

ROLE EXIT FROM HOME TO HOMELESS

Jeffrey R. Breese, Saint Mary's College and
Kathryn M. Feltey, University of Akron

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses homelessness as an involuntary type of role exit, experienced by women residing in emergency shelters or a transitional housing program. Put forth is an analysis of Ebaugh's role exit process (which has traditionally been applied to voluntary types of transitions). A reordered model is presented which considers a unique sequential process. Specifically, these areas are examined: the events leading to homelessness, decision making in terms of procuring shelter and other resources, the development of the homeless identity, the experience of homelessness as a distinctive role, and plans for exiting this role.

INTRODUCTION

A growing area of study in the field of development is the process of transitions in adulthood (Allen, van de Vliert 1984; Conville 1988; Hogan 1980; Menaghan 1989). These transitions have been conceptualized as "role exits" in which the individual disengages from a role that is central to self-identity and reestablishes a new identity that is, in part, based on their ex-role (Ebaugh 1988). This approach involves a process model which identifies event sequences underlying all role exits, regardless of the specific role in question. While the process model has been used primarily to examine voluntary role exits, involuntary role exits are also a part of the adult experience (Blau 1973). Involuntary transitions include changes such as death of a spouse, expulsion by group (e.g. excommunication), divorce, and job loss.

The focus of role exit research to date has been the *voluntary* role exit process. Thus, the process has been examined for those who choose a role transition or change (whether it be occupational, religious, marital, or other). The current study applies role exit theory to *involuntary* exiters (those who did not pursue the change, but had it forced upon them by external circumstances). The goal is to determine how well general role exit theory explains the experience of involuntary exits.

This study extends the framework by applying it to the involuntary experience of homelessness for women and women with dependent children. Specifically, we explore how homeless women make involuntary transitions from one status (that of a housed citizen) to another (a displaced or homeless person). While a few may be seen as choosing this role, most have not. Regardless, the focus is on those who *define their* situation as an involuntary one. While previous work on exit types emphasizes aspects of autonomy, self-direction, and controllability of the situation,

this research deals with powerlessness, helplessness, and uncontrollability.

Whether role exits are voluntary or not, they rarely happen as a result of one sudden decision. Rather, role exiting usually takes place over a period of time, frequently beginning before the individual is fully aware of what is happening or where events and decisions are leading. The current research examines the events leading to homelessness, decision making in terms of procuring shelter and other resources, development of a homeless identity, the experience of homelessness as a distinctive role, and plans for exiting the homeless role.

Theory of "Role Exit"

The concept of role exit was introduced in the literature to describe a process that occurs "whenever any stable pattern of interaction and shared activities between two or more persons ceases" (Blau 1973). Essentially, this describes the transition which leads to a role exit. It is a complex and recurring process since there are few statuses retained over the life course and these are generally ascribed.

Socialization, from a developmental perspective, is a life-long process in which new or changing conditions are constantly encountered. Thus, new demands are encountered by individuals in every stage of the life-cycle. Anticipatory socialization, central to this process, describes the acquisition of values and orientations found in statuses and groups one is not yet engaged in, but which one is likely to enter in the future (Merton 1957). The more an individual engages in anticipatory socialization, the sooner he or she will be comfortable with a new role (Ebaugh 1988; Merton 1957). Thus, it aids the individual's assimilation into a group, in terms of motivation and ease of entrance, and it eases his or her adjustment after becoming a member.

The problem is that, unlike childhood, adult life is filled with few major guidelines to assist anticipatory socialization. What develops instead are rather rigid notions about age-appropriate behavior. As Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe describe:

expectations regarding age-appropriate behavior form an elaborated and pervasive system of norms governing behavior and interaction, a network of expectations that is imbedded throughout the cultural fabric of adult life. There exists what might be called a prescriptive timetable for the ordering of major life events. (1965)

Thus, one of the major bases for the ascription of status and one of the underlying dimensions by which social interaction is regulated is *age*. This is more commonly known as "age-grading" influences. The other two regularly cited influences are history-graded and idiosyncratic life events. Inherently, each of these factors can be seen as being causal in form. All of these "influences" are the markers which serve to let an individual know if she or he is properly moving through the life-cycle. However, the journey is often vague and problematic for adults. For unlike early childhood, there is no prescribed route of role entrances and role exits. Also, there are few, if any, agencies to "program" acceptable behavior, unlike childhood when there are numerous sources (i.e. parents, schools). A lack of agencies makes socialization in adulthood difficult (Bengston 1973; Blau 1973).

