

Running head: IMMORAL TREATMENT: A STUDY OF HOMELESSNESS

IMMORAL TREATMENT: A Study of Homelessness
Adam Kilgore, Terri Mason and Kerrie Smith
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

SOCW 333

Mrs. Kathy Purnell, MSW

October 26, 2006

IMMORAL TREATMENT: A Study of Homelessness

INTRODUCTION

Attempting to write this paper in APA style has been at the very least futile due to the personal and emotional impact this assignment has given our group. Perhaps it would be best to consider APA in this case, as A Personal Affect; which is what the persons we interviewed gave.

During our initial group meeting, this assignment seemed as though it was going to be basic research: a simple study of a subsection of the population of Chattanooga, Tennessee. When we left out on our adventure, we had no idea that we would come away from it so personally touched. We took with us, our preconceived ideas about who the homeless were; we went with the intention of sticking with our approved format, which included predetermined questions. The following is what interviewers Adam and Terri, came away with.

HISTORY

Poverty and homelessness have been apart of society from the very beginning. During the sixteenth century in England the vagrants were given housing and trained in a profession instead of being punished. The place in which the vagrants were sent were called bridewells; here the vagrants were trained in a profession. Later during the eighteenth century the bridewells were replaced by workhouses. However, the workhouses were put in place to discourage depending on too much help from the government. Dormitory housing or “Spikes” soon replaced the workhouses. During the 1930’s there were 30,000 people living in the dormitories in England and by the 1960’s the problem had gotten worse. Though, through the “Rough sleepers act” by 2006 there was a great decrease in people on the street from 1000 to around 200.

Though out history there have been an area in each town in which contained the poor and homeless population, from New York’s famous “The Bowery” to “skid row”.

Homelessness went from mostly being men to in 2002 the largest population of homeless people were women and children. The largest cause for homelessness followed by drug and alcohol misuse, serious mental illness and disability, people coming out of foster care, women escaping domestic violence, and people coming out of incarceration. There are those people who make it a personal choice to be homeless or to not have a permanent residence. There is a high cost of housing and rent which causes some people to just not be able to afford housing. Which is why the growing population for homeless is now women and children.

OBSERVATION OF THE COMMUNITY

TERRI

Thankfully, it was a nice day; weather wise. Nearly twenty people sat atop the formed concrete hedge; some smoking, some talking to each other, a couple of men were sleeping, and a few were listening to their radio via headphone/earpiece. There were both, men and women, although the men outnumbered the women ten to one. When we first arrived, both Adam and I sat amidst the regulars, to get a sense of how it would feel to possibly be seen sitting there by passerby's who might know us, and to perhaps give an air of our good intentions. I found no discomfort sitting there, although I realized that I really did not fit in. I did notice how people would stare when they passed by in their fancy cars, and even by those who were in vehicles, which appeared to be just moments from the automobile graveyard. Another thing I noticed was how some of the people who came with donations, would walk past with their head down; avoiding eye contact with those their goods would help. There were others who not only made eye contact, but who spoke with a pleasant voice of familiarity to a few of the Kitchen's patrons.

With the exception of two or three men, I noticed how the members of this particular culture were well groomed, something I had not expected due to my previous limited knowledge

or rather from my uneducated prejudice beliefs. I had always thought that homeless people would be clothed in torn and tattered clothing; just the opposite was true. I struck up a short conversation with the man sitting to my left, who told me he had just gotten out of jail, and furthered my knowledge by explaining the reason for his incarceration; it was as if he needed to explain, or rather to validate the reasons for the actions, which put him behind bars.

Across the street was the Market Restaurant; its outside walls littered with no loitering and restaurant parking only signs: A true validation of who does not and who does belong on that side of the street according to class norms.

ADAM

My experience was similar to that of Terri; however, my experience also had an element of shame. I realized unexpected prejudices and other things about myself of which I was unaware. When Terri and I arrived, I was amazed at how at ease she was with the population we were observing. I found that I was at a loss for words when approaching the population and thankful that Terri was so competent and a little envious as her ability to put the population at ease as well as myself. I was uncomfortable sitting outside of the community kitchen while cars were driving by because I was concerned that the people in the passing cars would think that I was homeless. While Terri was doing her interview I began chatting with a black male who voiced he was 28yrs old, married, and who had used the Kitchen as a support tool in the past. I embarrassed myself when a gentleman coughed behind me and I jumped. To my horror the gentleman that I was chatting with stated “nobody is gonna hurt you” with a smile on his face obvious of my discomfort. Another observation that I did make about the environment that Terri has not mentioned already is that all of the people supported were outside of the kitchen and were not inside. A couple of the people voiced being warm and were trying to get out of the sun.

From a previous experience with the Community Kitchen, I was made aware that the consumers were not allowed to stay inside of the building unless food was being served. I found it surprising to find how congenial and open people were in discussing their lives with me.

THE SUMMARIES

Terri's Comparison and Contrast of the Interview

When comparing interviews, it would appear as though Adam's 'Angel' was in denial of her situation. Although she stated that she could go back home anytime she wanted, it would appear as though her definition of "want" differs drastically from what her parent's wishes are. There seems to be a sense of shame to her condition similar to that of Abraham's, however it differs in that his shame involves not being able to contribute to his family where Angel's shame involves people knowing that she is homeless. I agree with Adam, in that my interview was actually an open conversation, limited only by time, and his interview with Angel was more focused due to her not wanting to go into details. As well, Adam's interview remained focused on the questions we had submitted, where as my interview remained focused on the information Abraham was willing to share.

