

## **Women Living in a Homeless Shelter: Stress, Coping and Leisure**

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This study sought to understand the stress experienced by women who lived in a transitional homeless shelter, to explore how the women coped with their stress, and ultimately to identify the role leisure played in helping the women cope. Photo-elicitation was utilized to supplement and clarify data obtained through traditional interviews. Results showed the women experienced a variety of stress, such as chronic stress, negative event stress, and daily hassles. Coping strategies included diversionary activities, getting away, and social support. At times leisure was a coping strategy, while at other times it was a context for coping.

**KEYWORDS:** *Women who are homeless, stress, coping, photo-elicitation, leisure.*

Historically there were two periods of extreme homelessness in the United States, namely the Great Depression and the 1980s (Baum & Burnes, 1993). Kelly (2001) noted that at the beginning of the twenty first century there were up to two million people homeless in any given year. Perhaps the United States is on the brink of yet a third period of extreme homelessness as those numbers continue to rise. Television shows depict people standing in long food lines, and newspaper articles demonstrate that unemployment numbers are growing. In fact, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that in 2002 the official poverty rate significantly increased over the previous year (Proctor & Dalaker, 2003). This government record showed an increase in poverty of female-headed households and in people who worked but still earned below the poverty threshold. Poverty increased in nine states: Arkansas, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Michigan, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Utah.

The correlation between a struggling economy and its impact on the poorest people in communities across the country, who are often women and children, is indisputable. Therefore, it is not surprising that unlike the earlier high homeless times, women currently account for half of the homeless population (Grimm & Maldonado, 1995). In discussing women who were homeless, Liebow (1993) wrote,

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*How do they manage to slog through day after day, with no end in sight? How in a world of unremitting grimness, do they manage to laugh, love, enjoy families, even dance and play the fool? How in short, do they stay fully human while body and soul are under continuous grievous assaults (p. 25)?*

Indeed, the literature consistently shows that homelessness is a stressful situation for all who are homeless, especially for women (e.g., Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1995; Fogel, 1997; Goodman, Saxe, & Harvey, 1991; Huttman & Redmond, 1992; Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995). Klitzing (2003) provided some insight as to how women who are homeless use leisure to cope with stress. The current study expanded this research to understand more fully the stress experienced by women who lived in a transitional homeless shelter, to explore how the women coped with their stress, and to identify the role leisure played in helping the women to cope. Photo-elicitation was used to extend and clarify data obtained through traditional interviews. This paper provides a review of the literature on leisure and coping, women who are homeless and coping, and photo-elicitation. The results presented are from the voices and cameras of 11 women who lived in a transitional homeless shelter.

## Review of Related Literature

### *Leisure and Coping*

For more than a decade leisure scholars have suggested that leisure could help people cope with stress (e.g., Coleman, 1993; Compton & Iso-Ahola, 1994; Iso-Ahola & Park, 1996). Coleman and Iso-Ahola (1993) proposed that leisure was a buffer against adverse effects of stress on physical and mental health. In analyzing how leisure could contribute to people's ability to cope with stress, Iwasaki and Mannell (2000) identified two dimensions of leisure stress coping, namely leisure coping beliefs and leisure coping strategies. Leisure coping beliefs are defined as "people's generalized beliefs that their leisure helps them cope with stress" (p. 165). Leisure coping strategies are actual strategies that people use to cope with stress. Three strategies were discussed by Iwasaki and Mannell. The first strategy was "leisure companionship," or engaging in leisure that is shared with other people. The second strategy was "leisure palliative coping," which meant leisure provides a time-out that allows people to escape stress, become refreshed, and become better able to handle problems. The last strategy was "leisure mood enhancement," leisure that increases positive moods or decreases negative moods. The strategies are thought to be effective in coping whether leisure involvement was initially chosen to reduce or manage stress, or if leisure was chosen for some other reason and ultimately ends up reducing stress.

In 2003, Iwasaki continued his examination of the role leisure played in coping with stress and the resulting impact on health. His study tested eight theoretically grounded leisure coping models by studying 132 police and

emergency response workers. The results of the study provided support for the model which showed that stressors negatively impact immediate adaptational outcomes (e.g., coping effectiveness, coping satisfaction, stress reduction) and longer-term outcomes like health. It also showed that there is no direct relationship between stressors and leisure coping. Leisure coping beliefs and strategies, however, positively impacted immediate adaptational outcomes, and immediate adaptational outcomes have a subsequent impact on maintaining good health. Leisure coping beliefs were thought to be antecedents to using leisure coping strategies effectively. In other words, it may be essential for people to believe leisure can help them cope before they will actually use leisure to cope with stress. From these results, Iwasaki (2003) concluded, "stress-coping and health benefits of leisure are likely evident not only when individuals deal with minor stressors, but also when they experience high stress levels" (p. 202).

Kleiber, Hutchinson, and Williams (2002) added to the conceptual literature on leisure and coping. These scholars explored leisure as a resource to cope with negative life events such as an injury, death of a loved one, or loss of a job. Kleiber et al. saw leisure as a means to help cope short term with day-to-day stress and to help adapt to major negative life events over the long term. Immediately, or in the short term, leisure could assist with coping by distracting a person from the stress or negative event. For example, watching television, listening to the radio, or playing with a pet may provide diversions and keep a person's mind off a problem, thus granting some respite from the stress. In the long term, leisure provides a way to get back to "normal," to reconnect with others in familiar activities or to reaffirm parts of one's previous life. Unlike Iwasaki and Mannell (2000) or Iwasaki (2003), Kleiber et al. focused on leisure coping strategies and did not address leisure coping beliefs.

Adding to the literature on stress and negative life events, Hutchinson, Loy, Kleiber, and Dattilo (2003) studied the daily coping processes of people following a traumatic injury or onset of a chronic illness, such as spinal cord injury, stroke, multiple sclerosis, and so forth. These researchers found,

*Regardless of the type of activity engagement, study participants reported that they used leisure instrumentally to help themselves cope with the challenges they encountered in their daily lives. While they might not have intentionally sought out a specific activity to help themselves cope, they nonetheless acknowledged the utility of enjoyable activities in their ongoing efforts to cope* (p. 149).

In this study, leisure served as a buffer from immediate stress (e.g., mental distraction, preserve connections to past self or past life, escape home or hospital, escape illness or disability) or was a source of motivation to continue to cope with issues (e.g., offer hope or optimism, provide structure or sense of purpose, provide sense of belonging or acceptance, preserve a sense of competence or independence, maintain physical or mental health). Leisure provided an opportunity to connect with friends and family, and also to connect with others who might be experiencing similar life experiences.

