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Peer Relationships: Comparison of homeless youth in the U.S. and South Korea

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Abstract

Youth homelessness is a growing global concern; thus, homeless youth peer relationships in the U.S. and South Korea were examined. Although some aspects of street life transcended culture; individual and group behaviors varied according to perspectives related to individualism versus collectivism. Service delivery approaches are needed to develop culturally-specific interventions.

Keywords

homeless youth; individualism; collectivism; adolescent peer relationships; service delivery

Youth homelessness is a growing global concern as both developed and developing countries are experiencing an increase in this phenomena (Karabanow, & Rains, 1997). Previous research reveals that homelessness among youth has become disturbingly common in the United States, as well as in many other countries around the world (van Wormer, 2003). Studies of youth homelessness in Canada and Guatemala (Karabanow, 2003), the United Kingdom (Reid, & Klee, 1999), Israel (Spiro, Dekel, & Peled, in press), the Netherlands (de Winter, & Noom, 2003), and the U.S. (Kipke, Unger, OConnor et al, 1997) indicate that pathways to and experiences of homelessness are strikingly similar across cultures. These youth have been shown to engage in similar strategies for meeting basic needs, abuse drugs/alcohol, and experience physical health problems, victimization, and societal alienation.

Homeless youth are identified as those who spend extended periods of time without permanent or stable residences, often with little family contact (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002). Youth who become immersed in “street” culture comprise a homeless youth population highly susceptible to peer affiliation and acceptance (Kipke et al., 1997). Emotionally distressed and unsupervised, homeless youth often seek supportive others and may quickly invest in new, but harmful, relationships in an attempt to be accepted and reduce feelings of isolation (Kidd, & Kral, 2002). Relationships with other homeless, street youth quickly become the primary source of social support. However, negative influences occur as these youth tend to affiliate

with peers who are engaged in a myriad of deviant survival strategies, often leading to illegal activities (Gaetz, 2004; Hagan, & McCarthy, 1997).

Previous research has examined the experiences and circumstances of homeless youth in various countries; however, peer relationships within the context of culture have been largely overlooked. The current studies on the interaction of homeless youth with their peers have failed to include contextual facets of the culture in which the youth live. In light of the suggested parallels found among homeless youth populations across the globe, cross-cultural, comparative studies may provide additional information useful in developing methods to improve services to homeless youth.

One widely recognized conceptual framework useful for examining East Asian and Western culture is the notion of collectivism/individualism. Previous research suggests that individualism and collectivism characterize distinct interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships differently across cultures and countries (Gudykunst, Yoon, & Nishida, 1987; Kashima et al., 1995; Kim, Kasser, & Lee, 2003; Markus, & Kitayama, 1991). Although this framework cannot completely explain differences between East Asian and Western cultures, it is useful in exploring distinctions among homeless youth and their views concerning peer relationships.

Individualism, typically reflected in Western cultures, emphasizes personal autonomy and self-fulfillment. Individualism focuses on a concern for oneself and immediate family, rather than larger society. Individuals are most concerned with personal accomplishments rather than those of the group (Markus et al., 1991; Rhee, Uleman, & Lee, 1996). Individually-oriented societies promote personal responsibility and freedom of choice, living up to one's potential, and respecting others' choices (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Features of individualism include having greater concern for one's own fate than that of the group, giving priority to personal goals rather than the group's goals, and feeling independent and emotionally detached from the group (Markus et al., 1991; Rhee et al., 1996). Those in individualistic cultures are more likely to form new groups and include new people in those groups (Triandis, Bontemp, Villareal, et al, 1988).

Features of collectivism include being concerned with the group's fate and giving group goals priority over individual goals and desires, maintaining harmony and cooperation by avoiding conflict within the group, and maintaining relationships through interlinking responsibilities and obligations (Rhee et al., 1996). In collectivist cultures, relationships tend to be more enduring and group goals take priority. The key is that the behaviors of individuals focus more on goals consistent with the group and subordinate ones own personal goals for that of the collective (Triandis et al., 1988). Conformity may occur more readily in collectivist cultures as relationships with groups are intensive and interdependent. Group goals often result in advantages to the group such as social support, increased resources, and security gained from the group. Maintaining harmony by avoiding conflict within the group and sustaining relationships through interlinking responsibilities and obligations are key (Rhee et al., 1996).