Another concern is that an increasing number of adults are undergoing major changes central to their core self or being. What this warrants is a continuing revisioning and re-evaluation of one's "social clocks." As Schlossberg (1984) warns, "the prescriptive timetable for the ordering of major life events is in flux." Plainly, this means that physical maturity is no longer (or perhaps never was) the period of social age marked off by relatively clear cut, tranquil events in the life-cycle. Briefly stated, most adults make at least one major shift in an area of their lives that they consider central to their self identity.

The transition or "exiting" of a central role involves tension between an individual's past, present, and future in terms of the expectations for appropriate behavior. The concept of self-identity is largely determined by social roles. Not all roles in a person's role repertoire are equally important to self-identity, nor are

they all operative at any one time. Role exits (and for that matter role entrances) are closely related to self-identity since the roles an individual plays in society become part of one's self-definition. Over time, personal identity is formed by the internalization of role expectations and the reactions of others to one's positions in the social structure.

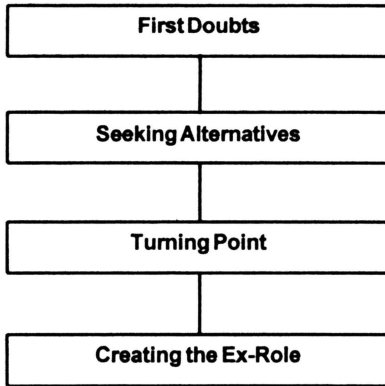
Transitions from one role to another must be seen in their social context. Rapid social changes experienced by individuals in the course of their lives generate a new type of self-concept, which Zurcher (1977) calls the "mutable self." The mutable self represents a significant shift for the individual, from orientation toward the *stability* of self (self as object) to orientation toward *change* of self (self as process). The mutable self develops as a response to the centrality and frequency of role change in the course of an individual's lifetime.

Therefore our society (or social structure) allows, perhaps even causes, the personal changes taking place. One relevant example is the concept of the "marginal man," which originated in case studies of immigrants. It portrays the immigrant as an individual caught between two cultural worlds as she or he struggles to leave behind the old world and adapt to the new one. The uncertainty involved is connected with perhaps the greatest degree of stress and negative effect. As Schlossberg (1984) writes, "the individual who is betwixt and between roles often feels marginal."

Two additional concepts important to role exit theory are disengagement and cognitive dissonance. Disengagement is involved in the role exit process and occurs any time a person withdraws from a group or social role. While disengagement theories have been developed to explain the aging process primarily, the concept refers to any process of role loss and disidentification with a previous source of self-identity. Thus, disengagement is yet another aspect of the larger social process deemed "role exit."

Cognitive dissonance, a state of tension that occurs when a person holds two incompatible or contradictory perceptions at the same time, is a major cause of the role exit being undertaken. Cognitive consistency theories in social psychology have long emphasized the need people have to balance and harmonize perceptions of their world (their social reality). Often there is a "turning point" experience for the role exiter that becomes central

Figure 1: Ebaugh's Role Exit Process (Voluntary Form)



in demonstrating how one's current role is impossible or problematic. The individual realizes that somehow he or she must reduce the cognitive dissonance and justify his or her actions to put them in balance with attitudes and beliefs.

