CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Discourse Analysis on the Portrayal of Homelessness

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to SAMOSHEL, a project of Ocean Park Community Center, who has fostered compassion toward the homeless community of Santa Monica. I am grateful for the stories this community has shared with me, as they have taught me there is more to being homeless than what is seen on the streets and on the media.
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Abstract

Discourse Analysis on the Portrayal of Homelessness

By
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Master of Social Work

The purpose of this project is to utilize discourse analysis to uncover stigma portrayed around homelessness in different sources such as media, policy and public information. The questions that guided this research include: 1) How is homelessness portrayed in media outlets, written policy and public information? 2) How is stigma perpetuated through media, written policy and public information when addressing homelessness? and 3) What are the stereotypes portrayed about homelessness/the
homeless population? Critical Race Theory was used in order to examine the discourse in
different sources to promote social justice and advocacy toward the social issue of
homelessness. Data was gathered through the use of existing materials in the form of
newspaper articles, media coverage on homelessness, reports by the National Coalition
for the Homeless Report and information on the McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance
Act. Through looking at the language used in these different sources, it was found that
the information is delivered in a stigmatizing manner. Three specific themes were
identified: *dehumanizing language, responses to homelessness and homelessness as
contamination of living space.*
Introduction

This research will analyze the language used in different media outlets, written policy and public information to portray homelessness. Through a discourse analysis, the stigma behind different language used to talk about the homeless population will be exposed and questioned with regard to how the language adds to the marginalization of people that are not housed. This will advance social justice in revealing specific language found in media outlets, written policy and public information language to address homelessness.

The three research questions that will gear the direction of this discourse analysis are: 1) How is homelessness portrayed in media outlets, written policy and public information? 2) How is stigma perpetuated through media, written policy and public information when addressing homelessness? and 3) What are the stereotypes portrayed about homelessness/the homeless population? To address these research questions, Critical Race Theory will be the interpretive framework used:

At its core, CRT is committed to advocating for justice for people who find themselves occupying positions on the margins – for those who hold ‘minority’ status. It directs attention to the ways in which structural arrangements inhibit and disadvantage some more than others in our society. It spotlights the form and function of dispossession, disenfranchisement, and discrimination across a range of social institutions, and then seeks to give voice to those who are victimized and displaced. CRT, therefore, seeks not only to name, but to be a tool for rooting out inequality and injustice. (Treviño, Harris & Wallace, 2008, p.8)

It will support the idea of exposing the language that condones the marginalization of the homeless community and the condition of homelessness.

“News accounts that focus on the desperate situations of particular individuals also promote a view that individual factors, such as mental illness, addictions, or personal
competence, push people into homelessness, rather than structural factors, such as unfair wages and over-priced housing” (Schneider, p. 242). In this sense there is an individualist perspective given to individuals that become homeless and the larger social responsibility is not addressed. “When studying coverage on homelessness, researchers have asked whether the media focus on structural or individual causes of homelessness, whether the coverage is sympathetic or stigmatizing, and which solutions are discussed” (Best, p.75). There are different perspectives formulated and put out for the public audience that also focus on crime and violence associated with homeless individuals. Those accounts do not validate the homeless experience or empathize with the community in addressing their strengths such as the ability to be resourceful throughout their homelessness. By looking at the different media representations of homelessness, it is important to acknowledge that this can also affect how homeless individuals see themselves as a result of how they are viewed by society. “Findings indicate that those who are homeless mix together discourses that assert their value and legitimacy with those that are stigmatizing and denigrating” (Clair, Wasserman and Platt, p. 332). This affects their sense of identity and their sense of belonging in the respective community/location where they have been homeless.

