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Predicting Uptake of Housing Services: The Role of Self-Categorization in the Theory of Planned Behaviour

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The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) and self-categorization theory (SCT) were used to predict homeless people's ($n = 80$) uptake of housing support services. Homeless people's uptake behaviour was measured one year after a TPB/SCT-based interview schedule was administered. Congruent with previous research, TPB variables were influential predictors of both intention and behaviour. However, the addition of self-categorization variables, such as friendship group norms and identification as a housing support service user, significantly increased the rate prediction for both intention and behaviour, respectively. The implications of the research are firstly, that social cognition models are useful for understanding uptake of housing support services; and secondly, the addition of self-categorization variables aids in exploring the central role that social norms play in understanding the uptake of these services. These findings are discussed in terms of their impact on theory and practice.

The UK government spends, on average, £11.6 billion per annum on short-term accommodation to house homeless people (Shelter, 2001). In spite of this, recent estimates suggest there are still as many as 108,000 homeless people in the UK (Social Trends, 2001; Wilcox, 2000). The implication is that alternative—preferably long-term—methods of reducing the numbers of homeless are required to address the housing issue, as well as deal with social exclusion caused by homelessness (Pleace, 1998).

One alternative to providing short-term accommodation (often in the form of bed and breakfast accommodation) is to provide accommodation plus of housing support services (Fitzpatrick, Kemp & Klinker, 2000; Randell & Brown, 1996). Such programs are aimed at assisting homeless people acquire and maintain tenancies, as they progress into longer-term accommodation (i.e., self-contained flats) without support.

Unfortunately, the evidence about these programs is mixed because homeless people regularly discontinue their use of housing services within six months of initial program uptake (O'Callaghan, Dominian, Evans, Dix, Smith, Williams, & Zimmeck, 1996). Yet, clearly there is a need for support during the re-housing process (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000).

Thus, while many studies have examined *how* people become homeless (Blecher & DiBlasio, 1990; Jahiel, 1992), very little is known about what might motivate homeless people to make use of—and to persist in their use of—housing services, because housing advocacy organizations lack the resources necessary to explore the underlying basis for motivations of service use (Christian & Maio, 2001). Given the importance of these issues and the general absence of knowledge about uptake of services, we decided to explore these issues in South Wales. This region of the UK has one of the fastest growing levels of homelessness, and currently has a homeless population of 16,800. In sum, there is little research into the psychological variables that facilitate and inhibit the uptake of housing services: the aim of the present research is to redress this balance.

The Relevance of TPB to Study of Homelessness

Researchers have applied both the theory of reasoned action (TRA; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and theory of planned behaviour to the study of homelessness with some success (Christian & Abrams, 2003; Christian & Armitage, 2002; Wright, 1998). Of these studies Christian and Armitage (2002) and Christian and Abrams (2003) hold the most relevance for the present research. For example, Christian and Armitage (2002) explored the predictive utility of the TPB within the context of housing outreaches, or programs assisting homeless people to find accommodation. In contrast with much of the research into the TPB, Christian and Armitage (2002) found that the subjective norm component was the most influential predictor of behaviour, unmediated by intentions (Armitage & Conner, 2001).

More recently, Christian and Abrams (2003) replicated the Christian and Armitage (2002) study, and extended it to examine further normative variables and to explore outreach uptake among homeless people in the UK. In this context, the researchers were interested in the link between formal authority, perceived social targets, TPB and behaviour. Christian and Abrams (2002) found that—consistent with Christian and Armitage (2002)—behaviour was most strongly predicted by subjective norm, identification with support services, attitude to authority, and to a lesser extent, attitude toward using the outreach service. Moreover, in contrast with much of the social policy literature, Christian and Abrams (2003) demonstrated that there were no distinctive effects associated with gender, marital status or age. Rather, effects associated with these variables are fully mediated by the TPB and attitude to authority measures.

The present research was designed to both replicate and extend these findings, by further investigating the direct effect of norms on behaviour and examining a different type of service, namely housing support services. Housing support services aid the

homeless by providing support “in the community” either as they gain access to short-term housing, or once in short-term accommodation. More specifically, these services (1) facilitate housing tenancy process; (2) provide regular visits to individuals in order to ensure that their tenancies run smoothly; and (3) offer a central place where individuals can “drop in” and gain support for a variety of activities (prior to and during tenancies). The following section outlines the theoretical approach taken in the present paper.

