On the news today: challenging homelessness through participatory action research

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Abstract

Purpose – How can people with lived experience of homelessness actively participate in contesting their marginalisation? The purpose of this paper is to suggest that involving people who are homeless in participatory action research (PAR) is one such strategy. This paper shows that such an approach can have a significant impact on empowering people with direct experience of homelessness to challenge prevailing social discourses, particularly in terms of the way in which the local media presents homelessness as a social issue.

Design/methodology/approach – A PAR approach informed the design, development and dissemination of the study on which this paper is based. Analytically, it is underpinned by Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA). FDA, with its focus on power relations in society, is noted to be particularly useful for analysing local media representations of homeless people.

Findings – The research reported here found that academic practitioners and homeless people can work together to challenge media discourses, which serve to marginalise people affected by homelessness.

Research limitations/implications – The research reported here served to challenge some of the ways in which homeless people are victimized and stigmatized.

Practical implications – The research reported here has the potential to inform future research concerned with understanding media presentations of homeless people. It can be seen as a model for how people affected by a particularly pernicious social issue can contribute to research in ways that go beyond researching for the sake of research.

Originality/value – The research reported here provides evidence of the emancipatory value of research that seeks to bring academic practitioners and homeless people together in a partnership to challenge vital social issues such as the power of the local media to frame understandings of homelessness.

Keywords Media, Participatory action research, Foucauldian discourse analysis, Homelessness, Emancipation, Brighton and Hove

Understanding homelessness

Homelessness can be understood as a moment of extreme crisis for individuals and families (Breese and Feltey, 1996). It is also closely associated with deep social exclusion and profound health inequalities (Breese and Feltey, 1996; Burki, 2010). For example, the average age of death for homeless people is just 47 years old, while the average life expectancy for the general population is 77 years old (Breese and Feltey, 1996; Burki, 2010). Homeless people are eight times more likely to suffer from mental health problems and 35 times more likely to commit suicide (Burki, 2010). Research on homelessness indicates that there is a wide variety of reasons why people become homeless. Relationship breakdown, debt, domestic violence, problematic gambling and experience of institutional care have been identified as risk factors for homelessness (Wright and Tompkins, 2006). This has led Sayce (2002) to suggest that homeless people are among the most marginalised, disempowered and voiceless groups in society.
Homelessness in the UK: how complex is the problem?

Homelessness in the UK has soared by 65 per cent since 2010 (Barker, 2017). More than 300,000 people in Britain – equivalent to one in every 200 – are officially recorded as homeless or living in inadequate homes (Shelter, 2017). The year-on-year rise in homelessness has coincided with a period of sustained welfare reform under the Coalition government and (2010-2015) Conservative administrations (2015-2018). The current age of austerity has been termed “radical fiscal retrenchment”. The consequence of this is that housing and welfare spending has fallen to its lowest level in over 60 years (Nevin and Leather, 2012).

According to the Rough Sleeping Statistics England – Autumn (2016), in Autumn 2015 there was a total of 4,134 rough sleepers estimated in England. This number is up 565 (16 per cent) from the autumn 2015 total of 3,569. London had 964 rough sleepers in 2015, which is 26 per cent of the national figure. Brighton, the site of the research reported here, has similarly witnessed a steady rise in homelessness (The Brighton and Hove City Council: Homelessness Strategy 2014-2019, 2014). More particularly, Brighton and Hove City Council sees approximately 4,500 people a year and gives advice and assistance in an effort to resolve housing-related problems. Nearly 1,000 people receive a case prevention/casework service, and a further 1,000 people make a homeless application each year (The Brighton and Hove City Council: Homelessness Strategy 2014-2019, 2014). The city’s street services teamwork with more than 1,000 cases each year – this equates to 20 rough sleepers’ every week. Nevertheless, in November 2015, a snapshot of a single night estimated 78 people were sleeping rough in Brighton & Hove (Brighton and Hove Sleeping Rough Strategy, 2016).

