The Meaning of Family Routines in a Homeless Shelter

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OBJECTIVE. This exploratory investigation sought to understand what meaning parents, living in a homeless shelter, attribute to family routines and the nature of those routines.

METHOD. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 parents living in a homeless shelter. Thematic analysis was employed to develop descriptive codes and themes from transcribed data and field notes.

RESULTS. Parents described family routines focused on three features: promoting intimacy, maintaining or developing a legacy, and connections with the community. These routines seemed to preserve family integrity while homeless and to provide hope for the family to continue into the future.

CONCLUSIONS. Homeless parents, in this investigation, seemed to expend a substantial amount of energy to create or maintain family routines while living in a homeless shelter. Findings suggest that occupational therapy services may help support homeless parents as they exercise their role as the organizer of family routines.


Homeless families represent the fastest growing segment of the homeless population in the United States (Nunez & Fox, 1999). They constitute 38% of the total homeless population nationally but have unique needs when compared to other homeless adults (Blair, Jacobs, & Quiram, 1999). Homeless families in the United States are most often female-headed consisting of a single mother, approximately 30 years old, with two to three children under the age of 5 years (Nunez & Fox).

For many families, homelessness is not a single event but rather reflects a pattern of housing instability (Wong & Piliavin, 1997). Over a third of homeless families have had two or more episodes of homelessness (Nunez & Fox, 1999). Many homeless families experience two to three moves during a single year (Rog, McCombs-Thorton, Gilbert-Mongelli, Brito, & Holupka, 1995). The frequency of moves and lack of permanent housing arrangements have been identified as significant stressors for homeless families (Goodman, Saxe, & Harvey, 1991; Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, & Silva, 1998). Parents, who are unable to provide a home for their children, often experience a sense of failure and loss of parental roles (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1995; Bassuk, Rubin, & Lauriat, 1986; Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995). Stressful parental experiences have been related to a diminished sense of well-being in children (Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). Being homeless can severely disrupt family integrity and organization, compromising the development of both parent and child and the function of the family as a unit (Bassuk, 1993; Lindsey, 1998).

Family routines are often significantly disrupted with the loss of a permanent residence (Lindsey, 1998; Menke & Wagner, 1997; Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995). Living in an emergency shelter provides a family with needed housing but often
does not provide an environment necessary for a parent to orchestrate meaningful family routines. Routines, as understood from the occupational therapy literature, have an established recurrence or sequence of events (Jacobs, 1999). Family routines have been defined as “repetitive behaviors which involve two or more family members and which occur with predictable regularity in the ongoing life of the family” (Boyce, Jensen, James, & Peacock, 1983, p. 194). The meaning of a specific routine is not an absolute but is attributed by the person performing the activity or routine. As an example, one mother may consider preparing a meal to be a symbol of love and caring for her children, but another mother views meal preparation a mundane chore.

Engagement in family routines can be viewed as a measure of family functioning and health (Boyce et al., 1983; Denham, 1995). These “routines are observable patterns occurring among family members on a consistent basis that describe, explain, and predict the uniqueness of families as members interact and respond to their environment” (Denham, p. 11). Engaging in these routines serves “to buffer the impact of stressful experiences impinging on the family and to protect it’s members against ill health by fostering a sense of stability” (Jensen, James, Boyce, & Hartnett, 1983, p. 201). When daily routines are compromised by homelessness, the uniqueness of the family can begin to disintegrate (Lindsey, 1998; Memmott & Young, 1993; Menke & Wagner, 1997).

Engagement in routines has been identified as a critical component promoting health for both an individual and the family system (Boyce et al., 1983; Brown, Humphry, & Taylor, 1997; Denham, 1995; Humphry, 1989; Humphry, Gonzales, & Taylor, 1993; Jensen et al., 1993; McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson, McCubbin, & Kaston, 1993). Health, from an occupational therapy perspective, refers to being able to optimally function within a specified environment (Jacobs, 1999). For a family, healthy behaviors must both promote growth of individual members and increase the strength and integrity of the family as a system. This growth allows for optimal functioning of the family within the social and cultural environment of a given community.

