

Misery Loves Company: But Who is Misery's Company?
An Ethnographic Study on Community, Belonging, and Homelessness

Kelly B. Cunningham

Abstract: Homelessness is often romanticized. Homeless people are frequently understood as being a collective group of individuals who, because of their shared unfortunate circumstances, relate and connect with one another. I argue that this perception of homelessness, which in essence follows the old adage "misery loves company," incorrectly assumes that community exists among those who share similar pain and experiences, that mere physical presence of other homeless people consequently establishes feelings of belonging. Through this research, I reveal that relationships manifest among the downtown homeless population in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada in very unique ways. The relationships do not emerge as a result of proximity but rather as a function of the particular needs of the individuals. The purpose of this research is to encourage a deeper understanding of the diverse lived experiences of community and sense of belonging among those who are homeless. In order for this deeper understanding to occur, it is important that we suspend judgments and preconceived notions. Instead, we must open ourselves up to the lives that are discussed in this research and read with boldness and courage to foster our own empathic capacity.

Key Terms: belonging, community, homelessness in Victoria, empathic capacity

Introduction

Homelessness is often romanticized, meaning homeless people are frequently understood as a collective group of individuals who can, despite their unfortunate circumstances, relate and connect with one another. I argue that this perception of homelessness, which in essence follows the old adage "misery loves company," incorrectly assumes that community exists among those who share similar pain and that mere physical presence of other homeless people consequently establishes feelings of belonging. I seek to reveal the way relationships manifest themselves among the downtown homeless population in Victoria, British Columbia. This research describes the extent to which a homeless person can or cannot exert his or her individual will to forge specific relationships with others, thereby highlighting how homeless people are constrained by the physical space they live in.

The purpose of this research is to encourage a deeper understanding of the diverse lived experiences of community and belonging among those who are homeless. It is my hope that

this research will foster empathic capacity within the minds of those who read these pages. Matthew Taylor, the Chief Executive of the Royal Society for the encouragement of the Arts (RSA), asserts that empathic capacity is crucial to achieving a world full of people at peace with themselves and one another. Therefore, we must always be open to hearing the narratives of others who have experienced great trials and suffering. One of the fathers of sociology Max Weber argued that the way to knowledge is through sympathetic understanding, or *Verstehen* (Snape & Spencer, 2003). The concept of *Verstehen* grounds qualitative research and is a technique I have relied on to complete this ethnographic study. Ethnography involves interviewing participants and sharing in their daily lives in order to describe the meaning-making process of their lived experiences (Morse, 1998). This paper describes in depth the meaning-making processes of relationship building as experienced by my two participants.

I have used the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism to guide my ethnographic study. Symbolic interactionism seeks to uncover how we construct meaning, or reality, as a direct result of our position in society (Ritchie, 2003). This theoretical framework guided my research to reveal answers to questions concerning human agency, specifically around notions of the human will and intentionality concerning relationship building. Through the ethnographic approach, this research has uncovered the ways in which a sense of community, or feelings of belonging, is directly linked to broader social structures and power relations that exist within society in regard to homelessness.

Methodology

My interest in homelessness began a year and a half ago. It was then when I joined a street outreach group called Socks. Socks is the name given to a group of university students who every Thursday night for the past four years have walked the streets of downtown Victoria to hand out socks to those in need. When I first heard about this group's existence, I became instantly interested and have been an active member since September 2009. While socking the cold and wet feet of Victoria's homeless citizens is the act the group is named after, the socks themselves are used more or less as an icebreaker. As a group, we seek to establish meaningful relationships with homeless individuals in Victoria, to reach out to those who may have no one in their life to talk to on a daily basis. It is our goal to listen to anyone who wants to speak. Because of the incredible openness, honesty, and complete vulnerability of the many homeless people I have had the chance to meet, they have let me into their world. The homeless people I have met have given me the opportunity to get to know them, and true friendships have emerged as a result. My experience in the field places me in a unique position as an inside-outsider. I am not homeless; and because of this, I will always be understanding or interpreting homelessness from an outsider's perspective. However, my consistent presence downtown and the relationships I have formed with people who do experience homelessness day to day has placed me in a position of familiarity with the culture. So in this sense, I am an insider. I

recognize and appreciate the way in which my positionality has led me to understand that the experience of community and belonging within this specific population occurs in extremely unique ways.

