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Background and Significance of the Study

Introduction

This qualitative study offers multiple perspectives regarding the news media’s coverage of homeless people. Throughout, I hope to better inform you about the cultural phenomenon known as “homelessness.”

I look at a sample of homeless people; their characterization and description of themselves in the news media; journalists’ responses to those observations, and a sample of stories from the print and television news media that provide the dominant culture with accounts of the homeless and homelessness. The role of the media in depicting the homeless is a key issue here.

As cognitive psychologist Richard Jackson Harris asserts, the mass media are “a ‘magic window’ through which we view the world, but also the ‘door’ through which ideas enter our minds” (2004, p. 3). The metaphor of the window is especially useful in understanding how ordinary citizens learn about homeless people and the state of being homeless. Most Americans have no personal familiarity with homeless people; therefore they depend heavily on depictions of the homeless in the news media. Thus ordinary citizens learn about the homeless and homelessness from the media, just as they learn about political candidates, the functioning of government and most other aspects of society beyond the range of the individual citizen’s senses.

Media researchers Rivers, Schramm and Christians noted: “Undoubtedly, the most important role of the media is to feed the ground – to deposit layers of information, day by day, hour by hour, so that a base is laid for the knowledge on which we walk. Compared with the occasional great and dramatic changes we can attribute to the media, this slow, continuing, never-ending effect is immensely more powerful and significant” (1980, p. 28–9).

I deal with three key areas of focus: (1) an analysis of how the mass media informally educate their audiences about the culture of homelessness in the United States through their descriptions and presentations of homeless people; (2) the results of a series of interviews with a theoretical sample of homeless people that explores how they describe themselves and how they perceive their portrayal by the mass media; and (3) the results of a series of interviews
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with a theoretical sample of Albuquerque, New Mexico-based print and broadcast journalists in which the journalists were asked to respond to the major concerns raised by the homeless interviewed for this project about the media’s portrayal of homelessness.

I have identified two major ways that the general public learns about homeless people: (1) through their portrayal in the print and broadcast mass media; (2) by the public’s own direct observations as the homeless appear in their local communities, perhaps while soliciting handouts or traveling about within local communities. This latter approach – directly observing the homeless – is the method least likely to provide useful information because many members of the general public, and especially those in moderate- to high-income brackets, may go for days, or even weeks, without seeing a homeless person. When they do see them, it is commonly only a glimpse of the person from the window of a passing automobile. Thus, media portrayals are the primary sources of information about the homeless for most Americans. I will:

• analyze how local and national mass broadcast and print media portray the homeless
• report on the responses of a theoretical sample of homeless people who were asked how they perceive themselves, how they feel they are portrayed in the mass media, and how they believe they are understood by the general public
• report on the responses of a theoretical sample of journalists based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, who were asked to respond to the major concerns raised by the homeless interviewed for this project regarding the media’s portrayal of homelessness.

Outline

Chapter One establishes the purpose of the research, the statement of the problem, the hypothesis and the methods to be used. Chapter Two provides a review of the relevant literature dealing with this issue. Chapter Three provides an overview of the methodology used. Chapter Four provides data from the interviews of homeless people and media professionals in
Albuquerque, New Mexico. Chapter Five provides an analytical overview of interviews conducted with the homeless and some members of the media in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Chapter Six looks at the theories through which the findings of this research project are analyzed. Chapter Seven analyzes portrayals of the homeless in the mass media. Chapter Eight provides final conclusions from the results of the research, presents recommendations and provides opportunities for further study.

Most people do not have face-to-face encounters with the homeless; in fact, many of us try to avoid such encounters. People generally gain their knowledge and form their opinions regarding the homeless from their own exposure to news stories in the media, i.e., what they have read in the newspapers or heard on radio or television. While such knowledge and opinion may be distorted due to inaccuracies or distortions in the reporting (Hartman & Husband, 1974), people are, nonetheless, generally willing to express their opinions on the issue of homelessness because they believe the information they have received from the media.

In fact, people think they are being educated about what is going on in the world because they view television and read newspapers. However, many national television news broadcasts and other national media portray the homeless as ordinary people whose problems can be “fixed” by a meal and some overnight shelter. This portrayal is at odds with the experiences of many homeless service providers.

Donors from among the general public to ministries and other service providers to the homeless respond generously to appeals that emphasize the need for food and overnight shelter. They do not respond well to appeals that emphasize the need to fund rehabilitative programs, which most homeless services providers understand are an integral part of seeing alcohol and drug dependent homeless people reintegrated into mainstream community life.

**General Statement of the Issue or Problem**

I examine the relationship of national print and electronic media in their limited and oftentimes misleading portrayal of the homeless.

