselves- which is why they had hopes their next tax refund would be enough to get them out of the motel.

Through my community involvement during my field work I attended county commission meetings, participated in community outreach events, interviewed social service providers and was invited to attend various planning meetings for new community initiatives along with service providers. Through these experiences I consistently heard that there were different types of motel residents and there were some who were happy to be at the motel and would not need or want assistance. Based on this sample, I conclude that this is not the case, not at least for those with families. Whether they identified as homeless or not, every single participant said they wanted to get out of the motel. Every single participant said they wanted better for themselves. Throughout my field work I came across a handful of individuals who have lived in the motel for years (anywhere from 2 to 7 years). These individuals did not have children and most of them were disabled, lived alone or with another relative who was also disabled. Perhaps these individuals would feel differently than the families did or perhaps they believe or have encountered the same as Jack and Marge- the fact that most assistance is reserved for families with children. There is very little financial assistance available for single individuals in Osceola County. Multiple service providers told me that because of the limited resources, they had to limit the assistance and children are the priority. Multiple social service providers said

they felt that single individuals did not have as tough of a time living in a motel as families with children so they were focusing on helping those with children get out of the motels.

On a related note, I should clarify that the feelings that the motel residents described and the reasons cited by social service providers as to why these individuals are homeless are not exclusive of motel residents. Financial instability, overcrowded living, pests, lack of privacy, exposure to drugs, and unsafe neighborhoods are all issues that low-income individuals in low-income neighborhoods across the nation face (Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002; Choi & Snyder, 1999); but no one labels them homeless or tries to "rescue" them from their substandard housing or inadequate family environment. They are just "poor." Therefore, it seems that in this case, it is not necessarily the housing conditions or even the fact that there are children in the household that yield the conclusion of "homelessness" on a structural level but the fact that these individuals live in areas not zoned for residential purposes. Specific to the area where the research took place, is the fact that not only are the motels in non-residential areas but they are in what is a heavily tourist trafficked area and hence it is difficult to deny the fact that from the policy makers' perspective, people who live in motels endanger the image of this area as a beautiful, magical land for a family vacation. Currently there are plans by the county to re-zone areas and prohibit long-term stays in what are defined as tourism viable areas of Highway 192 which suggests that people in the motels are viewed as a nuisance. While the plan is to relocate motel residents to more "appropriate" areas, there are no plans for the near future to build or subsidize housing for these families or to build a proper family shelter. These code changes may offer some basis for penalties for these motels but they will not eliminate motels as a housing option for families without other options.

Homeless Identity Management Strategies

I Didn't Have a Choice

As Riessman (1993) discusses, the focus of an interview is not necessarily the story itself but the way and reasons the story was told in that particular manner at the time of the interview. Although I purposely avoided the use of the word "homeless" or "homelessness" in my recruitment flyers, individuals who had been interviewed and referred participants to me would advertise my study as one for "homeless people in hotels" to their acquaintances. Hence, most participants believed that I viewed them as homeless and in turn made references early on in the interview about their particular reason for why they ended up in a motel and focused on the external locus of control compared to others who may have put themselves in that situation voluntarily and may be happy about it. The participants described their reasons for moving to the motel and even when the reasons seemed voluntary (as in the case with those who choose to move away from everything they know to come to Florida), they still framed it as if they had no choice but to move. For example, Jackson, father of three children under the age of five, says:

> Jackson: I mean it depends on the person you know, a lot of people they move in here because they blew their money or all kinds of stupid reasons. . . . I mean it's, you meet a lot of different people in the hotel and a lot of people they move here because they didn't, again, mess up their money or just came to town and don't know where to go. You know. But, I don't know. I came here because I was sick and the medical is better here.

In this case, Jackson tries to differentiate himself from others who he believes are in the motel for bad decisions or voluntary reasons whereas he had no other choice given his financial and medical situation. Jackson is a pancreatic cancer patient who lives off of his Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) check of $657 a month and his motel rent is $610 a month. He moved here from Las Vegas two years ago because his doctor advised him to leave Nevada if he wanted to survive. Having a daughter in Central Florida and perceiving this state as one with better medical treatment opportunities, he moved to Florida with his three young children. He relies heavily on food pantries and charities to supplement his food stamps each month as well as provide needed items for his kids (e.g. clothes, shoes). He had recently moved to Kissimmee and hoped that he would be able to find some work that paid cash to supplement his monthly income so he could eventually move out of the motel room. Three months after our interview I delivered groceries at the motel as a volunteer and saw Jackson. He was still living in the same cramped motel room.

Another family who had lived in motels off and on for two years, Aida and Joey, tried to put their situation into perspective when their child's therapist told them the number of families who were living in hotels in Kissimmee. Even though they knew they were not the only ones and they weren't alone, they still believed that others' circumstances and reasons for ending up at the motel were different and the others could have helped themselves.

Aida: there's a lot of families that maybe they're worse than us because that's what the girl [therapist] tells me, you gotta think how many, there are people worse than

us, yeah, I understand there are people worse than us but like……. their

circumstances, it's just NO.

Throughout the interview they both mentioned their frustrations at how the wrong people

were receiving help and people like them, the "good ones", were overlooked. Also, they

suggested that many "locals" are struggling because of the number of families moving to

the Central Florida area from out of state and taking up resources and assistance that could

benefit the true locals. They said: "if the people that live here, naturally from here, if we are

stuck because of people that come from outside, so, then lock them out from outside, CLOSE

the door!" suggesting that assistance should be restricted to those who are local and

deserving. This particular family is not "naturally from here", they moved to Florida from

Puerto Rico but have lived in Florida long enough that they now consider themselves

"locals."

Unlike Zufferey and Kerr's (2004) findings where half of their participants (street

homeless) blamed themselves for their situation, all but one of the motel residents in this

sample took full responsibility for their housing situation. The one motel resident felt his

bad decisions when he was younger to engage in criminal activity are the reason why he is

not able to have a "normal" life today. Luis, a motel resident off and on for 2.5 years said: "I

don't blame anybody you know, I just blame myself. I could have a job, if I didn't choose to

make the choices I, you know what I mean and all that craziness…"

A common reason cited for moving into the motel was the lack of financial

opportunities, namely jobs and/or affordable housing. This was most common among

those who came to Florida from out of state looking for a better way of life (which were the

67

majority of the sample, 12 out of 18 are from out of state). They viewed their misfortune as the result of the economic times and moved to Kissimmee in hopes of finding a better quality of life. Florida is viewed as the "promised land" for most of the participants. Through all of the interviews there was just a generic theme of "this is the place where I can 'make it'" and they made their way to Kissimmee hoping their dreams would come true.

      After Debbie's husband was "shorted" a paycheck, the family was evicted from their home in Indiana for failure to pay the rent. The family then went to an emergency shelter for the maximum time allowed, 30 days. After the 30 days they did not know where to go, and she explains how they got the idea to pack up their five children and move to Florida:

> Debbie: I got my taxes and since there was no jobs over there that he could find, and I was at this time out of work because I ended up having back surgery, I hurt my back and I, so we were just like, a couple of friends of ours were like "there's all kinds of jobs down in Florida you know we can go down there and find a job with no problem." So we packed up all our stuff, all our kids and we came down here.

Mike and Jane moved to Central Florida a year ago from Rhode Island with their four children and Jane's mother. They chose to move to Central Florida because "everybody said it was affordable here." They thought they would move to a motel temporarily until they could find an apartment they liked but when Jane's mother suddenly passed away, they lost a major source of their income (Jane's mother's SSDI check) and have been unable to move as a result.

      Orphee and her husband Joe came from South Carolina with their two daughters, ages 15 and 6. Joe explained his reasons for choosing Kissimmee as his destination:

Joe: Really, I want more better for my daughters and stuff, man, they [SC] don't have

nothing to offer them…the job rate, can't get a job there. . . .My brother some time

ago came on a trip and he was telling me he brought his family to Orlando, he would

tell me that's a nice place to be at, Kissimmee, so I took it up [laughs] cause he was

telling me how they got all the hotels on the strip and everything on one strip and I

said that's where we need to be, something like that

For these families, Central Florida is their land of opportunity and even though they might

not have the same housing as they did where they came from, they still believed they can

do better in Kissimmee. This is not uncommon among homeless individuals and families.

(Donley & Wright, 2012) study of homeless campers in Central Florida found many had

crossed state lines in search of work and a better life. Choi and Snyder's (1999) study of

homeless families with children in shelters found that some of the families were long-

distance movers searching for better work opportunities and quality of life. Virtually every

social service provider in the area that I interviewed had narrated story after story of

families who "packed up everything they had and came to FL without a job." This sample is

no different. None of the families did any online searches or any type of research prior to

coming to the area to determine whether there were indeed jobs available in the area or if

they were qualified for the types of jobs that are available. They all made their decision to

move to the area based on hearsay, on the perception of a relative or friend of this area. It

truly is the "Pixie Dust" effect (Wright & Donley, 2011). People visit Central Florida or

know someone who has and they believe that this pretty, magical place is where they can

find a new life and prosper.

Unfortunately for some, too many people had the same idea and now find themselves stuck in the motel without a job or without adequate income to support their family. As one provider said:

> "I think they don't understand that Disney is seasonal and it's 20 hours. Seasonal and 20 hours is not gonna, and we don't have the same as some of the big cities, we have buses but it's [not] like bus systems in other cities. They think "I'll just catch the bus" Well, it's gonna take you 3 hours! To get from here to here on the bus. So I don't think all that gets factored in. We don't have any community support for that."

Family conflict, or lack of family support, was also cited as one of the reasons for having nowhere else to go other than the motel. Most participants did not expect help from their relatives and hence did not view their lack of support as a reason for their "homelessness." However, there were two participants who were living with family prior to moving to the motel and they both felt family conflict was the reason for their move, although neither of them felt it was their choice to move. They both felt it was out of their hands and were both in that situation as a result of their husbands. For example, Donna lived with her mother while her husband was in Puerto Rico taking care of his ill mother. When her husband returned three months ago, they moved to a motel.

> Donna: I'm staying here, really like I said no choice of mine, my mother and my husband didn't get along, if my husband was to leave tomorrow, I'd go back to my mother's. … I'm staying here until I can better myself to better my children.

Jeanette and her family were also living with her parents prior to moving to the motel. Conflict between Jeanette's parents drove them away and to the motel seven months ago.

Jeanette: My dad, he did not want to be with my mom and the truth is that there was

a lot of arguments and my younger brother liked to be disrespectful… and my son

listens and was saying things and acting like my brother…. My husband, he was the

one that decided to move because he didn't want [to be around them anymore]

One thing that was evident in the interviews is that most of the families either did not have

traditional/functional family relationships or did not have family in a position to help them

and hence they felt that reaching out to their families was not an option. All participants

discussed how circumstances outside of their control led to their move to the motel. They

all (but one) presented their decisions as logical and as what needed to be done in order to

better their family circumstances. In looking at the literature on deservingness, this would

be consistent with narratives attempting to promote a positive self-image and put

themselves on the "deserving" stack for assistance.

Judgments and Social Comparisons

As Douglas Massey (2007) explains in his book *Categorically Unequal*, "Human

beings are psychologically programmed to categorize the people they encounter and to use

these categorizations to make social judgments" (p. 9). We all make social judgments but

"people are more likely to fall back on [stereotypes] in making judgments when they feel

challenged, face uncertainty or experience sensory overload (Massey, 2007, pp. 10-11).

The motel residents in this sample made a great deal of judgmental comments and

references about homeless people and even other motel residents. Some were aware of

their judgments about others and did not make apologies for it because they believed their

judgments to be factual. Others knew they were judging and attempted to qualify their

statements by saying they knew it was not inclusive of everyone but they thought it was

prevalent enough that it was worth the judgment. The types of judgments differed in direction. Various motel residents judged other motel residents for their actions or inactions, other judgments were aimed at service providers or the public at large and lastly they spoke of how others have judged or may perceive them because of their living situation.

Judgment From Others

Many respondents cited incidents they had experienced where they were judged negatively by others. This resentment was particularly bothersome when the "others" worked for an institution they felt should be there to help them without judgment. Laura talks about how she feels some providers judge people in her situation and are not happy to do their job.

> Laura: But it's just some places that I have gone to, they treat you like that like you know, they see you in a situation and assume that you've been in that situation all your life and you know. Like I told them, you pay taxes in case you're ever in that situation, you know you're able to go and apply and receive it again. And it's like bothersome to some people.

Other participants reported being stereotyped by the motel staff or other service providers in the community. Luis mentions how he has been politely told that he is not welcomed at specific motels. He makes a distinction between motels who will let anyone in and those that are "good" by restricting their clientele; in a sense profiling and exercising their right to decline service in order to keep trouble out. He says, ". . .like I don't know if I just have a mean face or something written on my forehead but they'll just say "nah, nah, nah, not here." I should note that Luis has been a motel resident as a single male and as a family

man during his 2.5 year journey on the strip. In the cases Luis refers to being discriminated he was looking for lodging as a single man, not with his family, which may be why motel operators judged him. As one motel manager told me in reference to single individuals, "sometimes you see someone walking through the door and you just know that's not the type of people we want here."

Luis also mentioned that some motel staff has "made up" stuff to deny him lodging, such as quoting higher rates than advertised and saying there is no vacancy when he knows from others in the motel that there are empty rooms. Later in his interview he does comment on how even though he was discriminated against, he thinks it's good that some motels are doing this to clean up their clientele and attract the "tourist money." Luis himself believes there is a lot of "trash" and "craziness" that goes on at some motels.

Another male, Jack, was stereotyped and judged by a police officer. He told me of a recent incident where he was stopped and searched by a police officer while waiting for the bus at 5:45am to go to work even though he was wearing his work uniform and had his identification. He believes he was searched because of where he lives since the motel where he resides has a particularly negative reputation in the area and the bus stop is within walking distance to it.

> Jack: We've been stereotyped by the police. yeah, just because we live there…..they just kind of put you in a class once you're in the motel so,……… you know the cop told me "that people out there are degenerate, degenerate scumbags", that's nice, thanks, I appreciate that.

After doing a ride along with a deputy officer, I learned that Jack's experience (being stopped and searched) is not uncommon. From the deputy's perspective they rarely see

the "good" people living at the motels, the ones who ended up at a motel because of a series of unfortunate events. Typically at the motels, the deputies encounter repeat offenders, parolees, felons, sexual offenders who have no other alternative for housing, drug dealers, drug addicts, and prostitutes. Their most frequent call is to resolve domestic disputes. In their defense, it is difficult for a police officer to picture the upright, law abiding individuals and families who get caught up in that environment strictly because of their financial struggles, mainly because these are not the elements of the population that they, the police, typically interact with.

More generally, participants talked about the 'general other' judging them, people knowing their living situation and treating them differently because of it without knowing the circumstances. Some mentioned specific people or ways they manage their identity by not disclosing their living arrangement to avoid being discriminated against. For example, those who had social support in the area would use their relative's address as their mailing address for employment purposes to avoid disclosing to their employer or potential employers they live in a motel. This identity management strategy could be pivotal in their financial outcome, the difference between getting or keeping a job and not. A few years ago I attended a meeting of local Chamber of Commerce members who operated businesses in this area. During the meeting we were discussing ways to help connect those who needed jobs to those who had jobs available and one owner of a fast food chain franchise disclosed that he would not hire anyone who listed a hotel address as their address on their application. He said he had had too many problems in the past and people who lived in motels were not reliable employees so he no longer hires them. According to Regenstein, Meyer and Dickhemper Hicks (1998), the majority of employers would not describe

74

welfare recipients as reliable. This may be the most crucial structural barrier for individuals to overcome. Not to mention, women would have an even harder time because of the generic welfare recipient stereotype and mothers being perceived as less reliable than men because of potential child care issues.

Most of the participants were aware that people outside of their situation would have some judgments towards them even if the participants had never experienced it firsthand. At the end of the interview I asked if there was "anything else you would like to add." Many said they wished there was not as much judgment placed on them and that there should not be generalizations made to the whole group. Inocencia mentions how she does belong to the category of "homeless" but that there are multiple sub-groups under that umbrella and she should not be judged the same as the others.

> Inocencia: Sometimes people generalize too much. Like putting everybody on the same boat. That general term should be evaluated. That thing, like considering people who live in hotels as homeless, I think that is a very important part to determine which families are under that category. What are your needs? How many different groups are there under that term? Because from what I could see here, there is a variety, anywhere from 15 to 17 different types of groups of people. But we are all placed under "homeless."

For Inocencia, she was okay being labeled as homeless as long as there was also an understanding that not everybody was the same. She later goes on to explain why there are differences within the group and they mainly dealt with lifestyle choices. She did not want to be grouped with other homeless who she felt made bad decisions such as other single moms who bring in people to stay in the room with them, or others who do drugs.

Mainly she wanted people to know there are those who want to get out and those who either do not do enough to get out or do not want to get out of the hotel. Other participants shared this sentiment and this directly aligns with Boydell et al. (2000) findings of a hierarchy of homelessness. The participants in this study were concerned that people viewed them as people who choose the motel lifestyle, people who are content with their living arrangement and do not need help and/or do not want help.

> Jack and Marge: I understand where the police are coming from but they shouldn't put everybody in that category either. ....it's hard, once you get into that motel room, it's hard to get out. [Marge: it's hard to get out]. You're living week by week and then your money [Marge: it's hard to save the money to do] yeah, cause it's always something coming up, you need something, food or [Marge: you have to pay that rent or you're out on the street]
>
> Sunny: I just want other people to know, not judge other people until they know for sure what they're about, don't sit there and say 'oh you're homeless and we're not going to help you', you know, maybe that's the help they need, they need to open their doors a little more or provide something, something more for the families to do .... I mean my kids would just love to get out, to just get out. We can't do it because we can't afford to do it..... I don't want to keep living in a hotel.

Jack, Marge, and Sunny stress the financial constraints of their situation as if other people or those who judge do not understand them. Debbie and Joe both clearly stated this. They feel if people who have never lived in a hotel would experience it or would realize the hardships that come along with it, they would not judge them and perhaps do more to help people in their situation.

Debbie: It would be nice to kinda just, I don't want to say the wrong thing but you

know what I mean, try to try to get a helping hand up a little bit, if people would

actually realize how hard it is for like, especially for like big families, your money is

gone like this (snaps fingers)….. So yeah, it's, it'd be a lot better if uhm, people

actually knew the hardships that us poor people have to go through.

Joe: You know they need to live in our predicament for one month. And see what

they gotta go through for that one month, for 30 days, and then they might, they will

see a difference, they will see different.

Several residents spoke of the lack of understanding not only from the general public but

also from social service providers. However, very few actually realized that in their

comments expressing their wish to not be judged they were themselves judging others in

their same situation.

Judgment Of Others

Motel residents judged others as an identity management strategy. In this case, they

commented on others' lifestyles and decisions in a negative manner to present themselves

in a better light and to perhaps convince me that they were different and hence, deserving

of help. Every single participant, except one, made at least one comment of judgments

towards others.

Life Coaching

A common sub theme of judgment was to point out the choices that others have

made and/or continue to make that are not helping their situation. I refer to these as "life

coaching" because of their counseling nature. The comments made pointed out things or

decisions that would improve other family's situation if the other family would focus and prioritize the right things. By others not making what the participants considered wise decisions, they were perceived as wanting to stay living in the motel and not trying to better themselves or their families. These statements were made by employed and unemployed participants alike and ranged from attitudes to family planning, parenting, to financial decisions. Here are some examples:

Mara: Because sometimes the people in the hotels, I say, are there because they want to, because you can find a job. Sometimes you see people, ok there are single women that's ok, but sometimes you have couples and one can save and the other pay but the people get stuck there and hotels, hotels, hotels, ….and I say no, no! …. But sometimes there's money for some things and not others. Because some women are women first and then mothers but not me.

Jack: People seem to drink a lot. I don't know why…..I would think if you didn't have much money, I think you would not be spending all your money on alcohol.   I'm trying to figure that out.