Hutchinson et al. found support for Iwasaki and Mannell's (2000) coping strategies and for Kleiber et al.'s (2002) propositions of leisure being self-protective and self-restorative.

Leisure researchers have continued to explore the role leisure plays in coping with stress (Iwasaki & Schneider, 2003; Schneider & Iwasaki, 2003). Recent studies (e.g., Hutchinson et al., 2003; Kleiber et al., 2002; Loy, Dattilo, & Kleiber, 2003) have expanded the study of leisure coping to include people with disabilities or people dealing with major negative life events. Minimal attention, however, has been paid to how people who are homeless cope with stress or the role leisure might play in their coping.

### *Women Who Are Homeless and Coping*

Following the 1980s an extensive body of literature about homelessness emerged (e.g., Bates & Toro, 1999; Baum & Barnes, 1993; Breakey, 1997; Breakey & Fischer, 1990; Toro, 1999; Toro & Warren, 1999). Although women made up an increasing number of people who were homeless, there was consensus that women were underrepresented in the homeless literature (e.g., Burt & Cohen, 1989; Hagen, 1987; North & Smith, 1993), and the absence of women limited the generalization of the results or recommendations from the research (Roll, Toro, & Ortola, 1999). In the late 1980s, researchers began to study women who were homeless (Hagen, 1987) and to include women in research about homelessness (Burt & Cohen, 1989).

The literature notes that being homeless is stressful for people, especially for women (e.g., Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1995; Fogel, 1997; Goodman et al., 1991; Huttman & Redmond, 1992; Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995). Banyard and Graham-Bermann (1998) found that women who are homeless had high levels of stress and depression. Although the literature documents high levels of stress among people who are homeless, there is little research that has explored how women who are homeless cope with stress. Milburn and D'Ercole (1991) were some of the earliest scholars to look at this area when they applied their theoretical stress model to women who are homeless. They theorized that women who are homeless were exposed to persistent stressors, but more importantly that the women had strengths or social supports they could draw on to cope with stress. Based on Milburn and D'Ercole's theory, Banyard (1995) conducted a qualitative study of 64 mothers who lived in temporary emergency shelters. She found that the women used a variety of coping strategies, and further that the women often used more than one strategy to cope. Strategies that were utilized included: confronting the problem, getting social support, using activities to keep their mind off problems, thinking positively, getting distance from problems, letting feelings out, praying, and focusing on children or the future. At times children acted as a diversion or distraction to help the women stop thinking about their problems. Although leisure was not mentioned in Banyard's study, some of the identified coping strategies are similar to those mentioned in the leisure and coping literature.

Klitzing (2003) proposed that women who are homeless might face what has been identified as chronic stress. Chronic stress is conceptually different from stress caused by negative events, trauma, or daily hassles. These last three forms of stress are the ones most frequently discussed in the coping literature, and in the leisure and coping literature. Chronic stress does not necessarily start from a specific negative event. It can develop slowly over time, have a longer course than acute events, and may or may not be resolved. Wheaton (1997) defined chronic stress as "problems and issues that are so regular in the enactment of daily roles and activities or are defined by the nature of daily role enactments or activities, and so behave as if they are continuous for the individual" (p. 53). Therefore, chronic stress could come from a variety of areas, such as ongoing stress at work, trying for extended times to get a job with no luck, living with a long-term disability, or living in poverty. Gottlieb (1997) noted the goals of coping with chronic stress might be more connected to accommodation than stress termination.

Klitzing (2003) interviewed 10 women who lived in a transitional homeless shelter that housed women and children. She found that the women dealt with numerous, ongoing difficulties, and had done so for years before entering the shelter. After the women moved into the shelter, however, they continued to live with difficult situations. Klitzing concluded that the women indeed lived with chronic stress. The women were asked how they coped with the stress of being homeless. Themes that emerged included religiosity and positive thinking, problem solving, being alone, and being with others. The coping strategy that was used most frequently was being with others, be that their children, other women in the shelter, friends, family, or staff. This was similar to Banyard's (1995) findings. When the women were asked to describe how they relaxed, all of the women responded with activities that could be considered leisure. The women walked, read to children, listened to music, watched television, worked crossword puzzles, and so forth. Although these diversionary activities helped the women relax, they were not identified when the women discussed how they coped. Klitzing concluded,

*The women used a variety of methods to help them relax, with engaging in diversionary leisure activities as the most commonly utilized. The women, however, did not associate relaxing with coping. Since the women dealt with chronic stress, involvement in diversionary activities or other forms of relaxation may have provided brief moments of respite so the women could continue to cope. Diversionary leisure activities may be critical to helping the women cope with chronic stress, but are not recognized as coping strategies (p. 179).*

Klitzing (2003) indicated that additional research is needed to more fully understand how women who are homeless use leisure to cope with chronic stress. The data for that study were obtained primarily through single interviews with the women. Some of the interviews were relatively short, and many of the women seemed intimidated by being interviewed and having their interviews tape recorded. In addition, Klitzing discussed the difficulty of conducting follow-up interviews with a transient population. The present

study was designed to expand the literature on the stress experienced by women who are homeless, on how the women cope, and on the role leisure plays in their coping. Photo-elicitation was used to supplement interviews in an attempt to overcome the limitations of Klitzing's study.

### *Photo-elicitation*

Photo-elicitation is a method of visual research that was first described by Collier (1967). It can be helpful in understanding everyday events that might be difficult for some people to articulate. It can also be used to provide an inside look at people's worlds or reality. Photo-elicitation uses photographs to guide interviews and to stimulate discussions during those interviews. At times the research participants respond to existing photographs that might be in books or other areas of public domain (e.g., Newbury, 1996; Smith & Woodward, 1999). At other times, the participants react to photographs that the researcher produced (e.g., Collier, 1967; Suchar & Rotenberg, 1994). Finally, participants may discuss pictures that they took themselves (e.g., Cook, Swain, & French, 2001; Cunningham & Jones, 1996). Harper (1994) noted that when participants are actively involved in the process by taking their own photographs, the research becomes more collaborative.