Homelessness is not simply a lack of housing but is also a disenfranchisement from the larger community (Baumann, 1993; Toro, Trickett, Wall, & Salem, 1991). From a social systems perspective, a family is embedded within a larger social network that has direct and indirect influence on the family system (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Pilisuk & Parks, 1986). Families engage in meaningful routines both as an expression of unique characteristics and as a representation of membership in a community (McCubbin et al., 1993; McMillan, 1996). However, homeless families often have a diminished sense of membership in a community (Menke & Wagner, 1997; Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995). Parents experience the devastation of being unable to provide basic shelter for their children in addition to the stigma of being labeled as homeless (Baumann). The “loss of a person’s house represents loss of place in the community and loss of physical space in which families may function in their most intimate manner in privacy” (DeOllos, 1997, p. 3). Homelessness “places family members in situations where they are unable to perform appropriate functions in the ‘normal’ domiciled manner” (p. 4). The unique rituals, routines, and meaningful activities that provide the glue for family integrity are severely disrupted when a family is faced with being homeless.

Although many authors have examined the characteristics of homeless families, there is a paucity of literature describing how homeless families engage in daily routines (Choi & Snyder, 1999; Denham, 1995). When homelessness places an inordinate stress on a family, being able to maintain familiar routines may serve to support the family and maintain family integrity. Shelters and support services attempt to preserve the integrity of homeless families but are not well-informed of how these families construct meaning in their daily lives (Baumann, 1993; Choi & Snyder; DeOllos, 1997). Understanding how homeless parents attempt to construct meaningful family routines while living in a shelter can be used to design occupational therapy programs that support and foster family functioning while they are homeless.

Several authors have advocated the use of occupational therapy services for those who are homeless (Davis & Kutter, 1998; Drake, 1992; Finlayson, Baker, Rodman, & Herzberg, 2002; Herzberg & Finlayson, 2001; Heubner & Tryssenaar, 1996; Kavanagh & Fares, 1995; MITCHELL & Jones, 1997; Mobsby, 1996; Tryssenaar, Jones, & Lee, 1999). Occupational therapy services have been described for homeless adults (Davis & Kutter, 1998; Kavanagh & Fares) and homeless children (Drake, 1992), but no literature describes the use of these services with homeless families. The profession of occupational therapy is uniquely positioned to address the needs of the family, as a system, embedded within the larger environmental context of the community (Schultz-Krohn, 1997). Considering that homeless families constitute the fastest growing segment of the homeless population, identifying their specific needs is warranted.

This investigation specifically explored how homeless parents, living in an emergency shelter in an urban county in California, engaged in meaningful family routines. It was estimated that 20,000 people in this county experienced episodes of homelessness during 1998 (Burstein, Woodsmall, & Espinoza-Howard, 1999). During that time
period, over 40% of the homeless in this region were families and of those families, 64% were headed by single women. The remaining 36% of homeless families were headed by men and predominantly two-parent families.

The executive director of the shelter where this investigation was conducted indicated that understanding what parents consider as meaningful family routines would help design programs that foster family unity and support parents during the stressful event of being homeless. As an occupational therapist, I had participated in several projects at this shelter including the development and supervision of an occupational therapy internship program. I was supervising two interns completing their Level II affiliation while conducting this research project. This investigation not only adds to the general body of knowledge regarding homeless families but also identifies areas of need within the shelter that could be addressed through occupational therapy services.

The following questions were designed to guide the investigation:

1. What do parents, living in a homeless shelter, consider as meaningful family routines and what meaning is assigned to these routines?
2. What obstacles and opportunities do these parents encounter as they attempt to engage in meaningful family routines?

**Method**

Semistructured, in-depth interviews were deemed most appropriate for this investigation because “interviews are particularly suited for studying people’s understanding of the meanings in their lived world” (Kvale, 1996, p. 105). Use of in-depth interviews has also been supported as an effective means for data collection when the focus of the investigation addresses the participant’s subjective experience (Morse & Field, 1995; Seidman, 1998). This investigation did not seek objective verification of the parents' perceptions but was focused on the lived experience from the parents’ perspective. The parent, not this investigator, identified the meaning of a routine.

This investigation sought to meet the criteria of trustworthiness and credibility through the use of several means. Two interview sessions were conducted with each parent, each reviewed information from the first interview during the second interview session, and a self-reflective journal maintained by the researcher was used to examine research decisions made during the process (Angen, 2000; Krefting, 1991; Seidman, 1998).

At the completion of the second interview, each parent was given coupons to a local fast food restaurant and a prepaid telephone calling card in appreciation for volunteering their time for this investigation. Each parent was also provided with a stamped, addressed envelope to receive a summary report of the investigation.