Role Exit Theory Applied to Homelessness

The preceding discussion has served to build up the theoretical base of "role exit" as a social psychological/sociological concept. There are a number of case studies on unique types of adult transitions, yet little scholarly attention has focused on "role exit" as a generic social process. Ebaugh (1988) contends that role exit is a generic social process that is as necessary in explaining social lives as socialization and role theory. Thus, Ebaugh describes a voluntary role-exit process which occurs in terms of decision making, seeking and weighing alternatives, anticipatory role playing, and alterations in significant reference groups (see Figure 1). Our present study examines role exit theory with data drawn from interviews with homeless women. The concern is with those homeless who define their situation as an *involuntary* one. Thus, in terms of role exit, the consideration would not be upon those persons who concede their homeless status is one they selected for themselves. This latter form of homelessness could in fact be applied to Ebaugh's theory as well. However, the emphasis in this study is on changes that were not intentionally sought by the individuals involved.

The current study examines issues that not only address experience of homelessness,

but also dovetail with the concerns raised by Ebaugh in her discussion of the role exit process. Specifically, the following will be addressed: the role or function served by the home; the role of work and unemployment; social networks and support; and homelessness as a distinctive subculture with its own unique socialization process. These points taken together not only provide a personal or individual level consideration of the homeless way of life, but also enable further analysis of homeless as another form of "role exit." Each stage of the process will be examined for applicability to the homeless experience.

RESEARCH METHODS

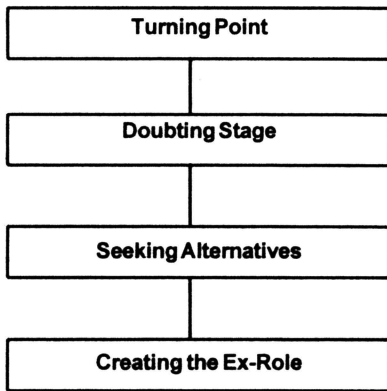
The findings in this paper are based on a qualitative study of homeless women, and homeless women with dependent children, in a mid-sized, midwestern urban community. Data collection involved interviews up to three hours long with women residing in one of the four emergency shelters and the one transitional housing program for female-headed families in the area (N=102).

The interview guide was constructed to obtain an understanding of the events leading the women to the homeless shelter, the development of a homeless identity, a description of life as a homeless person, and the plans of homeless women to change their situation. Interviewing took place over nineteen months, from September 1988 through April 1990. The interviews were conducted by trained interviewers in the most private space available in the shelter, usually a room reserved for the residents use.

All interviews were tape-recorded, unless the respondent requested otherwise. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded and sorted using the IBM-PC database software program called ASKSAM. The text of the interviews was analyzed according to the process of grounded theory (Charmaz 1983), so that the responses were coded on the basis of emergent themes in the data. The selected quotes represent general themes identified throughout the majority of the interviews (Psathas 1995; Richardson 1988).

The sample is racially balanced (48% white; 52% African-American). The women range in age from 17 to 71, with a median age of 27. Almost half of the women have never married (46%) and 41 percent are either separated or divorced. One-fourth of the women have never had any children. The mothers

Figure 2: The Modified Role Exit Process (Involuntary Form)



have, on average, 2.5 children, with well over half (57%) having 1 or 2 children. The majority of the mothers had their first child as teenagers; 65 percent by the time they were 19 years old. The median years of education for this group is 12, with one-third not completing high school. The majority of the women (59%) are homeless for the first time, and a slightly higher percentage (62%) are in an emergency homeless shelter for the first time.

FINDINGS

It is necessary to realize that homelessness is a condition that is the culmination stage of a variety of problems affecting numerous groups, such as the mentally ill, the physically disabled and chronically ill, the elderly, single parents, runaway children, and entire families (Hoch 1987). A logical extension to this point is that there are just as many pathways leading to the homeless position. Regardless of the form, the end result is that these persons find themselves in a marginalized or alienated position in terms of the larger society (Ropers 1988).