Photo-elicitation has been used to study people who live in poverty. Van der Does, Edelaar, Gooskens, Liefing, and van Mierlo (1992) explored the perceptions of residents who lived in a poor quarter of The Netherlands. The public perception and media representation of the area was extremely negative. These researchers noted that the residents' views tended to be left out of both the media depictions of the neighborhood and other studies of the area. They decided to conduct their research from the view of those who live in the neighborhood. The photo-elicitation model used was a combination of several approaches or what the researchers called "customized." Van der Does et al. asked their informants to show the researchers places in the neighborhood that were important to them. Although the researchers ultimately took the pictures, the informants not only pointed out what pictures should be taken but also looked through the camera lens to determine the best angles for the pictures. On some occasions, the informants actually took the photographs themselves. The results of the study showed that the informants' view of the area was very different than what was previously reported in the media or research. Through an insider's perspective, the researchers were able to see the places where people walk, talk, relax, and play together. The insiders demonstrated the desirable qualities of the neighborhood, which had previously been missed. The researchers concluded, "photo-elicitation allows for an intensive examination of a social reality from the point of view of those who live there" (p. 4).

Van der Does et al. (1992) evaluated the photo-elicitation method utilized in their study. They indicated the informants enjoyed showing their world to an interested outsider. When the researchers returned after the

pictures were developed, they were welcomed by the informants, and the interaction between them flowed more readily. The researchers recounted,

*We found that photographs led to informal and cooperative relationships with our informants. Speaking about photographs, perhaps as a family does when looking over its album, encouraged a positive feeling which we all appreciated. Informants also seemed able to remember more from a photograph than they would have from memory alone (p. 63).*

The researchers noted they could easily encourage the informants to talk more in depth than if they were answering typical interview questions. There were, however, limitations to the method. For example, in some cases it was difficult to photograph an area or abstract concepts.

Bowling (2000) also used the photo-elicitation method to explore survival strategies of the "working poor." His study included seven women and four men who relied on public assistance. Bowling interviewed his participants before giving them disposable cameras with a list of suggestions of possible things to photograph. A second interview used the pictures the participants chose to share as a guide to the discussion. The results showed that the participants used various leisure contexts to mitigate daily life stressors. All of the participants were engaged in diversionary activities like playing computer games, playing with children, and reading that provided moments of respite from their stress. Some of the participants sought peace by being in natural environments. Social engagements, self-expression, and escape were also coping strategies used to decrease stress. Bowling (2001) stated,

*... the use of participant directed photo-elicitation presents opportunities to elicit detailed understandings of leisure experiences within the context of everyday living. It provides a method to move smoothly between concrete images and abstract understandings of the expressions represented in those images, and it opens a space for the voice of the participant to speak as a collaborator in the research project. Therefore, in the quest to understand leisure in the context of everyday life, the merits of photo-elicitation should be further explored in all areas of leisure research (p. 23).*

Although photo-elicitation could be a method to help understand the everyday experiences of people who are homeless, limited research exists. Hubbard (1991) completed a photographic project of the lives of children who were homeless. Hubbard taught the children to use a professional camera. The children were asked to take pictures inside the shelter where they lived or within one block of the shelter. It was noted the children took pictures that depicted life events Hubbard had not experienced himself, or even thought of before the project. The pictures showed the children experienced incredible trauma and violence. The pictures also showed the strengths of the children and their families. Pictures emerged that showed children playing, people talking, and adults "hamming it up" for the camera along side of pictures of gang signs or fights and drug deals. An insider perspective was obtained for Hubbard through the use of photo-elicitation, as it was for van der Does et al. (1992), and that perspective may be impossible for an outsider to see without the assistance of a guide who is living the experience.

Leisure researchers have examined the role of leisure in coping with stress for at least a decade. Leisure has been shown to help people who experience negative life events or have disabilities to cope and reduce stress or adapt to major life changes. Although women who are homeless are known to face numerous stressors, little is known on how leisure might assist the women cope with their stress. Just as studies using photo-elicitation methods have provided an insider's perspective into the lives of people who are poor or living in poverty, it may be possible to do the same for women who are homeless. The present study utilized traditional interviews and photo-elicitation to help obtain an insider's view of how women who are homeless cope with stress.

## Method

### *Theoretical Framework*

An interpretive paradigm was the basis for this research project. Feminist standpoint theory was used as the theoretical framework, and thus guided the process of designing and conducting the study, as well as the interpretation of the data. Feminist standpoint theory has its roots in the Marxian analysis of the conditions of the working class rather than the ruling class (Harding, 1991). For example, when the boss is asked about the safety of the factory he/she may cite the procedures that are designed to promote safety, whereas a worker may discuss how some of the machines are not maintained to standards and cause co-workers to be injured. It should be noted that knowledge generated from any standpoint is not the whole truth, rather it provides a look into differing perspectives (New, 1998).

Feminist standpoint theory evolved through the work of Collins (1991) and Stanley and Wise (1993) who highlighted how accepted mainstream knowledge was challenged when viewed from the standpoints of African American or lesbian women. Feminist standpoint theory, therefore, emphasizes that the everyday lives and experiences of women, especially women who have been oppressed or marginalized, should be the starting place for research. Often the voices of these women are absent from discourses about their lives, thus the knowledge of the topics explored is incomplete. In addition, starting from the standpoint of marginalized women enables the researcher to see what was previously invisible about the study participants and about dominant discussions, theories, or models (e.g., Frelke, 1999; Harding, 1991; Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1996; Swigonski, 1994).

Women who are homeless have primarily been absent in the leisure studies' literature. Leisure scholars seem to know little about women who are homeless, about the stresses they face, how the women cope with stress, and the role leisure plays in their coping. Although models and theories regarding stress, coping, and leisure have been developed, it is not known if these models or theories relate to women who are homeless. Thus the present study was designed to learn more about stress, coping, and leisure



from the standpoint of women who are homeless as expressed in their own words and in their photographs.

### *Setting*

The research project was conducted in a not-for-profit transitional homeless shelter. The shelter provides housing for women with children and "single women," defined by the shelter as women who do not have children, or women who do not have their children living in the shelter. The shelter is located in a Midwestern, university city in one of the states that experienced a growth in poverty during 2002. The women could live in the shelter for up to two years. Programs are available to help the women learn skills to become stably housed. Additionally, women are required to set goals, such as completing a degree, going to school, and so forth, and to follow an extensive set of rules to remain in the shelter. The shelter consists of two older houses that are side-by-side on the same city block. Women with children have private bedrooms, while up to five single women may share one bedroom. Each house also has communal living spaces. No more than a total of 32 women and children can live in the shelter at any given time.