**Setting**

The shelter selected is exclusively designed for homeless families. To be housed at this shelter, the parent or guardian must be more than the age of 18 years, test free of drugs and alcohol, and be responsible for one child under the age of 18 years. The shelter is able to house a maximum of 36 families at any time depending on room availability and the size of families. Families are accepted on a 3-month emergency basis as they seek transitional housing, permanent housing, or other living arrangements. The shelter has not had a vacancy during the past 3 years.

The ethnic background of families residing at the shelter varies on a weekly basis due to the transition of families from the shelter to other living arrangements. Although most of the families who reside at the shelter are African-American or White and speak English, there are also a large number of Latino families. Asian and Pacific Island families frequently reside at this shelter but constitute a smaller number of the families served.

Each family is assigned a single small room, approximately 12’ × 12’ in size, for sleeping and to store personal possessions. If the family is larger than five members an additional room is assigned for the family to use while staying at the shelter. Families have access to their room from 5:00 p.m. in the evening to 8:30 a.m. the next morning. Families are not allowed to remain in the shelter during the day but are expected to be seeking housing, employment, or attending job-training programs. The separate family rooms do not have bathrooms. There are large, shared bathrooms but access to showers is restricted to specific hours during the morning and evening. The shelter has a shared coin-operated laundry area that also has restricted hours for use. Breakfast and dinner meals are provided at the shelter and all families eat in a large shared dining room. A bag lunch is provided for the residents during specific times each morning. Parents are not allowed to prepare meals for their children and food is not allowed in the separate family rooms. The only telephones available for families to use are located in the dining room.

Children, regardless of age from infants to teenagers, are to be supervised by a parent at all times according to shelter policy. This rule includes use of the bathrooms, which means single mothers were expected to supervise their teenage sons in the bathroom. Lack of supervision of children constitutes an infraction of the shelter rules and may result in a written warning to the family.
Mandatory shelter meetings are held two to three times a month to inform families of any changes in programs or to inform families of additional services that are available at the shelter, such as parent education courses. All parents are expected to either attend these meetings or make prior arrangements with their case manager to be excused from the meeting.

Specific schedules have been established at the shelter for meals, use of the laundry room, access to family rooms and bathrooms, and mandatory shelter meetings. The parents are also expected to complete assigned chores within the shelter such as sweeping the floors, cleaning the bathrooms, and wiping off dining room tables. Chores are assigned to parents by their case managers and must be completed at specified times during the day.

Participants

Twelve parents volunteered to participate in this investigation during the summer of 2001. Parents were recruited during the mandatory shelter meetings over a 2-month period until 12 parents had completed the interview process. An invitation was extended to all parents with an explanation of the purpose of the investigation, time commitment, and that participation was completely voluntary but no immediate changes in programs or services would occur at the shelter following the collection of data. Issues of confidentiality were discussed but the appreciation gifts were not mentioned as an enticement during the recruitment process. Parents were informed that occupational therapy interns could provide child care during the interview sessions.

The following criteria were used for selection of participants: The parent had resided at the shelter for at least 2 weeks in order to be able to discuss the experience of constructing and engaging in family routines in that setting and the parent needed to speak English. Since the invitation to participate in this investigation was extended to all English speaking parents living at the shelter, no attempt was made to eliminate any parents who volunteered. Married or partnered couples were not preferentially recruited over single parents. Although not all parents who initially volunteered completed both interview sessions, the 12 parents who completed both interviews represented 10 of the 32 families housed at the shelter during the summer of 2001.

Each parent identified his or her ethnicity by self-report during the first interview session. There were no specified racial or ethnic categories from which parents could choose from, thereby allowing the diversity of responses. The semistructured interview form did provide labels to indicate marital status, but many parents indicated that they were not single even though they were not legally married to their partner. The term “partnered parents” was used in this investigation to refer to a family configured of a mother and father, living together, with at least one child. Partnered parents readily disclosed that they were either married by common law in that the relationship had been in existence for 7 or more years or they had been together for less than 7 years. Eight parents reported that they were in significant relationships with a partner who was also living at the shelter. Over 35% of the homeless families in this county are two-parent families compared to 5% nationally (Burstein et al., 1999).

Table 1 represents the demographic information provided by the participants. The number assigned to each parent corresponds to the order of the first scheduled interview session conducted with each parent. The parents who agreed to participate in this investigation had a mean age of 32 years with a range from 21 to 47. Parents had an average of three children, ranging in ages from 2 months to 14 years. Six of the parents were employed on a full-time basis, four were either in school or a job training program, and two were searching for work.