Role or Function Served by the Home

Homelessness is interpreted here as being a form of "role exit" because the individuals lose a central or core component of their selves. Home plays a central part or "role" in defining who a person is (Feltey 1989; Watson 1986). Jahiel (1987) asserts that "because of [the] many functions of the home, the loss of one's home usually entails significant personal difficulties or hardship." It bears pointing out that homeless can also be from

environments with declining opportunities in the work force. This loss would also result in a profound sense of despair and inability to remain in control of one's life. This became evident when the respondents in our study were asked to define what home means to them. The homeless women identified eight dimensions comprising home: 1) physical shelter and a place to belong, 2) stability and permanence, 3) emotional well-being, 4) physical safety and security, 5) social relations, 6) freedom and privacy, 7) responsibility and control, and 8) self-identity. In one woman's words:

Home is where you can raise your kids. You can have your own privacy. You have a sense of responsibility. [Home is] somewhere you can feel good about yourself. You don't have to answer to anyone. You don't have to go along with the program just because you are staying in someone's home, do what they say, eat what they say you have to eat, go to sleep when everyone else goes to sleep. You know you have more freedom in your own home.

It is being asserted here that the homeless experience a form of role exit. Thus, the loss of one's home could be interpreted as the activating event that brings with it extreme personal difficulties and hardship as a result of the void brought on by one no longer possessing a home.

As developed by Ebaugh, role exiting is a process comprising various stages. Due to the involuntary nature of becoming homeless, we are offering a re-ordered process (see Figure 2). The sequentiality of events is obviously different for an *involuntary* type of exit.

Turning Point Stage

The turning point is obviously the activating factor among the homeless women of this sample. As Table 1 indicates, there are evidently multiple events leading to the current episode of homelessness for the homeless women. Thirty-nine percent of the women report that they are currently homeless as a result of eviction by family relative or friends. One-fourth (25%) report that they chose to leave an intolerable situation (e.g. overcrowded conditions, drug or alcohol abuse by other in the home). Even though these respondents made this "choice", it could easily be asserted that due to the oppressive situation there was no alternative option. Close to one-fourth (23%)

Table 1: Events Leading to Current Episode of Homelessness*

	Cases	Responses
Eviction by family, relative, or landlord	62%	34%
Intolerable living conditions (such as overcrowding)	30%	18%
Drug or alcohol problems	22%	13%
Termination of a relationship with a man	19%	11%
Domestic violence	19%	11%
Loss of employment	17%	11%
		100%

*multiple reasons were provided by respondents

report that eviction by landlord led to their shelter stay. Twenty-two percent had drug or alcohol problems which contributed to their homelessness. Relationships with men directly contributed to homelessness: 19 percent are homeless because a relationship ended (e.g. divorce) and another 19 percent report that domestic violence resulted in their loss of home. Seventeen percent say loss of employment was a contributing factor. Finally, 5 percent were living in substandard housing which resulted in their turning to public shelter for accommodation. Many of the women report that a combination of factors led to their current homelessness, as the following accounts illustrate:

(I ended up here because) MHA (public housing) put me on a list. They couldn't find a place for me so I waited and waited and I stayed with friends. Then my friends and family couldn't afford to have me anymore.

When I was in the hospital (I just had a baby) my apartment was robbed and they took everything. They broke the windows and I was afraid to stay there. So I moved in with my sister. She has six kids and I have four. She didn't have enough room for me. Then I moved in with another sister. Section 8 called her and I had to leave so I ended up here.

To make a long story short I was divorced and got back with my ex-husband. I broke a bone in my knee and I was unable to work. He deserted me and the children and I was unable to pay the rent and I got evicted. All of my clothes and belongings were set out.

I stopped drinking for seven months and I started drinking again. I was staying with my mom and she threw me out. So that is how I came here.

Collectively, these various factors comprise examples of those "turning points" that led to these women and their children moving from housed individuals to marginal, displaced homeless persons. This "loss" brings with it changes involving the issues of privacy, freedom, and control. As Hoch sees it,

when pushed into the ranks of the wandering poor, [homeless] people lose not only a physical place, but their social standing as well. (1987)

Truly, the women of this sample have experienced a significant type of social marginality. In her study, Feltey (1989) addressed these issues (privacy/freedom/control) and detailed how they come to be altered when a person takes on the "homeless" identity. Specifically, she notes that

homeless women often speak with longing about the freedom and privacy they are denied in the shelter system. Home physically structures privacy, creating a barrier between the individual and the public world. (Feltey 1989)

In one's own home there is a sense of personal domain. With the homeless "lifestyle," one must forsake these "privileges" and accept the rules and regulations defined by others.