Participants

To generate data, I used purposive sampling and conducted and recorded in-depth interviews with two participants, both of whom are male and over the age of 40. I met David and Samuel while I was handing out socks on a Thursday evening over a year ago. Throughout this paper, I have used pseudonyms for my participants. Prior to participating in this research project, they each signed informed consent forms and agreed to have their interviews recorded. I made sure to clarify with David and Samuel that their narrative would be handled according to the University of Victoria confidentiality protocol. The interviews I had with each of my participants sought to uncover their day-to-day experiences and interactions. My interview guide channelled my interviews toward unveiling the lived experience of homelessness, specifically in regard to feelings of belonging. I asked questions such as “Tell me about a typical day for you. What does it involve?” and “Who are people in your life that you spend a lot of time with?” These questions provided a firm general structure for my interviews while simultaneously allowing room for my participants to express their unique experiences. From these interviews, I was able to draw out overarching themes. The overarching themes that my research revealed are those which were most frequently discussed by both of my participants. Each of my participants discussed issues concerning feelings of belonging, ways they choose to spend their time, and opinions of service providers, all of which relate to the notion of community and being around people on a day-to-day basis.

Wiseman’s Study

I have modelled my research methods after Wiseman’s (1970) ethnographic study on the treatment of skid row alcoholics titled “Stations of the Lost: the Treatment of Skid Row Alcoholics” because my specific research topic is in a similar field. After ten years of extensive fieldwork, interviews, and observations, Wiseman studied the “loop,” which refers to the journey many skid row alcoholics experience as the constant move from one rehabilitation institution to the next. She notes how the cyclical nature of this process has had a profound effect on how the service providers and the alcoholics perceive meaning in their interactions with one another (Wiseman, 1970). Her study reveals valuable information regarding how the forced lifestyle of skid row impacts the way a skid row alcoholic makes meaning out of his experiences and relationships. Perhaps most importantly, Wiseman’s study gives hope. Her findings speak boldly of how resilient the human spirit can be in times of great trouble and despair. Her findings also highlight the human capability to cope with the various situations and institutions they find themselves living within, the ability to design one’s will in such a way that

fits society's expectations. The men in Wiseman's study speak about how they have learned to get by with their circumstances and make do with what they have. Wiseman discusses how these men learned to make do with their lack of control and power over their circumstances by developing their own creative survival strategies. She depicts their experience as follows:

The Skid Row alcoholic has little or no money, no steady job, little formal training and no recent job experience, poor health, and shabby clothes. He is in an environment that any outsider would label as bleak and comfortless, offering nothing but destitution, shame and despair. Yet his strategies for survival indicate a remarkably indomitable and creative spirit, somewhat inconsistent with the visage of pathology presented in the literature. How does a person, without the usual resources available to an adult male, find a way to meet his minimum needs and thus survive? Inventiveness, or creativity, is the talent with which survival tactics are most often associated. The essence of creativity is redefinition[;] that is the ability to mentally free an object from one meaning or mental framework and then convert it into raw material to serve another purpose in another context. (Wiseman, 1970, p. 17-18)

Specifically in my research on community and belonging, I found the above statements by Wiseman to be fully applicable. As I describe more in depth further on, my research has shown that this tactic of creative redefinition applies not only to, for example, turning a bus stop bench into a bed for a good night sleep, but also to the process of establishing and maintaining relationships. In a sense, my participants redefine notions of community and its meaning. My participants describe that the relationships they make and maintain have immense physical survival value. This points to the fact that certain relationships are not an end in themselves: there are crucial survival reasons for the initial existence of these relationships.

My written observations of the interactions between people who are homeless and the participants in my study occurred on Thursday evenings while I was with Socks during the months of October and November 2010. While I was walking in downtown Victoria, I recorded my observations, specifically of the interactions homeless people had with one another along with my own personal reflections and opinions. Using both interviews and observations is a way to validate information collected during the research process. This is the technique of triangulation, which "involves the use of different methods and sources to check the integrity of, or extend, inferences drawn from the data" (Ritchie, 2003, p. 43).