A detailed housing history was not collected because it was not the focus of this investigation and the sensitive nature of this information may have compromised the interview focused on meaningful family routines. However, many parents voluntarily revealed that they had been evicted for overdue rent, because of an inability to pay an increase in monthly rent for an apartment, or for housing additional people in excess of the number specified in the rental agreement. Some parents reported that other relatives had been living with them in their apartment and then all were evicted. Parents living with other families disclosed that conflict with other adults in the previous housing arrangements necessitated a move to the shelter.

Data Collection

Prior to beginning this investigation, approval was granted by an institutional review board to insure protection of all participants. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the first interview session and a signed copy was provided to each participant at the first session.

Each parent was interviewed twice, using a semistructured interview guides (see Appendix A). A panel of experts reviewed the semistructured interview guide for content and flow of questions. Interview sessions varied in length from 45 to 75 minutes and all interviews were conducted in a private office at the shelter. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. At the end of the first interview, the second interview session was arranged at the convenience of the parent. All second interview sessions were completed within 7 days of the first interview as is recommended by Seidman (1998).
Prior to the second interview session, the researcher listened to the audiotape of the first interview session at least twice. Additional field notes were made regarding the parent’s emotional tone and content of information presented during the first interview session. Verbatim responses to interview questions were written to be reviewed with the parent during the second interview session. These data were combined with entries made in a self-reflective journal to further guide the second interview session and as a means to keep the researcher vigilant for personal prejudices that can influence eventual interpretation of data (Angen, 2000). At the end of the second interview each parent reviewed interview data from the first session as a means of data verification to insure credibility of interpretation (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 1999). Although full transcripts were not reviewed, parents were asked to provide feedback regarding their responses provided during the first interview session.

**Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used for all data collected. This analysis method seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon through the interpretation of multiple sources of data (Boyatzis, 1998; Draucker, 1999). Narrative summaries were first generated for each parent from both interview sessions using the process outlined by Draucker. This process enabled the researcher to focus on the key information provided by each participant in answering the research questions along with alerting the researcher to novel information provided in the interview process. These summaries were reviewed with an experienced qualitative research consultant to check trustworthiness of interpretation. All transcripts were then coded for common responses to interview questions (Boyatzis). Codes allow data to be organized into “meaningful chunks of transcript” (Seidman, 1998, p. 100). Codes were then reviewed across all interview transcripts and grouped to form themes. Although the semistructured questions provided a format for parental responses, open-ended questions asked parents to describe the meaning they assigned to a family routine. The meaning assigned to a family routine was not verified by other family members but represents the meaning to that specific parent.

To insure credibility and consistency of codes and themes, a second experienced qualitative research consultant was hired to independently develop codes and themes from randomly selected transcripts. The consultant and researcher then further refined the codes together using the process outlined by Boyatzis (1998). Thematic analysis emerged from the coded interview transcripts, the field notes, narrative summaries, and a reflective journal. The coded portions of several transcripts were analyzed as a group to identify themes. The two primary themes and the respective codes are presented here to identify how parents constructed and engaged in meaningful family routines. Table 2 provides a description of the codes and themes.

### Family Routines in the Homeless Shelter

Parents provided detailed accounts of the complexity of living in a shelter as a framework to view how they attempted to engage in meaningful family routines. The theme labeled “Living With the Rules” focused on the interaction between the parents and the shelter environment. The theme identified as “Preserving the Family” addressed not only the variety of family routines but identified the meaning those routines held for homeless parents.

#### Theme: “Living With the Rules”

The theme “Living With the Rules” encompassed the physical, social, and cultural aspects found within the shelter and the ways parents had to reconfigure family routines to fit within this environment. Two specific codes, identified as the “shelter effect on routines” and “diminished parental authority,” were combined with entries from the self-reflective journal, narrative summaries, and field notes to understand the complexity of this theme.
“Shelter Effect on Routines”

Transcript portions presented here represent both positive and negative aspects of the shelter effect on routines. This polarity of responses was found in all transcripts. Although most parents were very frustrated by the restrictive nature of the shelter rules, many also reflected on how the shelter rules provided the impetus to secure a job. Parent 9, for example, discussed the support she perceived was provided by the shelter to establish a routine. She stated:

We've established a routine here, and that's something that gets him [her partner] out there and gets me out there. If it wasn't for them telling us you have to get out of the shelter by 8:30, he would still be there. He has to get out, and he has to go look for a job.

Parent 5 provided clear examples of both the benefit and impediment to basic family routines attributed to the shelter environment. A support to family routines was seen with having the meals prepared at the shelter. “At least here I don't have to worry about making dinner. You're tired from work, at least you know the food is already prepared and you can just serve your children and then just relax. That's a plus.” Alternately, this parent had also commented that the limited access to showers and lack of cleanliness in the showers required her to reconfigure her routine for having her children take their showers.

