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DO YOU SEE ME? ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF THE HOMELESS

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Abstract

In city parks, people who are homeless are often seen with backpacks and bags sitting on benches or sleeping there. Society may view the homeless as troublesome or not see them at all. Researchers identify issues that should be explored, but recognize that the homeless are a fragile population and proceed with care. People who are homeless can be at risk for exploitation, because the person, who is hungry or cold, may be willing to exchange personal dignity for food or shelter. This is an exploration of the awakening and enlightenment that occurs when the researcher truly sees the homeless, not just as research participants, but as humans. As the researcher is allowed inside, the research purpose may fade and become insignificant as the plethora of problems for the homeless come into focus. Those who were invisible become brilliantly visible while the hue of the researcher's work fades in comparison. The researcher will face the human suffering that presents. In the end, it is the researcher who learns. The telling of this unveiling is interlaced with a story from a man who is homeless in New Orleans, Louisiana. As the researcher attempted to get inside the culture to prepare for research, the invisible became visible. Getting into the community means learning and understanding the plight of the people; sometimes, that experience is shocking.

Keywords: Homeless, Research Participants, Ethics, Homelessness

Do You See Me? Ethical Considerations of the Homeless

The homeless are often seen around city parks, on highways, or under bridges. In big cities, the homeless gather for safety or sleep during the day time to avoid harm. In an attempt to discover new knowledge, a researcher may enter the culture with a planned research project in order to explore a research problem. At times, it is the researcher who learns and the homeless who teach as the invisible become visible. This is an exploration of such an experience that occurred as the research project was being prepared. A homeless man in New Orleans, Louisiana, opened the eyes of the researcher. The research purpose began to fade as human frailty came into sight.

The Inequality in Life and Death

Our society focuses on the event of death. It is believed important to alleviate suffering and to promote a pleasant death. There is extensive education available to teach ways to care for those at the end of their life. As soon as the impending death is known, caregivers begin planning the place, the medications, and the support. The underlying thought is to alleviate as much suffering as possible. With the homeless, there is daily suffering in survival against the elements. What happens when death is near for the homeless? The person who is homeless is basically alone, without family. It is an amazing thought that one dying person is provided such care while another person may die alone on a park bench without so much as a gentle touch. The homeless often are without support and family (Song, Ratner, & Bartels, 2005).

If then, society does not want to allow the person who is dying to suffer, should not the same benefit be awarded to the person who is alive, sometimes suffering, and homeless? Song, Ratner, & Bartels (2005) point out that the homeless do not have access to care in some

situations, but have extreme living situations filled with dangers. Food, safety, and shelter are the daily concerns for the person who is homeless. Concerns of death due to violence are common; death is not thought of as a result of illness. Death is always with the homeless, a part of life. People who are homeless voice a feeling of being shunned by the community. And the homeless wonder what will happen to their body after death, and will anyone even respect it.

> *He lay on a shaded bench on the edge of Jackson Square. The wind stirred the branches over him. With the early morning rain, it was cool in the park. His hand supported his head keeping it from the hard wood. Next to him was a faded blue backpack; an army coat covered his thin body. No one seemed to notice him as they scurried by talking and laughing. He was invisible. He slept peacefully, seemingly free of the encumbrances of life, unworried, and unhurried.*

An Obligation to Care

America has become anesthetized to the person who is homeless (Mangano, 2002). The person is indeed invisible to the public. Mangano, the Federal Homeless Czar, said homelessness should be abolished; it is a "violation of human dignity" (para. 10). Mangano said homelessness does not follow the spiritual ideal. Those who are homeless should be fed and clothed. He recalls the writing of Simone Weil, a woman who lived in France and wrote about the obligations of the public. She believed anyone who was an elected official had the responsibility to promote caring for the homeless; it should be a top priority.