Understanding Community: A Matter of the Human Will

As previously stated in this paper, it is my intent that this research will broaden understandings regarding the nature of community and how relationships manifest among Victoria's diverse homeless population. In order for community to be understood throughout this paper, I first engage in a discussion to establish a general definition. In the most basic sense, community can

refer to those who share a common experience or live in the same place. For example, those who share in life circumstances related to homelessness are often understood as belonging to the mental classification of a “homeless community” as perceived by outsiders. In a more complex understanding, the word “community” describes a context in which an individual desires, and eventually fulfills that desire, to be connected to another individual or group. A feeling of community can also be related to how much a person feels a sense of influence or control over his or her surroundings, whether or not he or she perceives meaning in his or her day-to-day activities and has achievable goals. Many scholars of sociology have claimed that the concept of community is so ill defined that it is perhaps better if it were ignored altogether (Etzioni, 1996). However, McMillan and Chavis (1986) attempt to narrow down this broad concept by identifying four elements of community: 1) membership, 2) influence (meaningfulness and achievable goals), 3) integration and fulfillment of needs, and 4) shared emotional connection. I interpret these four points as all being deeply connected with the notion of belonging. In many cases, the definition of community overlaps with the concept of belonging because one can choose to surround oneself with a specific group of people, or within a specific physical location where one feels he or she belongs. Location determines to whom an individual will connect because it establishes physical boundaries and limitations. This is especially true in regard to homelessness. Belonging involves the action of choosing to join a specific person or group outside of oneself and consequently feeling connected as human beings. My definition of community refers to either sharing a physical location or place of living with others—and to some degree shared experiences—or the process that occurs within an individual’s subjective experience when he or she feels connected to a group outside of himself or herself, which consequently goes hand in hand with the experience of belonging. More specifically, belonging can be defined as a connection to one’s surrounding systems and feeling like an important part of the environment one lives within (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992). When one feels like he or she belongs, it coincides with being respected, appreciated, and valued.

A key concept I would like to address in regard to relationship building is the notion of “choice.” Sociologist and philosopher Ferdinand Tönnies understood all human relationships and interactions to be a result of human will. He purported that relationships “exist only through the will of the individuals to associate” (Tönnies, 2002, p. 5). Tönnies calls special attention to the fact that the human will can be a result of specific situations. He explained that “a group or a relationship can be willed because those involved wish to attain through it a definite end and are willing to join hands for this purpose, even though indifference or even antipathy may exist on other levels” (Tönnies, 2002, p. 5). This is defined as rational will. The other form of human will, as Tönnies identifies, is that of the natural will. Natural will occurs when the experience of the relationship is the goal in and of itself. I found these two distinctions of will to be applicable to my research of community and belonging among

Victoria's homeless population. The distinction applies to the homeless population because it points to the fact that community among the homeless population downtown is a more "forced" community because of the structure and constrained, shared physical space. As well, homeless individuals lack the monetary funds or means to be able to involve themselves in certain clubs or groups or move to another city where they feel they may be more comfortable and have more freedom. Both of my participants lack the means to choose with whom they surround themselves.

Findings

When I head downtown on Thursday evenings with Socks, I frequent the same area of Victoria's downtown core as well as The Street because that is where a dense population of homeless people gather. As I walk up The Street, the scene is always the same. People are squished together on the sidewalk along the sides of church buildings and against the walls of the homeless shelter, all scraping for a bit of shelter under every and any possible awning. I see people pushing shopping carts, others crouched down on the sidewalk alone, and women standing on street corners. I met my first participant, David, on The Street. He was with a group of people drinking, far away from the section of The Street where the intravenous drug users gather. I met my second participant, Samuel, while he was panhandling by himself on the sidewalk. He was sitting far away from the space occupied by the alcoholics and the intravenous drug users. The environments where I first met each of my participants remain more or less constant in their lives and are the same physical spaces I have continued to meet with them throughout the year.

The first man I interviewed was David. Our interview took place in a homeless shelter he frequents for lunch during the week. I met David in September of 2009 while I was handing out socks on a Thursday evening. Since that day, I have continued to maintain weekly contact with him, and this interaction has proven to be a highlight of my week and his. In my interview with David, I asked him questions regarding his day-to-day life. I wanted to uncover specific details regarding how, and with whom, he spent his time. He told me that his day-to-day activities are filled with "panhandling, drinking, more panhandling. Until [he] [passes] out at night. Then the same thing all over again." David is 50 years old and was born in Saskatchewan. During his time there, he experienced the tragic loss of both his parents as well as his wife. Years afterwards, David got involved in another relationship which ended badly. He explained to me that he ended up in Victoria because he tried to escape the tangled mess his life had become. He told me that he was trying to start a new life for himself. After a good beginning at his new West Coast life, quickly followed by a series of more unfortunate events, he found himself consumed by addiction. He told me:

It was about six years ago when I turned into an alcoholic. I...I broke the crack habit, and ever since then my life started going downhill, downhill. I started losing places. I didn't

care right? Where was my next drink? I just wanted to...I dunno...forget about everything. It was my way of forgetting things.