Aida: She only gets paid $7 something an hour, minimum wage, and it's just like, how are you supposed to live like that? And now she, she risked it, because she got a Saturn that's discontinued, she's freaking crazy, we're trying to convince her to take it back, cause she got it at a buy here pay here, it's discontinued, she's gonna have to pay $100 and something a month and she only gets paid $7 something an

78

hour. You know and she's like "I really, really want it and what I want I get"

whatever, more power to you

Joey: sometimes you see the mom in front and the little ducklings behind her and

there's 10 or 12 behind her.....they should make that [sterilization]mandatory like

after 2 or maybe 3 kids, that's it.

The participants pointed out the issues or poor decision making to show that some people

are not helping themselves, or at least not as much as they could be. Of course, all the

participants believed they were doing everything they could for themselves. At times I

noticed during the interviews they would point out the poor decisions of someone else and

through their narrative they would mention similar decisions they have made but they

failed to recognize their own behaviors as negative. For example, the majority of the

respondents criticized others for poor spending habits by criticizing things like alcohol

purchases yet they did not recognize their own cigarette use as a poor spending habit.

Tobacco smoking is so prevalent among motel residents that I wonder if it's even

considered a "luxury" or unnecessary as non-smokers view it.

Those People Do Not Need Help

It is engrained in our culture that everyone should pull their weight and do for

themselves. We don't like it when people take advantage of others or get things that they

have not "earned." While some people judge motel residents for their decisions and

housing arrangement, I found that those same motel residents hold negative feelings

towards those who attempt or take advantage of assistance offered. The participants had

an understanding that not everyone could be helped, not everyone *should* be helped. They

believed help should only be offered to those who are trying to help themselves, and are deemed deserving of the help. They despise "system abusers", people who get help without putting the effort to help themselves or those who take more than they need or deserve. Below are some of the more direct quotes that illustrate this type of judgment.

> Julio: But many, you try to give them a hand and they even take both of your feet

> Ellen: . . . then people that are not even trying to work could get, at the hotel this lady, a freaking pot head, smokes pot all the freaking time, she doesn't work, she says she's looking for a job the whole time I've been there, they don't have a car, she says she could take the bus, she gets freaking 800 and something dollars a month in disability and all she has is she walks with a freaking limp. Walks with a limp! There's another lady that lives below us that has bipolar disorder. I told her, we were arguing she tried to say that my kids were running too loudly upstairs, and she was like "well, I'm bipolar, sometimes I'm nice to you, sometimes I'm mean" and I said "bitch, we're all bipolar sometimes, shut up and go inside"

Mara commented on how she was able to get food stamps even though she filed the application including her boyfriend. She said, "I got food stamps with the father of my daughter, I put everything legal, if they give them to me good and if not ok." She was differentiating herself from the "system abusers" who lie in applications to get more help and she did not want to be classified as one of them.

There were a lot of assumptions made related to drug use and system abusers. This is not surprising since even the Florida governor was quoted saying "Studies show that people that are on welfare are higher users of drugs than people not on welfare" during a

CNN interview (Sharockman, 2011). This only fueled the popular myth that the majority of welfare recipients are drug addicts. The state did implement a law mandating that those who apply for TANF benefits (i.e. cash assistance, food stamps and/or Medicaid) be drug tested and receive negative results in order to be eligible for assistance. Data showed that out of the 4,086 applicants tested during a four month period, only 108 (2.6%) individuals tested positive for illegal drugs (Bloom, 2012). Nevertheless, the myth and judgments still persist in popular culture. The participants in this sample seemed particularly upset by the idea of drug users receiving assistance because they knew from experience that assistance is limited and they viewed others as a threat. Participants did not like the idea of money being given away to undeserving families instead of them. A few of the participants also made racist comments under the disguise of their dislike for "undeserving" people. For example:

> Dee: I think if anybody pulls up in a drug mobile, booming their music, with gold hoop earrings and long fake ass nails and a $80 fixed up hair do, don't need no goddamn assistance, ok.

> Ellen: Cause the people that get it [help] mainly are like the women with four kids with 4 baby's daddies who all of them are drug dealers and are living with their moms.

Dee and Ellen's, both White, descriptions of those who are undeserving carry specific racial/ethnic connotations against Blacks. Aida and Joey also made racist comments during their interviews and suggested that Blacks are not as deserving as others.

> Aida: . . .like all White people are not KKK, but there are some around there that are racist and killed Blacks, yes they are, but I can't treat all White people badly because

there are some who are racist. The same with Black people or with Hispanics or whatever, you know. There's a lot of Black people that are "bad" and there are good ones just like any race, it's the same. Although here, I will tell you that the African Americans go overboard because they think because they were slaves one day they deserve the world and it's not like that. And they treat people really disrespectful, they think they deserve the world. They are so rude.

Joey: sometimes they [Blacks] cross the street right there and they have that slow strut as if I don't have anything else to do, if you have nothing to do because what you're doing is selling drugs get out of the way because I have things to do.

Joey addressed the stereotype that all Blacks are drug dealers in his comment. These comments point to the intersectionality of the homeless experience and how race plays a factor. Based on these comments, it seems as if Black homeless individuals and families would have to engage in double identity work- trying to differentiate themselves from homeless people as well as the cultural convention that Blacks are drug dealing, system abusers who do not need or deserve assistance. Although, none of the Black participants in this sample mentioned feeling judged or discriminated against because of their race.

There was a high level of disgust from participants towards drug users who receive government assistance. Everyone was visibly angry when they commented on this and some made suggestions that violate civil rights as if to say that if you need government help you should be ok giving up your rights. In other words, if you have nothing to hide then you should not mind people searching your room, patting you down and/or drug testing you before giving you money. Although no one made suggestions as to how to evaluate

how you spend that money. So, they assumed that if you're drug free at the time of application you will remain clean and will make good financial decisions.

In addition, participants were very clear that they were unhappy in their housing situation not because of themselves but because of their children. They all agreed it was not a safe or healthy environment for children to be around and develop adequately. Even though they all had a pro-children attitude and agreed that those with children should get priority for assistance, it seems that came with a caveat—all for the children unless their parents are drug users. Out of those who commented on drug users receiving assistance, no one mentioned or seemed concerned about the children of the drug users. This seems to be a common ideology- not directly per se, but individuals make comments on those who are considered undeserving and "system abusers" but do not take into account their children and how taking away the assistance may affect the children. Of course this is all assuming that there are drug users who receive assistance which may not be the case.

Positive Self Image

Participants engaged in a variety of identity management strategies to present a positive self-image during the interview. These strategies align with the general image of what a "good" person is and should do such as work hard, be responsible, be a good parent, and abide by rules.

I'm Educated and I Work Hard

Consistently participants talked about their work histories to demonstrate they were hard workers and were not lazy people who wanted to be taken care of by the government or wanted to be homeless/in a hotel. Those who were employed made sure to

tell me that early on and used that as a marker for their character. Those who were

unemployed used their previous work histories, length of time employed in their lives, and

type of work or income they received as a marker for their character.

Personally I found the references to their education background to be more direct

ways of managing their identity. They shared their education history as a way to legitimize

their experience as unique and separate themselves from others- the more stereotypical

image of an uneducated, low income or homeless individual. Laura was a cosmetology

student at the time of the interview and she drove over an hour to get to her school. She

was very proud to tell me "after all of this, I'm still going to school." She did not want to

give up on her goals even though in the short term it may have allowed them to have more

disposable income if she wasn't driving so far to attend school.

Most of the participants were not four year degree college graduates. In fact, only

two said they had earned a bachelor's degree at the time of the interview although I later

learned that one of them had not actually earned her degree (through volunteering at the

motel serving lunch for kids, she later told me she only went to college for one year). Some

had received some technical training legitimately or through job experience and some

reported attending an accredited higher education institution but did not actually graduate.

Regardless of the type of education or even lack of education, they all found ways to project

themselves as educated and knowledgeable.

In the case of Sunny, she did not have a high school diploma but she used the fact

that she reads the news and is up to date on the state of homelessness in the area as a way

to present herself as an educated citizen. When discussing homelessness in Osceola County she says:

> Sunny: Because there is over… 'cause I do study, I do study how many people are homeless in what parts of Florida. There is over 4,000 homeless in Osceola area. So, you imagine 4,000 just in this little section alone, you imagine what it is in Florida, that's a lot of people.

I asked how she knew the statistics on homelessness, which seemed highly inflated to me although I did not tell her that, and she said she read them online but could not recall the exact source. Another participant talked up her partner's education history by talking about how even though he does not have a formal degree or education, he is knowledgeable and smart. At the end she insinuates that he is smarter than those with the actual certifications and work as a handyman.

> Aida: . . . .he has air conditioning studies, he graduated with honors and because he doesn't have his high school diploma they won't give him his, his, his certification I guess. And so he can't get his license but he's already, he knows A/C, electricity, he knows plumbing, he knows everything. He could build a house from scratch by himself. . . . . .'cause he's smart, he knows a lot, when we lived at that hotel. . .they had a handyman but when the handyman couldn't figure out what was wrong in a room they would come get him.

Similarly, when asked what the highest education level he had achieved, Jackson replied "10th grade… but I went to school for nursing, I did that for like 10 years." When I asked him where he studied nursing, he explained what sounded like a certificate program for

certified nursing assistants. Jackson wanted me to know that even though he did not earn a high school diploma, he did have a career. Other participants used past education experiences or future hopes of education as a way to project a positive self-image. For example, Aida did graduate high school but never went to school beyond that. In her narrative, and as you can see in the quote below, she tried to show that she did have the potential to go to college even though she did not attend college.

> I was a great student, I never got detention, I was in ROTC all 4 years of high school and to be in ROTC you know you have to be straight 'cause you can't get into fights, into trouble, you have to have good grades. I had all of that for 4 years in ROTC.

Natalia is an 18 year old mother of a 2 month old baby, and currently a high school dropout. During the interview, Natalia showed me her stack of books on the table in her motel room. She still hopes to go back and finish her education.

> Natalia: I want a better future, I'm trying to go back to school but it's hard because I can't trust any daycares nowadays and she has a condition so it's hard, so I study here so when I do go to school I know what they're talking about.

The vast majority of the participants talked about their education as a way to project a positive self-image. This could be a result of the fact that they were interviewed by me, a university student, and they were trying to connect with me. Or perhaps, education is a very important part of their identity and hence the prevalence of it in their narratives. Education is certainly highly regarded in our society and so it makes sense for the participants to have adopted this as an identity management strategy.

It was very important for participants to distance themselves from the stereotypical image of a lazy person, who wants to be poor or homeless, does not want to work and prefers to live off the government. Every participant, but one, made references to this stereotype and made sure to state their support for why they were not like "those people."

Employment was not part of the general interview questions, only part of the demographic information form the participants completed at the end of the interview. But the participants who were employed made sure to let me know that early in the interview. Based on their knowledge of the people around them in the motel, they knew that employment was a commodity not everyone had. Their neighbors were likely to be unemployed, underemployed, or disabled so those who had steady jobs were very proud of that.

> Donna: . . . I do work. I work for Orange County government. Uhm, I work for the
> convention center, my husband works everyday off the books. . . . So I took a couple
> of days off, I've been there for a year and a half and I've never taken a day off. You
> know I don't believe in it. I know I have a family to feed, I have to work.

> Laura: I've been working since I was 14 years old you know, paying taxes since I was
> 14.

The participants who were unemployed commented on their previous work histories to show they were not "lazy" and were not purposely trying to be in their current financial situation.

Jennifer: Before I left last June I had 2 jobs, I worked at Disney and I worked at McDonald's

Aida: ...it's like I said it's not that I cannot work or I don't want to, it's that I want to and every time I try I failed at it because my body's giving up. I've been working since I was 17. McDonald's I worked for 3 years and I was going to high school. Then I was working at Disney for 3 years.

At the time of the interview, Jennifer had trouble obtaining employment as a result of lack of transportation and money to buy bus passes. Aida was debating whether to apply for disability benefits because of injuries on her back and legs she incurred during a car accident over a year ago that prevented her from doing jobs she was qualified to do. She felt trapped because she did not have the diploma to prove she could do what she called secretary and computer type jobs and was not physically able to perform the duties of hospitality work. She shared the same sentiment as other participants when I asked her why she had not applied for disability benefits, she replied "yeah, that's what they [friends] told me, go apply for disability before they stop giving it out but I don't want to be a parasite either."

Most of the participants did not want to be perceived as a "system abuser" or someone who liked receiving government help. As Donna stated near the end of her interview, "I'm not a slouch, I'm not a low life, I'm just a mother, a woman, and a wife, a friend trying to survive." Participants shared things they did or experiences they have had to show they were responsible, they were good people, and were not going to take advantage of the assistance.

Some participants who moved from out of state specifically to come to Florida to better their families explained how they planned for the move. Some of the stories may sound irrational to some of us, like when you hear that someone just packed up their car with all their children and belongings and drove to Kissimmee, where they did not know anyone, had no job, and no place to live. While that literally was the case for some of them, some did make a point to clarify and show that their decisions were rational, responsible and planned and they were not just coming here and expecting others (i.e. government or social service agencies) to help them live. Below are examples of families who planned their move to Florida but circumstances did not work out as they had envisioned leading them to an extended motel stay:

Laura: When we came here we had, I had my savings. You know we were able to come, get an apartment, and everything. Came with our furniture. All our belongings. We were pretty comfortable. We were good in Orlando. Then when he lost that job then he went and he got the Quizno's job and then they went out of business! (*Laura and family drove from Pennsylvania. Husband was able to get a transfer from his PA job here but soon after arriving to FL lost it*)

Yanira:...and he had some money set aside because he worked, he lived in NJ and he had saved money from his job and with that money we moved here and were paying the motel but we ran out of money. We ran out. (*Yanira came from Puerto Rico and after 2.5 months of paying the motel they ran out of money and still had not found employment*):

89

Relatedly, everyone who moved here from out of state said they moved here to better their families, to improve the lives for their children. This ties in with another theme found in the data on parenting. All participants but one couple are parents and many presented a positive self-image by describing the ways in which they parent and how it is better than other parents in the motel and also doing things for the wellness of their kids. For example, Mara said, "I am a mother first, then a woman" as she compared herself to other women in the motel who she believed put their personal needs before their kids. Ellen said, "We're the only two women in that whole hotel that has not had DCF called on us, we're the only two", commenting on how other moms do not take care of their children and have had DCF come out to investigate them. Jeanette bragged about her son saying, "he is 4 years old, he speaks both languages perfectly" pointing out how she has taught her son two languages (English and Spanish) and he is not even in school yet.

The participants, mainly the moms, talked about how the motel environment was not the best for children. But they also commented on the things they do or would do to protect their children from harm. They view their situation as simply temporary and all claim their children are their motivations to move out of the hotel. Every parent in the sample reported doing everything for the wellness of their children. Everyone feared having DCF called on them, everyone feared losing their children to the state. This may be a reason why this was a prominent theme in their narratives. It was important for them to present themselves in a positive manner and to show me that they were good parents and were doing the best they could just in case I had some affiliation to DCF. I learned about this fear early on in the data collection process when I wore a polo shirt embroidered with UCF's logo on it. I carried a clipboard with me and I approached a female motel resident

90

who had children and I explained to her what I was doing. She was really quiet and her body language told me that she was not comfortable with me. When I lowered the clipboard to give her a flyer she smiled and said "OH, UCF...I thought it said DCF" and she explained why she looked so concerned and had not said a word to me. There is a lot of surveillance at the motels for DCF workers. The motel residents do tend to look out for one another and if they see a "DCF" worker they do share it with others which was something that I had to shake off at first because many did think that I was affiliated with DCF at first just by the way I dressed and looked when I visited the motels.

I Love to Help People, That's Just the Kind of Person I Am

Another identity management strategy the participants engaged in was generosity. Many participants gave examples of situations where they had helped others to show they are a good person and of good character. Though the resources were limited, food, some clothing and transportation were goods and services that could be easily provided to others in need. A few mentioned they donate their clothes to the Salvation Army or some other local organization when they or their children outgrow their clothes. Those who were fortunate to have their own vehicles spoke about the number of times they had provided transportation to someone without a car to go grocery shopping, go to a medical appointment or somewhere to look for assistance. Almost all of the participants were receiving food stamps at the time of the interview but had experienced a time themselves when they were waiting for food stamps approval or their benefits had been reduced and hence were very empathetic towards those who were in need of food. Many spoke of giving some of their food to others who were going through a rough time and did not have enough. Sunny said, "I'm the type, I don't care if I'm down to my last dollar, I'll go and feed

a baby" as she told me of a time she used her own food stamps to help another family with small children get a few things to get by.

Others spoke of hypothetical situations and how they would act in a generous manner, for the general good of people if they were fortunate enough one day to be in a position to help others. The lottery came up in conversation a few times and some fantasized about what they would do if they won. Donna said, "If I win the lottery, I would help everybody, I would give a little to everybody. I would." When discussing help available, Sunny said, "I'm the type that will offer to pay back the deposit if I have to" in regards to paying back the city or county if they were to give them help. Below, Jane and Jeanette talk about their desire to help others.

> Jane: I'm very kind like if, even with me living in a hotel if I had the chance to help somebody, I see that somebody needed food or something I would still end up helping out even though I'm in the situation too because a lot of these families are on the same boat.

> Jeanette: I'm the kind of person that I like to help people. I like to donate clothes, I like to, I see all those things, that children have cancer, that there are children on the street, and all that and I say I would like to help those people but I can't you know. And I always liked that, since I was little. Always, ever since I was little I dreamt about that. ……..From young, I would always dream of helping those in most need, to help those in need. Right now I have two boys but I would like to adopt a child, I would like to adopt a baby. I've told my husband many times, and he said we could

do it but not in these conditions that we're in right now you know. But I would like

to do it, I would like to help one child, raise him myself, raise him myself.

Jeanette said the above quote at the end of the interview when I asked her if there was

anything else she wanted to add that I did not ask during the interview. Clearly it was

important for her to let me know that she is a good person and would give back to the

community if she actually had the financial means to do so.

What I Used to Have

Another theme found in the data was the participants' description of the type of

housing they used to have prior to moving to the motel. Most of the participants were

average working families who rented homes or apartment and they were very proud of

their homes. Some of them made reference to their previous housing multiple times during

the interview. Of particular note was the reference to the "beautiful" homes they had. They

wanted me to know they had beautiful homes in nice neighborhoods unlike their current

housing which no one, even the ones who had semi positive attitudes about it, described as

beautiful.

When asked where they lived before the motel, Marge answered, "A one bedroom

mobile home" and her husband quickly added "it was a house too, it wasn't a trailer, it was

a nice home." It is as if Jack wanted to clarify they were not like "those people" who live in

trailers, they lived in a "house", a "nice house." Similarly, Donna and Dee both stressed they

had beautiful homes before moving to the motel. Donna says, "we lived in a home. In BVL,

we lived in a nice beautiful 2 bedroom, 2 bathroom house. Uhm, we had a beautiful house,

paying every month, everything was nice, we both were working." Dee also rented a home

prior to the motel and said, "We were living in a 5 bedroom house here in FL, right in Clermont, this beautiful big ass house." Whether these houses were nice, big, or beautiful to anyone else I will never know, but the fact is that in their eyes they had them and they wanted me to know that.

Just Like Everyone Else

While some motel residents did not hesitate to say they were homeless because they did not have what they considered stable housing, others rejected the label and instead told me they were just like any other average renter. I came in to the interviews with the assumption that I would be interviewing working poor or very low income families, but I found that some families did not perceive themselves as members of this category. Instead they viewed themselves as middle class families who just happen to be struggling at the moment. This was evident to me in the way some of them interacted with me, letting me know the type of work they used to do, their education background and/or the type of house or neighborhood they used to live or even currently live in (i.e. good hotel vs. cheap motel).