One shelter rule required all children to be supervised by their own parents at all times. This rule was repeatedly identified as a constraint by many parents, particularly the single mothers. Parent 4 illustrated the problem this rule posed for her living at the shelter:

For instance, if it’s 11:30 at night, all the kids are asleep; one wakes up and has to use the restroom. There is only me, the only adult, so I'm supposed to accompany this little one to the restroom, but I'm not supposed to leave the other ones unattended in the room. So what do you do? Do you wake them up and take everybody to stand half asleep in the restroom because one has to go?

Parent 2 discussed the significant change in family routines caused by the shelter rule that required children to be supervised at all times. Her 14-year-old son was in year-round school but the school day ended before she had finished working. He was not allowed to be in the shelter unsupervised and yet he was too old to be in a day care program. She explained:

I mean, my son can't even come home [to the shelter from school] and he has ADD and that's hard for him. I'm scared because I don't know what I'm going to do with him, because before [we came here] he would come home from school. And I tell him, you know, this is not our home, you can't do that. We can be put out [asked to leave the shelter] just because you did something simple like come home after school . . . because that's what you're supposed to do when getting out of school, is go straight home.

All parents had interview data coded as the “shelter effect on routines” that addressed the physical and temporal features of the shelter in relationship to family routines. Often parents reported feeling exhausted as they attempted to maintain family routines while living in the shelter and following the rules. Parent 7 stated “I gotta take all the kids to wash up [before meals] at the same time and I get so exhausted. And then I have to have all of them there to do the wash [laundry]. How am I suppose to do that?”

“Diminished Parental Authority”

Every parent who participated in this investigation also perceived a lack of respect for his or her parental authority while living in the shelter. The perception of diminished parental authority was generated from two sources: the shelter staff and the parent's own children. Every parent discussed the perceived lack of respect from the shelter staff although some parents identified only a few staff members who were disrespectful. All parents described how some staff used the shelter rules to subordinate their authority as a parent, such as disciplining their children without first asking permission. For some parents, this was a dominant issue within the interview sessions whereas other parents mentioned it but spent less time elaborating on how the perceived lack of respect from the staff compromised their ability to engage in family routines. Parent 4 provided the following response to explain how the lack of control and
shelter rules compromised her parental role of orchestrating family routines:

I'm not the one to decide what they have for dinner, or when they eat, or when they shower. My daughter used to come home and shower right after school because in P.E. [physical education] she would get sweaty . . . she can't do that here, you know. You have to wait until 6:00 p.m. or whatever that time is. So like, I mean, even simple things I have no control over.

Parent 2 discussed the disrespectful conduct of the staff members towards all residents. She commented, “The lack of respect is hard . . . it takes its toll on the kids and it takes its toll on the parents.” Parent 8 provides a representative statement of the effect of diminished parental authority:

It's not so much the rules, it's just the way that it makes you feel, that you're under somebody, and you're not really the parent. At the time that you're here, you feel, I feel as if there's a parent watching me, how well I “parent” or how bad I “parent.”

The diminished parental authority was also discussed in terms of the children's conduct within the shelter. Parents with children over the age of 4 years were more likely to discuss the disrespectful attitude of their children and attributed the recent change in behavior to the exposure to other families living at the shelter. Parent 11's comments reflect this change in the level of respect seen in her children:

She's [her daughter] been telling me what she can and cannot do when it's suppose to be me telling her what she can and cannot do. It's the attitudes from the other kids rubbing off on her. And being here, you know, they're like, “Well, you yell at me and I'll go tell the staff” and I'm, “Well, go tell the staff. I'm allowed to yell at you.” [pause] I just gave up.

The frustration expressed by parents over various rules and attitudes of the staff may be interpreted as an effort to maintain the family system with their position as the director and authority figure in the family. The shelter environment was volatile; the efforts of parents to preserve their authority often clashed with the shelter rules and the need for staff members to enforce the rules.

This theme, Living With the Rules, presents the interaction of the parent as he or she orchestrated family routines within the cultural, social, and physical demands of the shelter. This theme reflects the effort parents expended to counteract the negative effects of the shelter environment on the family system. Although the shelter offered support in terms of meals and separate family rooms, many parents expressed the exhaustion they experienced while living in the shelter. Environments must contain affirming and validating characteristics to support meaningful routines (Rebeiro, 2001). The shelter environment presented several obstacles requiring these parents to engage in additional strategies and expend additional energy to construct meaningful family routines.