The book comprises, in part, a content analysis of both print and electronic
media stories, in order to determine exactly what picture the national media are presenting to the public.

The analysis will identify whether or not the media are, intentionally or inadvertently, promoting a picture of the homeless as otherwise ordinary people whose problems can be “fixed” by a meal and some overnight shelter.

**Project Overview**

The research methods used were interviewing and analysis of the interview narrative. While content analysis was used, it was not employed as a research method, but as a technique used to quantify the characteristics of the media reports on homelessness and the homeless as found. This permitted a summarization of the media reports and provides an analytic approach to the media reports which constitute the data in this portion of the study (Appendix A).

Forty-one (41) people were interviewed for the main project. These comprised a national homeless advocate, a writer nationally acclaimed for his writings on poverty and America’s changing approach over the years to dealing with poverty, an international journalist who heads a Christian news service, two print reporters, five broadcast journalists and thirty-one (31) homeless individuals. The interviews were conducted primarily in February and March 2004. The questions asked of the homeless are presented in Appendix B; their interviews appear in Appendix C.

An ethnographic study (Appendix D) was used for a pilot study conducted in February and March of 2002. The pilot study is an important part of this research. It is a snapshot of who the homeless actually are, as opposed to who the media claim they are.

In addition to the ethnographic observation, 12 individuals were interviewed for the pilot study (Appendix E).

Shelter activity logs (included in Appendix F) are also an important part of this research because they provide an additional picture that shows who the homeless actually are, as opposed to who they are portrayed to be. Briefly put, the activity logs often, but not always, are negative. These provide snapshots of life, reflecting the daily activities of homeless people housed at Joy Junction. As part of their duties, Joy Junction personnel and program
participants record every incident that they feel needs to be brought to the attention of or addressed by shelter managers. These reports include summaries of events in which the police came onto the Joy Junction property, new guests arrived seeking housing, allegations of drug or alcohol use, which are prohibited, and disagreements among guests at the shelter. As a result, the logs often reflect the outbreak of hostilities and anger among guests of the shelter. The logs also provide descriptions of routine issues that need to be taken care of, such as putting locks on trucks, the need to check a dumpster, and the need for a driver to change among the vans used to transport residents to the shelter.

For example, as contained in Appendix F, one individual commenting on an incident wrote in the log, “Patrick came in drunk, and this was his third time on the alcohol list. Driver took him to People for Jesus church on 5600 Central S.W.”

Another individual wrote in the log, “Rita called in, as Lois and the van driver did not pick her up as she is on the not welcome list.”

A comment in the log from another individual read, “There was a confrontation between overnighters Doug and Jessie. They were yelling in each other’s faces, slapping and pushing; the two were separated and told to stay away from each other. This is the second confrontation in the past week.”

The respondents selected were a theoretical sample. Those residents interviewed at Joy Junction were members of the shelter’s Life Skills Program. The homeless people I interviewed were not staying at Joy Junction. They had responded to a sign-up sheet placed at three Albuquerque agencies by a marginally “homed” individual who coordinated this interview section of the project. The homeless respondents were compensated $10 and the coordinator was compensated $50.

Media personnel interviewed were those with whom I had enough of an ongoing relationship, due to my work at Joy Junction, to contact. The questions asked of the media personnel arose as a result of the responses from the homeless interviewed. There was no written list of questions. The media interview sessions were much more unstructured.
Question Form

I attempt to answer the question, “Do print and electronic media, as well as homeless service providers, present a misleading picture of America’s homeless to the public?”

Education and Culture

It is important to remember that homelessness is a subculture. As John Doughty wrote in his paper (1995) “Anomie and Homelessness: An Ethnography of Rural Nomads,” “Homelessness, like anomie, has a cultural definition … Robert Merton saw anomie as a difference in the goals of society and some individuals and in the difference in the way society and some individuals achieved those goals” (Hilbert, 1989, p. 47).

Here is additional evidence that the homeless constitute a subculture in the larger American culture:

The homeless often are ostracized from conventional society because of their lifestyles; the lifestyle of homelessness may be chosen in some instances, but in other instances it seems forced on some people who must claim that lifestyle in order to obtain resources offered only to the homeless. Many homeless people lack the resources to keep themselves and their clothes clean at all times, making them objectionable to many members of mainstream society, which constitutes the dominant culture.

The homeless often beg for handouts, putting them at odds with mainstream society where the Puritan work ethic allegedly still is valued.

The homeless often consume alcoholic beverages and illegal and illicit drugs to excess, causing them to commonly present themselves in public view in an intoxicated state, which is objectionable to many members of the dominant culture and often constitutes a violation of the laws passed by the dominant culture.