If, as some believe, it is the moral and ethical thing to do, to care for the poor, where is the outcry as cities create laws against feeding the poor in parks? It is illegal to hand food to the poor in the park in Las Vegas. The homeless are not all identical in need and condition; some homeless are mentally disturbed and some have recently lost work and have been thrown into the

situation. By one law, the entire populations of people who are homeless have been affected regardless of the reason for their situation (Institute for Global Ethics, 2006).

Is living on the street a crime? Does a person have a right to be homeless? Being homeless is a complex issue. If a family is homeless, is it the right thing to do to report the situation to protect the children? Kellenberg (2012) said, not so fast. "One significant legal and ethical issue facing homeless shelters is whether child services should be notified of homeless families with children" (para. 1). Child services may remove the child from the family and place the child in foster care or an institution. Which is better, homeless with family or institutionalized? When something happens to the homeless, who provides legal counsel to help resolve the situation, and is it sufficient and accessible?

> *He was so still except for his slow rhythmic breathing. It was cool out, and his chest was protected by his arms that were wound around him. From the shaded gate, I stood under the tree looking at him; he was one of the many homeless in New Orleans. He was not really invisible, but unseen and unnoticed, even avoided. Would I have noticed him last year? At the end of the long bench, where he slept, I sat down a few feet from his head. Suddenly, he opened his eyes and tilted his oval face toward me. I asked if I was bothering him, sitting on the bench. He replied, no, it was nice to have someone sit by him, he said. He sat up and stretched, then looked at me. Finally, after a minute or two, I asked how he was doing. He looked over at me again and replied, fine. Small talk ensued. He talked about the cold and the rain. He told me he usually slept there in the daytime where people were about, because it was too dangerous to sleep at night; you had to be watchful at night. People don't usually talk to me, he said, why are you? Suspicious, I thought, but I did not blame him. I told him I just couldn't pass him by without speaking,*

and that I was preparing for a research study later on in the year. A research study about homeless people? he asked. Yes, I replied.

Describing and Counting the Homeless

The number of actual people who are homeless is difficult to ascertain. The National Coalition for the Homeless estimated in the past year that 3.5 million people experienced homelessness (2012). Each night in the United States, around 730,000 are homeless. Most counts are accomplished at shelters, but many homeless do not frequent shelters. Many people who are homeless are able to find a place to wash and dress, and are really not noted as homeless, but they are homeless. They represent the invisible homeless (Public Broadcasting System, 2002, April 5).

There are many people who are called homeless. Some stay with others, some frequent park benches, some stay in shelters or cars. Homeless might mean living on trains, in the woods, or behind a store. Because of this, it is difficult to count the number of people who are homeless on any given night. Some counts are done during a brief period at shelters; therefore, those who are out in the elements are not included. Those who are homeless are sometimes classified as sheltered or unsheltered. Sheltered means the person is living in a temporary place, or is waiting to be placed in a permanent place. Unsheltered means the person is living in a place, like the city park or is sleeping in a vacant building (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Community Planning and Development, 2010).

According to United States Housing and Urban Development (HUD) (2010), the homeless using shelters are mostly male (62%). Anyone, regardless of their age, race, or gender, can become homeless. Approximately, 1.59 million people used a shelter for the homeless

between 2009 and 2010. Mental illness is present in 26.2% of the homeless; 34.7% suffer with chemical dependency issues.

> *He asked if I would come back and interview him when the project started. You can always find me right here, right here on this bench, he said. Behind him, in the blooming salmon colored azalea bushes, two bare feet were sticking out from the shrubs and a slight snoring was heard. I switched my gaze to the man on the ground. He followed my eyes and said he drank all night; he's just sleeping it off.*

Who Reaps Research Benefits?

The personal contact made with this person who is homeless was initiated because of an upcoming qualitative research project. During this time, the researcher was learning the area and the culture. This seeing of the person might not have occurred if the researcher was not learning the culture. It is important to ask if any research, but especially this piece, will benefit the people that are being studied and not solely the researcher. Researchers benefit from publications, tenure and promotion from publications, by speaking engagements and travel to other places to present the research, and by a fame of sorts as the researcher becomes the sought after expert.

