



More than just a job: The meaning of work for those who were previously homeless

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The research for this report was conducted as a Honours Research paper based on a request for such research by the **Streetscapes** programme of **Khulisa Social Solutions**.

This summary report focusses on the findings of the study preceded by a brief introduction.

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Context

The issue of homelessness has been much debated over the past century - both within academia and the general public. Some believe that it is a problem that can be solved, while others believe that it is perhaps a permanent feature of the “modern urban landscape”. In its basic form, it signifies someone that is without a permanent residence, as someone that is living on the streets. However, its definition may go far beyond the aspect of ‘rooflessness’ which only refers to one’s lack of a permanent residence. Gathering statistical data on the homeless population has not been an easy task either. The latest estimate on global homelessness is about 150 million people.

Within the context of South Africa, the main causes of homelessness seem to be related to the significant housing shortage, high levels of unemployment and rapid urbanization.

Statistically, there were about 200,000 homeless people living on the streets of South Africa in 2015. In Cape Town, the number of homeless people is believed to be close to 5000 while an estimated 700 is said to reside within the central business district (CBD). There is also a widespread perception of those who experience homelessness. The public image of a homeless person is that of the dirty, unkempt figure who sits on the side of the pavement begging for change. It is their ‘laziness’ and unwillingness to look for a job that dominates public discourse on the homeless. Consequently, this stigmatises those who are homeless. The result is a negative representation of the homeless as homogenous, inferior and dysfunctional.

Why this research was undertaken

The question to ask, is what happens when work is provided to these homeless individuals? The focus of this research was therefore placed on the meaning of work for those individuals’ whom have previously experienced homelessness. An attempt was made to understand the experiences of three Streetscape beneficiaries with regards to their transition (what it also termed their journey) from homelessness to having access to paid work and formal housing. The key argument I put forth is that work allows one to experience a certain type of citizenship, belonging and subjective wellbeing in which he or she can participate in the sphere of mainstream society.

The hope is that more research on the homeless may result in a better understanding of how individuals become homeless in the first place, as well as how academics can find ways in which to reduce its occurrence. More importantly, if such research can form the basis for future projects such as Streetscapes, then this so-called problem of homelessness may indeed be one that can be met with dignity and respect with regards to those who experience it. The fundamental goal, then, is for these individuals who have unfortunately found themselves in such dire circumstances to develop a sense of autonomy and inclusion within society. It is therefore suggested that work plays a major role in achieving this.

The Streetscapes programme

The Streetscapes project was started in 2015 and it has since gone to establish a number of work sites throughout the Cape Town CBD, as well as in the Northern and Southern Suburbs. It forms part of a larger international organisation known as Khulisa Social Solutions which has a number of programmes operating within South Africa and abroad. The core Streetscapes sites come in the form of vegetable gardens in which its beneficiaries are trained to maintain these gardens, where the produce gets sold and profits go back into the programme in the form of stipends. The programme also provides cleaning services in the CBD and Observatory.

The overall aim of the project is to offer those homeless individuals (referred to as clients) who were caught up in the criminal justice system or that is dealing with any chronic and progressive drug or alcohol addiction a second chance. Specifically, it is people who find themselves living on the streets with substance abuse issues and concurrent mental health problems. They become a burden on the health and criminal justice systems as well as a leading cause of public complaints. The programme's approach incorporates a combination of subsidised work accompanied by strategic psychosocial support. The work they provide therefore act as "opportunities that are rehabilitative and reintegrative", where "it provides this vulnerable population with a real opportunity to rebuild their lives which reducing crime and grime in the inner city" (Khulisa Social Solutions, n.d.). Social integration thus becomes one of the primary objectives within this programme, along with reducing the prevalence of homelessness within the city while allowing those who are substance abusers to once again become sober or 'clean'. As such, it has partnered with various stakeholders within the city,

most importantly local business whom have previously dissented to the presence and visibility of homelessness within their surroundings.

The research processes

This study made use of qualitative research methods. The specific type of qualitative research design was a case study in which those who were previously homeless became the unit of investigation and analysis. The sample criteria were based on factors such as age, gender and years within the programme.

Interviews were the primary means of data collection for this study accompanied by participant observations. I had multiple visits to each site with the aim of establishing some form of rapport with the beneficiaries and their working environment. The result of these observations came in the form of brief field notes highlighting certain aspects: either that of an individual or group of individuals, or the general (social) environment within these sites. The interviews ranged from about 40 to 60 minutes long and were of a semi-structured nature. This allowed for a conversational manner of interview. Before I could conduct these interviews, the participants had to sign a consent form which they first had to read and understand.

Once all the relevant data was collected, the process of transcribing and analysing this data began. The audio recorded interview transcripts were first transcribed. After transcribing the interviews, each transcript was read through briefly in order to establish broad themes throughout the texts. Upon completion of this task, eight major themes were established within and between each participant's transcripts. Each transcript was then read through more thoroughly, this time with the aim of capturing each participant's particular narrative.

Key findings

Looking back

All participants made reference to a 'good home', where the onset of homelessness is not one that appears to be due to an unstable household or family life in their past. It seems that becoming homeless has disrupted their own family structures which in turn produced feelings of guilt and despair which no doubt contributed to their sense of 'meaningless'.