In terms of control, Feltey describes how

adult responsibility and control over one's own life are important aspects of having a home. Homeless women often feel that they are treated like children in a shelter, and that they have no control over the events in their lives. (1989)

Rather involuntarily, these women lose a significant level of control over their daily lives. The following passages demonstrate this sense of loss:

I don't know what happened, it was like I lost all

control over everything. [Service workers] took over... and I didn't have nothing to say.

You don't have any privacy... it just seems like I am going back to being a child.

Doubting Stage

Collectively, the feelings of powerlessness, loss of privacy, and lack of control over one's life appear to lead to severe doubts about one's chances for adaptation. As Ebaugh describes these doubts, they are often brought on by organizational change or disappointments and changes in relationships. It is only over a period of time that the individual is able to reinterpret reality and articulate how their current role is problematic.

This is obviously the case for homeless women as well, for over time they begin to doubt or question how they will cope in this rather problematic transitional situation. Again, Ebaugh's original model is relevant. She argues that support by others is critical throughout this process (and especially during this phase of doubting). A good deal of homeless literature echoes this assertion. It is only too obvious that the development of the homeless role would require the dismantling or reordering of some forms of social relations (Cohen, Sokolovsky 1989; Watson 1986; Wright, Weber 1987).

What appears to often occur is the shift from informal to more formal forms of social contact. Since many homeless have weak social networks of friends and family, they must often seek assistance from the formal system of human service agencies. In a work addressing the female homeless population, Watson notes that:

the data on friendship networks revealed that women who are more socially isolated have less access to the private sector and a greater reliance on the public sector and hostels than women who have more friends and social contact, a greater proportion of women whom had lived in the private rented sector or stayed with friends. (1986)

These various points do demonstrate that there is a *shift* taking place in terms of reference groups of the homeless. Determining the extent and the effects of this shift would serve as one of the central variables in applying the role exit process to the homeless phenomena, and this is evident based on the

seeking out of formal support when it becomes necessary.

An equally important variable is the issue of socialization into the distinctive homeless culture. As mentioned early on, socialization is a central theme in Ebaugh's theory of role exit. A major difference, however, is that much of Ebaugh's work deals with anticipatory socialization. The persons in her work undertaking the "role exit" are aspiring to one role and leaving one behind. Through this process they are sifting through options and weighing the pros and cons of role alternatives.

Seeking Alternatives Stage

Once the person admits dissatisfaction in a current role, "alternative seeking" becomes a conscious step in the exiting process. Alternative seeking behavior is essentially a comparative process in which various roles are evaluated in comparison with the costs and rewards of the current role. From a social exchange perspective, comparison standards are developed over time as a consequence of the interpersonal relationships and situations an individual has experienced. Comparison levels are a measure of degree of satisfaction based on the subjective comparison of one's present situation with situations previously experienced (Ebaugh 1988).

The involuntary homeless do not have the luxury of "seeking alternatives." Instead, their lives do not afford this option. As Cohen and Sokolovsky (1989) found in their study of New York skid row persons, there is quite a unique way of life at work. They state that:

while life for most Americans has a linear quality- an orientation toward the future and a sense of progression toward something- life for skid rowers is largely cyclical. Their cyclical schedules are molded by the agencies and institutions on which they depend for daily meals, monthly checks, or daily room tickets. (Cohen, Sokolovsky 1989)

This appears to be the "quality" of life for the women of our study. In fact, it became a matter of realization for many of the respondents that the future could not be greatly enhanced unless there was a true restructuring in their lives. One woman spoke rather matter of factly about this point:

Housing without training, rehabilitating, is useless. Housing without child care and day care is

Table 2: Future Plans of the Respondents*

	Cases	Responses
Locate housing	78%	34%
Find a job	53%	23%
Continue education	33%	14%
Meeting needs of their children	22%	10%
Undergo counseling	13%	6%
Reunite their families	12%	5%
Assistance from agencies	9%	4%
Uncertain	5%	2%
Marriage/serious relationship	4%	2%
		100%

*multiple plans could be provided by respondents

useless. It is just a place to vegetate. Without child care and plans for rehabilitation, it is useless. You will be in that rut forever. That is why without the chance of reeducation I couldn't even think of keeping [my child].