### *Participants*

Criteria for involvement in the study were that the women must be over the age of 18 years, must have lived in the shelter for at least one week prior to the initial interview, and must be willing to talk with the researcher. When the study was initiated, 14 women lived in the shelter and all met the criteria. Two women declined involvement in the study. One woman was working numerous hours, attending outpatient treatment, and rarely in the shelter. The second woman was pregnant, often in the hospital, and was not taking her medication which caused her to be violent. Thus, 12 women started the study. After the study began, however, one woman left the shelter because her brother was murdered in another city, and she did not return to the shelter. Therefore, 11 women completed all components of the study.

The women involved in the study ranged in age from 20 to 38 years. Five of the women had children with them in the shelter, and six were single women. Of the women who had children with them in the shelter, the average was 2.2 children per mother, with the children ranging in age from 3 months to 13 years. The average age of the children was five years. Six of the women were African American, three were European American, one identified herself as African American and European American, and one stated she was Native American and European American. Eight of the women had disabilities (e.g., substance abuse, depression, bi-polar disorder, bulimia). Three of the women had been abused, either physically or sexually. Three of the women's children were in foster care, and two of the women had been in the foster care system themselves. The length of time in the

shelter at the first interview ranged from two weeks to two years, with an average of six months. Eight of the women had previously lived in a shelter. The women were similar to those in Klitzing's (2003) study in relation to age, number of children, and ethnicity. More women in the present study, however, had previously lived in a shelter, and more had disabilities. Pseudonyms were used in the present study to protect the women's confidentiality.

### *Procedures*

The study was conducted from June to September 2002. The author was a volunteer at the shelter during the study. The literature shows that volunteering in a shelter could increase rapport between the participants and the researcher. When a researcher volunteers in a shelter, he/she has the opportunity to interact and get to know the participants prior to initiation of a study. If the researcher is known, trusted, and liked by the participants, they are more likely to be involved in a study. If the researcher is not known or trusted, it is more likely the participants will refuse to assist with a study (Liebow, 1993; Toro et al., 1999). Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the shelter's director before the researcher began to volunteer. In order to establish rapport with the women, no official duties were assigned to the researcher, but she was in and out of the shelter talking with women, playing with children, interacting with staff, or reading the log where all staff write about each day's events. The researcher volunteered for one month before the study was explained to the women at two mandatory shelter meetings, and thus was well known by the women, the staff, and the children, and was familiar with life in the shelter prior to discussion of the project and solicitation of involvement by the women. During all phases of the study, the researcher maintained a research journal where observations and interactions were recorded. Journal entries assisted in providing context for the research data.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation. Informed consent was received from each woman who agreed to participate in the study. The researcher conducted all interviews, and the interviews were audiotaped with the women's permission. All interviews were conducted in various locations in the shelter, based on the women's choice. A semi-structured interview guide was constructed based on a review of the literature, and was utilized to assist with the first interviews. This study was based on the following questions: "Tell me about yourself. Describe your life at the [shelter]. Have you ever felt stressed?" Probes included "What causes your stress?" and "What helps you cope with stress?" During the interviews the women were treated as "conversational partners," which afforded them the opportunity to control the direction of the interview and allowed the researcher to customize probes to each participant. The interview was designed to feel like a conversation rather than an interview, as suggested by Rubin & Rubin (1995). Interviews ranged between 10 minutes and 1 hour 20 minutes, with the average time being 45 minutes.

At the conclusion of the first interview, each woman was given a disposable camera and a list of suggestions for possible pictures (what you enjoy, what is fun for you, how you relax, what helps you cope with stress), which was similar to the method used by Bowling (2000). After the women took all the pictures they chose to take, the researcher collected the cameras and had the pictures developed. A second interview was scheduled with the women to discuss their pictures. Most of the women approached the researcher to schedule this interview. During the second interview, each woman was asked to describe her pictures, including who was in the picture, where the picture was taken, and what was happening in the picture. Again the women were treated as conversational partners as they discussed their pictures. Each woman was also asked to discuss pictures that she took with the camera but were not developed, and to describe pictures she would like to have taken but was unable to do so due to the time limitations of the study or other restrictions. Finally each woman was asked to select pictures from those that were developed, not developed, or not taken that could depict what helped her cope the most with stress. This was done so that the woman was not limited to only selecting from pictures that were developed when those pictures may not have been important for coping.

A total of 231 photographs were developed, and 32 pictures were selected by the women to demonstrate what helped them cope with stress. The women selected a range of one to four pictures, with most choosing three pictures. The researcher, again with the women's permission, retained copies of all photographs. The second interviews where the photos were discussed ranged between 25 minutes and 1 hour 15 minutes, with the average time being 40 minutes. During the discussion of the pictures, the minimum interview was 15 minutes longer than the minimum initial interview. The two women who spoke the least during the first interview spoke an additional 20 minutes in the second interview. Three other women also had longer interviews when the pictures were discussed. The women who were the most talkative during the initial interview had shorter interviews when the pictures were discussed. The remainder of the women spoke the same amount of time for both interviews. When the women were asked what they thought about participating in the project, all of the women said they enjoyed it and had fun taking the pictures.

Since participation in research requires giving of one's time, it is a common procedure to thank people who are homeless for participating in a study. This is often done with a small amount of money or a gift (e.g., Banyard 1995; Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1995). At the conclusion of the second interview, the women were given copies of their pictures, a picture album, and a \$10 gift certificate from K-Mart.

### *Analysis*

Audiotapes of all interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber. The researcher read and reread all transcripts and journal notes to become intimately familiar with the data. According to Marshall and Ross-

man (1995) familiarity with responses is critical to the process of analyzing qualitative data. Data were analyzed by constant comparison (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data were coded and then compared to each other to make sure data in each code were similar. A second form of comparison was looking across codes to see similarities or differences, and to explore how themes related to one another (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). A second reader reviewed the data and critically questioned the researcher's analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

The first stage analysis of the photographs began when the participants viewed the pictures and provided explanations of the pictures (Prosser & Schwartz, 1998). The next stage of analysis occurred when the researcher closely reviewed the 32 pictures the participants selected to demonstrate how they coped with stress. Microanalysis was then completed by the researcher on each picture (Collier & Collier, 1986). Microanalysis requires careful examination of images by identifying major categories. A list of information to be recorded is delineated and used to analyze the pictures. For the present study, the following information was logged: who was in the picture, where the picture was taken, what activity was depicted, what information was similar to the verbal interviews, and what information was added to the verbal interviews. Making comparisons between all selected photographs allowed the researcher to derive patterns of responses and to see if the photographs related to the themes that had emerged from the interview data.