Theory of Planned Behaviour and Social Identity

Social identity theory holds that behaviour is driven by the extent to which one identifies with one’s social group (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1990). In further understanding the concept of social identity as a motivational construct, researchers have combined social identity theory and the TPB. For example, Terry, Hogg, and White (1999) found that social identity exerted a direct effect on intention, and an indirect one on behaviour. Thus, the more one identifies with one’s social group, the more likely one is to intend to engage in that particular behaviour. However, intentions were stronger for those who did not identify with the referent group (i.e., friends) than those who did, suggesting that one’s uniqueness was more salient than one’s group identification. Interestingly, the study provides some evidence that self-definition and uniqueness affect the salience of norms for role specific behaviours.

This has also been made clear in other social identity and TPB studies. In the domain of turnover intentions Abrams, Ando, and Hinkle (1998) observed that organizational identification was a more powerful predictor than intentions, and that the effects of subjective norms varied depending on the cultural context. Taken together, these studies suggest there is potential for exploring the influence of individual and group based identification variables within the framework of the TPB.

Social Identity—Self-categorization and Relevance to Homelessness

The present research therefore considers two levels of identity: self-categorization as a service user and the effect of group (or friendship) norms on uptake of housing and support services. Briefly, it is possible that the more a person sees him or herself as belonging to a category of “homeless people that use services,” the more likely the individual will be to regard services as being self-relevant. Moreover, though these identifications may affect intention, it is also likely that they affect behaviour directly because identity-based causes of behaviour may not depend on the rational decision making process that underpin behaviour as conceptualized in the TPB (Charng, Piliavin, & Callero, 1988). Furthermore, it is plausible that self-identity (i.e., service user identity in this context) may actually be interlinked with social ideals about individualism. In such cases, self identity may reflect a wider held ideal about groups, in which case we would expect self-base social identity to be more predictive of behaviour than group identity on identity based behaviours (see Jetten, Postmes, & McAuliffe, 2002).

This distinction also finds support in the homelessness literature. For example, Snow and Anderson (1987), in a study of seventy-one homeless people explored social identity and homelessness from a sociological perspective. They found that homeless people engaged in social distancing, or frequently drew important distinctions between themselves and others. That is, they expressed a desire not to be associated with other homeless people or institutions that serve them. For example, the participants suggested that they were not in the same position as “other homeless people” (e.g., “see him, I’m not like him over there. I don’t do . . .”).

Similarly, Farrington and Robinson (1999) conducted unstructured interview with twenty-one homeless people from a sheltered accommodation service near Bristol (UK). The interviews were loosely guided by the theoretical postulates of Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). On the basis of their qualitative analysis, they concluded that the role of social identification, as a homeless person, as well as identification with particular sub-groups, diminished the longer a person was homeless. From the initial findings, however, it is unclear whether Farrington and Robinson tested the distinction between types of social identity—as a homeless person or with sub-groups (i.e., young homeless people) or whether the findings might have been the function of the length of time spent as “homeless.”

In both cases, however, the literature makes no attempt to understand *how* these issues might be internalized, or *what* may facilitate individuals’ efforts to use housing support services. In particular there is little analysis of the impact of personal and group relationships on individuals’ responses to seeking housing assistance, although there has been considerable inference about this (see Bates & Toro, 1999; Fitzpatrick, Kemp, & Klinker, 2000). From a theoretical perspective, such an analysis might explain why norms predict behaviour independently of behavioural intentions (cf. Christian & Abrams, 2003; Christian & Armitage, 2002).

The Present Research

The present study aims to investigate the utility of the TPB and social identity variables to predict homeless people’s use of housing support services. On the basis of our previous research, we expected that stronger subjective norms would result in higher uptake of housing and support services. Moreover, based on the research reviewed above, it seems likely that the impact of service user identity, and group identity on behaviour may depend on whether there are strong pressures from immediate significant others in a person’s social network.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 80 (Men=60, Women=20; Age =17–70, M=32.99, SD=11.45) homeless people taking part in housing and support services in South Wales, UK. Although this is almost a half percent of the total homeless population in Wales, it is representative. Of those participating, eight were selected from overnight sheltered

accommodation, twenty-five were from short-term flats or shared housing, fourteen were from drop-in centres, or "street outreaches," and thirty-three were from other longer-term housing service schemes (including supported youth schemes).

The majority (81 percent) of the sample received government benefits, and the participants were predominately: Caucasian (96 percent); males (75 percent); single persons (93 percent); previously taken part in housing support programs, other than the program interviewed at (43 percent); and reporting no educational achievement (85 percent) (see Anderson, 1994; Burrows, 1997; Fitzpatrick, Kemp, & Klinker, 2000).