For these homeless women, real options (or alternatives as Ebaugh described them) are extremely limited. These women appear to realize that they have only a minimal chance of reordering their lives. Once alternatives are narrowed (albeit for this population they are limited due to the cyclical nature of their existence) and the individual is close to making a definite choice, there is an increased focus on the most viable and desirable alternative role. Ebaugh found that

there is a pattern among people seriously considering a role change to begin identifying with values, norms, attitudes and expectations held by people who are already enacting the role being considered. (1988)

There is a shift in focus from the role expectations of the current role to those associated with the anticipated role. The role exiters begin the process of anticipatory socialization as they prepare for their new role.

Creating the Ex-Role Stage

Often there is a vacuum experience which leaves the individual feeling anxious. The process of adjustment and reestablishing a social identity is easier and occurs more rapidly for people who build "bridges" prior to exiting their previous role. In contrast, feelings of isolation, loneliness, and a lack of support are highly related to difficulty in making the exit.

Of course it could be asserted that for

some homeless, this new way of life truly becomes a "lifestyle" (Redburn, Buss 1988). It is necessary to note that this is not the case for all homeless persons. As Snow and Anderson (1987) point out in their study of identity construction among homeless, some come to embrace this new "role" in their life, while others attempt to distance themselves from it.

Regardless of the approach taken by the individual homeless person, there is the development of an "ex-status." Snow and Anderson argue that:

the attempt to carve out and maintain a sense of meaning and self-worth seems especially critical for survival, perhaps because it is the thread that enables those situated on the margins or at the bottom to retain a sense of self and thus their humanity. (1987)

As Table 2 demonstrates, the women of this sample appear to echo this need, for their future plans revolve around re-entering the mainstream of the larger society. Not surprisingly, the most frequently mentioned plan of these homeless women is to locate housing: 78 percent of the women are looking for a house or apartment. A job is in the future plans for 53 percent of the women. However, housing is usually seen as a prerequisite for job hunting. As one respondent noted:

I need to get a place. Until you have a place and address you can forget about a job.

One-third of the women plan on continuing their education. For some this means finishing high school and for others it means pursuing an advanced degree or training. For all, it symbolizes their release from the poverty trap.

I (want to go) to school. Once I get a degree I can get off AFDC and live the way I want to live.

The needs of their children are an important part of the future plans of 22 percent of the women. These plans include meeting their physical and health needs and having a loving home environment.

(The kids will) have a lot more toys and clothes and support. Everything that they really need. I think we will be more together as a family than we have been. (I will) have an apartment and money (and) make sure they have a clean bed and clothes.

The women are concerned about adequate child care for their children. As in the general population of women, the lack of affordable child care can be a barrier to their education and employment opportunities.

Basically I would like to try to work if possible. I would like to go to college if I could. But who is going to watch my child?

Thirteen percent of the women plan on obtaining counseling for themselves and sometimes their children.

Twelve percent of the women want to reunite their families. This involves finding a home and bringing the children back together again.

I talk to my kids on the phone and they say 'mommy I'm ready to come home' and 'please hurry up and find a home'.

Nine percent of the women plan on seeking further assistance through social service agencies. Only five percent of the women had no idea what their future plans were. Finally, only four percent mention marriage or a serious relationship in their future plans. Most of the women expressed caution about relationships based on their life histories and their current circumstances.

Overall, the women are looking for steady employment that pays a living wage, adequate child care, housing that is safe, clean, and affordable, and a satisfying personal life filled with family and friends. As one woman said:

I would like to have money and not have to worry about where my next meal is coming from and where I am going to stay next. Just to be happy

and feel love and return love.

It is significant that only five women expressed a desire for anything beyond a life with basic necessities. Many of the women could not answer the question "If you could create any life you wanted for yourself, what would life be like?" or did not know what this question meant. Perhaps what is most lost for these women is their ability to dream of a better life. What's left is to hope that their basic life needs (and those of their children) will be met someday.