As I talked to some of the residents, it was clear that they did not think of themselves as motel residents but more like working class/middle class members who are temporarily down and out, waiting for their break to return to their proper social standing. Donna, a motel resident of 3 months, made a few references to her background and even compared herself to my financial background even though I made no mention of it. She assumed that I also lived paycheck to paycheck and could relate to her struggles. In explaining her difficulty in getting the money to get out of the hotel she said, "nobody, you

know nobody really, no middle class family can gather, pay Peter and try to pay Paul at the same time without taking away from something." She also brought up that although they live in a hotel (she called it a hotel not a motel) and some may think of families like hers as low-lifes, they do live a middle class lifestyle. Donna, and other motel residents, talked about the "luxuries" they were grateful for at the motel such as the pool but most importantly the fact that they did not have to worry about what their electric or water bill would be at the end of the month. Residents spoke of life before the motel and how they were concerned about things like how many hours the children spent watching TV- not because of the content but because of electricity use- and what temperature the thermostat was set at or whether the kids would run the water too long for their baths, etc. Donna had actually given this much thought and she explains how she compared herself to other members in her family who did not have the same "luxuries" as her, and discusses why she believed the government did not consider them homeless:

> Donna: . . .it's wild to say, but some people living in a hotel have more luxury than
> some other people. You have [my sister] that lives in a trailer, nice place, plenty of
> room, but she don't have the luxury of 100 degree weather going out to the pool,
> 100 degree weather running her air conditioner 24/7 cause of her electric bill, 100
> degree weather and not have to use her stove, go outside and BBQ or go to the
> laundry room which is only $1.75 versus running your washer and dryer. That's
> why I said some people years ago used to consider living in a hotel a luxury not a
> homeless. Cause my mother says "you live in luxury." I'm like "no, Ma, I live in a
> hotel, in one room with my family." She says "yeah, but you can have things that
> some other people can't, you can run you're a/c when you're sweating to death, I

can't. I live on a fixed income, you can have your TV on all night and not say "turn

the TV off" my electric bill, you can leave it on all night because you're not worried

about it because your rent includes it." Maybe the manager is worried about that

$20,000 electric bill but you don't have to, you understand, so it wasn't considered

homeless, it was considered a luxury. That's why HUD did not include it in, because

they said if you can afford to live in a hotel, especially in a decent hotel, then you're

not living poor.

Some of the residents (those who lived in the bigger motels with amenities) felt like they

live the middle class lifestyle at an affordable price, except with much less space of course.

Having the amenities and "luxuries" allowed them to cope with their living arrangement

and provided some "normality" to their family. As Donna said, it made them feel like

they're not "living poor" and hence more like everyone else.

Other residents were indirectly conveying the message that they were not motel

residents. Two residents in particular never even mentioned the word "motel" in their

interviews. Michael, a single dad of three boys, talked about keeping to himself in the

"house" and limiting the boys to playing "in the house or on the porch." He was very

adamant about not being homeless, not feeling homeless but just temporarily in a motel

until he could do better. Another resident refused to say the word "motel" and preferred to

use "hotel" to describe her place of residence (even though she lived in the stereotypical

image of a run-down motel). Although she continued to refer to her residence as a "hotel,"

she acknowledged that where she was staying lacked the basic amenities that one would

find in a hotel (e.g. housekeeping and continental breakfast). In her case, she asserted her

position as working/middle class by refusing to say she lived in a motel and made several comments of her unmet expectations as if she was a vacationer at a hotel.

Most residents saw no difference between the rent they paid weekly and the monthly rent that renters of apartments pay. In their eyes, they both pay rent and since they do not get any special treatment as long term guests at the motel, it feels no different to them. Most of the motels that house large numbers of extended stay guests have separate buildings for those who stay long-term. The motels offer inexpensive weekly rates for long term guests but they do not offer the same amenities or services as they do their "regular" guests. Since the extended stay guests have to provide their own housekeeping, laundry, and toiletries, to them it feels no different than renting a studio or an apartment. According to Donna:

> It's like a regular apartment, you pay your money, the $720 a month. Uh, they don't give you maid service [they don't?] No. you cook, you clean, you buy your own toilet paper, your own laundry stuff, your own, you buy everything yourself. . . So, it's really like living in your own place except for the only difference is of course you're in one room. . .

Some even emphasized how they actually pay more than those who rent apartments because apartment renters pay for one or multiple bedrooms, a living/dining room, and a kitchen, whereas motel residents pay a similar rent amount to renters but just for one room and one bathroom for multiple people. Of course, when they discussed this, they neglected to acknowledge that their rent is inclusive of all utilities whereas some apartment renters have to pay utility expenses on top of their monthly rent. Sunny was

pretty upset over the fact that she was paying what she considered too much for a one bedroom to house her family of seven. When talking about her urgency to find a place, she explained, "'cause I'm losing money actually, cause that's $740 for one room. That's not worth that...not when you got 7 people crammed in one room."

Daydreaming of a Better Future

In line with Snow and Anderson's (1987) and Boydell et al.'s (2000) findings, some participants in this sample engaged in descriptions of their future selves. At times, these stories were told as a way to present a positive self-image and at other times it was a coping mechanism, a way to see a light at the end of the dark tunnel they saw themselves in.

The most common fantasy was naturally of the day where they would not be homeless. These were comments made by the participants of things they tell themselves in order to keep themselves motivated to get out of the motel. For example, Jane said, "I keep telling him every month I'm like, on the 1st we'll have an apartment" and Donna affirmed to me, "Come next month, I won't be here I promise. You understand because my dream is to get the hell out of here. One way or another I'm going to get out of here." For them and others, they fantasized of the day they would leave the motel room and maintain hope that someday it would really happen.

Others described what their next housing would be. I placed these under the fantasizing theme because of the images that they described. The families had a specific type of house or location in mind when thinking of what their next or ideal housing would be like.

Joe: But it's gonna get better, I know it is. It just takes time. Yep. . . . My goal is to be out there in the suburbs, out there in the country. Yes, I'm a country boy.

Joey: Now we're here looking for a little house. Oh, yes, I want to give my kids a yard where they can run and I don't have to worry about a car hitting them, or someone taking them or something, you know, I want a house with a fence. . . . I want a lawn mower so I can mow….her mom said "oh you'd have to mow the lawn", that's what I want, I'm from the country. That's what I'll do on Sundays.

For Joey in particular, he was sold on this fantasy and at one point in the interview he mentioned he would only move from the motel to that house. If it wasn't a house with a fence or a yard, he would not move.

Another theme was the "what if?" game. A couple of participants made direct references to themselves sometimes thinking about "what if" they had not made a particular decision in their lives, and how their lives would be different. Luis regretted having a criminal past and made several comments throughout the interview about how his life would be different had he not made those poor decisions when he was younger. He envisioned a life with stable employment, housing and a relationship. Joey thought about how his dad wanted him to be a basketball player, he wanted to be a baseball player but he gave up and ended up doing something less than what he wanted for himself. He said, "…[I] never did what I wanted and at the end, young on the street, the only thing I could learn, it's not that I don't like construction, I like it, I like my job and what I do, I do everything with love but I would've wanted something better." Joey also did not finish high school and mentioned how he thinks his life would be better if he had finished and also commented on

joining the military since several family members before him had joined, saying "I think I would've liked it…"

A couple of participants fantasized about potential future endeavors. Snow and Anderson's (1987) respondents made reference to future self-employment, material possessions and financial success. In this sample, besides fantasizing about their future spacious homes with backyards, a few participants mentioned how they should perhaps write a book about their life story. They thought their life circumstances would be interesting and provide lessons for others. Neither participant who mentioned writing a book ever commented on the financial potential of writing a book though. Another participant, Laura, was a cosmetology student and she did fantasize about one day having her own line of hair care products and "making it."

Living in a motel room offers little entertainment or things to do "at home" so the television was a central feature in all of the participants' rooms and entertainment. A few participants mentioned how they look at celebrities on TV and wish they could be like them. Some mentioned their attraction to some celebrities because of their philanthropic acts and mentioned how if they were a celebrity and/or had money they would give donate lots of money to charities. One participant in particular, Aida, talked about her life-long dream of becoming a singer. She had even tried to audition for TV shows like American Idol and The Voice. She said,

> "that's my dream. I was raised in church and I don't know if you believe in that, "el don"-- the gift that God gave me is that, that's what they [church people] told me. I grew up Pentecostal, we believe that God uses people to talk through them to you, . .

100

. . and one day this person came up to me and he told me that the two gifts that God

gave me was to be a mother, motherly cause I'm motherly with everybody and

singing -- those were my two God given gifts"

In another case, Sunny fantasized of being featured on TV and someone "rescuing" her from

homelessness. Her 12 year old daughter showed me videos she had made on her mom's

laptop and had posted on the website YouTube in hopes of being discovered. The 12 year

old girl talked to me about her love of singing and how she would lock herself in the

bathroom to make these videos and if someone discovered her she could get help for her

family and not be homeless anymore. Sunny was very supportive of this plan because she

had seen some homeless families featured on the news and she suspected that after being

featured the families were helped out of homelessness.

Summary

It is evident by the themes discussed in this chapter that motel residents used

several identity management strategies which are consistent with the literature on identity

work among homeless persons. The most common theme was distancing, differentiating

themselves from homeless persons and even fellow motel residents. Motel residents

defined homelessness as something other than roof-lessness and hence distanced

themselves from people who are on the streets and described a type of hierarchy among

homelessness where they were clearly at the top with the "good" ones. Participants

thought of themselves as homeless when they considered their financial instability, lack of

space and privacy. Participants also distanced themselves from other motel residents by

negatively judging others for their decisions and lack of motivation compared to

themselves. They placed a great deal of judgment on others even though they themselves suggested and wished others did not judge them as motel residents.

Motel residents were not always quick to identify as homeless and whether they disclose that they live in a motel and their financial situation largely depends on the audience and what costs and benefits they believe may result from disclosure. Most do not really think of themselves as homeless on an everyday basis. Their self-identity is not homeless. But, when asked about "the system" and what they believed should and could be changed, they all embraced the social identity of homeless. Again, because in that case they believed changes to the systems of care should bring more funds to the area to help families in their situation.

CHAPTER FIVE: STRESS

The interviews with the motel residents show a pattern of what they described as heightened stress levels and debilitating mental health for the family members compared to the times when they were housed. The adults in the family bear the most burdens as their prescribed role is to provide for the family and some feel as if they have failed their families in this regard. Family members are under constant stress, experiencing multiple stressors from different angles. The majority of the stress stems from their financial limitations and insecurity. But there are other stressors related to the living arrangement that afflict the family negatively affecting their mental health and daily performance.

Financial Stress

The families living in motels experience extreme financial insecurity on a daily basis. For most of the employed residents, their employment does not provide a steady paycheck because their work depends on production and/or availability of work. Most of the working motel residents work in the hospitality or construction industry which pay by the hour but only while there is enough work. Demand for work ebbs and flows and so do their paychecks. Hence, it is difficult for families to budget and plan beyond their weekly paycheck, if that. When asked what the most difficult aspect of living in a motel was, a few of the participants said coming up with the money to pay their weekly rent. They found the short time frame between rent due dates to be particularly stressful compared to a monthly rent. As Luis and Yanira mentioned:

Luis: Getting that money every week. Basically. Because it's not like you've got your house when you got a whole 30 days to come up with that money you know what I mean. You can set aside a little every week. Nah, with these people it's you got it or you don't.

Yanira: (she had already mentioned lack of space). . . But in reality, in reality, it's not easy because you get depressed when it's almost the day we have to pay and we can't find the money. You know, it's not easy.

Most of the participants lived in motels where the management did not offer any leeway on payments. These participants talked about the difference between being behind on their rent in an apartment compared to being behind on their motel room. Almost all participants had experienced being short on rent before at some point in their lives, but they talked about the ability to negotiate with their landlord and come up with a payment plan to stay in their home. The motel residents believed it was easier to live in an apartment because 1. You have 30 days to come up with rent and 2. They perceived landlords to be more willing to work with them than motel operators. In the motel, as Luis stated, it's either "you got it or you don't" and if you do not then you have to vacate the premises. That constant and immediate threat of street homelessness was very real to the participants. It serves as a constant stressor for these families. A small number of families were fortunate enough to stay in a motel where the manager was praised for having a big heart and being empathetic to their situation, because he allowed families who were good tenants and had jobs to make partial payments on their rent until they could pay the rest. This practice was not advertised, of course, but every participant from that motel talked

about the manager and his willingness to help them. When I interviewed this manager about this practice he said "to be honest I don't know how I do it" and looked up and pointed to the sky and said "that's the only way." He said the hotel was not doing "good", it was "just holding on" but suggested he felt a moral obligation to help families who were trying to do good for their kids. In general, although the residents from that motel were not financially stable, they were much happier with their living arrangement than others. The perceived support from the management and the management's willingness to bring community members/services to the motel seemed to buffer some of the persisting thoughts of street homelessness that others had.

Then there are those who live on fixed incomes from their social security disability checks. These individuals also suffer financial stress because they are to some extent more limited in their income than those who are employed. Although their monthly income is reliable, they are limited to that income because unlike others who could pursue side jobs, disabled individuals cannot work. If disabled individuals work legitimately (i.e. not under the table), they risk losing their SSDI check. Out of fear of losing their only source of steady income, none of the participants in this sample even attempted to work part-time. One disabled female participant did admit to sometimes babysitting for pay but she did not consider that "work." Frustrated at her inability to pay her bills, Dee had considered getting a job even though she is receiving SSDI. But after doing the math, she realized it just was not going to put her in a better situation once they took her benefits away. She explains:

Dee: They don't make it worth your while to try to work a little here or there 'cause they take everything away. You know. If I have something, in food stamps, I get $600 cash, that's $1100 for not working, minimum wage you make what? You know what I mean AND I'd be away from my kids and I'd have to pay for daycare and I wouldn't have health insurance because usually minimum wage places don't have health insurance.

Dee felt financially stuck. Even though her disability check is not enough, she figured it was better than how she would be without it if she were to work a minimum wage job. A minimum wage job at 40 hours per week would yield about $306 a week in gross income or $1200 a month but if she had to pay for her own health insurance, cover the decrease in food stamps, and pay for child care her net income would be lower than what she is receiving now. This is referred to as "the cliff effect" (Families, 2011). Most assistance programs are referred to as sources of assistance on the road to self-sufficiency but in reality those who better themselves and climb up are penalized by losing subsidies and they end up the same or worse than before.

Every participant expressed frustration at their financial situation. Some even contemplated crossing the line and dabbing into illegal activity for additional income. It was pretty common for the participants to mention there were drug deals happening in motels along the strip. Most talked about that being the reason they motel hopped so much- to get away from that environment. A couple of the male participants mentioned they had been approached to take part in the drug business but they declined because they thought of the effect that may have on their family, namely their kids. One participant who

was approached multiple times during his tenure in the motel (3 years off and on) fantasized about the lifestyle after someone told him how lucrative it was but brought himself to "reality" when he thought of the cons of the lifestyle. Joey said,

> I'm not going to say it hasn't crossed my mind. I haven't done it because of my family because if I go to prison then I'm no good to my family but sometimes I think I'm going to sell drugs on the corner there. Tell me, it's money that's right there [making hand gesture suggesting it's a sure thing]. There's people that make 400 dollars A DAY. You know what that is, you know, when they say 400 dollars you think, I can have a new car, a HOUSE, and this and that... but then you start thinking of the cons....the son is going to learn this, the cop will take me to jail, take my kids away.......my kids are first, ok, because what they see, they will learn and they will do it so going to jail and depending on how much I got on me, how many years....but I'm really struggling.

Joey was not alone. There were two other men in the sample who talked about their temptation and all mentioned that their families kept them from looking for trouble. None of the women ever mentioned feeling tempted to sell drugs or prostituting as a result of their financial stress but a couple did mention either thinking about committing fraud or having committed fraud. They did not refer to it as fraud but they described it. Some participants mentioned lying on the application for government benefits in order to receive assistance or receive more assistance. Only Dee acknowledged this was illegal. The others knew it was not right but they did not perceive it as 100% wrong either. They justified their actions by explaining their situation and how desperate and needy they are but more

importantly how they did it for their kids. Natalia lied on her TANF application for cash

benefits. Although she lives with her boyfriend at the motel with their 2 month old

daughter, she applied for assistance and did not include her boyfriend's income under the

household income. Since her boyfriend gets paid cash under the table, there is no

documentation for his income.

> Natalia: They don't know about it, 'cause they don't use social security numbers. If
>
> they did, it would affect my welfare and they would've taken my welfare and it
>
> would've left me with nothing except for food stamps and that's it. So we trying to be
>
> sneaky but it's cause we need money so us being not honest, it's cause we need
>
> money and I'm also thinking about her [pointing to her 2 month old daughter].

Natalia believed she could not get caught because her boyfriend's employer does not use

social security numbers and since there are no paychecks, W-2's or taxes filed, there would

be no paper trail to show otherwise. She knew this was not right but she justified it

because she viewed it as what is best for her daughter and her family. This was common

for the women in the sample. Although they never told me directly about any tricks to get

more benefits, I know enough about the TANF system, their eligibility and process to know

when their stories did not match the TANF requirements. For example, a few of the female

participants told me they had trouble with TANF applications because they had not

submitted their "husband's" information through child support. What this meant is that the

couple is living as married but not legally married and the application was completed as a

single female head of household most likely in order to avoid having to report their

partner's income and receiving less food stamps or cash assistance. The difference in

benefits may be trivial yet even $50 more in food stamps makes a big difference for their families so again the mothers justify the fraud (they do not view this as that severe) because it is in the best interest of their family.

Feeling Stuck

The majority of the participants talked about feeling stuck as in stuck in life, without the ability to progress. As I mentioned earlier, most of the motel residents were never really thriving (e.g. able to save money for emergencies) prior to living in the motel yet in their narratives they described feeling stuck because of their inability to obtain adequate or better housing. Better housing meant an apartment or a house. This section focuses on the participants' comments and feelings of failure and lack of progress.

Inocencia, a motel resident for a little over 2 years, seemed to have done a lot of introspection on her situation. At points during the interview it was as if she was just thinking out loud and talking to herself, transporting herself to various periods of ups and downs during her stay at the motel. She did not seek assistance beyond food stamps and Medicaid for a year and a half after she was in the motel with her daughters. She explains why:

> Inocencia: I was trying, uhm…was trying to see where I came from, what I wanted to do and what I had come to….like brainstorm that. I had gotten stuck for a while. It was like really hard too, like….like the comfort, like you get used that and it was just so hard to get [out]…but then let's deal with this little by little.

Inocencia is referring to how she felt stuck for a while because you just get caught up in everyday life and struggles and forget or just don't have time to seek for ways to get out.

Stuck meant not progressing, not succeeding at finding better housing. This seems to be what happens after a while of living in the motel. At first the family moves in and believes the motel room is just a temporary living situation and they will soon move out into their own apartment. But once they start the cycle of paying the weekly rent, it becomes harder and harder to save money and any little expense can set them in a downward spiral so their plans become shorter and shorter termed. Rather than 'let's look for an apartment', their struggle turns into 'let's get through this week.' Jane told me, "once you're in a hotel you're stuck, you cannot leave" as she described all the reasons they have been unable to save money and get into an apartment. Aida also felt stuck; she said, "… I feel like I'm going to be stuck here in this rut for God knows how long." These families were just surviving each week. They did not want to live in the motel and although time was passing by and they tried to progress, they felt like there was always something that kept them from moving forward. Jack explains:

> We live week by week. …struggle. It kinda stinks, it seems like it's always
> something. We're trying to prioritize like we got rid of our phones because it was
> turning into too much money, we got a cheaper phone…cut it down to one phone
> instead of two phones. You know. We make sure we buy a bus pass 'cause we save
> $45/week believe it or not ourselves by buying a bus pass. Little things like that.
> But it seems, it's like she said we take 2 steps forward and 5 steps back and it seems
> like we get money saved and something comes up, you know… I need to go to the
> doctor or something like that, we need money for this, or we need food….

Some of the residents had tried to look for apartments and knew they were not able to afford them or did not meet the requirements for leasing. These residents spoke of being stuck in motel life because there were no other options for their family. When talking about how much they dislike the life in the motel, Sunny said, "It's still crazy but what are you gonna do when you have nowhere else", and Aida said, "It's like whatever….we put up with it because we have no choice really." Knowing the lack of options available really affected some of the residents' mental well-being. One of the most afflicted was Joey, he said, "living in a hotel [puts his head down]….if you have the will to live, this will get rid of it." After living in various motels along the strip for over a year, Joey and his wife were not optimistic about their future.