For David, alcohol was a solution the problem that his life had become. It became a way to numb and forget the pain he had endured. However, as the interview continued, it was made clear to me that his alcoholism served a purpose greater than being able to help him forget. Being an alcoholic enabled David to make a basic connection with other people living on the street. His alcoholism equalled protection. The people he drank with were the people who kept him safe. David explained the situation to me of when he first became homeless: "I met all these people...well about eight years ago when I first moved to Victoria. I met all these people, these street people. They took care of me. All they did was drink too, and that's how I kept up the bad habit of drinking." David had no other options of community, so he was forced to make do; he exerted his rational will (Tönnies, 2002). Technically speaking, David does "belong" in this group because they all share the same addiction and spend their days drinking together on the streets of Victoria. But this is an example of what Tönnies defines as rational will. Essentially, David forged relationships which were available to him for the purpose of protection and safety, and because there was nowhere else, he felt he belonged.

Along with this group of people David technically belongs *with*, he also has a physical space he belongs *in*. This space consists of the various streets, homeless shelters, and services that are available to him. In our interview, David explained to me that he sleeps on the street in places he calls cubby holes. A cubby hole is any alley way or store doorway that provides minimum privacy and some form of protection from wind and rain. I asked David what wakes him up in the morning, to which he responded: "The liquor store (laughs) and the police. The police always wake me up at seven o'clock in the morning. Then I'd have to occupy a couple hours, walk around the streets...mope around. But actually, I think it was about six months ago that The Shelter got the funding to be open at seven in the morning." He explained that when he goes there he is able to "sit and socialize with all the other people that have problems too." He said the downside is that he feels like "Dr. David sometimes though...people keep telling me their problems and stuff like that, so I just open my ears up and listen to them." When I asked him if he ever talks to people and tells them his problems, he responded by saying that he does not. David explained why he holds it inside: "people don't need to be depressed by my problems; they have their own problems, right? I like to keep private, but it's hard sometimes." David's day-to-day life lacks a relationship, or interaction, with a person he feels comfortable enough to confide in. Community for David refers to the people he is constantly surrounded by as a result of a shared physical space on the streets as well as within the buildings of service providers due to similar conditions of life.

My Second participant was Samuel. Samuel is 37 years old and was born in the North West Territories. He moved down to Victoria when he was about 15 or 16 years old. As Samuel talked about his experience of homelessness, he referred to the homeless population with

words such as “them” and “they.” Throughout the interview, it became clear that Samuel did not feel connected to the people who surround him on a day-to-day basis and with whom he has been forced to share the same physical space. I asked Samuel where he slept at night, and he told me that he sleeps downtown outside of a small church. He told me: “I usually find my own place, nice and quiet, away from those sorts of people, ‘cause I know what they’re like...you don’t always want to be around those people, but usually you’re around them every day.” Samuel does not have an addiction to drugs or alcohol; therefore, unlike David, he does not have a group of people he can come together with automatically because of a shared experience. Samuel has Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), and, because of that, he expressed that he finds it very frustrating and difficult to connect with people: “I was born with FASD, so for me, society...I guess it’s hard for me to communicate to society, in a sense that they would even listen...I just need somebody to actually listen. Finding that is the difficult part.” Because of his FASD, Samuel has great difficulty keeping track of the hours of operation of service providers. He is expected to be able to remember so he knows where to get food and where to find an emergency bed if he needs it; however, Samuel just cannot keep track. He has learned to live with these expectations and tends to rely on other people, the “them” he referred to earlier, for information on where to get food or where to find a bed. In terms of relationships in Samuel’s life, he told me about a man named Greg. He feels that Greg is the one person he can relate to. For Samuel, Greg is the one person in his life that he enjoys spending time with because, as Samuel said, he is different from everyone else on the streets:

Sometimes he’ll sit with me, try to pan, and sometimes we’ll just sit and watch the world go by...’ooh, I’d like to be them, nice hat, ooh nice car, ya know? I mean, dreams are dreams you know, but for us...they just don’t come true. It’s like, ah, whatever. We tried, we fought, I’m tired. Whatever, no more fighting. We just wanna...just wanna, I guess, be there. Sometimes it’s almost like waiting to die. That’s a lot of times what it feels like. Death seems more happier than being alive.

This heartbreaking passage is very telling of Samuel’s subjective experience of homelessness and points to an immense lack of community and feelings of belonging. Together, Greg and Samuel experience the desire to belong, and the desire for things to be different from how they are. Samuel chooses to distance himself from the rest of the homeless population while simultaneously feeling a forced distance between himself and the rest of society as a result of feeling like he is unable to communicate his needs, opinions, or feelings. For Samuel, “community” and “belonging” are almost unattainable entities. Similar to David’s lived experience, Samuel has a physical space of belonging in the sense that he sleeps outside a church and has various institutions structuring his life. This space is a result of Samuel choosing to make do, which is a result of the structure of homelessness.