The final stage of the exit process is the creation of an ex-role once one has left. The process involves tension between past/present/future, making it a unique sociological phenomenon. The social reactions to the exiter are also unique. People begin to react to the individual differently than before the exit. Ebaugh identifies two main types of reactions:

In many instances, ... ex-statuses are more salient to other people than current roles. For some ex-roles society has linguistic designations, such as divorcee, widow, alumnus. In other cases, however, the person is simply known as an "ex," (ex-physician, ex-nun, ex-alcoholic, ex-con). These ex-roles that are more common and are more widely experienced in society carry less stigma and are more institutionalized in terms of expected behavior. (1988)

Truly, the homeless "role-exiter" is stigmatized by the larger society. Also, there is a change that occurs among members of the homeless population in terms of their central identifying status. This change can be long-term or short-term; it may be welcomed or fought off. Regardless, these persons find themselves at a new cultural point of reference. Often, this new "home" status is used as a way of finalizing their role exit. Cohen and Sokolovsky (1989) echo this thought when they label skid row as being a "cultural refuge." For some, they note that this becomes a place

...where they can either hide from their prior life or 'rest' until restored psychological or economic resources permit an escape. The reluctance to reveal details of one's background or even a person's real name is reflective of the need to hide from one's own past. (Cohen, Sokolovsky 1989)

The urban and rural shelters which house this

homeless sample might also be thought of as "cultural refuge" for those who have developed an "ex-status" and are now displaced, homeless women. Other studies of the homeless echo the thesis presented here- that homelessness is a transitional process (Cohen, Sokolovsky 1989; Feltey 1989; Ropers 1988). Our work builds on this assertion and demonstrates a model that can be applied to the larger homeless population, and possibly to be utilized with other types of involuntary exiters.

DISCUSSION

This study has considered how well the general body of role exit theory explains the experience of involuntary role exits. Specifically, Ebaugh's role exit theory has been applied to homeless persons in order to examine their experiences from a process model and demonstrate the shifts in central identity from housed to homeless person.

By integrating a large body of standing homeless literature with data collected in a study on sheltered homeless women, we considered the following points: the specific events leading to homelessness, the decision making involved in procuring shelter and other resources, development of a homeless identity (yet not all women in this sample would accept this label), homelessness as a distinctive sub-culture, and the plans for exiting the homeless role. Collectively, these elements demonstrate that the transitional process of becoming homeless is applicable to the general model set forth by Ebaugh (1988). For persons experiencing such a role exit, the theory can help them to realize that their experiences are part of a greater phenomenon that is happening to many people today. Many in this population tend to express a surprise realization that there are many other people like themselves who have undergone similar life experiences. The role exit concept is one mechanism for helping with this realization process.

Obviously, the sequentiality of the process and the issue of time were reordered in this present study. As demonstrated, for these women the "stages" take on the following order: significant turning point; doubts about the situation; seeking alternatives; and a creation (for some) of the "ex-status." While the stages defined by Ebaugh are clearly present, the nature and duration for the respondents of our study were indeed different.

Regardless of the differences that exist, it can be asserted that Ebaugh's role exit

process is generalizable to the women in this sample. Further study is necessary to better delineate and describe the various differences and similarities among other populations of homeless individuals. This would aid in studying the larger process model initially set forth by Ebaugh (1988), who calls for such study of the model.

The issue which was most salient in our study was the change or precipitating factor in the individual's life (such as loss of job or displacement by divorce) which caused a shift in their ability to maintain and eventually keep their home. Forced out of their home, a shift also occurred in their reference groups and new sources of support and social networks emerged. Indeed, a distinctive culture was awaiting these women, and they had to be socialized into it over time (like any other new role).

In conclusion, this sample holds true significance because it chronicles the experiences of marginal/homeless persons in contemporary society (as well as how this existence can be viewed within the framework of the role exit model). There is also theoretical relevance, for it builds on the fundamental model that is presently offered. Finally, this study serves as a companion piece to other recent works utilizing role exit theory to describe life transitions such as the return to school by adult women students (Breese, O'Toole 1994) and the experience of divorce (Wright 1991).

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