Joey and his family were self-reportedly stricken with depression. They did not have much hope that they could move out of the motel room by themselves, meaning they did not think they would be able to save the money for the rental and utility deposits necessary to move into an apartment. Although they seemed to be the most pessimistic family in my sample, other families had come to this conclusion as well. After a while of trying and failing, they realize it is nearly impossible to come up with all the money necessary to move into a rental unit all on their own. Ultimately they surrender and just hope for a program or funding to become available to give them the hand out they need. Donna was very aware of this process. She said:

> …this isn't home, this is just a place to lay your head until you can lay it in a
>
> permanent spot. And I was too proud to take money from anybody, I don't care who
>
> you are, I would not take it, if I could not afford to buy it, to eat, I will not take from

you. When I came here, I learned, that if you don't take or ask for help, you're going to be where you are for the rest of your life and I'm not going to do that, that's why I went to the county to sign up for that [program] because I don't want to be here.

Prior to living in the motel, Donna considered herself too proud to ask for help. She believed that those who asked for help were lazy or not trying hard enough to do it on their own. It wasn't until she found herself stuck in the motel that she realized she would have to put her pride aside and ask for help if she wanted a chance to progress- to move out into traditional housing. For Donna and others it was difficult to do this. Applying for assistance was like admitting failure to thrive. They had to turn to a stranger, disclose all of their personal information and family details in order to have a chance at obtaining assistance. The application for assistance begins the waiting game. It marks the moment the family gives up agency and surrenders to the demands of the provider.

Others like Mara, who said she cried every day and was traumatized by the experience of living in a motel, waited desperately for tax season. Mara worked as a housekeeper but was not paid hourly. Instead she was paid by production- the number of rooms cleaned. At the time of the interview it was low demand season for her work and she reported having only been paid $75 the previous week. She did not have much hope she would be able to qualify for assistance because of her unpredictable income so her hope was that she would work enough this year so she would get a tax refund in January and have enough money to move out. This was common for those who worked. Tax refunds were their perceived safety net. For some it was not enough to move out, like in the case for Joey and Aida. They used the previous year's refund to purchase a car so they

would be able to travel to work more easily. They talked about how they had to choose between housing and transportation when the check came and they chose transportation because they felt it could increase their earning potential for that year by being able to work more often. It ended up not working out as they had hoped. Their refund was smaller than expected and was actually used to cover rent and bills because Joey had not been getting steady work (construction). So now the family was stuck waiting again for a break -- an assistance application to come through, and if not, then wait another year for another tax return and hope they will have worked enough to earn a sufficient refund to allow them to move out. Incidentally, this is a strategy that has worked for some. Soon after our interviews, Laura, Mara and their families were able to move out of the motel as a result of their tax refunds.

It Brings Me Down, I Second Guess Myself

The motel residents in this sample had lived in the motel anywhere from two weeks to over two years. For the residents who had spent less than two months at the motel, their mental health or self-esteem was not as negatively affected as those who had been living in a motel for longer periods. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, every single motel resident moves into the motel thinking it will be a temporary living arrangement. After some time experiencing life in the motel, not being able to save money, feeling stuck, some residents began feeling self-doubt and negative self-feelings. One of the participants, Mara, had a difficult time coming up with the words to describe how she felt:

Mara: Like we are…on the street, like I don't know…it's true, sometimes you think of the word homeless….you see someone and you say "look a homeless" but I'm not

like that. I'm not like them because they live on the street but sometimes you feel

like, like, you feel like you're not.....I don't know. I felt, like, like I don't know, I just

keep saying I can't keep living here because I feel....not humiliated or anything like

that, but I feel like... I don't know...

It is unclear whether her equivocation about describing her situation was because she truly

did not know how she felt, knew how she felt but was unable to describe it, just did not

want to admit how she truly felt. It was clear that she was not comfortable, she felt

inadequate and she just felt not herself when she talked about where she lived and what

that meant for her. In between the lines she was trying to say she felt "less than" others.

Later she mentioned how she resented her partner for putting them in this situation and

making her live in a motel.

For Mara and others, their experience with others and their reactions to their living

situation affected the way they perceived themselves. Most who reported experiencing this

claimed they did not let what others thought get to them. They claimed they did not care

what others thought, they were only worried about their families and as long as their

families had the basic needs they felt good. Donna presented herself as a strong woman

throughout the interview. She reiterated multiple times throughout the interview that she

was an independent, strong, and proud woman and that she lived in the hotel but she was

"not the hotel." But even she admitted that sometimes, how others react or what they say

can and does have an effect on her self-feelings. She said:

Donna: Here sometimes it's hard to survive because sometimes things take you

down. You know, it does, it takes you down. . . . . , this is the big thing Stephanie, the

big thing they tell you "we don't take care of you people like that". And then I say to myself "you people" what are, what are us people? I mean, we pay $180 a week, some people can't pay $30 a week, we work, it's not that we don't work, it's not that we're bums, it's not that we're low lifes, we just can't get ourselves together to get everything all at once to get out. Don't make us "these people" . . . and it shouldn't be worded like that, it makes you feel, I don't know, like maybe you ARE worthless but you're not. You have to second guess yourself. . .Some people here take it to heart, I can see her [neighbor] crying. Take it to heart, how one person talks to another person.

Here Donna points out how the staff of the motel has talked to her and others before and how it affected her self-perception. For those individuals like Donna who come in thinking they are hardworking folks who are temporarily down on their luck and need time to regroup, the words and messages they receive from those around them can quickly change their outlook and bring their self-esteem down.

I Need a Door: Lack of Space and Privacy

Unlike staying at a hotel during vacation, when you live in a motel you bring all your belongings with you rather than a select few garments and hygiene items. All the rooms I visited were a fairly standard size that included two double beds, dresser with TV, and a nightstand. For some residents, especially those who flew to Florida directly to a motel, they had nothing more than their clothes, shoes and personal care items so the rooms were not as crowded. However, some of the families who had stayed in the motel for a while had accumulated their belongings into the single room, making space even more limited.

115

Things that normally would stay outside a house like bicycles (main mode of transportation for some), barbecue grills, and children's toys all have to be kept inside the room. Regardless of the amount of stuff in the room, every single participant complained about the lack of space, spoke about their need for more space and how it would greatly improve their quality of life and mental health to have more space for everyone in their family. Below is a quote from Luis where he talked about how the room was a constant reminder of their current situation and how it affected his mental health.

> Luis: It's like sickening man. Just waking up to just nothing else like man, I'm in a room. This is crazy. You know what I mean, it's just like bringing you down, making you depressed. How can we get up out of here? I don't want my kid to be stuck in this forever you know what I mean. So, it kinda messes with your head.

Besides the lack of space for general stuff, the lack of personal space was particularly upsetting to the participants. Personal space to get ready for the day in private, personal space to be alone and quiet with your thoughts, personal space to have a private conversation on the phone or with your partner, space to be with your partner in private, and personal space to get away from other family members when there was an argument or they just felt like not being around them. Below are some comments from the residents on how stressful life in the motel room can get, particularly for the children.

> Jane: I've noticed, from being in an apartment to being in a hotel, my kids have changed their behavior, it changes the whole way of how they look at everything around them. They're stuck in a little…it's like a cell to them you know. They're not used to being like confined into a room plus around here there's no parks. I can't

even take my children to a park. I can't even find one in walking distance unless we want to walk 30 miles up the street and I don't even have money for a bus to put me and my kids on a bus to even go find anything...

Aida: ...but living like this, anyone would be like crawling up the walls, it's horrible, it's depressing, uhm, just you don't have privacy, you don't have time for yourselves, the kids don't have room to play, they don't have a backyard to run around in and it's just, it's very stressful because everybody is crammed up in here, we're always, not always arguing because we get along pretty well but like we get into arguments, we argue with the kids, they get tired, they got attitudes.

Aida also mentioned how the lack of space leads to upsets with her son that would not happen if they had more space or their own house. She explained that her 4 year old son likes to help her cook but because the bathroom sink is the only place where she can plug in her electric skillet and hot plate to make meals, space is a problem and presents some danger for her kids. When her son approaches her to help, she has to push him away from the hot appliances for his safety but that upsets her son. She believes incidents like this affect his self-esteem because it makes him think that she does not want to spend time with him when it is only happening because of their limited space.

There are a lot more compromises to be made as a family when everyone is in one room together. What one person chooses to do inadvertently affects all others in the room. The smallest decisions such as what to watch on TV can spark a heated argument among siblings and parents. Those who had young children, pre-school aged, mostly complained about the limited space their children had to play and develop properly. One of the rooms I

visited was home to a 6 month old baby girl and she was confined to a portable crib because there was no floor room for her to play on and practice crawling and exploring. There were also issues of creating and maintaining bedtime routines for the children because, since there is no door separating kids' space from parents' space, if the parents wanted their children to go to sleep at 8pm, that meant lights off, TV off and everyone to bed at the same time. This was a consistent complaint from parents. Parents also talked about how the lack of space and privacy had affected the relationship with their partners. As one respondent said, "...me and him can't even have a conversation without her [7 year old daughter] listening and it kills me. We have even tried to go to the bathroom but still you can hear everything in this little room to even talk, you can't." All parents reported their relationships taking a toll as a result of not having any or adequate alone time with their partner to talk or be intimate. Some were candid enough to tell me how long it had been since their last sexual encounter and how that had become a point of contention in their relationship.

Those who had teenagers complained of their attitudes and the arguments that stemmed from both parties being frustrated at their lack of privacy. Lack of privacy and space lead to arguments and it also just build the frustration because there was no space to "cool off." As parents, they can't say "go to your room" after an argument. For the teens, there is no bedroom door to slam as they walk away. Although I am sure the bathroom door has been slammed a few times. Jennifer, an adult daughter lives in a motel room with her parents and she said, "it's really hard, it's stressful and when things go tough, everybody goes at each other so that's what's even more stressful about it. And then you feel trapped cause there's nothing you can do, there's nowhere you can go." So, the lack of

118

personal space contributes to the feelings of confinement and increases the levels of stress and tension in the family unit. The families residing in the motel experience a heaping number of stressors at one time. They stress about their finances, they stress about their kids, their kids' behavior, they stress about their relationship with their partner, and makes them live on the edge in more ways than one.

"Mom don't get that break": Gendered Differences

Six of the interviews had both partners present at the time of the interview. This provided some benefits in that at times there were two differing perspectives offered on an issue. It was through these interactions and through comments made by other moms that this theme was noticed. Families in this sample tended to follow traditional gender roles where the male was more likely to work outside the home and/or be the breadwinner even if through an SSDI check. Women were more likely to be unemployed and stayed home to care for children and take care of household duties such as make doctor's appointments, seek assistance programs, cleaning, laundry and cooking.

A few of the women directly reported that living in the motel had a worse effect on their mental health than for their partners. This was because they were literally stuck in the room as none of them had transportation on their own. If the family had a car (only two of the six interviews with both partners had a car), it was primarily used to travel to and from work and hence, women were left in the room with the children until their partner returned from work. Hence the women spent a lot more time inside the motel room, without a break from the "four walls" or their "work" which was the kids and household duties. Natalia, a stay at home new mom, described her situation:

119

...yeah, it's like, it's more, being in a motel makes you stress even more cause like

what you're in and it makes you want to think a lot and I'm always home, he's

always at work so I'm like sitting here [thinking] "I don't want to be here right now"

Another resident referred to her room as a "cell" and said she and the kids are stuck in the room like a cell all day. And just like prisoners, the women talked about the constant reminder of their situation, their limitations, and having no mental break from it all. Sunny, in particular, talked about this several times throughout her interview. She seemed to be pretty upset about her situation. She said:

I'm basically stuck with kids all day long, don't get a break for mom. Mom don't get

that break. If there was someone to sweep me out of here just for one day just to do

whatever, go to Disney just for the day to get away from everything, or just go to

dinner, or just go to the mall or something just to get the heck out and away from

the kids, oh, I'd be in heaven. I'd be in total heaven.

Sunny, a disabled mother with 4 daughters and a grandchild to take care of, talked about the constant stress that she experienced. Not only was she caring for her kids and grandson all day but she was also bearing the responsibility of managing the household budget, locating resources to obtain a rental unit big enough for all of them and actually finding a place. Sunny was overwhelmed with her household responsibilities and the stress that came with it. With her disability and no transportation she was bound to the motel room with the kids.

Coping with Stress

It was evident in all the interviews conducted for this study that motel residents find themselves in a constant state of stress. Whether they are stressed about their finances, their kids, or their future, they find some way to get up in the morning and push through another day. Through their narratives, the motel residents discussed aspects of their lives or presented their perspective on their situation and these were coded as stress coping mechanisms.

Belief That Something Will Come Through

The first coping mechanism that motel residents used was their belief that "something will come through" for them and their family. Something- whether it's an assistance program, a job, a tax refund, or a promotion- will come along and improve their financial situation. Most times, these beliefs are based on *if all the stars align right* type of daydreams that may not and usually do not materialize as hoped. Nevertheless, they fulfill a purpose. They serve as hope that the motel room will not be their home forever. As Joe said, "it's gonna get better, I know it is. It just takes time."

For Mara, who had been working as a housekeeper and paid not hourly but by the number of rooms she cleaned, her hope was that a new job that she would start in a week would improve her financial situation and make her stable. In her current job, she's unable to budget because her pay is not fixed but her new job will be full-time and will pay $9 per hour. During the interview, she was doing the math in her head and figuring out how she would be able to cover her rent and expenses. The math did not quite add up to a green line budget but she made up for it by saying she would sell handmade crafts on the side to

make up the difference. The promise of a full-time hourly job was everything she had been

hoping for and her face lit up every time she would talk about this new job where she

would have guaranteed hours and benefits for the first time in years.

Donna explained to me how she had applied for a housing program with the county

and was on the list to be helped, the county was just waiting for funding to come through.

She said, "I'm on the list to be helped in July when the funding comes through" and she told

me that she had been looking for rental homes and had found 12 affordable ones in the

neighborhood where she wants to live because it's close to the kids' school and closer to

her work.

Having these potential breakthroughs served as motivation for the residents and it

helped them maintain a positive outlook for their future. It not only served as coping

mechanisms for their financial stress but it also helped their self-image. They spoke to me

as if having these hopes and dreams made them different than others in the motel. They

were not just sitting around happy to be in a motel; they were doing something and putting

together a plan to get out.

A few of the respondents talked about their faith during the interview. Those who

were religious definitely relied on their faith and trust in God to cope with their life

outcome and current situation. They believed their misfortune was temporary and God

would provide for them because they were good people and had faith. Some attributed

their ability to survive some weeks to a miracle or divine intervention as in God placing

people in their path that provided the help they needed at that moment. At the end of the

interview, one respondent commented that she believed I was one of the people God had

placed in her path because otherwise she would not have had enough for that week's rent. The incentive for the interview would complete her weekly rent. Another couple said they believed I would do well in life because I was doing a good thing for people and God would be behind my work.

In some cases, some respondents believed that the periods of crisis and stress they experienced in their lives were tests that the Lord was giving them. These trials would test their faith and if they survived the crisis, they believed it strengthened their character and faith as well. One participant talked about these tests and at one point laughed and asked God to "keep sending them." She believed that the more tests she endured and survived, the more rewards or blessings she would receive later in life (or perhaps she meant later in life as in the afterlife).

Others thought they were experiencing financial struggles as a way to learn a lesson. They believed that God would want us to remain humble and live simply. By having them experience this temporary period of financial struggle they were reminded of this lesson. Dee said, ". . .So, maybe God wants us to learn to live a little more humble. I think maybe the recession is happening because there needs to be an even playing field. . ." Those who had faith constructed their circumstances to mean something more than just "bad things" happening to them. The participants gave their misfortune a reason and meaning to help them push through the tough times in hopes of rewards if they proved themselves.

For the Kids

Participants in this sample mentioned often how their biggest worry was their children. They worried about how the environment would affect them in the long run; the

lack of space, privacy, lack of "normal" kid activities like playing with their neighbors, having sleep overs, etc. However, parents also reported their children being their motivators to push through the less than ideal circumstances in hopes of giving the children a better future down the road. Children served dual functions: stressors and sources of optimism. Children forced their parents to have or at least present a positive outlook.

Many of the parents, especially those who were able to be interviewed away from their children, talked about how depressing and difficult their situation was and how they hated that their children had to endure that as a result of their (parents') failure to provide. At the same time the kids provide the parents with motivation to persevere every day. Aida said, "I don't even want to get up half the time......I get up because I have to because I have to get my son to school, because I have to feed my daughter, if not I would probably die there." For Aida who reported suffering from clinical depression, her children force her to get up and greet the world each day. Similarly, Natalia reported feeling down and depressed but pushed through the negative thoughts because of her daughter.

> Natalia: Me coming home to this, me opening the door, I'm like "ugh". It's not home
> to me. Uhm, it's kinda depressing. But she's my motive right now. I want a happier
> home and a much bigger place. She takes up a lot of room.. . . . But like I said I keep it
> together 'cause I have her...

Orphee and Joe said it hurt them when their daughters asked for stuff that they could not buy for them. But they also said those moments become teachable moments for them too. Joe, said "... but it's kinda good in a way for them, 'cause as my older daughter, they'll see

now what it takes to survive in the world you know. It's kinda teaching them as well." Dee thought similar about her six year old daughter. She said, "...for 6 years, whatever she pointed at, she got. So, maybe God wants us to learn to live a little more humble." So these parents coped with their inability to buy the extras for their daughters by framing the situation as a character building experience for their children.

What these parents feel is the universal parent role script that has been noted in the literature among homeless and low income families (Choi & Snyder, 1999). Our society clearly delineates that parents should provide basic necessities and a healthy environment for children to develop and grow. These parents see the disconnect between their environment and the cultural expectation that each family should have a single-family residence where each member of the family has enough space and their material and emotional needs are met, and that generates stress. The parents I interviewed demonstrated ways in which they were doing everything they could, doing their best to provide a loving and safe environment for their children. Each and every one had high hopes for their children's futures and that hope was a coping strategy. Although research suggests that homelessness can have detrimental effects on children's health, mental health and school performance in the short term, Rog and Buckner (2007, p. 2) suggest that these effects "tend to dissipate over time once children are rehoused. "

Blood is Not Thicker than Water: Building a Community with Strangers

Homelessness has been referred to as family-lessness (Wright, 2009). The motel residents in this sample did have some relatives that they kept in contact with but they all reported not having the ability to reach out to them for help for various reasons. Some of

125

the reasons included relatives not having financial resources to help, "dysfunctional" family dynamics, relatives were much older or not around anymore, pride or not wanting to bother anyone with their problems.

As Donna explained, a lot of the motel residents felt that they could not or should not bother their relatives or friends for help because it was not their responsibility to bear. The motel residents considered themselves independent and wanted to provide for themselves without bothering their families .

> Donna: I love them to listen to me if I need to talk but [my sister] she's great…if I need to talk, but I still have to do it on my own because if I rely on somebody as a crutch I'm never gonna get off of them so I have to do it on my own. Like I said, I'm a proud woman, I have to do it alone. If I need help, I don't hesitate to ask but I prefer doing it until I can't do it no more.

It seemed as though some did not ask out of consideration for their relatives and also as an identity management strategy. Ellen, for example, had not disclosed to her mother that she was living in a motel. She said her mother "would die" if she knew her grandkids were staying in a motel, so Ellen did not tell her and would ask her 6 year old not to tell grandma where they lived when they spoke on the phone. Ellen said her mother would come and take the kids away until they could find a house. Ellen thought about how beneficial it would be for her kids to be away from the motel environment but she couldn't bear the thought of being away from her kids and she firmly believed that it would not be much longer before they would have their house so she preferred to not trouble her mom for help.

Below, Jane talks about how they do not have any family support and the one relative that does keep in touch and tries to help finds herself in a similar financial situation. This was common for a lot of the residents who had family members with whom they kept in touch. Their relatives would provide emotional support but were limited to any instrumental support such as offering cash or housing to them.

> Jane: He has one sister here which she, she tries to help as much as she can but again she's in the same situation we were in, she JUST got her apartment [after 7 years of living in a motel], she has no furniture but she has an apartment, you know. So, she's kind of on the same boat so it's not much she can help out with.