The researcher must also consider the effect on the person being studied. Is this an attempt to socially control the homeless by discovering remedies of the situation through research? Does the person who is homeless want to be rescued? This person who was homeless had no door to close on a researcher and no control of his surroundings except to walk away. Does the researcher have a power over those being researched? And then again, the homeless may have concerns about information collected but bow down to the officials and researchers (Firdion, Marpsat, & Bozon, 2005).

Is research truly giving a voice to those who do not have a voice? A research group called CUHP (Constructing Understanding of the Homeless Population) (2012) is collecting information about research with the homeless. They espouse that collection of life views and statistics may bring about improved care for the homeless. People who are homeless are left out of society, ignore, invisible, and that demonstrates vulnerability in itself. Meade and Slesnick (2002) considered the ethical issues when doing research with homeless youth. The youth are often without parental guidance. Adults and children alike may be mentally ill and unable to fully consent to the research. Even though a person consents to the research, how might the researcher know if the person is cognitively able to participate? Is the homeless person fearful of the researcher or paranoid about the reason? Does the illness make the person paranoid?

Environmental problems exist for the person who is sheltered or unsheltered; do these problems affect consent? Although Meade and Slesnick were studying youth, might these questions apply to adults? Munetz, Galon, & Frese (2002) wrote about mandatory community treatment for the mentally ill. Many people who are homeless suffer from mental illness. They argue there are people who are seriously mentally ill and who deny they need treatment. When the illness deteriorates, the person needs commitment and subsequently will be treated. After release back on the street, the medications may not be taken, and the cycle begins again. Through interviews, if the person is found to be deteriorating mentally, does it ethically violate the person's rights to report the person for the person's own protection? This reporting may cause commitment to an institution for the person.

The Frailty Comes Into View

It is with much concern that researchers face the homeless. The disadvantaged are vulnerable. Beauchamp, Jennings, Kinney, and Levine (2002) found many homeless have

specific personality issues and insufficient coping mechanisms that put them at risk. There are addiction problems, abuse histories, mental illness, a lack of power, and a hopelessness at times that makes the homeless vulnerable. “Homeless persons thus may be forced to make tradeoffs among their interests that more advantaged persons need not make” (p. 550). Some researchers offer money for participation. For the person who is hungry, the researcher has an unfair advantage, and the researcher is a figure of “authority, unequal power and knowledge” (p. 550). It is well known that the disadvantaged are sought as laborers for cheap pay. Does the disadvantage create exploitation? At the same time, is pay for research a reason to ignore the homeless as participants who could benefit from the gain of money? Does inclusion in research remedy the invisible issue and allow the person to feel helpful to society?

People who are homeless often present to institutions for care; usually the emergency room. Reasons to seek care commonly include tuberculosis, mental illness, addiction, and abuse, along with other health problems (Faragher, Hayes, Hayes, 2007).

> *He began to talk about the gas station down the street where he could actually bathe. The waiters in the restaurant on the corner, the one with the blinking neon sign, hand him food out the back door. He told about the soup kitchen that is crowded and not so tasty, but better than nothing. The travel there was dangerous by foot. He knew about all the places he frequented sometimes. But his preference was to have a cup of coffee and beignets from the famous café across the street, and if he could get six dollars, that was enough for dinner. Some days, he was very lucky. Right here on this little square, he said, there are restaurants, a bathroom, and waiter friends. He preferred to sleep on the bench in broad daylight where he was safe. Here, he was invisible. At night, he hid in the bushes. A smile broke across his face, and I looked at him closely. Last night, a*

policeman came up and tapped my foot. I was sleeping right over there. He said he didn't want to arrest me, but since I was on the camera, he had to tell me to move on. Try and not get near the cameras where people can see, I should have told you to move. Kindness, from a policeman, he said.

