

Photovoice Research Summary Report

Title:

Exploring the lived experience of homelessness through photovoice methodology

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UCT KNOWLEDGE CO-OP

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In a nutshell

This paper is a summary of the research project conducted on the issue of homelessness in Observatory. Photovoice methodology was used to explore the homeless phenomenon from the perspective of those who have lived on the streets. This paper gives a brief outline into the aims of the research project and the methods used. It then addresses the key findings, hoping to both reaffirm OBSID's effectiveness, and provide insight into how OBSID's intervention with the homeless can be further enhanced. *Findings* show the challenges faced by those living on the streets and the men's experience of the program. *Recommendations* include expanding the program, creating more awareness in the community in order to decrease stigma and gain support, and creating opportunities for the participants in the program to help their peers who are still on the street.

Background and Introduction

Observatory Improvement District (OBSID) is an organisation which provides services to Observatory over and above those of the municipality. These services include public safety, cleaning and helping the homeless living in Observatory.

OBSID has recently introduced an intervention whereby people who are living on the streets are given the opportunity to take part in a job-shadowing program. The program works by facilitating the movement from living on the streets to entering or re-entering the working world, by giving participants work and ongoing counselling with Mr Kenneth Roman (OBSID's Social Auxiliary Worker). People on the program are paid a stipend for their work, some of which pays for their food and accommodation at a second tier shelter called *Loaves and Fishes*.

OBSID kindly agreed to incorporate a UCT honours student's research within the program, thus providing the researcher with access to participants, as well as facilitating an environment suitable for the research to take place. In return, the researcher aimed to assist OBSID in the following two ways:

- Firstly, as part of the research, an exhibition was held in Observatory which brought awareness to the public in the area of what OBSID was doing, therefore gaining support from the community.

- Secondly, the findings from the research will hopefully provide valuable insight into people's experiences of living on the streets and the challenges they faced. This information confirms the relevance of OBSID's work and gives further insight into how their program can be made more effective in helping the homeless.

The problem

There is a significant amount of quantitative research on homelessness which deals with conceptualising the population and demographic it. However, there is little qualitative, in depth research which involves those who have lived on the streets as the primary sources of information. In order for homeless interventions to be most effective and relevant to those they help, it is important to find out why people have ended up on the street in the first place and what makes it so difficult to come off again.

As Community Psychology (an emerging branch in the psychology field) theorises, those who have experienced living on the streets will in fact be the best people to answer these questions as they, having experienced the difficulties first hand, are the experts.

Method

Research was done using photovoice methodology. A focus group was held with the participants in order to begin the discussion and spark the thought process around the issue of homelessness. Open ended questions were used to guide the discussion. These questions included the following;

- 1) How would you define homelessness?
- 2) Tell us a bit about your experience of living on the street?
- 3) What caused you to end up on the streets?
- 4) What made it difficult to leave the streets?

The participants were then given a few weeks to take photographs of what represented their experiences of homelessness and their experiences of now being off the street. These photographs were presented within the group and discussed. The men also presented and discussed their stories with the aid of the photographs at a public exhibition in Observatory. The exhibition helped to create awareness of the problem of homelessness and to reduce stigma

around the issue; it gave pointers to people who wanted to help and most importantly gave the participants agency in showing that through their stories they can be the catalysts to positive change within their community. Many of the community members contacted Kenneth after the exhibition to find out how they could help. One of the men's stories was also displayed on UCT's website for a number of months, thus further creating awareness of both the problem of homelessness, and OBSID's program.

Another focus group discussion was held after the exhibition. The men talked about their experience of the exhibition and talking in front of a crowd about their life. They also spoke of the OBSID program and the shelter, *Loaves and Fishes*, and how they had changed their lives.

Findings and Recommendations

The data, in the form of transcripts from the focus groups and the photographs were analysed using thematic analysis. This type of analysis draws out dominant themes from the data. Some of these themes will now be discussed.

How the men ended up on the street

Four themes emerged within this category.

Broken Families, financial difficulties, substance abuse and involvement in gangs.

One participant spoke of domestic violence in his home, and growing up with his father as an unhealthy role model. He sought social support and family within the gang community, which led to addiction and living on the street to avoid the police.

Another participant's father had passed away when he was in his early teens. He then looked to his brother as a role model, who introduced him to drugs which eventually led to him ending up on the streets and then in rehab.

Death in the family was a concurrent theme, as another person described how his wife became terminally ill with cancer. She needed full time nursing, which they could not afford so this participant left his job to take care of her. The participant explained that his in-laws asked him to leave once his wife had passed away. Then, without either a job or a home, the man ended up on the street.

