

# Abstract

**Objectives:** The aim of the study was to explore subjectively perceived general resistance resources (GRRs), sense of coherence (SOC), stressors and coping strategies among people who have experienced homelessness. The target group was middle-aged homeless adults, residing in Freiburg, a city in South-West Germany. This qualitative study with its resources-based approach was based on Antonovsky's salutogenesis (1979). This theory focuses on what keeps people healthy, instead of concentrating on what causes disease. Salutogenesis helps to answer why people thrive and stay well despite suffering from stress. The main objective was to explore homeless people's perception of their personal strengths, and the resources available to them. The sub-objectives were first of all, the exploration of psychosocial, physical and biochemical stressors, secondly, an exploration of the use of resources and strategies to cope with stress and everyday challenges. The third sub-objective was to explore homeless people's SOC and ascertain whether it plays a positive role in coping.

**Methods:** This qualitative study with its phenomenological-hermeneutic orientation emphasizes the exploration of life experiences by describing and partially interpreting the experiences and impressions of the research subjects. Triangulation with observations and narrative or semi-structured qualitative in-depth interviews was applied for data collection. Permission was obtained from participants by written consent. In total, 18 interviews were performed with 10 homeless men, 4 homeless women and 4 experts. The data was collected between 04/23/2015 and 05/05/2015. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. A deductive analysis, based on the components of salutogenesis, was undertaken, and the findings were complemented with inductive codes and themes. Thematic network analysis was applied to the data, with the help of MAXQDA software, categorizing ideas from the data into themes. Three separate thematic networks for the findings of the men, women and experts were created.

**Findings:** By exploring which of the homeless people's personal strengths are normally used to help them stay well, it has been possible to identify pathways for the creation of health and well-being among homeless adults (Malterud & Hollnagel, 1998). A significant variety of GRRs were identified. The homeless women who were strong found and kept their flat, cared about their appearance, or quit drinking alcohol. The homeless men who were strong were satisfied with having just a little, full of the joys of life, cared about others and managed to control their alcohol intake. GRRs were personal traits such as hardiness, optimism, self-

esteem, self-efficacy and self-confidence. Leisure activities were frequently mentioned and some of the homeless had strong religious beliefs. Material and physical-constitutional resources were of little importance. All of the interviewed homeless expressed their feeling of SOC in different ways, however, almost all men and women reported on the three components of the SOC. Comprehensibility can be summarized as comprehending tasks, happenings and other human beings, manageability by managing challenges through inner or God's will, nature or help from others. Meaningfulness consisted of creating peace, giving love, providing help and achieving appreciation from people. The main stressors experienced by the homeless were chronic ones such as challenges of day-to-day life, social conflicts and tensions, and psychological problems. Furthermore, they experienced the state benefit system and city administration as burdensome. The predominant stressful life events were losing a loved one, a job loss or the loss of an apartment. The most common physical and biochemical stressors were health problems and diseases, cold temperatures and noise exposure. The most popular and successful coping strategies were generating solutions or seeking out professional help. However, a common adverse coping strategy was alcohol consumption, but not all of the homeless were subject to this; some only drank occasionally, if at all.

The experts highlighted the ability to ask for help or to admit to not being able to cope alone as the personal strengths of the homeless. They mainly reported on stressors. Furthermore, they pointed out the vicious cycle that the homeless found themselves in. Without an apartment, they could not find work and without work, they could not find an apartment. The experts commented that the homeless suffered physically and mentally, had a lack of social relationships, family contact, and life perspectives. In their view, once on the street, there was almost no way of escaping the situation, and furthermore, through living out on the street, mental disorders were seen as normal, as the homeless got ill through the society. In their view, this milieu was unbearable without consuming alcohol.

**Discussion:** This study explored why homeless adults were doing well and found a variety of solutions to enable them to thrive and remain strong. Most of the findings from the study were consistent with those from similar studies. However, this study added a huge variation of GRRs and parts of the SOC to the limited existing results of researches. Most of the homeless participants seemed to have a strong SOC that stimulated their movement towards positive health and well-being, and owned a great variety of GRRs. However, there was a lack of physical-constitutional resources and family support, as most participants were of poor physical health and lost contact to their family. Thus, the findings suggested that help for

handling traumatic life events, and public places where to find a substitute family are useful, especially for the homeless women.

**Conclusion:** This study is part of other researches that focuses on resources rather than stressors alone, since it contributed to the current scientific state of salutogenesis-based research with its exploration of personal resources as traits, action competences and leisure activities. Even though stressors might seem severe, many of the participants showed they had useful resources to cope with the challenges that affected their lives. What seemed to be the most vital resource that facilitated thriving were personal traits. A sense of coherence was found in almost all the participants. They were all motivated to work for a better life; they understood the challenges affecting their lives and seemed to have resources available to overcome these challenges. For future studies a more resource oriented approach and a health promoting perspective should be applied to homeless adults' researches.

**Keywords:** Homeless adults, salutogenesis, sense of coherence, general resistance resources, coping strategies, stressors, gender perspective, qualitative study, phenomenological-hermeneutic methodological approach.