Most of the motel residents did keep in touch with their family either in town or via phone although no one claimed to have real social support outside of their immediate family. The residents defined support as instrumental support—the ability to provide material assistance such as cash or housing. Since family members were not in a position to do that, or the participant did not ask for that, the participants felt they did not have any support. No one in this sample ever claimed to have social support when directly asked. However, when probed for specific types of instrumental support such as transportation, childcare, and even financial most of the responses revealed participants were not as alone as they had initially reported. However, because of frequency (once in a while) or inadequacy (not enough) of support, the residents did not feel they had reliable support from their families.

For a small number of the motel residents, their unstable family dynamics and/or dysfunctional relationships made it difficult to have a relationship where family could offer participants emotional support at times of need. Some of them had troubled family

backgrounds that almost made them destined to struggle. That is the case for Natalia, an18 year old mom who has been living in motels off and on since she was 15 years old. Natalia explained:

> My mother and I, we were the only ones living in a house and she couldn't afford to pay the rent cause it was a 4 bedroom and she couldn't, we got kicked out so she moved in with her boyfriend. At the time it was her boyfriend and her boyfriend didn't allow me being there so I got kicked [out] so I was living with my ex-boyfriend and when I was 16, I was living with my friend. And that's how I met him and, I moved in with him and then we lived in his house, his apartment for 4 months and then moved out and moved into a motel room because we couldn't afford the rent.

Natalia was not the only one with a "dysfunctional" family relationship as some of them described it. But she was the youngest resident interviewed and the one who reported being out on her own at a very young age. In other cases, the family simply believed their job was done and now that the participants had families on their own, it was their responsibility to provide for them. Some family members had turned their backs on some of the participants because of something they had done in their past that was not acceptable by the family. Others resented their family members for what they believed was purposely not helping them when they believed their relatives could do something to help their situation, whether it was babysitting, transportation, or even a job. These family dynamics led many of the participants to decrease contact with their families or just have a superficial relationship where they would talk every once in a while but they would not

share any personal news with them. For those who experienced this, families were not a source of support, just a title.

A number of motel residents found great comfort in meeting other families in the motel that they could relate to and built relationships they considered stronger than their family ties. There was a small group of residents who lived in one motel that were particularly close. In reference to this motel community, one participant said, "you know everybody kinda knows everybody. It's like, I call it "the happy hotel" from The Muppets." The families reported each other as their support system. When asked who they would go to for help, these families would say they would talk to their neighbors rather than their own relatives. Each participant had big smiles on their faces as they talked about the friends they were surrounded with and thought themselves lucky to have picked that motel and be surrounded by such supporting families (and management as well). These families felt as if they were in a judgment free zone when they talked to one another. One family could not judge another because all motel families were all in the same situation (although each family still judged specific decisions other families made). According to Donna,

> The other thing about the hotels, is that everybody understands one another,
> doesn't judge anybody about having no money, having no food or what kind of
> situation we're in. Everybody understands cause they're living it so everybody
> bends over backwards to help each other.

Whereas these families may hesitate to ask family or friends for money for rent or food, they rely on each other so as to avoid judgment and perhaps repercussions such as being reported to DCF for not having enough food for their kids. A resident at another motel,

Inocencia, had a network of four families who also lived at her motel. She said they became very close like a family and she could count on them for emotional support as well as during any crisis. Inocencia explains:

> On occasion, the other girls have lent me money, I would pay [rent] and then when I got paid I would pay them back. Also when I had money and another person was short, I would give them money and we would keep each other in this exchange to survive.

Ward and Turner (2007) suggest that social networks can prevent welfare. In these cases, the social networks were not complete substitutes for their TANF benefits but they did provide assistance that would not be available to them through TANF or available in a timely manner. For the majority of residents who found themselves in a motel with other supportive families, these relationships filled the gap that their families would have filled. Some completely replaced them by calling them their family. At an outreach event I met two of the participants who introduced themselves as "neighbor sisters." After talking to them a bit, I learned that they had met only a couple of months before at the motel when they became next door neighbors. One of them told me, "she's like my sister man, I don't know what I would do without her." This pair had become so close in that short period of time that they were planning to move in to a house together. They hoped that arrangement would help both of them progress by having each other as support as well as making the bills more affordable.

These fictive kin relationships were the residents' safety nets when the traditional bonds were broken or non-existent. As Julio said, "I got family over there but you know

what, sometimes you can depend more on strangers than your own family" and Laura also thought the same, "it's crazy how a stranger will, can impact your life, or be so close." For these motel residents knowing they were surrounded by people in their same situation, who understood their struggles and did not think of them as any less because of it, was a beneficial environment and helped them feel optimistic that they would be okay.

In contrast, there were some residents who either were not in a motel with families (or ones they could relate to) or had been through some bad experiences that made them hesitant to interact with others. These residents reported they felt it was best to keep to themselves and interact with others as little as possible in order to avoid being caught up with "bad" people or having others gossip about them and know "their business." While they felt that isolating themselves was best for their family, these residents were more likely to report feeling down, depressed and overall unhappiness with their current situation than those who talked about their close relationships with neighbors. Sunny describes why she prefers to keep to herself:

> Sunny: I've met other people but I try to keep myself distant not to get too involved with other people. Like we have a few people that we talk to but other than that we don't get involved with other people. We try and keep our distance. I find it's easier that way, no one knows your business, they don't have to know your business, my kids don't have to deal with other people saying your kids are doing this and that,…I'm right here, I can tell what my kids are doing, we don't need these people coming in here, run in here, yapping making it worse than what it is.

The isolated residents did not have any social relationships to buffer their negative feelings. They only depended on their partners, if they had one, to talk to and vent their emotions. These residents were also the ones who talked about their need for a break from the motel room, from the room. The lack of a social network made them more susceptible to depression and unhappiness. These residents reported wanting positive relationships with others, wanting to have social interactions, but were not sure their environment was conducive to the types of relationships they hoped for. In turn, they isolated themselves. However, I found that through their narratives they reported knowledge of other families in the motel. They did not "know" them but they knew of them and either had observed the families in the common areas or had some interaction that gave them the ability to tell their story. In other words, even though the families said they did not know anyone, they still speculated about the lives of others or gossiped about them during their interviews with me. I interpreted this as a coping strategy for the motel residents. It provided a connection, although not a real one, to others in the motel and it also helped them cope with their situation by judging others. The residents told me the back stories of other residents as their justification for not interacting with that family. The families were judging other residents and comparing other residents' decisions to their own and using those judgments to make themselves feel better. For example, one of the participants assumed that because she was surrounded by single people without children they would not have the same interests and the single people would be into the wrong things. Another resident judged a neighbor who had multiple children for buying a new car that they believed she could not afford. They explained how they paid for their cars outright using their tax refund and how that resident should have not given herself a car payment to

worry about. Others observed the amount of stuff in some rooms and thought of those

residents as people who must be happy where they are at and made that their home.

Even the residents who attempt to isolate themselves, still try to find a connection

to the others around their motel room. This pseudo connection serves as a coping strategy

for them by reinforcing their beliefs and values, and providing some affirmation that they

are better than their environment.

Summary

Motel residents just like housed low income individuals experience a great deal of

stress from multiple directions that affect their subjective mental health and even their

daily routines. The experiences described by the motel residents are consistent with Evans

and English's (2002)and Choi and Snyder's (1999) findings of higher prevalence of multiple

stressors among low-income families and their children than middle class families.

Financial pressures are the main stressor for these families but the financial

instability affects their housing, safety, and health (physical and mental). The residents

referred to times where they have questioned their self-worth as a result of their living

situation. Also, it was evident that the experiences of motel residents are gendered in that

women suffer more isolation and depression than men. Women spend more time in the

motel and hence do not get a mental break from their situation or their work.

Most of the participants coped with their stress using what Banyard and Graham-

Bermann (1998) refer to as active-cognitive strategies, such as thinking about their

situation, praying about it, and trying to keep a positive attitude. None of the participants

actually verbalized any "active-behavioral" plan they had to cope with their situation, as in

actually writing down and following through a plan other than just waiting for things to get better or something to come along. But there was some indication that the type of motel and relationships with neighbors also served as a buffer from the negative effects of stress and provided a positive light for the motel residents.

CHAPTER SIX: RELATIONSHIP WITH SERVICE PROVIDERS

Motel residents were quick to describe their experiences with social service providers during their interviews. Although most were receiving some assistance, mainly from the government in the form of food stamps and Medicaid, their experiences were not always positive. In line with Zufferey and Kerr's (2004) findings, there was a general feeling among the motel residents that social service providers were not "on their side." The participants described the negative treatment they had received by social service providers and how they felt judged when requesting assistance. Most of the negative comments related to the power differentials between the providers and themselves as clients where at times they even felt like second class citizens. A couple of the motel residents were able to empathize with the role of social service providers and their work overload. These themes and the suggestions for changes made by the participants are discussed in this chapter.

They Have The Power

Most of the comments shared by the motel residents were related to power differentials. Participants felt like social service providers had all the power and they had none. They, as low income and homeless individuals, had to prove they were worthy of the providers' time and assistance. Time was a particularly prevalent issue regarding applications and turn-around times. Participants talked about providers or the people in control of the assistance whether it was food, cash, or housing, having "all the time in the world" and expecting others to move quickly and obey their orders or else.

There were many different ways in which participants perceived social service

providers exerting power over them. These include, but are not limited to: having the

power to make up the rules, determining which documents will be necessary and/or

acceptable, withholding information about assistance or status of application, providing

selective information about programs available, requesting unnecessary documents,

asking for more personal information than necessary, setting limited appointment dates

and times, and setting the frequency of appointments. Participants had multiple and

frequent experiences where they felt bound by the system as one participant put it "obey or

get canned."

> Joe and Orphee: Weeeell, they're going through their policy thing, want to see if
>
> you're going to meet all the requirements and you going to meet all your
>
> appointments during that time, and then we'll make an appointment to see…..ooooh,
>
> you gotta work for it, you gotta work for it man. . . . .They got so many different
>
> requirements man, you just gotta make 'em [O: and obey] and obey. (*on why his*
>
> *SSDI check is only 70% of what he could get if he were defined as 100% disabled*)

> Dee: As one social worker once told me, "I have the power!" I said "who are you?
>
> Fucking He-Man" but he did have the power, he could do whatever he wanted and
>
> he did . . . . what are you gonna do?

The participants knew they were at the mercy of the providers. If they wanted to get any

assistance, they had no choice but to comply with their requests and follow the

bureaucratic rules. Just like the participants in Reutter, et al. (2009) pointed out, one

cannot complain or make comments about what they believe to be injustices towards them because any negativity is perceived as having an "attitude" and would label them as difficult or non-compliant and could suffer consequences such as losing benefits. According to Dee, "when it comes to the government you get all you can and you shut the fuck up because if you complain they take it all away and that's how it works..."

Another frustration with the social service providers was what they perceived as unnecessary withholding of information. The motel residents felt some providers withheld information on programs because they knew of or had heard of someone getting help through an agency but when they called there was no such program or help. Through the interviews I conducted with social service providers I was able to corroborate some of this sentiment because case workers do have to make judgment calls at times. So, it is possible that a client would call an agency and if the clients do not present themselves in a particular manner or present their situation as one that appeals to the case worker as a good match for a program, they will not be told about that program or offered assistance. In an interview, a program director told me their case workers do not always inform the clients about all the help that is available because if the family knew all of what they could get, they would not work as hard or as quickly to become self-sufficient and with less help.

Sometimes the frustrations with the providers were about the withholding of information on their application status. For example, it is very difficult to get an answer for your status on Section 8 housing vouchers because the waiting list is so long, the staff can only say it will be a long time before your number is up. In other cases it should not be as difficult to get an application status. Ellen applied for Medicaid for her children because they could no longer afford health insurance through her husband's employer. She says:

Ellen: They denied my kids the Medicaid. I've tried twice, I did it 4-5 days ago and

they said "your kids don't meet the citizenship requirement" and I'm like "what does

that mean?" and she said they'll send me a letter in the mail.

She was particularly frustrated because it had taken her quite a bit of time to get a real

person to answer the phone rather than just get information from the automated system.

Once she was able to get a human on the phone, she was even more enraged when this

person did not answer her questions and just told her to wait for the letter in the mail. She

felt this was a way of the system playing games and not being straightforward with the

people whom it is supposed to serve. Other participants also commented on how

automated everything has become and how providers are using technology to "streamline"

the process yet it has only made it worse for them because they are no longer able to just

walk up to an office, talk to an actual person and get a straight answer. They are redirected

to a phone or a website instead. Dee said, "I called every day for 8 hours and didn't get a

human, seriously." This again made the participants feel like they are not valued or

deserving of human acknowledgement.

There was a lot of resentment towards social service providers, government

agencies in particular, about the amount of time it requires to apply for and obtain

assistance. The participants felt as if their time was not valued, or as if their hardships

were not acknowledged. They felt as if social service providers did not acknowledge or did

not care about the time required to complete assistance applications, gather the documents

necessary, travel to deliver the documents, call for follow ups, all the while taking care of

the children and trying to fulfill their household obligations.

Mara (*on why she gave up on utility bill payment assistance)*: I got tired of calling all day and they wouldn't pick up [the phone]. The day was over. I ran out of time for the hours they were open and they never picked up.

Laura (*in regards to her 2 months wait for food stamps approval)*: What kind of help are you really getting from a call center? December 16th I put in that certification. We would have so much extra money to put towards other things had we not gone through that.

Donna (*on the process to obtain a housing voucher from the city)*: ...yeah, you have to take a class which I take on Wednesday, money management, and then you go on the waiting list, and then they do their priorities, the low income, the medium income and the moderate income

At times during the interviews I heard comments that sounded very similar to the "mommy wars"—the debate between working moms and stay at home moms that at times turns ugly with working moms wondering what it is that stay at home moms do all day with all their time since they don't "work." Participants had similar feelings. They felt as if social service providers thought that just because they were unemployed, they had nothing better to do with their time than fill out paperwork and abide by the providers' instructions, whereas families felt like the social service providers should consider that their needs are critical and immediate as in the case with food stamps or cash assistance. The delayed processing time could mean family members going hungry or not having enough money to pay for a roof over their head.

Jane (*on why she has not been able to apply for WIC)*: The closest one is by the health

department and that's 2 hours on the bus, 2 hours and then I have to bring all the

babies, again it's all about…honestly, out here it's tough with transportation. They

have to get on transportation because they want us to do SOOO much to get what we

need but how are we gonna get to these places when it's like 20 miles away. It's

horrible, like walking, we've walked I mean, I walk everywhere, that's not the issue,

it's just that, from the health department to here, it would probably be like a 4 hour

walk, something like that.

Further, some agencies require families to sign up for programs with extensive case

management over long periods of time (months) before being eligible for assistance. As

one provider said, "If they're motivated to make a difference, we can put them into a

program where we case manage them, and work with them one on one somewhere

between 2-3 months to 6 months." From the service providers' perspective, declining these

services is viewed as lack of readiness to change or complacency with their current

situation, whereas from the families' perspective, they are coming from a "crisis" mode

where they are looking for someone to provide immediate assistance and alleviate their

crisis and/or stress in the moment. Offering up case management – or "hand holding" as a

motel resident once called it- is perceived as a lack of willingness to provide assistance

when needed. Time is of the essence and motel residents live in the moment. If services

are not provided in the moment, then there are no services available in their mind.

Lastly, there was a general sense of mistrust towards social service providers. I

have mentioned previously the real fear towards DCF or child protective services. The

motel residents consider this agency the enemy in that the residents believe that if they

were ever investigated, as parents living in a motel, they would not be given the benefit of the doubt and would be assumed to be unfit parents because of their housing. Besides the mistrust of DCF, various comments related to the frequency with which the families had to disclose their personal information to strangers (providers) without really knowing the benefits or consequences. For most, this is just part of life now. They know each agency collects personal information on every potential family they will disburse funds to or help in any way. But a few mentioned how they try to vet agencies or people who say will help until they can confirm from others what they are indeed about. This feeling applied to my research as well. After we had wrapped up the interview, Joe continued asking questions and we were talking about landlords and housing programs and how he didn't know who to trust because they would end up asking all kinds of personal questions, histories, etc. and they would never hear back and he was not sure how many more times he'd be willing to tell a stranger his life story without really knowing his chances of receiving help and he looked over at his wife and she said, "yeah, I'd be looking at that piece of paper [my recruitment flyer] saying, should I call, should I not call?" They eventually called me after speaking with another family living at the same motel who told them I was ok. Prior to beginning this research I was told by several folks who have worked with low-income families that I would not have a problem finding people to talk to me about their story because "poor people" are used to disclosing all their personal information. And while this is the case, it seems that some are beginning to feel taken advantage of and resist that idea.

Second Class Citizens

Many participants mentioned experiences they have encountered with social service providers that made them feel as second class citizens. It is as if social service providers

view them as "less" than others, not worthy, guilty until proven innocent and hence not deserving of the same rights or treatment as those who are self-sufficient. There was a general sense that they were undervalued in this society. Jack explains it best when he says:

> I don't understand why they don't do anything to correct it because if it wasn't for the people that work in this area you know, there'll be no one to run these restaurants, gift shops, race tracs, gift shops……

This feeling was also expressed in their disappointment with the food provided by some food pantries or churches in the area. A couple of local groups collect perishable food items from supermarkets that would be discarded within a day because of their "sell by" date and instead of discarding the food, it is distributed to the motels and to families in need in the area. While this is appreciated as an act of kindness by some of the participants, others felt as if they were being given the left overs, the items that no one else wanted that were to become trash. This made them feel as if some people did not value them as much as other members in the community.

> Jennifer: . . .what they give in the pantry is crap really. Like they gave expired food, the other day, [name] Church they came over here and they gave bread and pastries, the bread was all expired, the pastries…the only thing good they give is the cookies, chocolate chip cookies cause the rest of the stuff was all expired, you know.

Overall they mostly felt undervalued because they felt the system was not there to support them as citizens. There were many references made to the types of assistance available and how it only exists to keep them in their current situation. As Aida said, "I have

142

therapists that come here weekly, early head start comes here weekly, we had two other therapists that came here weekly and no one, nobody helped us get out of here." Even though they were aware that all assistance was advertised as something "to help you get better", they felt that not enough effort or funds were placed into the type of assistance that would really help them be better, be un-homeless. What these families want is housing first, the rest is just icing on the cake. The assistance programs available are for other supplemental services to help the families with some of their needs, but not to help them get out. In a sense, the families are correct. We do not hear stories of anyone who was able to pull themselves out of homelessness because s/he went to the food pantries. As Wright (2009) mentions, food stamps do not help people become self-sufficient, it just makes them less hungry and Medicaid doesn't make someone self-sufficient, it just makes them healthier. The type of help that the motel residents cited as their most pressing need were help looking for and finding jobs and housing. Because this is the type of help that there is the least of, this contributes to their feelings of the system not doing enough to help them get out of their current situation. Furthermore, as Yanira and Julio stated in their interview:

> "we have gone to different places that supposedly would help us with transportation and even with the room rent but they tell us that if we're not working they can't help us and it's like I say to them, if I was working I wouldn't have the need to call you to pay because in reality I'm working. But if you're not working they don't help."

Yanira and Julio, as well as others, viewed the system as a façade that existed to present the image there were there to help everyone but in reality would only help a select few. Some of the participants commented on other barriers they have encountered trying to request basic personal documentation in order for them to obtain employment or assistance and how there is no assistance for that or to pay for those documents such as FL driver's license or ordering birth certificates.

A couple of the female participants pointed out they were unable to look for employment due to their lack of childcare and were not eligible for subsidized childcare because they were unemployed. For them this was the best example of how the system and people in power made senseless rules and were disconnected from people's needs

In theory, providing someone with food or food stamps would free up some income for other bills or perhaps savings. This would be true if these families had incomes that did not qualify them for entitlement programs and were spending their own money on things like food and medical bills. But these families have always been part of the working poor. They have always received these subsidies in order to make ends meet. Hence, the subsidies that they receive now are not placing them in any better financial situation. Giving someone more funds in their food stamps card each month as a result of drop in income just means the family can eat more food, it doesn't allow them to pay their rent or utility bill.