Recruiting

Sampled from these services. Homeless people were recruited from sheltered accommodation facilities, and from locations on the streets. To do this, we used three strategies. Where possible we representatively sampled by names from daily registers. Also, letters were displayed in facilities explaining about the research project, and subsequently appointments were scheduled with individuals interested in taking part in the study. Finally, the researcher staff visited drop-in facilities and other accommodation locations approaching potential participants and asking if they would take part in the study. Time of day as well as day of the week were varied to ensure a more representative sample. Upon three occasions, key workers also accompanied the researcher, at the participant's request.

Measures

Pilot interviews were conducted with 16 (Men = 11, Women = 5) homeless people, and the resulting information was used to construct a structured interview questionnaire. The structured interview was based on the TPB and assessed the following variables. All items were coded using five-point response scales.

Behavioural intentions. Behavioural intention was measured using three items: "Do you intend to use a housing support program in the future?" "Are you likely to use a housing support program in the future?" "(The) chances are that you're likely to use a housing support program in the future," scored 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The mean of the three items was taken as a measure of intention with the high score indicating positive intention to use the support programme ($\alpha = .85$).

Attitude. Participants were presented with the statement: "Using a housing support programme in the future would be . . . important/unimportant; satisfying/unsatisfying; positive/negative; useful/useless," scored 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The mean of the four items was taken as a measure of attitude with the high score indicating a positive attitude towards the use of the housing support programme ($\alpha = .92$).

Subjective norm. Participants were asked if they felt that friends and social workers influenced their decision to participate in housing support programs. For example, "my

social worker thinks that I should use a housing support program in the future,” scored 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The mean of the two items was taken as a measure of subjective norms with the high score indicating greater influence from social referents towards support programme utilization ($\alpha = .86$).

Perceived behavioural control. Three items tapped perceived behavioural control: “It is easy for me to use a housing support programme in the future,” “Whether or not I use a housing support program in the future is entirely up to me,” and “I can easily use a housing support program in the future,” scored 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The mean of the three items was taken as a measure of perceived behavioural control with the high score indicating a greater degree of perceived control towards the use of the programme ($\alpha = .92$).

Friendship group norm (FGN). Two items measured group norms, “how many of your friends use housing support programmes?” and “most of my friends would consider my use of housing support programmes (in the future) desirable,” scored 1 (*none*) to 5 (*all*). The mean of the two items was taken as a measure of group norm with the high score indicating a greater influence of the normative component ($\alpha = .94$).

Friendship group identity (FGI). Participants were presented with the following two items, “how much do you identify with your mates,” and “how well do you feel that you fit in with them?” Items were scored 1 (*do not identify/ do not fit in*, respectively) to 5 (*completely identify/completely fit in*, respectively). The mean of the two items was taken as a measure of group identity with the high score indicating a greater degree of identity ($\alpha = .92$).

Service user social identity (SUSI). Three items were used to assess social identity: “using housing support programmes is an important part of who I am,” “I am not the type of person that is orientated toward using housing support programmes,” “It would be a loss if I were forced to give up using housing support program services.” Items were scored 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with the mean of the three items taken as a measure of social identity (the high score indicating a greater degree of identity drawn from the use of the support programme) ($\alpha = .72$).

Prior behaviour. A single item was used to measure prior behaviour, “Have you ever use a housing support program before?” The item was scored 1 (*never used before*) to 5 (*have utilized services on a continual basis*). Since prior behaviour was measured using a single item, no alpha coefficient was computed.

Behaviour measure. Respondents’ participation in a service programme was collected one year later. The data were coded as (1) no longer participating to (2) participation continued.

Procedure

All interview schedules were administered verbally and on a one to one basis to minimize the effects of illiteracy, and other factors likely to hinder rates of participation (Akilu, 1992; Christian & Armitage, 2002; Milburn, Watt, & Anderson, 1986; Toro & Wall, 1991). Participants were told at the beginning of the interview that all

their responses were confidential, and that they would not affect their future use of services. Interviews took on average forty-five minutes to one hour to complete. Participants' travel expenses were reimbursed, but they were not paid for their assistance.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analyses

Initial analysis screened for multivariate outliers and revealed four cases that were excluded from further analyses, leaving eighty cases in all. Sixty were male, twenty were single, and the mean age was thirty-three ($SD = 11.45$). The means, standard deviations and intercorrelations among variables are shown in Table 1. In general, participants had a favorable view towards using housing support services programmes. For example, mean scores on intention, attitude and perceived control were greater than 4 on 5-point scales. Table 1 also shows significant correlations among the TPB variables. For example, significant relationships were found between behaviour intentions, perceived behavioural control, self-identity, and group norms. Likewise, behaviour was significantly related to subjective norms.