Lastly, another participant, explained that he found it better to live on the street with all its challenges than to try and live at home. He described a dysfunctional and broken relationship between himself and his mother which kept him and his late sister from living at home.

Difficulties experienced whilst living on the street

Lack of safety and rest

Every participant had taken a photo of their bed and their locker. They explained the contrast between trying to find a safe, quiet space to sleep at night, being chased by police and having your belongings stolen to living in the shelter where they had their own bed and a locker where they could keep their things.

Finding food

In the same way as photographing the bed, each participant photographed or discussed at length how on the street one had to travel far, or beg to find food. Now it was provided for them and they could eat in a dignified manner, at a table with cutlery and with company.

Stigma from the community

The men told stories of the way some people treated them when they were on the streets. One participant said that he was chased out of a restaurant where he had come to look for a job. Another spoke of how constant experiences of rejection by people had a negative effect on his self-esteem, making it even more difficult to search for work. In contrast, now that the men are working through OBSID, their self-esteem had a chance to grow. The men photographed themselves either working in the office or on the streets in their uniform, and spoke with pride of what they were doing. A woman in the community now greets one of the participants every morning on her walk. He said that would never have happened when he was living on the streets.

The contrast of living on the street and living in the shelter with OBSID's intervention, as described by the men, shows why the OBSID program is so effective. From the men's accounts of living on the street, it seems as if a person is in pure survival mode. Each day the priority is to find food, find a place to keep their belongings or carry them with them, get warm, stay safe and get rest. In the shelter, because these needs are met, the men said that they are able to focus their

minds and energy on things like overcoming addiction, healing broken relationships and developing their skills toward finding a career. What was impossible to do whilst living on the street, now became possible.

In terms of **addiction**, the men had also mentioned how alcohol was often used as a way to numb the cold and then turned into a habit. Therefore street life is conducive to substance abuse, whether the person ended up on the street because of it or started using to keep warm on the street. Addictions do make coming off the street a lot more difficult, but again it would seem that overcoming an addiction in the environment of a shelter with social support and one's basic needs being met has more chance of success than trying to do it whilst still on the street.

In summary, what the job shadowing program has done is help those who are on the street come out of the rut they are in and created an environment for them which is conducive to growth and change.

Recommendations

This study intended to use the findings to firstly confirm that OBSID's program is relevant in what it is doing to help people off the streets. The findings of this study revealed that the program had been hugely effective for most of the men. Therefore I want to encourage OBSID and the team to keep going with the program. I also highly recommend that it be expanded to take on more people. To do this, funding and further assistance will be needed from the Observatory community.

The community's response to the exhibition was very positive, with many asking how to help. Holding more exhibitions with other stories, or posting people's stories on OBSID's Facebook page or newsletter will help to both reduce the stigma of homelessness and inspire people to help. In creating awareness, the public can be guided away from giving handouts which perpetuate the problem, to investing in sustainable solutions like the OBSID program, and the shelters.

Community Psychology theory has found that people are more likely to develop as individuals when they are simultaneously developing their communities. After the exhibition, the men realised what a difference had been made through their work, and it inspired them to do

more. For example, one of the men has begun to write his whole story in a book, and is also helping at the soup kitchen that he used to line up at. I recommend that OBSID try and find a way for those on the program to help either those on the street directly through the soup kitchens, or indirectly through creating awareness by telling their stories. As I saw through their participation in the exhibition, taking part in something bigger than themselves will inspire people living on the street to develop themselves. Furthermore, the men spoke of how their peers on the street were inspired by seeing how they were able to get off and into work, helping them realise they could do the same. Inspiring others by example will be a powerful catalyst towards change.

Conclusion

OBSID's program is unique in the way it aims to address the problem of homelessness. In the lives of the men involved in this study it played an effective role in taking them off the street into a new life, and there is a hope that the program will continue to do this with more people in need.

End Note

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the OBSID team for allowing me to come into your fold and do my research. Thank you especially to Mr Kenneth Roman for your generosity of time and space, in attending every step of the research process and helping the participants along the way. Thank you for allowing us to disrupt your office with our meetings. To OBSID, I have realised how difficult helping the homelessness off the street is, and that success stories are often not the norm. However I truly have been inspired by seeing the change in the men from going through your program and feel that even if it changes fewer lives than you intend it to, it will be far more than worth your while. I look forward to seeing your work in the future.