Wishful Thinking

Participants wished that social service providers would spend some time in their shoes so they would actually understand what it means to live in a motel. The motel

residents believed that if the social service providers spent some time in the motel with them, it would turn them into compassionate beings with empathy towards all the families who are struggling. Some commented that if it was up to them, they would only hire formerly homeless individuals or individuals who had struggled and could relate to their situations.

> Dee: I would just have more people who….I would start with people who work with people in this situation, you, the people in the churches, because those are the people I'm going to hire to work with the system cause then they would be more qualified and understanding and knowledgeable to know who to reach out to and help in what ways. . . . .

In another interview, Jane talks about how she has only encountered two people who have been caring and helpful to them. This couple volunteers at the children's school bus stop and distributes groceries for the parents or children to take back to their rooms.

> Jane: there's one lady that tries to help the best she can, and she's been really good to us. [she lives here?] No. she actually goes to all the hotels and like provides…. I met her when I was at the Home Suite Home over the highway, they go to the bus stop every Thursday, every Thursday and I met her and she was actually out here the other day and saw me and she was [unclear] and she knows how the families are, that's what I like about her is because she knows, you know, she gave me some diapers and other stuff we need, stuff like that. . . . they've been the only people that really have tried to help, and it's not just us they're trying to help they're trying to

help every family in need right now and I know it's probably tough on them because

they're not getting as much help

Jane believed that this couple was actually reaching out to the families in motels by going to

the motel rather than setting up shop somewhere else and have the families come to them.

She mentioned multiple times during her interview how great it was that they cared

enough to come to the motel. For her, simply the location of service implied compassion

and understanding of her situation. Again, the families felt like people needed to

experience the motel, see for themselves how it is that families are living in the motel for

them to understand their frustrations. Jane said, "...they need to really hit some of these

hotels, they need to get in here and see what's going on because if not, nothing's going to

change."

Averitt (2003) found that homeless mothers in shelters expressed similar feelings

about their shelter staff even though the shelter staff were in fact formerly homeless

themselves. In their case, prior homeless experience did not make the shelter staff any

more empathetic towards the currently homeless families in the shelter. Averitt (2003)

suggests that one explanation could be the internalization of the dominant group's norms

and beliefs by the formerly homeless staff members. Zufferey and Kerr (2004) observed

this same type of behavior when homeless individuals became housed. When homeless

participants were on the streets they spoke about how people treated them like less of a

person and yet when they became housed, they turned and had negative things to say

about homeless people (Zufferey & Kerr, 2004). These findings suggest that even if the

motel residents got their wish, it would not change the relationship and experiences between the providers and themselves.

Although most of the comments towards service providers were negative, there were a few instances when participants acknowledged that social service providers are overwhelmed and cannot do their job perhaps as well as they would like to. Jane expressed some empathy towards social service providers, she said:

> . . . honestly I see so many people going through the same thing right now that I think it's hard on both ends the families being homeless and right now the government and the state assistance and everything like that. They're probably going through a lot because there are so many people trying to reach out for help right now. So honestly you can't even blame them because they're trying, I can't say everybody, but they're trying as hard as we're trying because we're trying to reach out to them and sometimes they don't have the money to fund it, what are they going to do?

While others also realized the number of people trying to reach out for help was high, they were sympathetic towards individual workers but not the system as a whole. The participants expressed frustration at the lack of staff available to handle the demand and did not understand why agencies could not hire more people, help people by employing them and in turn, have more people available to help others. In addition, participants appreciated when any case worker or agency provided straightforward information even if the news were negative. As one participants explained, she did not care

hearing the word "NO", as long as it was told in a timely manner and she was given a reasonable explanation for it.

Summary

The data presented here aligns with previous research on homeless individuals and their relationships with their social service providers. There seems to be a prevalent "us" versus "them" mentality among the motel residents. Participants did not feel supported by the social service providers and at times felt like their interactions affected their self-worth. Participants felt taken advantage of when they felt providers abused their position and exerted their power over them. The motel residents felt they had no choice but to comply with the providers' "orders" without complaint out of fear of losing their benefits if they did not. They overwhelmingly felt like there were unnecessary hoops to jump through to get assistance. From the providers' perspective, if clients do not comply then they are not willing to work hard enough to help themselves and do not deserve benefits. Providers operate under a deferred gratification system whereas clients want/need immediate gratification to feel like the providers are indeed providing the support they claim they provide.

CHAPTER 7: SERVICE PROVIDERS

Osceola County has grown much faster than the social service infrastructure could handle. The county does not have much assistance available to families in need of housing. There is no emergency shelter for homeless individuals or families (with the exception of one domestic violence shelter). There are literally a handful of spots, as in ten, available for subsidized "scattered site" housing with very strict eligibility requirements. And there are not enough low-income or affordable housing units for the families in the lowest income brackets. A number of faith based organizations offer food pantries to those in need at various days and times throughout the month. But as every homeless person will tell you, their only need is housing. According to the motel residents interviewed, there is not enough affordable housing in the county to accommodate all of the motel residents in the area. The interviews with social service providers were meant to learn about their perspective on the homelessness issue in Osceola County. Service providers included employees of non-profit organizations serving families, government employees, faith-based organizations ran by volunteers, and motel operators. These interviews focused on the types of assistance available, the process for obtaining assistance such as eligibility requirements, and what they believed to be the reasons families, a great number of families, where in need of assistance. In order to protect the identity of these social service agencies and employees, each agency was assigned a letter and discussed as such. This chapter discusses the themes that emerged from the interviews with social service providers.

Perceptions of Clients, Client Selection and Responsibility to Funders

In simple terms, a social service provider's job description is to "help" people. Every social worker and volunteer interviewed mentioned how much they enjoyed helping people and seeing through a success story. However, some also spoke on the reality that 1) not everyone could be helped or wanted help, and 2) they had to learn to select the families that had the best chance of success. The "best chance of success" essentially meant helping those who already had a step up, those who already had a job or at least some sort of steady income even if it was unearned such as SSDI or child support. Most of the programs had eligibility requirements that were clearly specified on paper but even so, the interviews with providers revealed that there were some judgment calls that they made based on their "gut feeling" and past experiences.

From the interviews I conducted with social service providers and community members, it is evident that the motel residents I interviewed did have a valid point when they pointed out how others misjudge them just because they live in a motel. Generally, motel residents were not viewed in a positive light. The "good" ones seem to be the exception to the rule. Hence, motel residents may find themselves trying to disprove the pervasive stereotypes of being lazy, disabled without an actual disability, system abusers, drug users, and irresponsible in order to receive assistance. Here are some examples of the quotes I heard from service providers about motel residents:

Case worker at Agency A: you've got people literally here on vacation and stay. . .
You know, they've just been here a few weeks [and call for assistance] "No, you're on vacation still"

Deputy A: I used to think they [motel residents] were the scum of the Earth but some deserve the time.

Deputy B: 98% say they are disabled but I wonder what their disability is

Motel Operator: there's people that walk-in and you can tell it's not what we're trying to do here

Motel Operator: We feel like babysitters, like caregivers. . . it's all about what is convenient for them

A representative from Agency H classified motel residents into three categories: those "who want and are trying to move out", those who have "lost hope and need help reestablishing hope" and the folks "who have become comfortable there [at motel] and don't want to leave." He went on to specify that the first group, the ones trying to get out, is the ones being targeted by most agencies right now. The third category this case worker identified was one that I heard multiple times from providers and community members, yet I did not encounter anyone living in a motel who felt like it was their permanent home. This seems to be a pervasive stereotype of a sub-group of motel residents without any evidence of its existence.

One particular provider from Agency "A" mentioned the word "motivated" eight times when referring to which clients were chosen for their programs. Here are some examples of the comments made during her interview in reference to their potential clients:

We got a lot of resources to help you get to that but if you're really not motivated or don't want to get to that point you're never gonna get there. . . . unless you're really want to start moving forward you're not gonna.

We call them and we screen them, we talk to them about what are their goals, what are they looking for, what do they want, and see if that family fits in what we can do to help someone. Trying to choose….you know, dollars are limited and resources are limited to what we can do. Take a family who WANTS to make a difference, it isn't always true that families want to necessarily move from where they are to move the direction everyone else will like to see them move in. If they're motivated to make a difference, we can put them into a program where we case manage them, and work with them one on one somewhere between 2-3 months to 6 months

Some of this language is reminiscent of references to addicts such as "the first step is recognizing you have a problem." During the interviews, various social service providers referred to their clients as those who *want* to get help, they *want* to work hard, they *want* a better future and those who were not willing to work with the case workers were labeled as those who do *not* want to be helped and are content with their situation. The first assumption made is that the families in need do not know how to get their lives back on track and need someone to tell them exactly what to do and guide them through the process in order for them to become self-sufficient like they are broken and need fixing. A program coordinator spoke of a family they had recently helped moved out of a motel, she said: "we *rescued* a family in Orlando. . . "[emphasis mine]; which suggests that the family was helpless and their organization their savior.

Another assumption is that if a family is not willing to sign up for long-term case management then they do not want to improve their situation; they don't care enough to put in the work. As one case worker said about their services, "it's not just a hand out but case management." Hoffman and Coffey (2008) refer to this as the infantilization of clients---the idea that case workers treat their clients as if they do not know better, they do not know what they need and hence have to tell them what to do. In turn, Zufferey and Kerr (2004) point out clients would have "to construct themselves as needing expert intervention and support" to guide them to their next step which most adults are not willing to admit to. Most of the families in motels I spoke to did not report feeling lost or not knowing what to do, they knew what they needed, and they just did not have the money, transportation or childcare to get it done. The families reported their need for immediate help and they did not see the benefit of signing up to be case managed for months because that was not going to help them pay their rent *this* week or month.

The social service providers pointed out examples of families who they have deemed eligible because of their potential for success as well as examples of those who were not quite "ready" for the program or probably would never be given their past life circumstances (e.g. individuals who have never been "self-sufficient" before). For example, a housing program coordinator said "if someone is 40 and has never been self-sufficient before then what do I have to work with." These judgments lie in the lived experiences of the social workers who are now in a position of power to judge whether someone in need is "ready" or has "potential for success." However, there seemed to be little reflection on the social service provider's part on their perspective or how they, their social position, and their privilege (race/ethnicity, social class, marital status) biased their "gut feeling." In

153

essence, what the social service providers do is ask the questions that will determine whether the individual's decisions were logical and reasonable according to the social worker's framework. Heron's (2005) work draws attention to the need for self-reflection for social workers, to recognize the mechanisms of power and how that infiltrates their attitudes and judgments towards their everyday lives and in turn, their clients. A common "illogical and unreasonable" example for an undeserving client that was cited several times was the family who came from out of state, packed up their car, moved to Central Florida with nothing, no money nor family, because they thought they could just get a job and be ok. As one case worker from Agency C said, "It just cracks me up when they come here unprepared. And then everyone is supposed to make plans on what they're going to do." Another case worker explained that some of the out of state families expressed frustration at the lack of services or the process of obtaining assistance in Florida. She said: "… a lot of people say, "this isn't how it's done up north" and her co-worker replied: "Let me get you a ticket! [room laughs]." The comment was made jokingly but it shows the undertone of the feelings towards families who uproot without a "well-thought out" plan whereas from the family's perspective, uprooting their family was the best decision they could make. The families I interviewed believed in their hearts moving across state lines was in their best interest and was their chance to find opportunities for a better future. Social service providers typically judge and view these families as poor decision makers, or "crazy" but in their line of work they are only exposed to the families whose plans did not work out as they anticipated. It is difficult to know how many families have taken this same risk— packed up their cars and families, drove to Florida and actually landed a job and went about having a relatively successful life compared to what they would have had wherever

154

they came from. Surely this might have worked for some and in those cases, those families are probably touted for their bold decision to uproot and leave everything they knew in search of a better future for their kids. The social service providers that I interviewed spoke as if they would never consider making a decision like that. Hence, their "gut feelings" align with those families whose circumstances the social workers can relate to and make sense of based on their social position which is typically one who is more privileged than their clients.

There were other instances when the program guidelines or eligibility requirements for assistance were designed to identify and exclude the "non-deserving" group. For instance, several assistance programs had stipulations where a family is only eligible for assistance once in a specified time period, typically one to two years. This means that if a family received assistance this month to pay their electric bill or their rent, they would not be eligible for assistance until a year from now. The idea behind this practice is to help a greater number of families rather than a select few families over and over and create dependency. Some case workers explain:

Agency A: "One of our requirements is that they haven't received assistance from any other program in 18 months so that we don't …so that they're not just jumping from agency to agency"

Agency C: ". . .some of them out there, unfortunately that do that and make it difficult for the ones that truly need the help."

For social service providers, the reason behind the judgment of clients was rooted in the cultural script and rules for the deserving group—those who have done things "right", are trying to help themselves yet just need a little hand up.

Families in need assume that social service providers are there to help them but the social service providers' loyalty is to their superiors, the organization and their funders. The case workers have been trained to administer assistance according to the rules and guidelines outlined by their organization which one could argue have been designed to deter people from applying or receive assistance. Several social service providers mentioned how their job required them to be highly selective of their clients in order to ensure positive outcomes for their program and organization. As one program coordinator from Agency J said "we are looking for "ready to work" folks who just need a hand up. . . .the success rate of the program is 90%. . . how we choose families is important." The case workers reported having to make tough calls and turning people away not because they did not think they were deserving of the help or would not benefit from the program, but simply because there were just too many factors to address in order to get them to be considered "successful" and complete the program. One provider explained how she and other staff in her office have to constantly turn people away who are in imminent danger of being homeless either because they are behind on their rent or they have no money to pay for their motel, because the family does not have enough income to sustain themselves after receiving help. She said, ". . .and people are like "but how can you do that?" but we have to be good stewards of our money." I heard the exact phrase "good stewards of our money" in three of the interviews with providers but others spoke of this same concept. The providers were very concerned about their reputation and record with their funding

sources. This has become an even more prevalent issue given the economic situation at the moment and the fact that virtually every agency, non-profit or government office, has had to make budget cuts. Therefore, the case workers feel it is their responsibility to help people but also help those who are most likely to achieve their goals and hence provide the organization with a high success rate and make a good case for funders to continue to fund the organization and their jobs. For example, a provider said:

> Agency I: "when we have someone with little kids we *don't want to* but we ask what is your support system because you know, we have outcomes to meet and. . .the reality is that it's hard for women with small children so we take that into consideration" [emphasis mine]

Sometimes this presented an emotional conflict for the case workers because they turned families away they knew needed help but just would not be able to get back on their feet quickly enough to meet the case plan goals. But it shows how the loyalty of the case worker is not to the client but to their organization and funders. In other words, they have to look out for themselves and protect their jobs first and help people second.

Poor Transmission of Knowledge

Through the interviews with the social service providers, there was a general theme of poor transmission of knowledge among providers. Seldom were providers able to identify other agencies or faith-based organizations that provided services to families, outside of government agencies. Every provider (and family) was aware of the benefits available to families in need through the Department of Children and Families which is the agency that administers the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; aka food

stamps), Medicaid, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF; aka cash assistance). The eligibility and application process for these benefits were equally known from social workers to the families. It was the smaller, non-profit organizations or faith-based programs that were not as widely advertised that were a mystery to the providers which may translate to unknown to clients as well. There were references to the collective "faith community" efforts. Social service providers were aware that they were not the only ones trying to help families but in some cases were equally as information poor as the families they were serving. For example, at the end of each interview I would ask the providers for referrals or leads on other agencies that I could talk to. In one instance a provider asked, "did you talk to Pastor [name] at [name] Church? They do a lot at the motels". I knew of this church because it had come up in other conversations in the area with providers as well as with motel residents. When I visited the church and spoke with the Pastor I learned that they have a food pantry that is open three days a week and they *try* to deliver bread and pastries to the motels once a week if there are no other events going on. Personally I felt the phrase used by the referring provider of "they do a lot at the motels", was misleading given that the only service the church provided was a food pantry. I realize that her choice of words was probably referring to the fact that they actually reach out to those in motels and deliver some food to the motels which is something that most agencies are not able to do. This is the kind of information gap that may lead to frustration on the families seeking assistance if they are told something that suggests a higher expectation than reality.

Furthermore, a couple of interviews with service providers revealed that information is not as easily transmitted from agency to agency and in turn at times to

158

clients. When discussing services and providers that visit the hotels, one social worker

pointed out: "They do it periodically there at the parking lot but unless you're hooked into

the community you don't know". At times it was hard for those even "in the know" to know

the specific details of these special events and initiatives. For example, when I asked for

details about a particular outreach event to be hosted at a motel, one social worker

commented "I thought they're also bringing Workforce Central Florida to discuss with

people their services" and another asked, "Second Harvest? They're also doing it with

them". When I attended the event, Workforce was in attendance but Second Harvest Food

Bank was not. The implications here are that when events are not effectively advertised,

target families may not get the information necessary to attend, or families may be

misinformed about the providers who will actually be at the event for them. If a family

needed food and were told that Second Harvest Food Bank would be there and they

showed up for food when there was none, the family would feel misled and their time

wasted, and probably would not attend future outreach events. If the events are not well

attended, they are not considered successful, necessary, or worth the time and cost and the

likelihood of them happening again decreases. When I asked a government agency how

they advertise for their outreach events I was told: "I usually send the flyers to the

community partners and leave a copy in nearby hotels and businesses." I asked if there

was a central website where these events are advertised (such as the DCF website where

people apply for benefits) or a phone number where people can call for information and

was told not at the moment. With no centralized hub for information, clients in crisis have

a difficult time navigating through the system to get assistance. At the time of this data

collection period, the local newspaper published a story on the "new" face of homelessness:

motel families in Osceola County (see Santich, 2012). The story mentioned various

initiatives that were implemented or about to be implemented to address the needs of

these families. I interviewed a social service provider from a large non-profit organization

the week after the story was published and she mentioned her surprise while reading the

story because she had not heard of any of the initiatives mentioned in the article before. A

co-worker came in half-way through our interview and talked of his surprise as well. As

employees of the largest NPO in the county, they felt they had a good connection with other

providers and key players in the community to be "in the know" yet there were initiatives

going on that they were unaware of.

Job Frustrations and Limitations

As I interviewed service providers, most which served a social worker type role

within their organization, there was one consistent theme among all interviews. Each of

them expressed the limitations of their job, the infrastructure and in turn, the assistance

they were able to offer to the families they served. One of the providers from Agency B

compared her work in Osceola County to her previous posts in the neighboring counties

and said "this county out of all three counties, I can honestly say is just a very poor county."

In this case, she was referring to the number of families in need in proportion to the total

county population based on the statistics on the number of food stamp recipients, calls

their organization received each month, and the number of children on free and reduced

lunch throughout the county. Later in the conversation there were references to the

"poverty" of the county in terms of resources, particularly with lack of affordable housing

and this was something that others commented on as well. The director of Agency C

expressed her awareness of how their county stacks up to the neighboring counties:

Agency C: "We don't have a homeless shelter, we don't have some of the resources

that some of the other counties have like homeless shelters and sharing centers, and

those types of things so we're a little behind the curve. So, we want to try to get in

there and offer our homeless folks the same assistance that some of the other folks

are offering out there, 'cause that's the first thing they [clients] say 'why don't you

guys have this? Why don't you guys have that? Why aren't you helping us with

this?'"

From the county government perspective, there are no plans on building an emergency

shelter because it is not viewed as an economically efficient initiative as just placing people

directly into housing. A program coordinator at Agency C said, "in the long run it's more

expensive to house people temporarily in shelters than it is to get them into sustainable

housing." It seems this agency favored the service model commonly referred to as the

"housing first" approach where families are given housing to stabilize them. Once

stabilized all the other needs are easier to meet (e.g. food, mental health, child's behavioral

issues, transportation, counseling, etc.). The problem or disconnect here is that there is not

enough affordable housing to place families into. As a new case manager at Agency B

realized:

"... I think one thing that I've been seeing . . . is that the lack of infrastructure and

capacity like having affordable housing to put people in . . . , it just seems like a lot of

families have enough to steadily pay their bills at the hotel and they may be paying

as much as they would for rent but then add on the utilities, and it's like, they're so

close but not close enough so that's kind of frustrating because it feels like if rent

was just like $100-200 lower maybe they could handle that. So, some of those things I feel are not in place and like [name] said a shelter or some more transitional housing for those that need more time to get their feet on the ground and have more stable employment or go to school or whatever it is. Just things like that and have the case manager help families out in connecting to resources and building their stability. I guess that's just frustrating cause sometimes you want to help a family move or connect them with the funding that everyone is like "oh there's so much funding now that we're getting publicity" but then sometimes they can't access the funding because there's all these strings and requirements attached to it. Or they're just a few steps away and it seems like it's just hard for them to get those few steps in place."