The precarious and unstable nature of being homeless becomes another aspect that is emphasised within the interviews. This instability is highlighted to foreshadow the resultant stability that is obtained once a participant began to work in the programme.

Stigma

As expressed earlier, society views the homeless as lazy, 'useless' and unwilling to change their lives. Interestingly, however, it appears that the 'label' of homeless was superseded by that of an 'addict'. The negative perception usually associated with the homeless is maintained however, and in this case the aspect of criminality is brought into question.

A shift in these perceptions seems to have occurred after each participant entered the programme. For Allison, the recognition of being a worker allows for this feeling of belongingness to be achieved.

The aspect of one's appearance is also emphasised, where one may be homeless but not necessarily 'look the part'. The emphasis on one's appearance is firmly situated from the view of 'others' or more specifically the general public. It is perhaps a form of resistance to how society generally views the homeless as those considered to be 'dirty'.

The meaning of work

One key finding is the clear distinction observed between a formal job and the work being performed within the programme. The programme itself is cited as a way for the homeless "to get themselves back in the community" (Allison, 22/08/2019). The specific use of the term 'community' showcases the inclusive nature of work where not having this opportunity may place one as outside of this community. The relationship that has become apparent is one which places work at the centre of one's stability within their life.

What can be highlighted is the value attached to work in regard to the broader society in which work allows one to “becoming more part of society you are more valuable for people” (Sophia, 11/07/2019). Sophia (unbeknownst to her) expresses this aspect, in which simply having a job firmly places some value on you as an individual a person that is actively contributing in some way to the ‘system’.

Giving back

All participants made it clear that they aimed to ‘give back’ to the community or to society. This aspect came about out of their own accord. One example of how these participants and other beneficiaries living in the house have given back was observed when conducting field work. On this particular day they decided to hand out food to the local homeless population. This action was undertaken without the influence of the programme itself and was completely done out of goodwill by the beneficiaries. The core idea behind this is that the participants now refer to themselves as being part of a community, where this was not the case while they were homeless. Both Noah and Sophia explicitly express this recognition of being part of a community. Their current situation of having a job and living in a house affords them a certain level of dignity and respect which was not afforded whilst homeless.

The self

As mentioned in the previous section, respect and dignity become key components in how participants express their identity. These in turn link to one’s subjective wellbeing.

Positive emotions are expressed at how each participant has changed since their entry into the programme. Sophia for instance, expresses that “I’ve got a job. I’m shy to ask people something” (Sophia, 11/07/2019) which relates to her having to previously beg for money. Similarly, Noah expresses the position emotion of being viewed differently in the public eye.

A future

Thinking about the future was not something that would have been feasible or likely to occur when homeless. However, at this point in their lives, each participant expressed a different outlook in how they perceived their own futures. Sophia for instance, would like to become a

supervisor within the programme. Noah expresses his desire to obtain a driver's licence in which to make himself "marketable" in the market. Allison wants to become a language interpreter and is actively saving up to pursue this dream. Another beneficiary whom I met while doing my observations, expressed his desire to work in a restaurant and has since undertaken courses at a Culinary School.

What the participants recognise now is their potential to achieve 'a better life'. The role work plays in this regard is somewhat blurred. I believe that this self-actualisation stems more from the structure of the Streetscape programme than from the work that is provided. However, it may indeed be that the work in itself has allowed them to reach a point of stability in which to question their own abilities and consequent future. In essence, they have now come to find a meaning in life that is important to them.

Suggestions for the programme and future research

1. This study aimed to explore the role that work played in the lives of those who were once homeless. The findings showed that although work in itself has played a major role within the lives of the participants, it is not the work in itself that has led to their current state of subjective wellbeing. What is clear is that **providing work and housing is only *one* dimension** of exiting homelessness and participating in mainstream society. However, work does appear to be a central feature as expressed by the participants of this study.
2. **Promoting a strong sense of one's subjective wellbeing** is believed to be a key aspect that needs to be focused on when introducing programmes that aim to 'reintegrate' the homeless back into society. Future programmes tasked at reintegrating the homeless therefore need to focus on more than just providing a house or job. Aside from those needs, homeless individuals may require social support and a feeling of belongingness in order to obtain a positive subjective wellbeing in the form of life satisfaction.

3. With regards to the Streetscapes programme, I have a few suggestions.
- a. First, aside from the gardening or cleaning work it provides, it may also be able to **provide skills training**. Specifically, ‘marketable skills’ which would subsequently be taught to its beneficiaries. These skills would first need to be established by means of research in order to determine what skills may be most useful for its beneficiaries to obtain a job.
 - b. This in turn relates to my second suggestion which is **to help beneficiaries successfully exit the programme**. A business model specifically catered to these beneficiaries is indeed a strategy that can be employed.
 - c. Another suggestion is to **raise the awareness of mental health** within the programme. Throughout my observations, I observed that the beneficiaries did not have a comprehensive understanding of what mental health illnesses are. Understanding what mental health is, may indeed lessen the stigma for those who suffer from mental health illnesses in addition to being homeless.



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