### *Trustworthiness*

Lincoln and Guba (1985) listed four constructs of trustworthiness that can be used to judge the quality of qualitative research. All of these constructs were addressed in the present study. Credibility, or how truthful the findings are, was addressed by explaining the role of the researcher, use of interviews, photo-elicitation methods, and researcher journal for data, and extensive use of quotes from participants and sample photographs to support the conclusions that were reached. Transferability, or how applicable the research findings are to another setting or group, was addressed by the use of thick descriptions and multiple respondents. A colleague, knowledgeable of qualitative methods, served as the second reader and provided a second opinion on data analysis. This was done to increase dependability, or how consistent and reproducible the findings are. The last construct of trustworthiness, confirmability, shows that data are factual. One way to establish confirmability is reporting the study in a published article that gives accessibility of the results to other scholars.

### Results

Various forms of stress and coping strategies, as well as the role leisure played in coping with stress, are described in this paper through the words and pictures of women who lived in a transitional homeless shelter. An anal-

ysis of the data revealed two major themes, experiencing stress and coping with stress. Three sub-themes of coping with stress, diversionary activities, getting away, and social support, demonstrate the strategies the women used to cope with their stress. At times leisure was the main intent of the strategy, while at other times it was the context for the strategy.

### *Experiencing Stress*

The first theme describes the stress experienced by the women. The majority indicated they had been stressed out almost all of their lives. For most of the women, the stress began early in their lives. They were physically and sexually abused or became wards of the state. These events affected the women when they were younger, and continue to affect their lives now. Tanisha, a 38-year old African American woman who had two children living with her in the shelter, explained,

*So they found in order for me to get my sobriety, which was only a couple of months clean before I came here, I needed to leave the home that I was in where the incest was going on. It started through my childhood, growing up. I've been self-medicating myself since about 18 from marijuana, to drinking. I graduated from that and I started to shooting cocaine.*

Most of the women also reported long standing relationship problems. They had problems with parents who were addicts, or did not know how to be good parents. They had partners who were controlling and abusive. Threats were made in regard to their lives and safety. They had children when they were in their teens, and were not ready for the responsibility of parenting. Over half of the women had disabilities, drug addictions, or health problems, and some women were previously suicidal. They also had repetitive problems that were created from the choices they made. Ramla, a 26-year old African American woman with a baby 3-months old and a 1-year old child who were in foster care, noted,

*My life has been stressed. I've had. . .and it's basically because of the wrong choices that I make. So I kind of bring stress on myself because most of it is with significant others. The first guy that I had was a real good man, and he was in jail for two years. So we were both on probation. And then he was an addict. He got clean and now he wants to get back with me, but when he wanted to get back with me. . .I got this other guy that I'm with now. And he's an addict.*

In addition to long term or chronic stress, most of the women felt stress at the present time from negative events in their lives. The women were trying to find jobs and housing, pay off old debts, and afford medications. They were trying to fight their addictions, obey probation requirements, or control health problems like asthma, high blood pressure, or sleep apnea. Kamali, a 29-year old African American woman who did not have children, explained,

*Right now I am on felony probation for possession of marijuana. I just found out this morning that I may be in violation of that because I was dropping dirty. . .smoking*

*marijuana. So I'm dealing with that right now. I have a lot heaped up on my plate. . . . I could stand to receive more probation time or I could go to the penitentiary. . . . But I was told by my P.O. that from here on out if I do well before I go to court, if my clean drops outweigh my dirty drops, I may have a chance. They might throw it out or they might tack on more probation or what have you. But it depends on what the judge has in mind.*

For some of the women, stress had to do with their children. Finding and keeping childcare was a concern. The women also discussed the stress of being a single mother or being pregnant. The stress increased when the children “acted out.” The women feared the Department of Children and Family Services might take their children away, or they worked to get their children back when custody was lost. Loss of custody led to constantly missing their children, scheduling parenting classes and supervised visits, depression, and the women feeling suicidal. Sharissa, a 29-year old African American woman who had a 5-year old and a 10-year old in foster care, noted: “I’m going through stress now. For me, stress is basically. . . I don’t know how to say it. Right now I think I go into stress about trying to get my kids back.”

The shelter itself also caused stress and daily hassles for most of the women. The women had problems living with other women, and at times dealing with staff. The women felt a loss of independence, and had problems complying with rules and curfews. Chores needed to be done, even if the women were too exhausted or were working. The women feared that one woman’s abusive partner might hurt her or them. Sharissa explained the stress associated with living in the shelter. She said,

*This place—it stresses me out with all the rules they have around here. They close the refrigerators down real early so you can’t get anything to eat or drink. They. . . you know it’s just real bad around here. Stress me out to the fullest. Me. . . I don’t like to be stressed out because when I get stressed out, everybody else is gonna get stressed out because I’m gonna stress you out. I don’t mind being here but I just don’t like this stress that I have here. It’s just hard to deal with a lot of the stuff around here. . . because it’s hard to deal with the people that’s around here.*

Similarly, Kamali indicated that some of the stress in the shelter comes from the other residents. She explained,

*It’s very stressful because you’re dealing with a lot of people and there are different attitudes, and you have some people that are very clean, and some people are lazy, and some people just don’t care. You’re dealing with people that are so early in their recovery where they may steal, lie, cheat, you know. And then you’re wondering. . . it’s even stressful when you leave from here and you could be at work and you’re wondering, “Did I put my purse under my bed? I hope I didn’t leave my money out.” “Did I put my CDs up? Is my music alright?” “I hope nobody didn’t take my pennies out of my drawer.” You know, your mind is constantly ticking with that.*

For some women, the stress of living in the shelter was connected to the children, and the varying ways mothers disciplined the children. Women who had children with them needed to constantly be with their children.

Women who did not have children had to deal with children “acting out” or being upset. For one woman, the children were a reminder that she did not have custody of her own children. Ramla said: “I see the little kids around here and it brings back memories for me. And I’m like, ‘I want mine!’”