As described above, both of my participants conversed with me regarding how they conceive of belonging, how they spend their time, and how the people who surround them day to day is a result of their efforts to make do with having to share the same physical space. Both participants experienced community in the sense of being in the physical presence of other people because of the structure of the service providers and the physical structure of the downtown environment. Their lifestyles are constantly constrained, but they are each able to cope and make the necessary relationships for survival. Underlying these three themes were comments relating to an overall lack of respect each one felt day to day. They felt like other homeless people did not respect them and that the broader public did not respect them; and this respect is a thing they each desperately desire to experience. Wiseman (1970) quotes one of her participants as he discusses the community atmosphere he lives in: “there is very little permanent buddying up here. They are too afraid and suspicious of each other” (p. 8). Both Samuel and David expressed similar sentiments. Throughout this research, I have learned that loneliness is a major component, or consequence, of living life on the street. And while specific relationships do form in different ways, my participants still articulated that they lack deep, honest relationships with others. In her discussion of skid row alcoholics, Wiseman states that these men are “almost completely without the social anchorages—the personal ties—that most middle-class men take for granted” (p.9). If a person lacks these relationships, and as a result rarely feels loved, respected, or appreciated by the people he or she is surrounded by, how is that person expected to have a sense of community or feel as though he or she truly *belongs*? To describe a common experience discussed by all of my participants, Samuel stated: “a lot of times it’s like, well, the faces you get when you’re on the street, you know? It’s not always ‘I’m sorry for you.’ Sometimes it’s just kind of dirty looks; ‘if I can do it you can do it.’ But hey, I’ve tried, ya know?”

My interviews revealed that diverse circumstances create multiple and varied experiences of community. My participants live very different lifestyles; however, the reality of homelessness forces them to share the same physical space whether they want to or not. Despite the constant close quarters, each of them expressed the desire to have personal space, to create physical distance from the people they see every day (some being able to accomplish this more so than others). This is because they do not feel like they belong. In my own experience, the places where I feel like I belong are the physical spaces and people I choose for myself. The types of relationships I get from this form of belonging are a result of my natural will. David and Samuel do not have this option to choose. They make do with a false structure of “community” and a forced place to “belong.” They essentially grin and bear it and make do with the position they find themselves in. This commonality connects their distinct narratives. Their stories highlight the way in which they each design their personal will around society’s expectations regarding how they are supposed to live their lives. One’s own intentionality to build specific relationships or to create a certain lifestyle can only reach as far as the social

institutions will allow. This points to the extent to which my homeless participants' experience of community and sense of belonging are structurally embedded.

Conclusion

We all have a story to narrate, one which is unique. However, not all of us have the power or means to communicate this narrative. This research project has provided my participants with an avenue to express their own personal narrative of homelessness. I have found that the intentionality of my participants to build relationships and, in essence, create a community of their choosing is limited by proximity. In essence, the extent to which we are free to do what we please is directly correlated to the constraints of our physical location. The notions of community and belonging felt by these individuals are distinctly tailored by the physical and social conditions of the street. My research has revealed valuable information regarding different experiences with, and conceptualizations of, community and belonging among the homeless population in Victoria. In particular, it has revealed that relationships manifest in unique ways according to the specific needs of an individual, whether those needs be, like in David's case, in regard to physical safety or, in the case of Samuel, to finding that one person who could understand and relate to him. Both David and Samuel saw themselves in different positions in relation to other homeless people. Neither one saw himself as belonging or being able to deeply connect to others who shared similar conditions of life. Reading about and understanding the lived reality of homelessness within the constraints of this paper still does not do justice to the lived experiences of my participants. Nonetheless, my study has shown that my participants have needs that run deeper than a roof over their heads or food in their bellies. They have emotional needs to connect to other human beings in deep and meaningful ways. Their needs are unique and based upon their lived experiences as individuals. Through the thoughtful discussions with my participants, I have found that proximity does not equal close, trustworthy, and respectful friendships of one's own choosing. In conclusion, it is my hope that this research has broadened understandings of community and belonging as experienced by those who are homeless in Victoria, British Columbia while simultaneously fostering empathic capacity.

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Contact Information

Kelly Cunningham, from the Department of Sociology, can be reached at kellyc@uvic.ca.

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