Theme: “Preserving the Family”

The importance of preserving the family emerged as another theme. The parents identified routines that were meaningful and symbolic to them. Family routines seemed to be designed by the parents to meet three different family needs: intimate interaction between family members living at the shelter, the transmission of a family legacy, and the connection of the family to the community. Although each parent may have emphasized a different aspect of family routines, each parent acknowledged the three functions of family routines. These routines held meanings of family perseverance, even when homeless, and hope for their future to improve.

“Intimate Family Interactions”

Parents provided detailed descriptions of family routines designed to support and strengthen the intimacy of family members living within the shelter. These practices varied substantially among families, but the meaning assigned to these routines was to strengthen family bonds as a buffer against the stress of living in a homeless shelter. Parent 3 described the purpose of the family routine of the “family hour” with the following statement:

Like we have family hour. Even before we came here we had the family hour . . . to become a close-knit family. We're still a family. Regardless of you're out doing this and I'm out doing that . . . I need to find out what's going on, all of us need to find out what's going on . . . it's not everybody doing their separate things, you need to, you know, what's up with your sister? What's up with your brother?

Parent 5 discussed her need to support and strengthen intimate family relations within the shelter by closing the door and having family time. The actual activity was not important but she described this routine as being able to “shut out the rest of the world.” Parent 2 described how she tried to configure the space of the family room to provide more privacy for the children. She said:

I've been trying to keep doing the little things like playing with them and giving them hugs . . . and like we don't have any privacy no more so the other night I got a comforter and hung it from the beds so the girls could have that little space and, and just play for a while and then I did it for the boys so each had their own private time for a few minutes.

Parent 11 discussed the importance of family intimacy. For her, a method to insure this intimacy was communication. The weekend family time allowed family members to communicate with each other and to express feelings in addition to strengthening family connectedness. Parent 11
described the importance of weekend family routine in the following statement:

If we don't do it, it's like our family's falling apart and there's only been a couple of weekends where we didn't do it and we felt like we were falling apart . . . so we figured out that we always do our weekend thing. That way we don't fall apart as a family. That bonding, we have to have it, it's our security blanket.

Every parent discussed routines used to support and strengthen family intimacy. This pursuit reflects the family system approach described by Bronfenbrenner (1986), Dunst, Trivette, and Deal (1994), and Vandewater and Lansford (1998). Parents, in this investigation, discussed the meaning of these family routines as representing the love between family members, the connectedness or bonds between members, and a shield against adverse conditions.

“Family Legacy”

Every parent also discussed the need to provide a foundation for his or her child to create a future family and this interview data was coded as the family legacy. Some parents described continuing routines from their own family of origin, other parents discussed the need to create a new family routine. This code reflected why a family created a specific meaningful routine. Family routines were developed to reflect a unique characteristic of the family, a symbol of the family that was preserved or developed. Many parents revealed abusive and traumatic childhood experiences. These parents actively sought to create new family routines that their child could carry forward to the future instead of repeating their experience. Other parents described how their family engaged in activities that were specifically designed to preserve a family routine from their own childhood experience. Both types of family routines are described here to illustrate the difference.

Parent 12 provided a detailed account of the lack of positive regard and support she received as a child. She specifically constructed family routines to allow her children to experience what she lacked growing up. The meaning Parent 12 attributed to this family routine was focused on her children having a sense of love and support they could share with their own children in the future. She stated:

I didn't come from a very loving family. I never knew I was loved. My parents never spent quality time with us. So I told myself when I have children that's one thing that I'm going to do . . . . My mother never said “I love you.” My mother never hugged me. I made the decision when I was pregnant with T [her oldest child] that this girl is going to know I love her. She's going to say “I love you.” I'm going to say “I love you.” To her, it's not going to be a problem.

Not all parents reported traumatic and abusive childhood experiences. Many parents discussed engaging in family routines that they had experienced as children. Parent 5 provided a historical account of a family routine from her own childhood that she preserved with her current family. The activity of closing out the rest of the world not only strengthened intimate family relationships but also preserved a family routine. She described her experience as follows:

I guess I’m just repeating what my parents did with me, you know. I had a very good relationship with my parents. We had a very large family and we did a lot of family closure . . . blocking out the rest of the world and it was all about us. We did that and that’s what I try to do with them as well. That’s important. Letting them know, letting them feel that they’re loved and that they have a family and a family relationship. Because, see, that’s something they’ll carry with them . . . me and their dad is not going to always be here but they’ll have something that they’ll remember . . . you know, “Mom used to say this,” or “Dad used to do that.” The same thing that I had, that my parents left with me.