Homeless people commonly associate with other homeless people with whom they share information about resources for food, housing, medical care and other needs.

The face-to-face interaction of the homeless helps them build a common knowledge of resources available to them and encourages the development
of a specialized vocabulary and syntax that can be used to describe, typify and talk about resources available to the homeless.

A foundational premise of this work is that the media educate—albeit in an informal fashion. As a writer commented in an article on the website of the Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning, “Informal education takes place in the information channels that become the principal avenues for learning … once formal schooling is completed. These channels include: mass media, the World Wide Web, museums and public talks.”

**Research Statements**

The national media and some homeless service providers often present a misleading picture of America’s homeless as otherwise ordinary people whose problems can be “fixed” by a meal and some overnight shelter. This understanding was fostered by my analysis of the print and broadcast media narrative.

The understanding that led to this hypothesis was also reinforced by the limited amount of literature available on how the media portray the homeless. While that is dealt with in the review of the literature, this brief comment explains the hypothesis.

A study by the nonpartisan Center for Media and Public Affairs reported finding an advocacy-type approach by the media to the homeless, one that suggested the need for government assistance to an aggrieved group. Ongoing private sector initiatives were rarely observed. “In addition, while presenting the homeless in a sympathetic light, the media distorted their social characteristics, in ways that understate the difficulty in addressing their needs” (Buck & Toro, 2002, p. 3).

Donors to ministries and other providers for the homeless prefer to think of the homeless as being just like them, so presenting a more accurate picture of the homeless as drunks, alcoholics and schizophrenics who nonetheless still need help, would severely diminish funding for the many ministries that serve the homeless.

There is nothing in the academic literature that provides a clear indication concerning what one might expect to find from this research. However,
observation from my ministry, as well as other ministries and providers across the United States, appears to indicate that the thesis statements presented above will be proven.

**Definition of Significant Terms**

The following terms are used throughout the book, and the definitions given here are used to clarify those terms.

**Homelessness**: People with “no fixed abode or nighttime shelter other than that provided by a private or public agency” (Caton, 1990, p. 20).

**Informal education**: The lifelong process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insight from daily experiences and exposure to the environment – at home; at work; at play; from the example and attitude of family and friends; from travel, reading newspapers and books; or by listening to radio or viewing films or television. Generally, informal education is unorganized and often unsystematic; yet it accounts for the great bulk of any person’s total lifetime learning, including the education of even a highly “schooled” person (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8).

**Non-formal education**: “Any organized activity with educational purposes carried on outside the highly structured framework of formal education systems as they exist today” (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 233). Non-formal education has also been described as: “Any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adults as well as children” (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8).

**Formal education**: “The highly institutionalized, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured ‘education system’ spanning lower primary school and the upper reaches of the university” (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8).
Entertainment-education (defined for the purposes of this study as a derivative of informal education): “The process of purposely designing and implementing a media message both to entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members’ knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, and change overt behavior. Entertainment-education seeks to capitalize on the appeal of popular media to show individuals how they can live safer, happier lives” (Piotrow et al., 1997; Piotrow, Meyer & Zulu, 1992; Singhal & Brown, 1996 – as cited in Singhal & Rogers 1999, p. 9).

Agenda-setting: Is defined for the purposes of this research as the importance of an issue on the mass media agenda.

Researcher Biases and Limitations of the Study
As well as being the author of this book, I have been in ministry to the homeless for more than 20 years and could thus be considered an insider. This fact may cause some people to question the credibility of the research. However, I compensated for this in three ways: 1) hiring two people to read the broadcast transcripts and the newspaper articles; 2) hiring a person to interview the homeless people staying at Joy Junction (this person was also one of the readers for media articles); 3) hiring a person who is marginally homed to aid me in identifying a sample of homeless people who were receiving services from three additional area agencies.

In addition, to mitigate an inherent bias the homeless individuals interviewed went beyond Joy Junction. I interviewed homeless people who were being assisted by three other Albuquerque, New Mexico-based agencies as described elsewhere.

Some of the material analyzed will not be random, but will be more of a theoretical sample. This means it would be inappropriate to infer the results of this research to all ministries to the homeless. In this study, the term “theoretical sample” is used in the sense originally described in Glaser and Strauss (1967) and subsequently in Glaser and Corbin (1998). Glaser and Corbin (1998, p. 73) describe this concept this way: “Sampling on the basis of emerging concepts, with the aim being to explore the dimensional range
or varied conditions along which the properties of concepts vary.” For this study, I attempted to meet this expectation by seeking out and interviewing people who understood the phenomena under study and who might be able to provide their applied insights.