In the news today: reframing homelessness frames

An established research literature exists on the role played by the media in framing homelessness as a social issue (Caeiro and Gonçalves, 2015; Devereux, 2015; Hodgetts et al., 2006; Schneider, 2011). Critical scholars have argued that mainstream media accounts are often incomplete, misleading and driven by political agenda (Caeiro and Gonçalves, 2015; Devereux, 2015; Hodgetts et al., 2006; Schneider, 2011). The effect of this is essentially twofold. One the one hand, homeless people are rendered passive and/or disruptive. On this theme, Chauhan and Foster (2014) have observed that newspapers not only provide a platform for informing readers but also foment public understanding of often complex, and sometimes divisive, social issues. The media has the power to frame contested events in society into easily digestible narratives for public consumption (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Iyangar, 1991). Going further Chauhan and Foster (2014) contend that such media accounts largely fail to give critical consideration to the wider political economy of homelessness. Consequently, blame is shifted away from socio-economic factors and towards the imputed moral failings of people who are homeless. Bruce and John (2012) make a similar point in the observation that society categorises people who are homeless as no longer “useful” and “functional” members of their community because they are seen as people who do not actively work and support their communities (Bruce and John, 2012).

Hodgetts et al. (2005) point out that the media’s framing of homelessness relies on simple, one-dimensional and stereotypical characterisations of homeless people, in situations that fit public expectations, and do not draw on facts. Homeless people are encouraged to conform to their ascribed stereotype (Hodgetts et al., 2005). As such, the media works to frame homeless people according to “what they lack”, rather than their capabilities and aspirations (Wright, 2000). Lyon-Callo (2000) argues that these dominant discursive practices encourage homeless people to learn to look within themselves, and not to wider social relations and economic forces, for the cause (and continuation) of their homelessness. Central to such discursive practices is an absence of space for homeless people to speak beyond such frames and constructed roles (Caeiro and Gonçalves, 2015; Devereux, 2015; Hodgetts et al., 2006). Hodgetts et al. (2005) note that the lack of engagement with homeless people on their own terms raises important questions as to whose needs are being met.

This paper asks: how can people experiencing homelessness contest their marginalisation? It approaches this task by first arguing that homelessness ought to be explored through an
approach that goes beyond the generation of new knowledge. It then advances from the position that research into homelessness is best informed through working collaboratively with people with lived experience of homelessness. Such an approach can, for instance, begin to challenge the way in which homeless people are discursively positioned as passive objects of avoidance and marginalisation (Crane and Warnes, 2001) through engaging in the research process as co-researchers. This paper concludes by suggesting that involving people who have direct experience of homelessness in participatory action research (PAR) has the potential to challenging normative understandings of homelessness.

Home Sacer: critiquing the frames

Homelessness in the context of austerity-led welfare reforms involves more than concepts of accommodation and pathways in or out of homelessness. Seen in this way, a homeless person in the contemporary political climate can be understood through reference to the concept of the “Homo Sacer” (the “accused man”) in Roman law. Homo Sacer is a person who is banned from Roman society and may be killed by Roman citizens and slaves, but may not be sacrificed in a religious ritual having been deemed impure for such ends. Therefore, one may argue that homeless people in the context of austerity politics are comparable to the Homo Sacer – i.e. a group who are punished by political practices and silenced from the political arena (Agamben, 1998; Bullen, 2015; Foucault, 1979; Kingfisher, 2007; Scanlon et al., 2008). Homeless people are moulded by forms of disciplinary power, which operate through political discourse, and thus serve to reinforce existing social arrangements (Agamben, 1998; Bullen, 2015; Foucault, 1979; Kingfisher, 2007).

In a widely discussed theoretical-infused paper, Scanlon (2008) posed a challenge to practitioners, academics and policymakers to reframe the philosophical basis of their work with marginalised communities. This is particularly relevant and important given that recent welfare reforms in the UK have served to further stigmatise and marginalise vulnerable groups such as homeless people. Taking-up this challenge the research reported here adopted PAR in an effort to challenge the way in which the local media in Brighton and Hove framed homelessness (Bruce and John, 2012; Groot and Hodgetts, 2012; Harvey, 2010; Kingfisher, 2007; Patrick, 2014). This paper demonstrates how PAR can enable academic practitioners and people affected by homelessness to act together to disrupt and problematise discourses of marginalisation. Importantly, PAR is a holistic approach that seeks to reclaim meaning and transform knowledge and understanding from the ground-up.