The manner in which homeless individuals are portrayed to non-homeless individuals becomes a perpetuation of the stigma that this community faces by living in places that are considered to be outside of the norm and directly labeled as “places not meant for habitation”. In newspaper coverage, “homeless people are represented in three main ways: as ‘other’, as criminals, and as victims. [Widowfield] concluded that media fail to present a full enough story about homelessness” (Schneider, 2011, p. 72). The
purpose of analyzing the language that is presented in media, policy and public information when addressing homelessness is also to acknowledge homeless individuals as something more than what is being portrayed of them. Homeless individuals have a story to tell and that should be the reality of what is being conveyed through media outlets, written policy and public information about homelessness.
In looking at the homeless community, there have been many definitions linked to the homeless condition. The experience of homelessness has been defined as “not having customary and regular access to conventional dwelling and the absence of an adequate nighttime residence but also specifies physical presence in selected locations-shelters, institutional settings, and places not intended for human habitation – as a sufficient condition to establish [homelessness]” (Lee, Tyler and Wright, p.503). Along with these definitions are “vulnerable” conditions that are linked to “the cause” of homelessness. In terms of the cause of homelessness, “the micro portion considers how certain members of that at-risk population become homeless because of their personal vulnerabilities, institutional experiences, and inadequate buffers” (Lee, Tyler and Wright, p.509). These references to the causes of homelessness look at the individual responsibilities that could ensure housing stability. However, in looking at different research on the homeless population, there are larger issues that have historically impacted the growth of the homeless condition that are not always acknowledged. Some of these issues include economic shifts, unemployment and lack of affordable housing.

“[The] use of the term “homeless” to refer to a class of poor people displaced by neoliberal policies, globalization, and structural changes was short lived. Homelessness became decreasingly communicated as a structural problem and increasingly presented as a result of personal deficiency” (Schneider and Remillard, 2013,p. 105 ). As Pascale (2005) concludes, such reframing of homelessness as an individual problem leaves unquestioned the foundations of the capitalist economic system and the neoliberal policies that had caused the rise in homelessness in the first place” (Schneider and
Remillard, p. 105). In the presentation of this information, it is apparent that certain information is overlooked at the convenience of different entities that keep homeless individuals marginalized.

“In the 1980s federal funding cuts for low-income housing caused a decline in single-room occupancies and other forms of affordable housing, although gentrification and “urban renewal” drove up real estate prices, all exacerbating the growing problem of homelessness” (Clair, Wasserman and Platt, p.339). For people that become homeless, there are different reasons that result in their homelessness. These can include untreated mental illness, drug abuse, loss of family member(s), however there is an overarching social issue at hand that relates to housing availability and the economy. “At a macro-level, big-picture narratives attribute homelessness to the housing squeeze (an excess of affordable housing demand over supply), economic conditions (e.g., restructuring, joblessness, poverty), demographic trends (competition within he baby boom cohort, more single-person and single-parent households), policy shifts (in welfare, mental health, and housing), and the crack epidemic, among other factors” (Lee, Tyler, Wright, p.509). As the homeless population has continued to grow, initiatives to address the “issue” have been put in place throughout the years. This includes, for example, the Housing First Model that aims to address homelessness by housing people first and working on mental health needs, medical problems and/or substance abuse issues once the person is stably housed.

The homeless population is addressed through different means of communication, whether that be with the implementation of a conduct rule, a policy to address homeless services or news coverage that involves incidents within the homeless community.
Homeless people often face assumptions based on their lack of housing stability and 
“similarly, those who are homeless, service providers, and a stigmatizing wider society, 
all employ a problematized sense of “the homeless” (Clair, Wasserman and Platt, p.333). 
Homeless people are seen as a problem and therefore are often excluded from the sense 
of belonging to society. For example, in news coverage, “the use of only certain kinds of 
quotations from homeless people and the extensive use of expert sources contribute to the 
production of a problematic larger social narrative of homelessness in which homeless 
people are positioned as ‘other’, setting up an opposition between ‘them’ and ‘us’ that 
promotes the social exclusion of homeless people” (Schneider, p. 80). In terms of media 
coverage of homeless people, there is a gap in the presentation of the events from the 
perspective of the individual and/or the homeless community. News coverage is 
presented through limited language that does not take into account the opinion of the 
homeless individual, excluding the person from this aspect of media about them. 

In order to make the homeless population become included and in the long run 
achieve permanent housing stability, further advocacy and inclusion into their own 
recovery needs to be taken into account. This can happen via different avenues. 

In Whiteford’s study, many users filled out questionnaires and provided feedback to 
staff about services, including those who experienced serious addictions issues. 
“Users” groups in England have developed strategies for involving people with 
experience of homelessness in providing education, input and feedback to service 
providers and the public. Such strategies value and make space for people who are 
homeless to give feedback on service design, development and delivery (Whiteford, 
2011,p.144) 

This study addressed policy level intervention directly connected to the inclusion of the 
homeless community in this process. Members of this community can become advocates 
for their needs at a “hands on” level. This will simultaneously address social inclusion of
this community and break through stereotypes created by society that have further marginalized homeless people.