All parents identified the importance of the transmission of family legacy, whether continuing with previous family routines or creating new family routines to sustain their children and hope for their children to have a better life. Parent 2 described the importance she attributed to providing a family legacy for her children in the following statement:

Giving them a sense of heritage. Let them know who they are and that they can be proud of where they come from and at the same time to be tolerant of other people. And that everyone has the right to be proud of who they are as long as they’re not trying to subjugate anyone else.

The need for a family legacy or a symbolic aspect of their family to continue into the future represents a unique finding from this investigation. Much of the literature addressing family functioning is focused on a family’s immediate needs and does not address a family routine that will continue, as a symbol of the family, into the future (Dunst et al., 1994; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). Parents, in this investigation, described activities that had the characteristic of either preserving previous family routines or creating new routines that would serve as a continuation of the family system in the future and the hope for their children to be strong.

“Connections With Community”

An additional dimension of family routines was found in transcription data coded as “Community Connections.” Many families created complex schedules to preserve family connections within the community. Included in this code were parental discussions of the need to raise a child who would become a good citizen. When parents described why
a family routine was meaningful and what the family routine represented to them, the codes of perseverance and hope emerged.

Parent 2 discussed the importance of belonging to a spiritual community for her family. Regular worship, particularly in her church, was a family routine that occurred several times a week. She provided the following explanation:

The church we go to is very small and it’s like a family . . . and they let strangers feel welcomed like they’re part of the family that they’re known all their lives . . . no matter how bad things are I know that when I go to church I don’t have to worry about it.

Parent 6 also described the significance of her entire family belonging to a church. Her 2-year-old son had a devastating illness and the entire church had prayed for her son and offered support. Although her partner did not initially attend he was now going to church with the family. She indicated that her son was much healthier and she attributed his health, in part, to the support and prayers offered by her church.

Connecting family routines to the community, whether extended family members or spiritual communities, was perceived by these parents as a means to support their children if something happened to them. Parents often made comments about their own mortality when discussing the importance of connecting family occupations with a larger community. The meaning of this family routine was primarily focused on support during the current situation and hope for the future.

The theme, “Preserving the Family,” focused on strengthening intimate family relationships, the development or preservation of a family legacy that provided love and support, and family routines that were connected with community. These community connections served to support the family during the present situation and as a safeguard for their children in the future. The meaning these family routines held for parents was that of hope for the future and perseverance of the family while homeless.

Discussion

Literature describes the importance of engaging in meaningful routines within a family (Boyce et al., 1983; Denham, 1995; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). These routines serve as a means to predict patterns of interaction between family members and to support family members when faced with environmental challenges. Homeless families, living in a shelter, often have their routines dictated by the shelter rules and thus the ability to engage in meaningful routines may be compromised (Memmott & Young, 1993; Menke & Wagner, 1997; Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995). In this investigation, parents discussed the structure and rules of the shelter as providing both a support and an obstacle to engaging in family routines. Parental authority was often subordinated by shelter rules requiring parents to modify how they engaged in family routines.

Parents, in this investigation, described the energy they expended to maintain family integrity in the face of homelessness. Being homeless places families in a position of marginalization within the community. This marginalization may compromise the pursuit of meaningful family routines and yet these parents discussed how they invested the effort to maintain family routines designed to support intimate family connections and as a method to transmit a family legacy. Parents also described the effort they expended to maintain community connections that would allow them to reenter the world of families with homes.

Engaging in family routines that foster community connections fits with Herth’s (1996) construct of developing interconnections with others as a hope-engendering strategy. The effort parents expended to maintain a connection with the community is paralleled in the literature discussing affirmation of community membership (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Community affiliation contributes to the construction of meaningful family activities and routines (McMillan, 1996). Without community connections and support, the sense of family integrity can deteriorate (Memmott & Young, 1993). Homeless single mothers described their loss of parental role as a lack of membership in a community of families with homes, school meetings and grocery shopping. Disaffiliation with the community can result in a deterioration of personal energy reserves, despair, and eroded self-respect (Baumann, 1993; McMillan).

Although current literature has been compared to the results of this investigation, a cautionary note must be made with this comparison. The current literature addressing homeless families appears to exclusively address homeless single mothers. No qualitative or quantitative investigations were found that address the characteristics of homeless families consisting of both parents or parents who have partners. Although corroboration between current literature and the results of this investigation were found, these findings require cautious interpretation.