Determinants of Intention

Hierarchical regression analysis was used to examine the predictors of participants' intentions to use housing support service programs. The variables were entered in four steps: (a) attitude and subjective norms; (b) perceived behavioural control; (c) prior behaviour; and (d) service user social identity, friendship group norm, and friendship group identity (See Table 2). In this way it was possible to assess the predictive utility of the TRA and TPB as well as the additional predictive utility of prior behaviour, and other identity variables under consideration.

The TRA was able to explain 21 percent of the variance in intentions $F(2, 73) = 1.90, p = \text{n.s.}$, with neither attitude nor subjective norms emerging as significant predictors. The addition of perceived behavioural control at step 2 increased the amount of variance explained by 17 percent ($F \text{ change} = 8.11, p < .01$). At step 2, perceived control was a significant predictor, while attitudes and subjective norms were not. The addition of prior behaviour at step 3 led to no further increment in the amount of variance explained ($F \text{ change} = .19, p = \text{n.s.}$). The addition of service user identity, friendship group norms, and friendship group identity at step 4 led to a further 10 percent increase in the amount of variance explained ($F \text{ change} = 2.62, p < .05$). In the final regression equation perceived behavioural control and friendship group identity emerged as significant predictors explaining 48 percent of the variance in intentions $F(7, 66) = 2.90, p < .01$.

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations

| Variable | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|------------------------------|-------------|-----------|----|------|------|-------|-------|-------|------|-------|-------|
| 2. Behaviour | 0.61 | 0.49 | -- | .27* | .19 | .23* | .19 | .28* | -.07 | .04 | -.04 |
| 3. Intention | 4.55 | 0.97 | | -- | -.15 | .45** | .12 | .38** | .00 | .24* | .10 |
| 4. SN | 3.39 | 1.98 | | | -- | -.03 | .02 | -.20 | .08 | .11 | .00 |
| 5. PBC | 4.45 | 0.93 | | | | -- | .38** | .34** | .10 | .03 | .21 |
| 6. Attitude | 4.37 | 0.96 | | | | | -- | .19 | -.07 | -.06 | .21 |
| 7. Service User Identity | 2.84 | 0.90 | | | | | | -- | .14 | .37** | .12 |
| 8. Friendship Group Identity | 2.53 | 1.37 | | | | | | | -- | .50** | -.27* |
| 9. Friendship Group Norm | 2.33 | 1.04 | | | | | | | | -- | .21 |
| 10. Prior Behaviour | 1.46 | 0.50 | | | | | | | | | -- |

Note. *
 $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

TABLE 2
Standardized coefficients from hierarchical regression analysis
predicting behavioural intentions

| Predictor | Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 | Step 4 |
|-------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Attitude | 0.20 | 0.05 | 0.04 | 0.01 |
| Subjective Norm | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.03 | 0.10 |
| Perceived Behavioural Control | | 0.35** | 0.34** | 0.33** |
| Prior Behaviour | | | 0.05 | 0.00 |
| Service User Identity | | | | 0.16 |
| Friendship Group Norms | | | | 0.30* |
| Friendship Group Identity | | | | 0.22 |

TABLE 3
Logistic regression analyses predicting behaviour

| Predictor | Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 | Step 4 | Step 5 |
|-------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Behavioural Intention | 2.49** | 2.42** | 2.41** | 2.42** | 2.22** |
| Perceived Behavioural Control | | 1.21 | 1.03 | 1.07 | 1.17 |
| Attitude | | | 1.40 | 1.40 | 1.25 |
| Subjective Norm | | | 1.22 | 1.22 | 1.35 |
| Prior Behaviour | | | 0.27 | 0.75 | 0.49 |
| Service User Identity | | | | | 2.24* |
| Friendship Group Norm | | | | | 0.90 |
| Friendship Group Identity | | | | | 0.83 |

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Determinants of Behaviour

Behaviour was coded using a binary scale, so a hierarchical logistic regression analyses was used to test whether TPB and social identity variables predicted participation. Variables were entered in five steps: (a) behavioural intention; (b) perceived behavioural control; (c) attitude and subjective norms; (d) prior behaviour; (e) social identity, group norms, and group identity (See Table 3).