This case worker's feelings mirrored the frustrations of their own clients with not being able to do what they know needs to be done to get ahead. Another case worker from the same agency said:

"When we the professionals don't have the answer. . . .then what do they do? They've reached out, they made a connection, they've got somebody who comes in 'cause we do, "ok, let's look at this, let's see what we can do", we got this and when we come up to a brick wall we're like "crap, now what do we do".

It seemed like the providers understood that the odds of a family obtaining permanent, stable housing outside the hotel were slim so they focused on services rather than housing. Some providers were very clear about this and felt the same as the clients; housing is the primary need. One social worker from Agency I said, "No one is talking about shelters,

162

they're only talking about [bringing] services." In her case, the organization receives phone calls directly from people who are in imminent risk of homelessness or homeless, and since there is no emergency shelter they have no choice but to refer them to the neighboring county emergency shelter. In some cases, the clients have transportation and enough gas to make the 45 minute drive to the emergency shelter but according to most of the providers' reports, transportation is one of the biggest barriers to this population. It is likely the family either does not have the means or will not go to the shelter as it would present an even bigger inconvenience especially if they work in Osceola or have children in school and the shelter is 45-60 minutes away. The director of Agency G told me he is pushing for a new service strategy since he knew it is impossible to offer permanent housing to all the families in motels. His approach was to offer an improvement of quality of life by finding ways to move families from the worst motels to better ones, ones that offer studio like living with kitchen facilities. Frustrated by the limitations of the job, funding, and lack of affordable housing for families, this director felt he could at least offer a little improvement to the families.

The government workers were just as restricted as the non-profit service providers. Although they receive federal funds, most are limited to specific programs that families have to meet strict requirements (as the previous case manager mentioned). Besides the eligibility requirements, federal funds tend to focus on neighborhood stabilization and/or homeownership rather than low-income rental housing. As the housing director explains their biggest federal funding source:

"Under stabilization we do more low income home buying program. We work with developers, they do these rehabs and we resell to low income home buyers and that is to definitely stabilize communities. So, you know we have areas of greatest needs, with the foreclosure rates you can kinda tell in our areas of greatest needs which area we are going to, like HUD is saying that our area of greatest need for NSP is Poinciana and BVL. And both of those have a really high foreclosure rate. So it's up to us to go in and stabilize those neighborhoods. That's ideally what you're supposed to do under NSP."

In this county the largest funding source is used to promote homeownership among low income families. It seems like a large leap for those in a hotel to move from the hotel to their own home. There is not much financial assistance to help them in between those steps. When I asked about rental assistance, I was told:

"Every year we get SHIP dollars. We decide once we get the funding what strategies we're going to use for the dollars. Next year if we get SHIP funding of $500,000 we may do some rental assistance we may not, it just depends on the need of the county."

The service providers understood not every person could be helped, not because of the clients' inability to progress necessarily but due to the lack of programs, funding, and staff to make it happen. Some of the providers pointed to individual causes (e.g. bad decision making) for the families' misfortunes but some did acknowledge the structural causes for the families' inability to progress and obtain stable, permanent housing. As one social worker explained:

"I think what happened was too is that you had that poverty level family that was able to maintain either a house or a rental and they work at the hotels and they got fulltime employment or they worked at Disney or whatever. Well, that whole level plus the level above them I think got pushed down. So all those people are now only working only 20 hours a week, they've got no benefits and they're really just going paycheck to paycheck and it's not like they can get another job someplace because all the people above them are now fighting for those same jobs. So, I think it's just really the lower middle class kinda pushed down on the people that were poor and they just really got pushed down."

Another case worker: When we the professionals don't have the answer. [X: That bothers us.] Yeah, then what do they do? They've reached out, they made a connection, they've got somebody who comes in cause we do, "ok, let's look at this let's see what we can do" we got this and when we come up to a brick wall we're like "crap, now what do we do".

Summary

The findings from the interviews with social service providers do align with some of the experiences the motel residents described in their interviews. The motel residents I interviewed described feeling judged by providers and powerless over them. The interviews from the social service providers suggest that providers do have prejudices towards families living in motels. It is very possible that a family may not receive the assistance they need or as much as they need depending on how they present themselves, what story they narrate to a particular social service provider. The judgments from

providers stem from their own personal experiences as persons with privilege (e.g. ones with jobs), but also from the cultural and organizational rules that have trained them to perform their job to benefit the organization. The providers are restricted in their roles as "helpers" by a system that forces strict selection and meant to minimize people on assistance. Sometimes the providers experience role strain when emotionally they feel they should and could help a family but their professional experience dictates that doing so would not look good for their track record or organizational outcomes.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

This study explored whether motel residents identified as homeless as the new federal definition of homelessness stipulates and what identity management strategies they engaged in their everyday lives. A total of 18 face-to-face interviews were conducted with current motel residents in Kissimmee, FL—all with children except for one couple. The findings show that motel residents found alternative ways to define homelessness as it related to their situation. Although they adapted a social identity of homelessness, they negotiated ways around the label in terms of their self-identity. In addition, as other researchers have discussed (Tomas & Dittmar, 1995; Watson & Austerberry, 1986) there are differences between having a roof with four walls and having a home. Most of the participants did not think of themselves as having a home—a safe and comfortable place to live. This, in turn, had some negative effects on their mental health, namely with reports of feeling sad and depressed. The motel residents used various strategies to cope with their stress such as believing that because they were doing good, something will eventually come through and help them move into a better situation. Children were also found to be a source of empowerment for the families. Although the families reported feeling stressed because they had children living in that situation, their children also served as motivators to do better and continue trying anything and everything. Also, some motels did have a number of families who felt they had a community and could rely on each other for social support and even some instrumental support at times. This sense of community helped alleviate some of the stress and perceptions of social support for the motel residents.

167

The recruitment process for this study offers methodological suggestions for future

researches wishing to reach motel residents. Even though I had what I considered

extensive experience with families living in motels, I found that it was not as easy to reach

out to families "on their turf." My previous experiences with homeless families were in the

context of my role as a service provider which meant that families were reaching out to me.

When the roles reversed and I tried to reach out to them, I found that I had to manage my

appearance, language and I had to participate in volunteer roles at the motels to

communicate to the families that I had good intentions with my research and not out them

as "homeless" or "bad parents" to the authorities. There is a high level of mistrust among

motel residents with children. Once I became a familiar face to the motel residents, I began

to receive referrals for interviews. This finding uncovers a barrier for social service

providers to reach out to the families in motels. Social service providers wishing to

conduct outreach at the motels would need to consider the mutual level of mistrust among

their target clients.

One of the common denominators for this sample is the fact that the majority moved

to Florida from out of state because they believed they would be able to find jobs and a

better quality of life in Kissimmee, Florida than they had in their home state. Two families

had experienced homelessness immediately before deciding to move and came to Florida

from a shelter in their home state. The others had somewhat stable lives elsewhere but

circumstances were not what they envisioned for themselves or their family so they made

the decision to uproot and try out Florida in hopes it would result in a better life in the long

run, at least for their kids. There is a strong association of Central Florida as the land of

plentiful employment. Participant after participant mentioned how they thought they

could come here and start working right away even if it was "cleaning toilets." The

disconnect is that outsiders are not seeing that even if there were jobs "cleaning toilets,"

they are not full-time, do not pay a living-wage, and do not have benefits. But, the

marketing for Central Florida excels at painting a beautiful picture of a place "where all

your dreams can come true" (Wright & Donley, 2011). In fact, two of the families in this

sample had come to Central Florida previously looking to progress and build a better life.

Neither of the families "made it" the first time around so they returned to their home state

and support networks. When things did not improve back home, both families decided it

was best to be homeless in Florida than in their home state. As a result, it seems inevitable

that Central Florida will continue to experience migration to the area and if the types of

jobs, wages, and/or housing affordability do not improve then homelessness will persist.

One of the main research questions for this study was whether motel residents

considered themselves homeless. The answer is that it depends. It depends on who asks

them and what the circumstances are. In general, participants were not shy about stating

they were homeless if they thought that would mean they could get assistance to move out

of the motel. Participants also tended to adopt a homeless social identity anytime they

referred to what the collective "system" should be doing to help them and people like them.

However, when asked if they identified as homeless, some had reservations and negotiated

ways around the term. Half of the participants constructed their homelessness as

something other than the image of homelessness they imagined. When asked what comes

to mind when you hear the word homeless, only one participant said "ME! That's what I

am." All others painted a picture related to the man under a bridge, the man living in the

woods, the man on the corner panhandling, people without a roof, bed, or bathroom of

their own. Yet, the majority did *not* consider the motel "home" and they did feel home-less. The participants constructed homelessness as being in a constant state of financial instability, lacking privacy, lacking space and the inability to make progress in their lives. They felt homeless because they were not comfortable with their space and with their lives.

I had hypothesized that a non-homeless self-identity would affect service seeking behaviors meaning that families who did not identify as homeless would not seek out housing assistance. In general this was not the case because the families did identify as homeless to seek assistance, housing or otherwise, because they were unhappy with their housing and financial situation and would take up any offers that could help them survive or improve. The only exception was identification through the school district for some of the participants who had children. Some participants mentioned they were unsure whether they would be letting their child(ren)'s school know about their situation out of fear of differential treatment for their kids if they are labeled as "homeless." This suggests a certain level of mistrust towards school personnel. Therefore, it is important for school personnel to address these concerns with families who are in transition.

The participants were aware that people outside the motel believed them to be homeless and hence used stigma management strategies similar to ones previously explored by Snow and Anderson (1987). What was different about this sample was the emphasis they placed on education for a positive presentation of self even though the overall sample lacked post-secondary education and several did not complete high school. Those who did not finish high school nor had a college degree found alternate ways to show they were educated such as mentioning facts about current issues or expertise in

170

their field. This may have been a result of reactivity to me as an interviewer and identifying

myself as a university student. Participants not only found ways to present themselves in

an educated manner but they also expressed their wishes for their children to be educated.

This was one of the reasons I found linked to their perception of their own social class.

Although a few participants mentioned they were "poor," several participants made

suggestions or references to themselves as belonging to the middle class. I believe they

understood that they could differentiate themselves from the "poor, uneducated" folks if

they expressed their values towards education and their dreams for their children.

Perhaps one of the most surprising identity management strategies was the

judgment of others that I refer to as *life coaching*. Participants judged other motel

residents for making bad decisions and talked about how they would or do things

differently to actually help themselves and improve their situation. They judged others

who were in the same situation as themselves and they believed that their choices were

better than others. This was the case even when they themselves told me about what

outsiders would consider unnecessary spending (e.g. buying cigarettes, going out for a

drink) for someone in their situation. Participants engaged in this type of judgment not

just as a self-identity management strategy- believing they are not like the other

"homeless" people- but also as a way to cope with their frustrations with their situation.

Participants judged others in order for them to believe that they were doing better than

others, making better decisions that in turn, should be rewarded sooner.

The ideas that the participants constructed as what homelessness meant to them

were the contributors to their sadness and daily frustrations. As I previously mentioned

participants were not happy about their current state. They lived in a constant state of

crisis and this inevitably affected their mental health as they reported feeling depressed,

not wanting to get out of bed, and "going crazy." Participants were surrounded by an

environment not conducive to physical or mental health. The physical conditions of the

motels made them a hot bed for potential health hazards. Every participant had

experienced problems with roaches at some point during their motel stay which

underscores the potential effects of motel life on their physical health. Also, some

participants reported that they or their children suffered from asthma, headaches, allergies

and rashes and they believed that living in the motel made their conditions worse.   If the

unsanitary conditions did not affect their physical health, it certainly affected their mental

health and made them think about the sub-standard housing they were stuck in. In

addition, most of the motel residents experienced social isolation. Unlike residential zones,

where there are clear neighborhood lines delineating communities with renters and

homeowners, those who live in a motel do not have that privilege. Their neighbors might

change daily and because of their circumstances, they are afraid to make social connections

with others who may turn out to be trouble. Through the interviews there were several

comments alluding to this general feeling of being forgotten, invisible, and not cared about

by the community. It is unclear what the long term effects of experiencing these conditions

will be on their physical health. Shaw (2004)discusses the effects lack of adequate housing

can have on physical health due to pests, mold, moisture, unsanitary conditions and how

the lack of access to healthcare that typically accompanies low-income individuals can

exacerbate any condition and turn it into a chronic condition (e.g. asthma). Although most

of the participants did report having Medicaid or Medicare, there were still mentions of

inability to access care, particularly specialists and dental care. Future research should incorporate a health assessment to determine gaps in access. A longitudinal study would also be helpful to determine what, if any, are the long-term effects of living in a motel on physical and mental health.

Research on homelessness has shown that the experience of homelessness varies by gender (Hagen, 1987; Passaro, 1996; Tomas & Dittmar, 1995). This also holds true for the motel residents. Women in the sample reported they felt like they experienced more stress than their male partners because they did not get a break from the motel room or the kids. Women were more likely to not have transportation and be responsible for child care duties. The women were more likely to spend more time inside the motel room than their partners and that led to more "thinking time" as one participant put it, which translates into more time to think about how they are literally stuck in a room with four walls away from other families. Just like every mother has experienced at some point, mothers living in motels experienced barriers with childcare and their ability to obtain employment and contribute to the household income. Not only is employment a barrier but as a social service provider suggested, the lack of sustainable childcare could also affect the types of assistance offered to mothers in need. In contrast, the only single father in the sample, Jackson, mentioned how assistance programs, namely transitional housing and subsidized housing programs, were biased towards women with children. This points out the intersectionality of homelessness and the fact that there is no "one size fits all" experience and/or approach to addressing the needs of every homeless individual.

Regardless of gender or race, the negative feelings about their living situation and self-doubts were less prevalent in participants who lived in motels that had a sense of community. Those fortunate enough to have found a motel where other families stayed and created neighborly and familial bonds with them were much happier, felt safer and supported than those who said they did not know the neighbors or did not want to socialize with others in the motel. Although the living conditions weren't that much different from other motels, these families seemed more optimistic. This finding has practical implications in that perhaps it would be beneficial to create initiatives to improve social capital among motel residents by hosting community or outreach events at motels where families can interact with others in their same situation. There is not enough assistance or affordable housing at the moment to help every motel resident but given the stories by the motel residents, some have been able to create bartering and social support networks among themselves that have alleviated their stress and perception of support. Hence, creating opportunities for social connections among motel residents can create social bonds that may be able to alleviate some of the stress for families, provide community support among motel residents, and improve overall mental health and possibly prevent a crisis (as in the case with the families who were short one week and were able to borrow from their neighbor and later returned the favor).

Policy Implications

It is clear that the reason why families are living in motels has less to do with personal pathology and more with structural barriers- overall poverty, lack of jobs with a living wage, and insufficient supply of low income housing. Yet, as Choi and Snyder (1999) mention, virtually every social service provider including the government still treats

homelessness as a "temporary situation that deserves no more than emergency relief in the form of temporary shelters and other temporary assistance" (p.3-4). For Kissimmee in particular, it does not even mean a shelter. There, homelessness has been addressed by supplementary assistance for other needs such as food but few dollars have been raised locally or allocated federally for affordable housing or housing subsidies. Through my data collection I did interview a coordinator for a housing program with potential to help a number of families living in motels. The program is a partnership between a property management company and several non-profit organizations aimed to help homeless families by offering apartments at a discounted monthly rate and without any rental deposits. The program is designed to help families who have the potential to be self-sufficient in a short period of time if they were given the opportunity to be housed without the deposits that are normally required to move into an apartment. A base extremely affordable rent amount is calculated (e.g. $200 per month) based on the family's income and it is increasingly adjusted until it reaches the actual full rent amount (e.g. $900 per month) over a one year period. However, the program is less than a year old and there is not enough longitudinal data to determine whether they help families become self-sufficient and afford the full rent amount past the one year period. So far there have been no evictions or problems with program participants in Osceola County. This suggests that partnerships and programs like these can be beneficial to at least a small group of families.

Eliminating some of the eligibility requirements for housing seems a feasible and reasonable solution to the problem of accessing housing for some of these families. These families, almost by definition, have evictions in their past. It borders on immoral to deny housing to a family simply because they have faulted in the past. Social policy should

175

intervene with legislation that will make housing more accessible to low-income families who live a life of long-term financial struggle. For example, currently those who have been convicted of a felony are virtually forced into homelessness because every property management company that I have spoken to for this research said they deny applications for convicted felons regardless of the time frame of the felony. This means that individuals like Luis and Joe in my sample are unable to legitimately apply for an apartment for their family even if they had the money to do so. In the case of Joe, his felony was non-violent and occurred 20 years ago yet it is still a present barrier to housing for him. Since he is the main breadwinner of the family, his wife cannot apply for an apartment without him because she has no source of income. As a society we penalize the individual for their crime but I'm not sure that most people have considered that felons have families, and by continuing to punish them, we are punishing the next generation and setting them up for failure too.

Felons can apply for a federal bonding service to be able to obtain employment given that most employers will also not hire a felon. This bonding program consists of a seminar or a series of them that felons attend and receive a certificate upon completion. At that point, they are able to apply for employment and have a federal bond where if for some reason the felon employee does something that leads to termination of employment, the employer can receive money to compensate their costs in hiring that employee. This bonding program only applies to employment but it seems that a similar program for housing seems necessary. This would be beneficial for any homeless family, particularly motel residents who by default can show a satisfactory rent history (i.e. if they don't pay, they have to leave). Organizations serving homeless families could partner with landlords

and property managers and create a vouching system where the case worker would be able to speak to the strengths of the family and why they have shown a history that suggests they would be good tenants and should not be required to come up with rental deposits. This would require no money, just rapport, trust and partnerships.

In addition, in this particular region there are a number of abandoned motels that could serve as affordable housing if renovated and retrofitted for this purpose. For some of the smaller families with one or two children, it seemed like they would be satisfied with their living situation if they just had a full size kitchen and some walls dividing personal space.

Future Research Directions

There were various findings in this sample that were not explored here but that should be explored in future research on motel residents and other homeless individuals in general. Throughout the data collection process I met several families and received phone calls from individuals who lived in motels but did not meet the criteria for the study, i.e., did not have children living with them. Through these informal conversations and interviews with motel staff I noted some stark differences in perspectives among the various types of motel residents. There seems to be a significant number of motel residents who are elderly and live at the motel because they are unable to afford any other type of housing with their single fixed incomes. One of these residents was a couple who had lived at the motel for three years and she wanted to know if she would qualify for an interview, she said, "I don't know if I qualify because my husband and I choose to live in a motel." She thought I would not be interested in those who "choose" to live in a motel. However, as she

continued to tell me her story she said "my husband and I choose to live in a motel because this is what we can afford." So, it turns out that her "choice" was not much of a choice after all. It sounded like a forced "choice" given the lack of affordable housing in the area. Besides families like this couple, I also encountered single individuals who were disabled, single men who were felons and also did not have much of a choice for housing outside the motel and couples or people who were shacking up for the moment until they could do better. The experiences of all of these motel residents should be uniquely explored. These individuals seem to encounter more structural barriers to traditional housing and are subject to more judgment from the social service providers. Several social service providers assumed that individuals or couples without children did not have as many difficulties as the families with children did. A couple of providers mentioned how a motel room would be fine for one or two people to live in because there is enough space and have all your needs in one room. They did not take into consideration the isolation that these individuals may experience as a result of living in a space not meant for residential purposes which may present physical, emotional, and structural barriers to a "normal" and healthy life.