Recognizing these divergent cultural perspectives, this study explores peer relationships of homeless youth in the U.S. and South Korea. Conservative estimates suggest that approximately 1.5 million youth in the United States and 61,000 youth in South Korea have spent at least one night without stable shelter during the past year (Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlack, 1990; Greene, Ringwalt, & Iachan, 1997; KYSA, 2002). Youth in the U.S. typically receive assistance from formal services, such as shelters, drop-in centers that provide basic supplies such as food and clothing, and outreach services that focus on providing items aimed at risk-reduction such as condoms, clean needles, etc. South Korean homeless youth, on the

other hand, receive more assistance from informal networks of family and friends as few formal services are available to meet their needs.

Drawing upon the conceptual framework of individualism versus collectivism, this study aimed to gain broader understanding of this perspective on peer relationships among homeless youth from the U.S. and South Korea. To further understand the similarities and differences across Eastern and Western cultures, this study utilized qualitative interviews to query homeless youth concerning their peer relationships. Gaining increased understanding of these relationships among homeless youth can aid both countries in developing and improving services that are more attuned to cultural characteristics.

Methods of Qualitative Studies

Qualitative research methods have recently been utilized to access the experiences of homeless youth and illustrate the context within which these youth negotiate their existence (Auerswald, & Eyre, 2002; Kidd, 2004; Rew, & Horner, 2003). For this study, two qualitative studies utilizing exploratory methods were employed to compare peer interactions of homeless youth in the U.S. and South Korea. These studies were conducted independently and interview methods varied as focus groups were conducted in the U.S. and one-on-one interviews were completed in South Korea. The original data collection was not developed jointly, but narratives were later coded to focus on the issue of peer relationships of both groups.

The study conducted in South Korea employed in-depth interviews with 14 homeless youth between 13 and 18 years of age. The convenience sample was recruited from six social service programs, including shelters, group-homes, community centers, and counseling centers in Seoul and Kyonggi, South Korea. The nine male and five female participants completed an hour and a half hour qualitative interview that sought information concerning a variety of areas, such as peer and family relationships, high-risk behaviors, criminality, etc. All interviews were conducted in Korean and then translated into English for analysis.

The study conducted in the U.S. included sixty young people recruited from a youth drop-in center in Central Texas. Following human subjects protocols approved by the associated University's Institutional Review Board, youth between 15 and 24 years of age were invited to participate in one of seven focus groups. Each focus group included approximately 10 youth who were engaged in discussions that focused on relationships, service use, and service needs for approximately one to one and a half hours. This convenience sample of homeless youth included female (47%) and male (52%) participants (one identified as 'transgender'). Youth were Caucasian (65%), African American (10%), or Latino (24%), and averaged 19 years of age.

In both studies, narratives were audio taped with youths' consent, transcribed, and analyzed by developing, coding, and reconciling thematic categories. Categories were developed that captured features of peer relationships among participants in both countries, including: (1) formation of peer relationships, (2) positive peer functions, (3) negative peer functions, and (4) the aspects of group dynamics experienced by these youth.

Results

Forming peer networks on the street

Homeless youth often prematurely separate and become disconnected from their families and conventional networks of friends. Youth new to the streets quickly search for and join other "street" youth as a means of survival and protection (Kipke, et al., 1997). Interestingly, "street" youth easily recognize each other by appearance or demeanor. As one Korean youth stated,

“As soon as I see their face, I go and talk to them. Even before I talk, I know they have run away. I can feel it.”

Some youth maintain their home-based relationships with friends while they are on the street. These friends intermittently provide food and shelter. South Korean homeless youth report that their street relationships grow out of relationships developed before leaving home. In many cases, groups of youth run away together and continue living together during the initial period on the street (KYSA, 2002). Most, however, lose these conventional networks and become absorbed into the street economy the longer they remain homeless (Kim, 2003).

Positive Relationship Functions

Peer networks provide the youth with protection, knowledge of how to survive on the streets, and emotional support. Homeless peers provide emotional support, listen to one another, and share money, shelter, and other resources (Auserwald & Eyre, 2002; Gaetz, 2004). Various means of survival are communicated through these peer networks, such as identification of helpful individuals and techniques for obtaining food, shelter, and services. Experienced street youth often identify newcomers and offer instruction and guidance in how to survive on the street. One U.S. youth reported, “I wanna take this one [newcomer] under my wing and make sure he doesn’t get into trouble and what not.” They often help newcomers learn survival techniques, such as methods to guard against victimization and protect property.

Youth in the U.S. utilize peer networks predominately for information and survival, especially in locating services in a new area. When arriving in a new town, they find other homeless youth that can direct them to “the drag” and provide information concerning service locations. One American youth describes his experience:

“...I know when I would get to a new town, I would just ask around-there is a drag in [expletive deleted] every town... you just ask them like where is the main strip where, like, you see a lot of young people hanging out - and you find out where the like good drag is or whatever - where they have good spanging [begging], then once you get there you just ask other street kids...”