Caring has Facets

Outside a church in New York, the police did come and ask the homeless to leave. In cardboard boxes, huddled for warmth, having found a safe place to sleep, the homeless had settled in for the night. The church pastor did not mind. Reverend Tewell, the Church Pastor, said the police came and woke up the homeless. He referred to it as harassment. The church sued the city and was successful in their quest to keep the homeless at their door. The homeless said the shelters were dangerous, and it was safer near the church (Public Broadcasting System, 2002, March 29). Esthetics had lost to safety and human caring as the homeless are criminalized, but there was an appeal to reverse the ruling.

Mangano (Public Broadcasting Service, 2002, April 5), the homeless Czar for the United States, said churches should have the right to allow people who are homeless to stay inside and outside the church. Many homeless are afraid to enter the shelters that are provided for them. Not only are they afraid of assault, but people with mental illness may be afraid of the confinement.

He used most of the facilities that provide for the homeless in New Orleans. A story unfolded about a back injury that caused him to lose his job. He was terminated from employment, because he had been drinking that day. Without insurance or a job, he was unable to have the surgery he needed, and his fractured vertebras had not healed. He had found God at the shelter and now believed he was under his care. He pulled the bright green Bible from his backpack and showed me. What will happen-will happen, he said.

He exhibited a gentle spirit at peace with the world and his life. He could not stay on the bench forever. It would become more and more difficult to tolerate as he aged. A cough arose that almost strangled him. He was not well.

Abbarno presented to the newspaper an article that detailed an opportunity for the city to assist the homeless. The suggestion was for the city to build a town for the homeless on some donated land. The homeless could make their own rules, run their own town, and live there peacefully. Lots of land would be given away by lottery. His article was returned unpublished. The editor rejected the piece. Abbarno believed this did not come to fruition, because the homeless did not donate money to the political funds and did not vote. The powerful had little interest in the project, as it did not benefit them. Tindner (2002), in a comment about the perspective, wrote that the editor denied to perspective publication, because the wealthy ignored the situation.

Conclusion

This was an exploration of what a researcher learned from a homeless person. The research problem and purpose faded as the researcher was faced with the truth about the daily struggles of the homeless. As the researcher talked and explained the future project, the tables turned. The homeless gentleman began to ask questions. The one that stuck out like jagged glass was his inquiry as to why the researcher stopped to sit by him. Honestly, the researcher replied, he touched the researcher's heart. He smiled.

Most people, he continued, do not see me. They pass me by like I don't exist. Invisible, that's what I am, he said.

And that jolted the researcher, because the researcher remembered not seeing either only a few years ago. Perhaps, it is fear that causes some to not see, or a feeling of helplessness that

causes people to walk by without stopping. The sun was out then, peaking through the oak branches. Steam rose from the streets, and the horse draw carriages pulled up to the curb. As the researcher studied the horses and mules, the homeless man studied the researcher. Finally, he broke the silence. Timidly, he started to speak.

> *Whatever caused you to stop today, to really look at me and ask me how I was doing, don't lose that, whatever it was. See me, and see us all out here in the cold and heat. He stood and gathered his backpack and coat. If you are here when I return, I will stop again if you do not mind. A smile lit his face, and he reassured me that would be wonderful. He extended his hand and shook mine with gentleness.*

With that simple gesture, the meeting was over. He walked away fully visible to anyone wanting to see. And people nodded and spoke to me as they passed, and the rain fell upon the bench gently. Apparently, I was not invisible. Without the research preparation, the getting into the community, he would still be unseen. The visit with the man who was homeless suddenly became much more than the exploration of the research environment. An awareness of the invisibility of the homeless had come forth. Suddenly, the researcher was aware and saw for the first time the trials of the homeless.

Do You See Me?

It's cold and raining, and the voices are with me,

I have no medicine to quiet them.

A cough takes my breath as the newspapers melt around my body, damp.

The soup from the shelter is long gone within my belly,

and you had no change; I have no supper.

I am invisible, acrylic, glass; I do not exist to you.

If you have no change, a smile will do.

Rest your eyes on me, if only for a second.

Show me I am real, human, someone,

anyone, for I am alone.

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