Implications for Occupational Therapy

Prior research has suggested that homeless families represent an underserved population in need of occupational therapy services (Finlayson, Baker, Rodman, & Herzberg, 2002; Herzberg & Finlayson, 2001; Heubner & Tryssenaar, 1996). These families experience significant levels of stress and deterioration of family routines (Lindsey, 1998). The
support of meaningful family routines or occupations can act as a buffer against the deleterious effects of being homeless and living in a shelter. McColl (2002) has eloquently described the supportive benefits of “occupation in stressful times” (p. 350). Occupation or meaningful routines can represent the persistence of normalcy when crisis exists. Continuing with meaningful family routines, even while living in a homeless shelter, can provide a sense of perseverance through negative circumstances.

Occupational therapy services were offered at this shelter, through a student intern program, to support parents as they constructed family routines that fostered intimacy, maintained or developed a family legacy, and maintained connections with the community. An example of services offered were sessions for families where basic massage strokes were presented to parents with a discussion regarding the use of touch to calm children and improve bonding, thus enhancing intimacy between parents and children. Small groups were offered where parents shared information with one another regarding such issues as discipline and control of children. Occupational therapy interns also provided parents with information regarding low-cost or no-cost community events to foster continued community connections. Throughout the occupational therapy services offered at the shelter, parents were encouraged to maintain and refine their role as the director of family routines thus acknowledging their parental authority in orchestrating family routines. The support provided through the occupational therapy intern program was seen as beneficial and the executive director has sought funding to hire an occupational therapist at the shelter.

Suggestions for Future Research

Additional research is recommended to investigate the meaning homeless parents attribute to family routines in various regions across the United States. This investigation was exploratory in nature and limited to only one shelter in California. Extending the research to include parents who are not English speaking is recommended since only parents who were English speaking were included in this investigation. Interview data from teenagers and children may provide further understanding of the meaning of family routines when families are faced with being homeless. Use of both in-depth interviews and participant observation may provide a richer and more elaborate understanding of family routines within a homeless shelter.

Understanding the three features of meaningful family routines allows occupational therapy services to focus on each characteristic: routines designed to promote intimacy, develop or maintain a family legacy, and connections with the community. Additional investigations should also evaluate the efficacy of occupational therapy services provided to homeless families.

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References


Appendix A
Sample Interview Questions From the Semistructured Interview Guide

I. Interview Guide for First Interview Session:
A. I'd like to understand what your day is like, both during the week and on the weekend. Tell me about how you spend a typical weekday and a typical weekend day, things like when you get up in the morning, eat meals, etc.
   Probes: How did you come up with this schedule? What were some of the things that you needed to consider when you were planning your day? How do these activities make you feel? How does this compare to before you came to this shelter?
B. General routines: What are some of the things your family likes doing together?
   Probes: When do you get to do this? How often? What are some of the things you need to consider when you want to do this? What are some of the things that get in the way of doing this? How does it compare to before you came to the shelter?
C. Specific routines: I'm also interested in how you are able to take care of your family on a daily basis while you are living at the shelter. How do you manage to care for your children physically and emotionally? Tell me about some of your typical family activities or routines related to the care of your kids, like getting them dressed, taking baths, reading to them, giving them hugs and kisses.
   Probes: How do you manage to get these things done? What are some of the things you need to consider in trying to get these things done? How important are these routines and activities to you? How important are they to your family? Why? Are there any other typical family routines or activities you do? How do these activities and routines compare to before you came to this shelter?
D. Challenges to routines: What's the hardest thing about being a parent at the shelter?
   Probes: What happens on a good day? What happens on a bad day? Is there anything else that is hard for you?

II. Interview Guide for Second Interview Session:
E. Before we review your interview from the last time we got together I'd like you to tell me more about your family. Can you tell me about some family activities that are important to you?
   Probes: Where are they done? Who is included? Excluded? What do these activities mean to you? Why are these activities meaningful to you? What do these activities represent to you? How do these activities compare to before you came to the shelter?
F. I'd like to find out more about your role as a parent. What makes you feel good about yourself?
   Probes: What gives your life meaning? What is really important to you?
G. Most people have never lived with their children in a shelter. What do you think you could tell them about this?
   Probes: What hopes do you have for your children? For the next few months? For how they will grow up? Is there anything else you'd like to add to this interview, anything important I haven't asked? Do you have any questions you want to ask me?