Since a few of the women were dealing with addictions, the shelter and its geographic location created problems for maintaining sobriety. One woman noted the shelter was located in a neighborhood where she used to buy her drugs. When she walked to the bus stop, she ran into people who she used to “use with” or she saw people who used to sell her drugs. Tanisha talked about women coming into the shelter who were still using drugs, or were relapsing. Having other women around who were not far along in their recovery created stress as she attempted to maintain her own sobriety. She explained how maintaining sobriety was important to her well being and to remaining in the shelter, but situations in the shelter provided possible complications for her:

*Well, living in a shelter is not a easy thing to do because there’s people going and coming. And a lot of people now are on the same thing with drugs. Basically I’m one of those kinds of people and trying to maintain my sobriety and change my way of living and thinking also. I’m better, and they have different people to come in and out of here, and a lot of those people. . .you know there’s a chance and if you don’t follow the rule you could be thrown up out of here.*

Stress was very prevalent in the lives of all the women who participated in this study. The women faced a variety of different forms of stress. They faced stress that was long term, at times emanating from childhood or life long patterns. The women also experienced stress that was not historical, stress from negative events that recently happened to them and stress from the daily hassles of living in a shelter.

### *Coping with Stress*

The second theme emerging from the data outlined the strategies the women used to cope with stress. Although all of the women discussed reacting to stress in negative ways (e.g., snapping at people, loosing temper, yelling, screaming, committing violent acts, using drugs, attempting suicide), the women knew these behaviors only relieved pressure momentarily and were not helpful in the long run. The women also discussed more positive ways of coping, like going to church, taking medication, telling themselves things will get better, and trying to keep calm. The women knew that positive coping techniques led to decreasing stress and provided more long term relief. Three sub-themes were evident from the interviews and the pictures that demonstrated the strategies the women primarily used to cope with their stress. These sub-themes included: diversionary activities, getting away, and social support. Leisure activities were somewhat evident in each sub-theme.

The pictures, however, helped to demonstrate that leisure spaces also provided the context in which coping took place. Quotations from the interviews and pictures from those selected by the women to demonstrate how they cope are included in the paper. Pictures were also chosen to demonstrate when the pictures supplemented or clarified the words from the first interview.

*Diversionsary activities.* “Diversionsary activities” is the first sub-theme related to coping with stress. Most of the women used activities as distraction, diversion, respite, or breaks from their stress. When talking about using activities as a coping strategy, the women noted they often engaged in passive activities like journaling, listening to music, reading, or playing computer games. Elata, a 21-year old bi-racial woman whose 4-year son was in foster care, described how reading or listening to music helped her cope:

*When I read, it just takes my mind off of it and I don't think about it or anything else while I'm reading. When I listen to music, it relieves stress. When it's a pretty good CD, then I can get some kind of encouragement or motivation out of it.*

Cheryl, a 30-year old single woman, also discussed the use of passive activities as a way to cope with stress. Her three children live out of state with their grandmother. Cheryl spends most of her free time using the shelter's computer, as shown in the picture of her by the computer. She had a friend take the picture for her. In reference to the computer, Cheryl said, “It's the only place I can find canasta to play. I do spades.” Playing games on the computer was what helped take Cheryl's mind off her problems (see Figure 1).

The majority of the women used passive leisure activities to help them cope. A few women engaged in more active pursuits like walking or bowling. Some, like Tanisha, engaged in both active and passive leisure activities. She discussed the activities she used to cope:

*But it's always stress but it's just that if you choose to use it in a proper way or choose to get out of it. . .because sometime we find we can get out of it so there would be other things to get out of it. Like maybe go shopping or bowling or do your hair, put on some make-up, do your toenails, take a bubble bath.*

Diversionsary activities that helped the women cope with stress were both passive and active. Passive activities were used more frequently than ones that were active. Activities were primarily revealed through interviews rather than the photographs. Only three pictures were taken that showed activities, and the content of the pictures added little to the interview data.

*Getting away.* The second sub-theme was “getting away.” Many of the women spoke about getting away as a coping strategy. Getting away could be going on an “overnight,” going to another part of the shelter to be with others, or getting away in the shelter to be alone. An “overnight” is a privilege the women can earn by doing their chores and meeting their goals. When the women take an overnight, they are allowed to be away from the





Figure 1. Diversionary Activities to Cope with Stress Include Playing Computer Games.

shelter for one night without the risk of eviction. Kamali talked about using overnights as a means of coping during the first interview. Few details were provided about what she did on her overnights until she described the picture of herself and her friend in a car. Kamali laughed as she spoke about her friend and the importance of being with other people and doing activities when she got away from the shelter (see Figure 2). She said,

*So I've been walking around here lately with a lot of stuff pinned up inside me. Like I'm a bombshell. And that's when the overnights come in handy. . . I go to her place [friend's house]. She'll come by. She'll pick me up. We'll ride to [city]. We'll shop and we go to movies and we go to restaurants a lot.*

Some of the women did not take overnights away from the shelter. This was because they could not afford to be away from the shelter, had no place



Figure 2. Getting Away to Cope with Stress Includes Using an Overnight Privilege to Spend a Night Away from the Shelter.

to go, or lost their privileges to use an “overnight.” Their form of “getting away” was going to the porch where they could talk with the other women, smoke, laugh, or watch the world go by. Going to the porch allowed the women to be outside and momentarily distracted from life in the shelter and their stresses. Almost every nice day, groups of women could be seen sitting on the front porch of one or the other shelter houses. The porches were the most used areas of the houses. Women from both houses would gather together on one of the porches to get away from their stressors. The escape was primarily psychological. Ramla described getting away to the porch in words and in a picture of the women sitting on the porch (see Figure 3).