Behavioural intentions accounted for the equivalent of 14 percent of the variance in behaviour at step 1, $\chi^2(1,79) = 13.53$, $p < .001$. However, perceived behavioural control, at step two, and attitude and subjective norms, entered at step three, explained an additional 4 percent of the equivalent variance in uptake (perceived control: $\chi^2(1,79) = 0.32$, $p = \text{n.s.}$; and attitudes and subjective norms: $\chi^2(1,79) = 2.56$, $p = \text{n.s.}$, respectively). Prior behaviour, entered at step four, did not significantly account for any additional equivalent variance, $\chi^2(1,79) = 0.23$, $p = \text{n.s.}$ However, identity variables (service user identity, group identity and group norms) contributed 5 percent to the overall equivalent variance in behaviour, $\chi^2(1,79) = 4.51$, $p = \text{n.s.}$ Although the step was not significant, service user identity emerged as a significant influence on behaviour.

In the final regression equation, behavioural intentions and service user identity emerged as significant predictors of housing support use one year after completing the interview. However, attitudes and perceived behavioural control were not significantly related to participant's behaviour.¹

DISCUSSION

The present paper tested the applicability of the TPB and variables from social identity theory to predict use of housing support services. The results offer support for the TPB: As predicted, behavioural intention remained a significant predictor of behaviour, even when a range of variables from social identity theory were statistically controlled for. More importantly, behavioural intentions better predicted behaviour than did prior behaviour, providing further support for the sufficiency of the TPB (Ajzen, 1991). In contrast with our prior research (see Christian & Abrams, 2003; Christian & Armitage, 2002), subjective norm was not directly related to behaviour, although service user identity was. The following discussion focuses on the implications for theory and practice.

Theoretical Implications

Ajzen (1991) regards the inclusion of prior behaviour within the TPB as a test of its sufficiency. In this respect, the model passed with flying colors: past behaviour was not the best predictor of future behaviour (see Sutton, 1994). However, in keeping with Ajzen's (1991) argument that the TPB is "... open to the inclusion of additional predictors if it can be shown that they capture a significant proportion of the variance in intention or behaviour after the theory's current variables have been taken into account" (p. 199), the present research showed an independent effect of identity on behaviour. Interestingly, the effect of identity persisted over the period of a year, implying that people's identities may have been temporally stable. Charng et al. (1988) have shown that, although attitudes and subjective norms are important in initiating behaviour, over time, they become less important because people's self-identity concerns come to the fore. In other words, although attitudes, and norms are important determinants of behaviour, at some point the need to maintain one's self-concept (e.g., as a blood donor in the case of Charng et al., 1988) outweighs the impact of attitudes and subjective norms. A similar pattern of findings is shown in the present study. Future work might usefully examine the relationship between identity stability and past behaviour in order to further understanding between habit and self-identity (Conner, Sheeran, Norman, & Armitage, 2000).

Contrary to what might be predicted by social identity theory, neither friendship group identity nor friendship group norm were predictive of behaviour. This raises two possible explanations that are worthy of further research. First, it is possible that normative identification might be with housing support workers and not with friends or others in informal support networks. In other words, there may be a hierarchy of identifications in which support workers are ranked above friends. The second possibility is that friendship groups are less stable than support worker groups and are therefore easier to identify with. It would therefore be interesting to utilize social network analysis to investigate shifts in friendship patterns.

Implications for Homelessness Literature

While interesting, much of the literature on homelessness actually describes initial causes of homelessness, i.e., leaving home, domestic violence, etc. The literature makes no attempt to understand *how* these issues might be internalized, how homelessness is perpetuated, and what may facilitate individuals' efforts to find a home. In particular there is little analysis of the impact of personal and group relationships on individuals' responses to homelessness. The present and related research (see Christian & Abrams, 2003; Christian & Armitage, 2002; Christian & Maio, 2001) provides some of the earliest systematic research into these questions, and further insights are likely to be produced from ongoing research into social stigma, attitudes to authority and social rank theory.

CONCLUSIONS AND CAVEATS

In conclusion, the present research provides the first concrete step towards looking at the motivations for entering and sustaining participation in housing support programmes. For those who create and monitor such services, it is vital to understand the effects of homeless people's motivations. By assessing homeless people's use of such programmes, this research provides a new avenue for understanding homeless clients' motivations, and can also potentially answer questions about the most effective means for providing assistance. The research found that housing support agencies must pay more attention to homeless people's service user identity and intentions as a means for increasing housing uptake—especially in the long-term.

NOTES

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Additionally, we also explored the moderating impact of service user identity—briefly we tested whether for individuals with high service user identity, attitudes and perceived behavioural control might be stronger predictors of intention, but for individuals with low service user identity, subjective norms might be more relevant. Moderated regression analyses suggest that service user identity moderates the impact of perceived behavioural control on intention, but not on uptake behaviour (p 's > .05). Also, subsequent analysis shows that there is no moderating effect for service user identity on attitude.

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