“Social inclusion also means “political inclusion”, where people who experience homelessness are active “citizens” that is, have a voice that is valued and supported (Sakamoto et al., 2008), taking an equal place in determining services aimed at them alongside other members of their community” (Kennedy and Fitzpatrick, 2001) (Norman and Pauly, p.144). Through these types of actions, the homeless community will have participation in services that are geared to address the needs in their community and take into account that these policies will be created for them through their shared participation with policy makers. This can fill the gap that is relevant in research of homeless individuals where they are presented a marginalized community. Furthermore, “Social inclusion requires fundamental power shifts between housed and unhoused people and recognition that homeless people have an important contribution to make to the process, thereby democratising service development and delivery” (Kennedy and Fitzpatrick, p.146). That is another point that can be addressed in research; there is a gap in research that focuses on service development and delivery that is inclusive of the service recipients who will be using the services.
Methods

The research design used will be a critical discourse analysis. This research will have a focus on the homeless community. Language used in media outlets as well as public information will be analyzed in order to address how stigma can be reinforced through these sources. I am curious to learn more about the portrayal of the homeless community through the lens of someone that is “behind the scenes” and may not know about the community directly.

I became interested in this population through a fellowship experience and gained further connection to this population through employment at a homeless shelter facility. I have witnessed homelessness in the community of Los Angeles and then became involved with this community through employment in the city of Santa Monica. There, I have seen different interventions take place at a mezzo/macro level to address the “homelessness issue”. Ultimately, there is compassion present within the organizations that work to serve the homeless population, however there is still stigma present in society toward homeless people.

Even though I am not a member of the homeless community, my employment opportunity has allowed me the to engage and build rapport with the homeless adult population. I am an outsider in terms of not having had the experience of being homeless, however I am an insider to homeless service provider community and have been able to interact with this community.

I have also been able to witness some of the barriers that homeless people experience when trying to access services or trying to work on their mental health issues,
medical issues and/or substance abuse issues. While working one on one with this population, I have learned about some of their struggles while being homeless. Some people have expressed not being able to sleep in certain areas because they receive tickets. This ties into police criminalizing and targeting the homeless population, relating different events to homeless people labeling them as violent or aggressive. Other difficulties involve not being able to manage their mental health and health conditions because of their homelessness.

When conducting this research, I will keep in mind that being the researcher I have my own biases with this community since I have worked directly with the homeless population. I will separate any personal biases that can come up when reading public information that presents the homeless population in a different light that portrays violence or substance abuse as the focus. I would also use a reflexive journal to document my personal experience and feelings about finding discourse that further stigmatizes the homeless population. It is important for me to be able to debrief about my biases and I would utilize resources like my capstone advisor and other faculty to consult about my findings when necessary. I would discuss any issues or barriers that I encounter throughout this research project and look for feedback from others to have the perspective of an outsider to my research.
**Data Collection**

Through a discourse analysis, the language used to talk about the homeless population will be examined and questioned as to how the language adds to the marginalization of people that experience homelessness. Themes behind the language found in media outlets, written policy and public information sources in regards to homelessness will be identified.

For this project, the data that will be analyzed will include the language used in media outlets such as television news reports, videos and newspaper articles. Other sources that will be analyzed are organizational reports (e.g., National Coalition for the Homeless Report) and policy, such as the McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

When analyzing the data, discourse analysis:

requires the researcher to adopt a rather ‘split’ approach to the text. That is, it is necessary to read along with the meanings that are being created, to look to the way the text is organized and to pay attention to how things are being said. At the same time, discourse analysis often requires the researcher to read against the grain of the text, to look to silences or gaps, to make conjectures about alternative accounts which are excluded by omission, as well as those which are countered by rhetoric (Seale, 1998, p.258).