*But anyway when it's a nice day you'll see us sitting outside. We'll drag our stereo outside and that's where you see us sitting at. And we'll be outside and we'll watch the cars go by or just have our conversations instead of being up in the house all the time. Sometimes we feel like we be cooped up in here so much. And we may not want to go anywhere either so we'll just go outside and sit on the porch.*

Many of the women also got away by themselves to cope with their stress. Sometimes the women would go to their bedrooms and read or watch television. The main intent was to get away from stress, and a secondary action was engaging in a diversionary leisure activity. The activity was not described as something that helped them cope, unlike in the sub-theme “diversionary activities.” At other times, the women wanted to get away but they did not



Figure 3. Getting Away to Cope with Stress Includes Setting on the Front Porch of the Shelter.

want to interact with others or participate in activities. If they were with anyone during this time, it was with their own children. The women would go to their bedroom and just sit or sleep. They did not want noise, television, music, or conversation. This time alone would allow them not to react negatively to others, and to regroup so they could cope more positively. Tanisha talked about getting away as a form of “time out” even though when she went to her bedroom she was always accompanied by her young son, as shown in the picture (see Figure 4). She explained,

*We go and take a timeout and come back. I mean it's not like it's over with but it makes you smile and you feel better or just release a bit more stress. . . .Sometime it doesn't change but mentally I got. . .how would you say it. . . I got a little more. . .okay, if my tolerance was out, I got a little more tolerance.*

Getting away as a means of coping with stress took several forms. At times the women actually got away from the shelter, whereas at other times they got away from people by going to their bedrooms or to other areas like the basement that was not typically used by the women or staff. The women also got away from stress by sitting on the porch. Although socializing played a role on the porch, the intent seemed to be getting away from stress rather than seeking out people to assist with coping. Only three pictures were taken to depict “getting away.” Although the pictures themselves added little to the explanation of how the women got away, the conversations generated as



*Figure 4.* Getting Away to Cope with Stress Includes a Woman Going to her Bedroom to be Alone or with Her Child.

the women shared the pictures with the researcher helped to show that sometimes leisure provided a context for coping rather than serving primarily as a coping strategy.

*Social support.* The final sub-theme as to how the women coped with stress was the use of social supports. Unlike the previous sub-themes where people might have been involved, the primary coping strategy in this sub-theme was being with others. In the previous sub-themes, most of the data were obtained through the interviews, with few pictures adding new content to the interview data. In relation to this sub-theme, only seven women identified the use of social supports in their first interviews, whereas all the women depicted the importance of interacting with others as a coping strategy in their photographs and in their follow-up interviews. Not only did the pictures show who helped the women cope, but they also showed the role leisure played in coping. At times being with other people (e.g., children, friends, partners, other women in the shelter, staff, family) included engaging in leisure activities, while at other times it included interacting with the people in leisure spaces or environments. Being with others was the coping strategy, but leisure provided the context for being together. For example, Wanda, a 20-year old European American who had no children and was estranged from her family, indicated in her first interview that “forming a good relationship with my sister helps me cope.” From this response there

was no indication that leisure was involved. However one of the photos Wanda selected to demonstrate coping showed her and her sister in front of a theatre marquee (see Figure 5). Wanda was excited when she told the researcher about the picture:

*We go shopping and we go to the movies. We used to go bowling but she's almost due. She's due the 6<sup>th</sup> of this month, so can't go bowling anymore. We played Putt-Putt the day before yesterday. So yeah, I'm usually with her.*

In her first interview, Faun, a 21-year old African American woman who had three children living with her in the shelter, noted that playing with her children helped her cope with stress. This was supported by the picture she



*Figure 5.* Social Support to Cope with Stress Includes Being with Family Member in Leisure Activities.

took of her children in a park (see Figure 6). When describing the picture, Faun said,

*We always go to that park like on my day off. And normally on Thursdays I take the kids to the park and they'll play. It's one of our. . . I guess you call it quality time. . . Yeah, it is stressful being a parent but if we're out somewhere or we're having a good time and I'm playing with them or whatever, then it's like. . . I guess I relieve my stress.*

Sharissa did not discuss social support as a coping strategy in her first interview. When she moved into the shelter, her children came with her. Shortly thereafter, she lost custody of her children. While in the shelter, she formed a close relationship with Nealy, who was also a resident. Sharissa selected a picture of Nealy and Nealy's two children at a playground to explain what helped her cope with stress. Again a leisure space was the context that afforded the women an opportunity to be together (see Figure 7). Sharissa indicated she picked that picture because, "You know, just being around people, seeing that they are happy, too, just make me that way."

When it was not possible to talk to people in person, the women would use e-mail or telephone calls to interact. This form of social contact was particularly important for Lori, a 23-year old European woman who was pregnant and had two young children. Before she came to the shelter, she lived in an abusive relationship. One of the pictures she attempted to take, but



*Figure 6.* Social Support to Cope with Stress Includes a Woman Interacting with Her Children in Leisure Spaces like a Community Park.



Figure 7. Social Support to Cope with Stress Includes Being with Friends from the Shelter in Leisure Spaces.

that did not turn out clearly, was of a computer. Describing the picture, she noted,

*That's a picture of the computer in the house, here at the shelter. That's where I have a lot of friends I talk to. It's been a big part of my life, I think, for a couple of years. Even when I was living with my [abusive] ex. . .because I wasn't really allowed to have friends outside so I pretty much had friends on the computer.*

The initial interviews showed that the primary coping strategies of the women were “diversionary activities” and “getting away.” These strategies were not as evident in the photographs. When the photographs and the interview data were combined, “social support” became the most utilized

coping strategy. The pictures show the people who helped the women cope with stress, and the leisure activities and spaces that were the context for the interaction. The pictures also facilitated the dialogue that more fully flushed out this last sub-theme.

### Discussion

The literature consistently showed that being homeless was stressful for women (e.g., Banyard, 1995; Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1995; Fogel, 1997; Goodman et al., 1991; Huttman & Redmon, 1992; Klitzing, 2003; Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995). The study of how women who are homeless cope with stress has received minimal attention in the homeless (e.g., Banyard, 1995; Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1995, 1998) and the leisure literature (Klitzing, 2003). The present study sought to more fully understand the stress experienced by women who lived in a transitional homeless shelter, to explore how the women coped with their stress, and to identify the role leisure played in helping the women cope. Feminist standpoint theory guided the process of designing and conducting the study. This theory suggests that the everyday lives and experience of marginalized women, such as women who are homeless, should be the starting place for research so that the women's voices are present in discourses about their lives (Harding, 1991). Thus, the study sought to listen to the women who lived in the homeless shelter to hear how they experience and cope with stress. Photo-elicitation, or the use of pictures the women took with disposable cameras, added to the women's voices in providing insiders' perspectives on their lives.

One purpose of the present study was to more fully understand the stress women who are homeless and live in a transitional shelter face. Klitzing (2003) found that women who are homeless experience chronic stress, but the picture may be even more complicated. The results of the present study showed that the women faced a variety of different forms of stress. The women described dealing with chronic stress, negative life events, and daily hassles of living in the shelter. Feminist standpoint theory asks the researcher to see if the women's experiences match what is reported in the literature (Harding, 1991). In relation to the many forms of stress the women faced, the women's accounts do not match the literature. Most of the research or theories presented in the leisure and coping literature focus on one type of stress at a time such as coping with a negative life event (e.g., Kleiber et al., 2002; Iwasaki, 2003), daily hassles (Schuster, Hammitt, & Moore, 2003), or chronic stress (Klitzing, 2003). It may be that women who are homeless, as well as other people who exist on the margins of society, face multiple types of stress in their lives, and this complicated construct of stress has not been examined in the leisure and coping literature.