Peer networks among South Korean homeless youth provide more concrete assistance, as they often share shelter, money, and food (KYSA, 2002; Kim, 2003). It is common for these youth to encounter ‘nice friends’ on and off the street that help meet their basic needs. One youth described how she uses relationships: “On the internet chatting, she asked me if I was out of my home. Then she said, if I was she thought she’d like to ask me to come over to her house and stay for the night... So I met her and stayed at her house for a week.” South Korean homeless youth typically rely on other street youth to meet survival needs and fail to seek formal services. One Korean youth reported, “I searched everywhere to get a job. Doing that, I found this shelter at a local newspaper. I never knew this kind of place existed. Other kids didn’t know, either. I was lucky to find it.”

Negative Relationship Functions

Peer relationships, by virtue of the homeless experience, are largely limited to ‘street’ friends and are as transient as are living arrangements. Although peer relationships serve numerous functions for homeless youth, they are often fraught with conflict. Homeless youth report problems of competition for resources and distrust among their similarly situated peers (Auserwald & Eyre, 2002). One Korean youth stated, “They are with me only when I have money. If I don’t, they leave. Now I don’t trust anybody any more.” One U.S. youth stated:

“There’s some people out here [on the street] who will use you up. That’s how you pick your friends....You share with someone, they’ll share back with you. There’s

other ones who will just stick around and just take everything ‘til you have no more. Then they’ll be gone and come back when you are back on top again.”

Peer relationships formed on the streets can be harmful and destructive. It is not uncommon for street youth to steal from each other when the opportunity or necessity arises (Auserwald & Eyre, 2002). Peer victimization also occurs in the form of verbal and physical threats, betrayal, and physical/sexual assault. Both females and males are forced into unwanted sexual activity by street peers (Kurtz, Hick-Coolick, et al, 1996; KYSA, 2002).

In both countries, homeless peers provide an important environment in which deviant behaviors are learned and reinforced, including begging/panhandling/scamming, stealing, using alcohol/drugs, and engaging in sex work (Kim et al., 2003; Kurtz et al., 1996). Homeless youth tend to seek friends with similar behavior patterns, selectively embedding themselves in social networks that reinforce their choices, attitudes, and behaviors (Baron, 1999). Although deviant behaviors may be inevitable for survival, the more these behaviors are absorbed into the youths’ lifestyles the harder it becomes for them to re-assimilate into main-stream society.

Youth who are new to the street must form relationships quickly in order to survive, and this can lead to forming relationships with street “predators” that are often coercive and manipulative (Gaetz, 2004; Kidd & Kral, 2002). Korean homeless youth experience exploitation frequently in group situations. The coercion and victimization of younger and weaker members often occurs for the profit of group members, evidenced by one Korean youth:

“I didn’t like to be with them. The older pals forced me to steal. I didn’t like to do it. Even when I did it, I didn’t get all the money. I wished to have it all.”

A homeless youth in the U.S. stated:

“...you show [someone] a dry place to sleep....then you need a dry place to sleep and they’re nowhere to be found. They don’t want to help you or anything.”

Peer-group dynamics

The dynamics of group membership and affiliation appear dissimilar in the U.S. and South Korea. Korean homeless youth form communal arrangements with peers immediately upon becoming homeless and work together to obtain basic needs. Groups are organized, members have assigned roles, and decisions are made as a collective group. One South Korean youth described the experience: “We were divided into parts. One team did begging and the other team got jobs to make money.”

Another Korean youth reported:

“I ran into a house and I saw thousand-won bills. I grabbed them into my pocket and got back to them [peers]. I showed them the bills. It was forty-seven thousand won. I shared evenly. We all got ten-thousand won or so.”

Although there are times these youth work alone or move from group to group, their highly interdependent relationships provide crucial experiences and environments that form and restrict behaviors.

Conversely, U.S. homeless youth often depict themselves as adventurers and self-determined individualists who are living life on their own terms. As one youth said, “I’m on vacation for life!” Although peer affiliation and acceptance is important to youth living in these unstable circumstances (Kipke, Unger, et al., 1997), homeless youth in the U.S. report few significant and trusting relationships. They feel they are largely on their own - “You got to watch out for just yourself.” As one youth stated: “when you’re on the streets you gotta pretty much learn

that people don't tell you who they are. You gotta be able to walk away cause some are (expletive deleted)...but some are nice."