Another theme that surfaced that should be explored is the use of the internet, social networking sites and online resources such as Facebook and Craigslist. A couple of studies have analyzed the use of technology among homeless persons (Le Dantec & Edwards, 2008); Robertson & Nardi, 2010). These studies concluded that technology can be an important tool to make the community more inclusive of homeless persons and empower homeless individuals. In this sample, I found several examples of how motel residents utilize these sites as resources and potential income boosters, whether it was selling their

178

crafts (e.g. hairbows for children) to Facebook "friends" or posting their services and looking for jobs on Craigslist. It seemed as though Craigslist is the new "day labor site." Several men reported looking through Craigslist for construction or handyman jobs for extra income because the work was flexible, they could get paid cash immediately, and for most of them they did not need to have a license to do the work. When I mentioned this to service providers in the area, they were surprised motel residents used these sites as resources. However, it makes sense for those who are somewhat computer savvy because most motels offer free wi-fi with their rent and some even offer a computer station. Additionally, motel residents understand that services are becoming more and more electronic and automated. Every participant had at least applied for TANF benefits, and in Florida all TANF applications need to be completed through the online automated system. Even if the family were to physically walk-in to a DCF ACCESS Center to apply, they would be assigned a computer station, not a case worker, to complete their application. Therefore, social service providers should note these changes and adaptations from their clients and incorporate these sites into their marketing and outreach strategies. However, like LeDantec and Edwards (2008) showed, there is a digital divide among homeless persons and not everyone would benefit from technological initiatives. Based on this sample, the majority of participants did not use the internet as a resource. For example, since all participants have applied for TANF benefits, it would potentially benefit the families for this website to have links to local resources by zip code or agency where those who are new to the area could click for more information. Also, these links might include upcoming outreach events with information to address the gaps in information that were

noted through the interviews with the families and also with social service providers themselves.

Furthermore, it was evident to me that this population suffers from great food insecurity. Every family reported not having had enough food at some point during any given month. Not one family said their food stamps were enough to pay for the food necessary to adequately feed their family. Many parents talked about going hungry at times so their children could eat. Several participants mentioned they believed they spend more on food because they live in a motel compared to when they were not in the motel. Reasons cited were the lack of storage for food. The rooms only contain a mini-fridge that may or may not have a freezer section. Even if it did, it is not large enough to hold more than a packet of meat. Hence, families could not store a lot of perishable foods at a time, were unable to buy in bulk or store leftovers to save money on groceries. In addition to not having enough food, many participants mentioned they had untreated medical conditions or had not been to the doctor in what they considered a significant period of time. Future research should address these issues among this population and determine ways in which their needs can be adequately met.

In summary, the present study contributes to the homelessness literature by examining the experiences of a "new" homeless population, motel residents. Findings from this study align with previous research on homeless identity management strategies where individuals attempt to deny or distance themselves from others in that social category. This sub-group of homeless individuals do not always accept a self-identity of a homeless individual but in the context of "for the common good" do accept a social identity of

homeless and identify with the experiences of others in "sub-standard" housing. In

addition, the findings also contribute to the literature on relationships with clients and

social service providers. This allows for practical implications to be drawn from the

experiences of this sample to improve the system of care. Motel residents are not "new"

but they are new as subjects for research and are difficult to access. The methods and

methodological considerations described in this study may serve as guidance for future

research on this population.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**
          FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: **Stephanie Guittar**

Date: **January 27, 2011**

Dear Researcher:

On 01/27/2011, the IRB approved the following minor modifications to human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination
Modification Type:	Study design revised to include audio taping of interviews and participants will receive $25 Visa gift card as compensation. Faculty advisor is Dr. James Wright.
Project Title:	Motel Families in Osceola County
Investigator:	Stephanie Guittar
IRB Number:	SBE-09-06484
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Joseph Bielitzki, DVM, UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 01/27/2011 10:53:19 AM EST

IRB Coordinator

Page 1 of 1

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions:

1. Prior to moving into the hotel: what was your housing situation?

2. What events or circumstances led you to move to the motel/extended stay?

3. Did you consider or have other housing options prior to moving to the motel?

4. Tell me about what it is like to live in a motel.

5. Do you talk or get together with others in the motel?

6. How would you describe your support system?   In other words, who do you rely on for support, whether emotional or instrumental?

7. How would you describe your financial situation at the moment?

8. What, if any, has been the most difficult aspect of living in a motel?

9. What would you say is your most pressing need at the moment?

10. Have you sought any assistance either from a government agency, a non-profit organization, or any other organization (e.g. faith-based)?

11. IF moving out is a goal, how many attempts have you made to transition out of the hotel?

12. As of 2009, the federal definition of homelessness changed and it now includes individuals in your situation--living in hotels. How do you feel about that change?

13. When you hear the word "homeless", what comes to your mind?

14. Do you identify as homeless?

15. If you could change any policy (or anything about the "system"), what would you recommend?

16. Is there anything that I did not ask but you feel is important to know about families who are currently in your situation?

REFERENCES

Ajrouch, K. J., Reisine, S., Lim, S., Sohn, W., & Ismail, A. (2010). Situational stressors among African-American women living in low-income urban areas: the role of social support. *Women & health, 50*(2), 159.

Averitt, S. S. (2003). "Homelessness Is Not a Choice!" The Plight of Homeless Women With Preschool Children Living in Temporary Shelters. *Journal of Family Nursing, 9*(1), 79-100.

Bailey, A. (2012). New Voices: Look beyond the stereotypes of homeless to make an impact, *Orlando Sentinel.* Retrieved from http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2012-06-30/opinion/os-ed-homelessness-central-florida-063012-20120628_1_homelessness-families-motel-room

Baker, S. (1996). Homelessness and the Latino paradox. *Homelessness in America*, 132-140.

Banyard, V. L., & Graham-Bermann, S. A. (1998). Surviving poverty: Stress and coping in the lives of housed and homeless mothers. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 68*(3), 479-489.

Bassuk, E., & Rubin, L. (1987). Homeless children: A neglected population. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 57*(2), 279-286.

Bassuk, E. L., Weinreb, L. F., Buckner, J. C., Browne, A., Salomon, A., & Bassuk, S. S. (1996). The Characteristics and Needs of Sheltered Homeless and Low-Income Housed Mothers. *Journal of the American Medical Association, 276*(8), 640-646.

Blau, J. (1992). *The visible poor*: Oxford Univ. Pr.

Bloom, R. (2012). Just as We Suspected: Florida Saved Nothing by Drug Testing Welfare Applicants.   Retrieved September 5, 2012, from http://www.aclu.org/blog/criminal-law-reform-racial-justice/just-we-suspected-florida-saved-nothing-drug-testing-welfare

Boydell, K. M., Goering, P., & Morrell-Bellai, T. L. (2000). Narratives of identity: Re-presentation of self in people who are homeless. *Qualitative Health Research, 10*(1), 26-38.

Brownrigg, L. A. (2006). PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN HOTELS: AN EXPLORATORY OVERVIEW. *Survey Methodology*, 3.

Burge, K. (2012, March 25, 2012). For homeless families, hotel is life in limbo, *Boston Globe*. Retrieved from http://articles.boston.com/2012-03-25/metro/31234032_1_homeless-families-homeless-population-hotels-or-motels

Burr, V. (2003). *Social constructionism*: Psychology Press.

Burt, M. (1991). Causes of the growth of homelessness during the 1980s. *Housing Policy Debate, 2*(3), 903-936.

Burt, M. R. (1993). *Over the edge: The growth of homelessness in the 1980s*: Russell Sage Foundation Publications.

Burt, M. R., & Cohen, B. E. (1989). Differences among Homeless Single Women with Children, and Single Men. *Soc. Probs., 36*, 508.

Calsyn, R. J., & Morse, G. (1990). Homeless men and women: Commonalities and a service gender gap. *American journal of community psychology, 18*(4), 597-608.

Ceballo, R., & McLoyd, V. C. (2002). Social support and parenting in poor, dangerous neighborhoods. *Child development, 73*(4), 1310-1321.

Census, U. S. (2010). State & County QuickFacts: Osceola County, Florida.   Retrieved June 28, 2012, from http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/12/12097.html

Choi, N. G., & Snyder, L. J. (1999). *Homeless families with children: A subjective experience of homelessness*: Springer Pub. Co.

Clearinghouse, F. H. D. (2010). Osceola County Profile.   Retrieved April 4, 2011, from http://flhousingdata.shimberg.ufl.edu/a/profiles?action=results&nid=4900

Cloke, P. J., Milbourne, P., & Widdowfield, R. (2002). *Rural homelessness: issues, experiences and policy responses*: The Policy Press.

Cohen, S., & Wills, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological bulletin, 98*(2), 310-357.

DCF, D. o. C. a. F.-. (2012). [Families in Transition-McKinney Vento Program in Central Florida].

DOE. (2004). Education for Homeless children and youth program Title vii-b of the Mckinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, as amended by the No child left behind act of 2001 Non-regulatory guidance.   Retrieved December 9, 2009, 2009, from www.ed.gov/programs/homeless/guidance.pdf

Donley, A. M., & Wright, J. D. (2012). Safer Outside: A Qualitative Exploration of Homeless People's Resistance to Homeless Shelters. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Practice, 12*(4), 288-306. doi: 10.1080/15228932.2012.695645

Eckholm, E. (2009, March 11, 2009). As Jobs Vanish, Motel Rooms become Home, *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/11/us/11motel.html?pagewanted=all&_moc.semityn.www

Evans, G. W., & English, K. (2002). The environment of poverty: Multiple stressor exposure, psychophysiological stress, and socioemotional adjustment. *Child development, 73*(4), 1238-1248.

Exchange, H. H. R. (2011). Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act.   Retrieved July 8, 2011, from http://www.hudhre.info/hearth/

Eyrich, K. M., Pollio, D. E., & North, C. S. (2003). An exploration of alienation and replacement theories of social support in homelessness. *Social Work Research, 27*(4), 222-231.

Families, I. I. f. W. (2011). The Cliff Effect: Easing the Transition to Economic Self-Sufficiency.   Retrieved September 5, 2011, 2011, from http://www.incap.org/documents/iiwf/2011/FINAL%20Cliff%20Effect%204-19-11.pdf

Farrington, A., & Robinson, W. P. (1999). Homelessness and strategies of identity maintenance: A participant observation study. *Journal of community & applied social psychology, 9*(3), 175-194.

Fitzpatrick, K. M., Irwin, J., LaGory, M., & Ritchey, F. (2007). Just Thinking about It. *Journal of health psychology, 12*(5), 750.

Florida, E. (2011). Osceola County Profile.   Retrieved June 28, 2012, 2012, from http://www.eflorida.com/profiles/CountyReport.asp?CountyID=30&Display=all

Fogel, S. J., Smith, M. T., & Williamson, A. R. (2008). Decent Home for Every Family-Housing Policy Initiatives Since the 1980's, A. *J. Soc. & Soc. Welfare, 35*, 175.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*: Touchstone.

Griffin, M. (2012, September 25, 2012). [Homeless Education Liaison].

Groth, P. E. (1994). *Living downtown: The history of residential hotels in the United States*: Univ of California Pr.

Hagen, J. L. (1987). Gender and homelessness. *Social Work, 32*(4), 312-316.

Harter, L. M., Berquist, C., Titsworth, B. S., Novak, D., & Brokaw, T. (2005). The structuring of invisibility among the hidden homeless: The politics of space, stigma, and identity construction. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 33*(4), 305-327.

Hoffman, L., & Coffey, B. (2008). Dignity and indignation: How people experiencing homelessness view services and providers. *The Social Science Journal, 45*(2), 207-222.

homeless, N. C. f. t. (2006). McKinney-Vento Act. Retrieved April 4, 2011, 2011, from http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/McKinney.pdf

Homeless, N. C. f. t. (2009). How many people experience homelessness? Retrieved April 4, 2011, from http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/How_Many.html

HUD. HUD Historical Background. Retrieved August 8, 2012, 2012, from http://www.hud.gov/offices/adm/about/admguide/history.cfm#1980

HUD. (2007). HUD Historical Background. Retrieved August 8, 2012, 2012, from http://www.hud.gov/offices/adm/about/admguide/history.cfm#1980

Insider, B. (2011). How Many Excess Vacant Houses Are There In America? Retrieved august 8, 2012, from http://articles.businessinsider.com/2011-12-14/markets/30515060_1_vacant-homes-vacant-housing-housing-vacancies#ixzz230Mgo25u

Jasinski, J. L. (2011). Mean as a Snake, Crazy as a Shithouse Rat: Public Perceptions of the Homeless. In J. D. Wright & A. M. Donley (Eds.), *Poor and homeless in the Sunshine State : down and out in theme park nation* (pp. 211-232): New Brunswick, N.J. : Transaction Publishers, c2011.

Jasinski, J. L., Wesely, J. K., & Wright, J. D. (2010). *Hard lives, mean streets: Violence in the lives of homeless women*: Northeastern Univ Pr.

Ji, E. G. (2006). A study of the structural risk factors of homelessness in 52 metropolitan areas in the United States. *International Social Work, 49*(1), 107.

Johnson, A. K., McChesney, K. Y., Rocha, C. J., & Butterfield, W. H. (1996). Demographic Differences Between Sheltered Homeless Families and Housed Poor Families: Implications for Policy and Practice. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, 22*, 5-21.

Le Dantec, C. A., & Edwards, W. K. (2008). *Designs on Dignity: Perceptions of Technology among Homeless.*

Massey, D. S. (2007). *Categorically unequal: The American stratification system*: Not Avail.

Milburn, N., & D'Ercole, A. (1991). Homeless women: Moving toward a comprehensive model. *American Psychologist, 46*(11), 1161.

Molina, E. (2000). Informal non-kin networks among homeless Latino and African American men. *American Behavioral Scientist, 43*(4), 663.

National, H. C. (2011). Dark Before the Storm: A Picture of Low Income Renters' Housing Needs before the Great Recession from the 2005-2007 American Community Survey: National Low Income Housing Coalition.

Osborne, R. E. (2002). " I May be Homeless, But I'm Not Helpless": The Costs and Benefits of Identifying with Homelessness. *Self and Identity, 1*(1), 43-52.

Passaro, J. (1996). *The unequal homeless*: Routledge.

Regenstein, M., Meyer, J. A., & Dickhemper Hicks, J. (1998). Job prospects for welfare recipients: Employers speak out: The Urban Institute.

Reid, M. K. (2011). *A disaster on top of a disaster: how gender, race, and class shaped the housing experiences of displaced Hurricane Katrina survivors*. Doctoral Dissertation. University of Texas at Austin.

Reutter, L. I., Stewart, M. J., Veenstra, G., Love, R., Raphael, D., & Makwarimba, E. (2009). "Who Do They Think We Are, Anyway?": Perceptions of and Responses to Poverty Stigma. *Qualitative Health Research, 19*(3), 297-311.

Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis* (Vol. 30): Sage Publications, Inc.

Riessman, C. K. (2002). Handbook of interview research: Context & method. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), (pp. 695-710): Sage Publications, Inc.

Rog, D. J., & Buckner, J. C. (2007). *5-Homeless Families and Children*.

Ross, C. E., & Jang, S. J. (2000). Neighborhood disorder, fear, and mistrust: The buffering role of social ties with neighbors. *American journal of community psychology, 28*(4), 401-420.

Rossi, P. H. (1989). *Down and out in America : the origins of homelessness*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rubin, D. H., Erickson, C. J., San Agustin, M., Cleary, S. D., Allen, J. K., & Cohen, P. (1996). Cognitive and academic functioning of homeless children compared with housed children. *Pediatrics, 97*(3), 289-294.

Ryan, E., & Hartman, M. (2000). Homeless families on the border: A demographic profile. *Journal of Children and Poverty, 6*(2), 169-177.

Santich, K. (2012, May 26, 2012). Osceola Motel Families: New face of homeless kids in Florida, *Orlando Sentinel*. Retrieved from http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2012-05-26/news/os-homeless-children-florida-20120523_1_motel-rooms-food-and-hygiene-items-rent-by-the-week

Schutt, R. K., Meschede, T., & Rierdan, J. (1994). Distress, suicidal thoughts, and social support among homeless adults. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 35*(2), 134-142.

Sharockman, A. (2011). Rick Scott says welfare recipients are more likely to use illicit drugs.   Retrieved September 5, 2012, from http://www.politifact.com/florida/statements/2011/jun/09/rick-scott/rick-scott-says-welfare-recipients-are-more-likely/

Shaw, M. (2004). Housing and public health. *Annu. Rev. Public Health, 25*, 397-418.

Shinn, M., Knickman, J. R., & Weitzman, B. C. (1991). Social relationships and vulnerability to becoming homeless among poor families. *American Psychologist, 46*(11), 1180.

Silverman, D. (2006). *Interpreting Qualitative Data* (Third edition ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Snow, D. A., & Anderson, L. (1987). Identity work among the homeless: The verbal construction and avowal of personal identities. *The American Journal of Sociology, 92*(6), 1336-1371.

Stovall, J., & Flaherty, J. (1994). Homeless women, disaffiliation and social agencies. *International journal of social psychiatry, 40*(2), 135.

Studies, J. C. f. H. (2010). The State of the Nation's Housing: Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies.

Sunshine, O. (2012). Florida Statute 509. Retrieved August 8 2012, from http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0500-0599/0509/0509.html

Tomas, A., & Dittmar, H. (1995). The experience of homeless women: An exploration of housing histories and the meaning of home. *Housing studies, 10*(4), 493-515.

Toner, K. (2011). Making Sure "motel kids" don't go hungry. Retrieved September 5, 2012, 2012, from http://www.cnn.com/2011/LIVING/03/24/cnnheroes.serato.motel.kids/index.html

Turner, R. J., & Lloyd, D. A. (1999). The stress process and the social distribution of depression. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 40*(4), 374-404.

Vacha, E. F., & Marin, M. V. (1993). Doubling up: Low income households sheltering the hidden homeless. *J. Soc. & Soc. Welfare, 20*, 25.

Vandsburger, E., Harrigan, M., & Biggerstaff, M. (2008). In spite of all, we make it: themes of stress and resiliency as told by women in families living in poverty. *Journal of Family Social Work, 11*(1), 17-35.

Vision, C. (2008). Osceola County Report Card: Focusing on Community Connections (Vol. 6): Community Vision.

Walsh, C. A., Rutherford, G., & Kuzmak, N. (2009). Characteristics of home: Perspectives of women who are homeless. *The Qualitative Report, 14*(2), 299-317.

Ward, S., & Turner, H. (2007). Work and Welfare Strategies among Single Mothers in Rural New England: The Role of Social Networks and Social Support. *Community Development, 38*(1), 43-58.

Wardhaugh, J. (1999). The unaccommodated woman: Home, homelessness and identity. *The Sociological Review, 47*(1), 91-109.

Watson, S., & Austerberry, H. (1986). *Housing and homelessness: A feminist perspective*: Routledge.

Wingate-Lewinson, T., Hopps, J. G., & Reeves, P. (2010). Liminal living at an extended stay hotel: Feeling" stuck" in a housing solution. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*.

Wright, J. D. (2009). *Address unknown : the homeless in America*. New Brunswick, N.J.: AldineTransaction.

Wright, J. D., & Donley, A. M. (2011). *Poor and homeless in the Sunshine State : down and out in theme park nation / James D. Wright, Amy M. Donley*: New Brunswick, N.J. : Transaction Publishers, c2011.

Wright, J. D., & Lam, J. A. (1987). Homelessness and the Low-Income Housing Supply. *Social Policy, 17*(4), 48-53.

Wright, J. D., & Rubin, B. A. (1991). Is homelessness a housing problem? *Housing Policy Debate, 2*(3), 937-956.

Wu, T., & Serper, M. R. (1999). Social support and psychopathology in homeless patients presenting for emergency psychiatric treatment. *Journal of clinical psychology, 55*(9), 1127-1133.

Zufferey, C., & Kerr, L. (2004). Identity and everyday experiences of homelessness: Some implications for social work. *Australian Social Work, 57*(4), 343-353.

Zugazaga, C. (2004). Stressful life event experiences of homeless adults: A comparison of single men, single women, and women with children. *Journal of Community Psychology, 32*(6), 643-654.

Zussman, R. (2004). People in places. *Qualitative Sociology, 27*(4), 351-363.