The present study also sought to explore how women who are homeless cope with their stress and the role leisure plays in coping. As noted previously, feminist standpoint theory asked the researcher to see if the women's experiences match what is reported in the literature (Harding, 1991). The



women utilized a variety of coping strategies, such as diversionary activities, getting away, and social support. Previous research identified the use of diversionary activities as a coping strategy (e.g., Banyard, 1995; Bowling, 2000; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000; Kleiber et al., 2002). The connection between leisure and using diversionary activities is obvious, as the engagement in active or passive leisure activities helps the person cope with stress (diversionary activity → cope with stress). Although other studies have also identified coping strategies similar to getting away (Bowling, 2000; Klitzing, 2003) and social support (e.g., Banyard, 1995; Bowling, 2000; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000; Klitzing, 2003), the present study suggests the connection between these strategies and leisure is less obvious than for diversionary activities. Leisure scholars note that leisure is the central component to coping strategies (e.g., Iwasaki, 2003; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000). For example, Iwasaki and Mannell indicated it is leisure that allows a person to be with friends, or it is spending leisure time with friends that help a person cope (leisure → social support → cope with stress). The results of the present study, however, suggest that women who are homeless use social support as a coping strategy and that leisure may or may not be a part of the strategy. In some cases leisure spaces or activities may provide the context for interacting with friends or family, but it is the social support that is the actual coping strategy (social support → [at times leisure spaces or activities] → cope with stress). Thus for women who are homeless, leisure can be a coping strategy as with diversionary activities, or leisure can be a context for social support or getting away that are the primary coping strategies. Leisure as a context for coping is a new addition to the leisure and coping literature, and could benefit from additional development.

The results of the present study also indicated that women who are homeless not only used coping strategies to deal with stress, but at times they would “react” to the stress rather than attempt to cope with it. At these times the women would yell, scream, attempt suicide, or use substances. The women stated that the outcomes to these reactions were primarily negative, and often added to their stress rather than decreasing or removing it. On the other hand, the women identified positive outcomes from using coping strategies. When the women would use these strategies they would get some respite or relief from the stress. Iwasaki (2003) identified that coping strategies led to immediate adaptational outcomes such as stress reduction which have a positive impact on physical and mental health. Therefore the use of positive coping strategies may have both immediate and long term benefits for the women. The examination of when and why people who are marginalized react versus attempt to cope has not been addressed in the literature.

Overall, the topic of women who are homeless has minimally been addressed in the leisure studies literature. Milburn and D’Ercole (1991) wrote that most articles about women who are homeless focus on the women’s problems or pathology. These scholars proposed that the women have strengths and are capable of responding to aversive pressures and stress. This theory was supported by Banyard (1995) and by the present study. The

women in the present study faced numerous and often extremely difficult situations, some of which were brought on by their own behaviors and choices, and some by societal structures that make it difficult for unskilled women to find jobs that provide a living wage, by the lack of adequate and available childcare for mothers who do work, by the lack of affordable housing, and even by a society that minimally punishes fathers or men who abuse women. The results of the present study showed that the women are strong and have multiple strengths. The women attempt to be good mothers and helpful friends. The women are creative and resourceful in day-to-day living and in coping with stress. The women are giving and willing to help a relative stranger begin to gain insights into their lives and to share those insights with a scholarly community. The women have learned to laugh and to survive.

Although many of the women have strengths, some could also benefit from programs designed to help them cope with their stress and life situations. Hood and Carruthers (2002) proposed a coping skills theory that could be used as a framework for therapeutic recreation services, and might be useful in designing programs for women who are homeless. These scholars noted that programs should focus on teaching skills to decrease negative demands of stress and to increase positive resources to respond to stress. The present study would suggest that it is also important to discuss all the various forms of stress women who are homeless might face, and the outcomes of reacting to stress compared to the outcomes of using more positive coping strategies. While it is important to help the women understand that leisure can be a coping strategy, it is also important to explain the role leisure spaces and activities can play in supporting interactions with family and friends. Assisting the women to identify their own strengths and to celebrate their resiliency will provide the opportunity for the women to see positive components of their lives rather than their weaknesses which are too often the focus of programs. Additional research is needed to design programs to assist women who are homeless positively cope with chronic stress, negative events, and daily hassles, and to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs.

### Research Implications

Bowling (2001) advocated using photo-elicitation as a method to gather detailed information on the everyday life of research participants. This study demonstrated the utility of doing so. Klitzing (2003) indicated the women in her study seemed intimidated by the interview process and that it was difficult to conduct follow-up interviews with women who lived in a transitional homeless shelter. However, in the present study obtaining follow-up interviews was not a problem. The women even approached the researcher to schedule their second interviews. It could be that waiting for their pictures to be developed and delivered encouraged the women to complete the study. Discussing the pictures during the second interview helped some of the women feel more comfortable talking with the researcher. Two of the women

in the study answered questions minimally in the first interview, but spoke significantly longer when discussing their pictures. The women seemed to enjoy sharing their pictures and insights with the researcher. Sometimes the pictures added content and context that was not obtained solely through interview questions. Sometimes it was not the pictures but the conversation that was generated while looking at the pictures that added content and context. Additionally, sharing the pictures made the research more collaborative as suggested by Bowling (2001) and Harper (1994). Van der Does et al. (1992) described similar benefits of the photo-elicitation method.

Although photo-elicitation added to the research project, the method was not without limitations. The time limit of the study may have restricted the ability of the women to take the pictures they wanted. Disposable cameras may have decreased the quality of the pictures and affected the ability to take pictures inside buildings, at night, or close up pictures of items. Pictures were taken that reflected all three primary coping strategies, but more pictures were taken of people and reflected the social support strategy. This could be because social support is the most used coping strategy, or because it is easier to take pictures of people than of more abstract things like listening to music. Van der Does et al. (1992) also noted that a limitation of their study was the difficulty of photographing areas and abstract concepts. Even with these limitations, photo-elicitation can positively assist researchers who seek to actively involve participants, including those who have been marginalized, with the research process and to make the process more enjoyable.

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