Some American youth spoke of setting up a family structure, with father, mother, and sibling designations. The groups were described as small with limited access and loosely arranged. Relationships were described as fleeting, especially with "traveling kids" who are constantly moving from city to city.

"I'm a very independent person. I don't need very many people in my life. I tried to not have too many in my life. I keep to myself for the most part. Everyone knows who I am, but I try not to hang with others. I got a couple people I mainly hang with and I try to stay like that."

Discussion and Conclusions

This study builds on a growing body of research regarding homeless youth across the globe. Taken collectively, study findings indicate there may be elements of homeless youth street culture that transcend these youths' dominant cultures. In both the U.S. and South Korea, peer relationships serve as the social environment for these young people and are intricately, but paradoxically, linked to both their daily survival and further exclusion from mainstream society. Street peers are the primary source used to secure resources and stay safe, but also increase their engagement in socially deviant behaviors. Regardless of the positive or negative influences of these relationships, they play a crucial role in shaping homeless youths' attitude toward society and life in general (Ennett, Bailey, & Federman, 1999; Kim, 2003; Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis et al, 2000; Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz et al, 2001).

This study of a particularly vulnerable group of young people supports previous research of differences between Eastern and Western cultures concerning collectivist and individualistic values (Gudykunst et al., 1987; Kashima et al., 1995; Oyserman et al., 2002; Triandis et al., 1988; Williams, 2003). For example, homeless youth in South Korea described a greater dependence on peers for decision-making and survival strategies than American youth for whom peer involvement was more a matter of opportunity and necessity. It also appears that South Korean homeless youth are more vulnerable to peer-group pressures and expectations than American youth, due their collectivist cultural norms. As Korean youth remain with the group, even when high demands are placed on them, their personal objectives are subordinate to group goals. Networking activities center on relationships with other homeless youth and rarely includes formal service providers.

Homeless American youth peer networks appear to be much more transitory as they form and disappear with changes in living situations. Homeless youths' emotional investment with specific individuals is viewed as counter-productive due to their frequent exploitation and victimization (Whitbeck, 1993). These youth find peer networks useful for safety and survival; however, their lack of trust and history of victimization precludes development of enduring, supportive relationships. American youth appear to take advantage of formal service organizations, rather than relying solely on peers for survival and basic needs.

Service provision to homeless youth in the U.S. and South Korea must consider the unique needs of youth when developing and implementing services, as well as identifying gaps in service delivery (Reid et al., 1999). The U.S. has been providing services to homeless youth for nearly half a century (Springer, 2001); however, South Korea is in the initial stages of homeless service delivery. Thus, Korean service providers may face obstacles in successfully reaching these youth. As findings of this study suggest, peer groups act as the mechanism for protection and survival; therefore, the collectivistic approach of South Korean homeless youth may hamper utilization of formal social services. The general hesitation in seeking formal

assistance among East Asians must be considered when approaching this population (Yoo, & Skovholt, 2001). Services organized to deal with groups of homeless youth, rather than approaching individuals, would likely be more successful in introducing these homeless youth to formal care.

By comparison, homeless youth in the U.S. are more likely to respond positively to individual approaches that strengthen their self-determination by providing extensive options and information. Services must be congruent with the chaos of street life and work to meet the needs of these youth rather than dictating to them. Independence and control over their own lives is fundamental to the needs of these young people (Kidd, 2003) and providers must recognize the empowerment associated with youths' active participation in goal setting and planning.

Social workers, who provide a majority of care to homeless youth in the U.S. and South Korea, are in a prime position to offer assistance to homeless youth early in their homeless experiences before they become entrenched in street culture (Reid et al., 1999). Services must be comprehensive and address the unique needs associated with these young people's high-risk lifestyle, non-socially sanctioned survival strategies, and non-conventional peer networks. The first priority is ensuring that they are provided with the basic necessities, such as adequate shelter, food, and clothing. Medical and mental health services are also a high priority, as many homeless youth are at increased risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, depression, suicidality, and substance abuse (MacLean, Paradise, & Cauce, 1999; Ringwalt, Greene, & Robertson, 1998). Services that offer skill-building activities, such as vocational training and employment readiness can assist in successful independent living (Aviles, & Helfrich, 2004; Karabanow, & Clement, 2004).

Although it should be recognized that results from these small convenience samples may not be generalizable, these findings do provide exploratory and preliminary information upon which future studies can expand. Further research is needed to replicate and extend results to more fully understand the influences of peer networks on homeless youth people.

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