The research problem that motivated this research project entails the ever increasing number of people that are homeless, which seems to keep growing throughout the years. There are advocacy efforts to provide services for this population, however there are still negative views about the homeless community. Recently, a “state of emergency on homelessness” in Los Angeles was called to address the homeless problem. There is continuous coverage in the media and efforts to address this social issue have been implemented in different ways. By taking into consideration the view of outsiders to the homeless community, it is relevant to study what is being portrayed and what the
language in different media can hide about the homelessness situation in the country. The objective of the study is to analyze the language that is used in media outlets, policy and public information that is presented to the public to expose language that perpetuates stigma in these sources. “Within discourse analysis, language is viewed as the topic of the research”(Seale, p.247). The research questions for this discourse analysis include: 1) How is homelessness portrayed in media outlets, written policy and public information? 2) How is stigma perpetuated through media, written policy and public information when addressing homelessness? and 3) What are the stereotypes portrayed about homelessness/the homeless population?

In addressing these questions, there can be an opportunity to recognize that the homeless community is a marginalized community in society that is often seen as a burden to society, and that are not often afforded the opportunity to counteract this view. With this research, there will be a focus of looking at the social issue of homelessness through a social justice lens and exposing language found in different sources that continue the oppression toward this community. Through a social constructivist framework, the experience of the homeless community will be highlighted. Information found through discourse will indicate the outside perspective on homelessness. Since the information gathered will be part of public information, there will be no breach in confidentiality for the homeless community for this research.
**Data Analysis Strategy**

After collecting the data from sources such as videos, newspaper articles, organizational reports (e.g, National Coalition for the Homeless Report) and policy, such as the McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Critical Discourse Analysis will be used to analyze the information. “[Critical Discourse Analysis] is concerned with studying and analyzing written texts and spoken words to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality, and bias and how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced, and transformed within specific social, economic, political, and historical contexts (Van Dijk, 1988). It tries to illuminate ways in which the dominant forces in a society construct versions of reality that favour their interests”(McGregor). By analyzing the discourse of different sources there will be an opportunity to continue to raise awareness on stigmatizing publications that could directly impact perceptions about homelessness.
Results

Dehumanizing Language

One of the themes that was identified through thematic coding, is dehumanizing language, which was observed through different discourse relating to homeless people or homelessness in general. Some of the words that appeared consistently throughout media and newspaper articles include: vagrant, bum, hobo and aggressive. The word vagrant itself is defined as “a person without an unsettled home or regular work who wanders from place to place and lives by begging”. This word alone limits the capabilities of people who are given the label vagrant and presents begging as a livelihood rather than a method of survival. For example, reports documenting “local residents’ complaints” include such statements from California residents “the homeless population is becoming more aggressive” and “homeless individuals who show up early to the weekly meal pose a security threat to the local residents”. These statements were found within the “Share No More: The Criminalization of Efforts to Feed People in Need”, a report by the National Coalition for the Homeless. The discourse within these statements alone indicate dehumanization based on stereotypes that do not fit every homeless person on the street, such as being “aggressive” or “posing a security threat” by standing in line for a free meal. There is a discord on how homeless people are viewed by members of communities who find it uncomfortable to witness homelessness in their neighborhood.
Responses to Homelessness

Other discourse that emerged directly responded to homelessness as a problem within the community, neighborhood and/or city/state, and involved the following phrases and words:
combat homelessness, public nuisance, complaints, national embarrassment, quality of life offense, unfortunate distinction and criminalizing sleeping.

“Quality of life” offenses appeared in different discourse with focus on attempts to criminalize living on the streets as demonstrated by reports about sleeping in public, sitting in parks or asking for money in public locations. These acts generate responses from the idea that homeless people are interrupting the quality of life of others who are not homeless. For example, a video documenting bans on sleeping in public reported, “the 1% wants to ban sleeping in cars because it hurts the city’s quality of life” (youtube.com, April 25, 2014). Homelessness therefore is portrayed as a barrier to quality of life from the perspective of those who live in cities where homelessness is apparent.
The National Coalition for Homelessness, documents the following as the manner in which U.S cities criminalize homelessness:

“Even while most cities cannot provide enough affordable housing, shelter space, and food to meet the need, many cities use the criminal justice system to punish people living on the street for doing things they need to do to survive. Such measures often prohibit activities such as sleeping/camping, eating, sitting, and/or begging in public spaces and include criminal penalties for violation of these laws. Some cities have even enacted food sharing restrictions that punish groups and individuals for serving food to homeless people” (Homes not handcuffs, p.15).

These are ways in which homelessness is criminalized even though there is no eminent danger within the activities mentioned. Stigma around homelessness is perpetuated here
when homeless people are punished for activities that someone who is housed would not be punished for such as sitting in a public place.