Adam's Comparison and Contrast of the Interview

I had a very different experience than Terri did. Terri's gentleman was very kind and willing to share and be open about his situation. I found him to be a nice man that I would not have minded sharing time with and talking to about life in general not just the homeless population. Angel seemed angry and unperturbed by her situation. The more she stated how great her life was the sadder I felt for her and the pain I am sure that is just under the surface. I asked Angel if she ever had any contact with her children and she said no and that she did not want to talk about them. That was the first time I saw a crack in her wall. I would have liked to

get to know the true Angel and to truly know who she was and what led her to where she was.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Terri

What I have learned is actually quite disturbing to me personally. I had some preconceived ideas of what homeless people would look like; dirty, ragged clothing, smelly, and riddled with scabs from injuries caused either by other people, or from falling down after a night of Aqua Velva drinking. I also half expected the conversation to be on different levels, with the level from which I stood to be higher. Neither of these expectations came true, nor were they even close to being a reality.

During my conversation with Abraham, I thought how lucky I was to have the opportunity to speak with such a great human being. His words entered my ears with absolutely no consideration of my previous prejudices. Maybe it was because beforehand, I really wanted to be open to the experience, and to let this opportunity teach me what I needed to be taught, or maybe it was Abraham's calm mannerism. When Adam and I first arrived, I took the opportunity to sit alongside this community, to share in the environment. I wanted to feel what it was like to be seen sitting on the wall, to see if I had any feelings of embarrassment. I was a bit amazed at my comfort level; Adam mentioned that he noticed my lack of discomfort. I realized that everything I had previously thought, was an untruth, and that I was about to embark on an amazing learning experience.

After my interview with Abraham, I helped Adam find a homeless woman to which his interview could begin. I went with them inside the kitchen, but felt this incredible urge to go back outside and find out more about these people who sat on the concrete hedge.

He was as big as a house, with arms that could lift buildings. His smile was so genuine

and kind, that I was instantly drawn to him. I did not ask his name, nor did I offer my own, that way, there were not any rules for conversation. He spoke about having just been released from prison. He looked into my eyes, to see if I was going to ask why he was in. I did not; was not any of my business. I think he appreciated not having to get into his past, and not having to consider whether or not I would judge him on his previous actions. We did not talk about the past: just what was, and what is. We laughed several times, about my mistaking a parked car for the one Adam and I had arrived in, and about how by simply holding Adam's keys would be my ticket out of being arrested for appearing to be breaking into a car. He also told me that the only way I was ever really going to know how to help the homeless, was to pack an overnight bag with a change of clothes, a toothbrush and paste, and enter the world of the homeless. He is right, but I am not ready for that step.

Maybe it is, that between these men that I spoke with and myself, there is a connection of being outcasts; the societies damned. Two subgroups of the population to which the larger majority could do very well without: Perhaps it is we can both feel the societal injustices in which we both struggle to survive. Whatever the circumstance, what I received from this experience was a gift; a gift of knowledge and appreciation. A gift that has affected me to my inner core, and will last for the rest of my life; I only hope that these two men received as much from me.

ADAM

I have learned several things from this immersion exercise. The young woman that I was fortunate to interview completely blew all of my preconceived ideas out of the water. Before this immersion assignment, I thought that all homeless people were homeless because they had no other alternatives. I was dumbfounded when Angle shared with me that she has a home to go

anytime she wants to. Angel shared that she could live with her mother if she chose to stop drinking but she stated that she is unwilling to allow her mother to dictate her actions. Another preconceived idea was that the homeless population is miserable living in shelters and lives their lives feeling hopeless. She voiced having no true issues dealing with being homeless and stated that she had a clean bed to sleep in every night, medical care and plenty of food to eat. Her only objection was her having to sit through a church service in the morning. I ask her if she thought that being a woman put her at a disadvantage over being a man, her answer was no that she thought it was an advantage and most of the men were very nice to her. All of the research that I had done prior to the immersion had clearly stated an increased potential of women being raped and/or beaten, as well as how women constantly live in fear.

Angel grew up in a middle class family and had every opportunity to succeed in life. She voiced no history of sexual abuse in her family of origin and stated that she had a happy home. I assumed she would be visibly depressed and might even cry and ask for assistance to get out of her current predicament and would want to use me a resource to get help. On the contrary, she was almost aggressive and most adamant about the fact that she was in control of her own life. She shared her history of domestic violence and the loss of her children it was the only time during our conversation that she even showed the slightest sign of not being in complete control.

Kerrie

Looking over the interviews that were conducted, I learned a great deal and many of the ideas that I had going into this project were changed. I guess It would appear when looking at the homeless population, many tend to blanket them with reasons why they are where they are. Such as being alcoholics, or lazy and not wanting to get a job. People also tend to think that the homeless don't want to move ahead in life and get out of the situation that they find

themselves inhabiting. In reading the interviews, especially the one conducted by Terri, my mind was completely changed on the way I thought about things. I now see that each person has a face and they each have a reason for being where they are.

My thoughts going into this project came from when we had a service project at the community kitchen at Chattanooga State. When I arrived, I saw some men across the street and expecting them to be in rags and unclean, I found them well dressed quite nice looking. In the back of my mind, I wondered what they were doing and why weren't those men looking for a job? They actually sat across the street after breakfast and waited until lunchtime, so that they could come and have the next meal. I suppose if had I personally taken the time to talk to those men and find out their situation, I wouldn't have been so quick to think derogatory things about the men.

Having chosen this population with my group, my eyes have been opened into a world I never really looked at. I wasn't so sure that my mind was going to be changed when we started out. However, from the beginning of the project until now my thoughts on the entire thing have done a complete turn around. Though I wasn't present for the interviews and wish I could have been the way the interviews were described, hearing about them was a very powerful experience on its own.