The portrayal of homelessness in materials such as the McKinney Vento Act, is focused on acts to improve the homeless condition. “The programs created by the McKinney-Vento Act are needed now more than ever, as homelessness shows no signs of abating. However, after more than a decade of an emergency response to a long-term crisis, it is clear that only by addressing the causes of homelessness -- lack of jobs that pay a living wage, inadequate benefits for those who cannot work, lack of affordable housing, and lack of access to health care -- will homelessness be ended” (http://nationalhomeless.org). This presents a different interest, as opposed to media that display homeless individuals in a dehumanizing manner. The information on the McKinney Vento Act advocates for homeless individual needs, however the discourse throughout different materials analyzed for this paper, demonstrate that the existing stigma around homelessness is still overpowering efforts to address this issue.

Homelessness as Contamination of Living Space

Another component that encompasses being homeless is finding places to live, to sleep, to survive. However, media coverage on locations where homeless individuals stay delineate discourse that also respond to the idea that homeless people are not always wanted or that they are seen as taking over certain cities/locations. The following discourse found related to the latter statement: homeless capital, tent city, homeless magnets, encampments and health hazard. A story in the Los Angeles Times describes shutting down homeless encampments and stated “People have until the end of Friday to vacate a rambling tent city along a busy San Francisco street that was declared a health
hazard by city officials earlier this week” (Associated Press, 2016) This is discourse that also demonstrates direct response by city officials toward the homeless population in the city of San Francisco.

Furthermore, other articles depict certain cities with a larger homelessness population as “the homeless capital”, alluding to sentiments of homelessness invading city reputation and city life. Statements such as “L.A has the unfortunate distinction of being the country’s homeless capital” (Holland, 2016), reinforce reactions to homelessness in the city of Los Angeles. A similar response is portrayed via a New York Times article that relays “In the past year, about a dozen parks seem to have become magnets for homeless people” (Foderano, 2014). Discourse such as “homeless magnets” and “unfortunate distinction” present homelessness as an invasion of property with property being a city or an area where homelessness predominates.
Discussion

Limitations

A limitation in this study was compiling data from several sources which generated information published in different cities or focusing on information about homelessness in different cities. It might have been feasible to focus on one city in order to focus on a city of interest where homelessness has grown according to recent statistics on homelessness. Another limitation is looking at discourse in the context of stigma. This geared my attention on media that portrayed homelessness as a disturbance or in a negative light. Although data was gathered that included positive acts, such as feeding homeless individuals as an act of empathy and kindness, it was interpreted through the larger context which involved banning large homeless feedings in that particular city.

Implications for Social Work

After looking at data focused on the portrayal of homelessness through different media outlets and sources of public information, it is necessary to reflect on the social justice portion of this research. As mentioned previously, through critical race theory, the aim of this research is to expose language that further marginalizes populations like that of homeless communities. The discourse in media demonstrates that homelessness is seen as a “public nuisance” and therefore work will continue to be required toward macro, mezzo and micro levels to advocate for homeless communities. The discourses that people receive through media outlets also seep into their consciousness, which manifests in criminalizing responses to homelessness that can be witnessed throughout different cities.
Another implication for social work practice is the necessity of advocacy efforts aimed towards helping homeless people becomes housed and live fulfilling lives. By changing the language with which homeless individuals are talked about in our communities, we can generate small advocacy efforts toward treating homeless people like humans and members of our communities who need help and support to continue healthy lives.

Recommendations for Future Research

As a recommendation for future research, it would be interesting to look at discourse used in one specific area, for example, just the city of Los Angeles, or looking at the trends in the way discourse around homelessness has either remained the same, or changed throughout the years. It would also be recommended to gather data that presents two attitudes toward homelessness; one that condones stigma or adds to the stigma around homelessness and then comparing this data to data that takes on a social serving attitude of aiding the homeless population through community service work such as feeding, creating hygiene kits, donating money, etc.
Conclusion

It was interesting to see the discourse used to address homelessness throughout different cities. There were similitudes in discourse used, which often presented homelessness as a crime or as a nuisance. Although there is immediate need to help homeless individuals get off the street, by having permanent housing, it is important to recognize that while on the street, homeless people should be treated with respect, like any other human being, housed or not.
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