Methods

Participants

Ethical approval was received from Brighton University. The research team was recruited from Emmaus Brighton & Hove via a link created through a previous project with University of Brighton Community University Partnership Programme. Emmaus was clear about their involvement in this project. Emmaus offered a space for the meetings. Emmaus provides a unique and innovative solution to homelessness. The Community provides companionship, a place to live and work. The first Emmaus Community was founded in Paris, in 1949, by Father Henri-Antoine Groués, better known as Abbé Pierre. Emmaus had been established in France for 40 years before it came to the UK in the early 1990s (De Oliveira, 2015). No two Emmaus communities are the same – each has its own distinct personality and provides a set of services which meet the needs of its local area.

Emmaus Brighton & Hove was contacted about the possibility of recruiting people for research about homelessness. The community leader read the research recruitment blurb to the community. Following this, three people expressed an interest in participating in this study. A meeting was arranged to discuss research ideas and the research process. It was during this meeting that the participants were invited to become co-researchers. The main outcome of the meeting was that the participants wanted to challenge the misrepresentation of homeless people by the local newspaper, The Argus. The co-researcher team featured two British citizens and one European citizen. All the co-researchers’ noted that the cause of their homelessness was relationship breakdown, and all the participants were in their 30s or 40s.
Procedure

The co-researchers had power to direct the research from its early stages through to the writing up stage (Freire, 1970). The research team, formed by a research student and the three co-researchers from Emmaus, met weekly over a ten week period in the Autumn of 2015. In these meetings, the research team discussed homelessness for 30 minutes, and after that, the research team worked for up to two hours on a folder of arts which included paintings, photography and poetry. The research team wanted to recruit more experienced artists to support the group to enhance their art skills in preparation for the art exhibition. Two third-year art students from the University of Brighton were recruited as volunteers through the School of Arts to support the group. The art students met with the group for eight weeks helping the group to explore their art folder. The art students told the research team that they wanted to be part of the discussions about homelessness and the research team not only accepted them to take part in the debate but also asked the art students if they would like to be part of the research team. The art students were admitted and joined the research team. The research team was interested in learning a method of social science inquiry to challenge the local newspaper misrepresentation of homelessness.

The research team discussed possible methods for analysing the newspaper article such as thematic analysis, narrative analysis, Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) and phenomenological interpretative analysis. The group decided on a method focussed on the power of language. In this case, the research team decided on FDA as it is a method that provides a framework for challenging the power and the construction of passive subjects. The group was interested in learning about FDA, and during a two period the group met after the art classes for one and half hours to discuss FDA. A Senior Lecturer at the University of Brighton was invited by the research team to mediate one seminar session. This session provided an opportunity for people who might not otherwise have had the chance to learn about and use a scientific method of analysis. This process effectively brought the research team into being.

PAR: challenging marginalising narratives preparation

This PAR used the conventional cycle process of action research approach of planning-acting-observing-reflecting (Brydon-Miller, 2004; Best, 2010). First, the research team planned to challenge the local media representation of homelessness by using art as a mean of bringing the community together and through that present to the community the FDA on the local newspaper’s article. Second, the research team acted by challenging the issue and presenting homelessness from their point of view to people with lived experience to the local community (Hodgetts and Groot, 2012; Johnsen et al., 2008). Finally, the team reflected on ill frames of homelessness and its impact on the local community. It was agreed from a process of open dialogue and debate that an art exhibition could help the local community develop a deeper understanding of homelessness and homeless people’s lives (Hodgetts and Groot, 2012). This project enabled the co-researchers involved to gain and enhance their artistic skills by allowing the engagement of different actors with distinct skill-set. Throughout the facilitation classes where art skills were shared, the research team collectively selected the media that they wanted to use in the exhibition (Plate 1). The research team shared techniques on collage, photography, acrylic painting and poetry.

Regarding empowerment, in a PAR approach, it is essential that the co-researchers have the opportunity to learn and to develop long-lasting skills. As one of the co-researcher noted:

This is an amazing project, isn’t it? I never thought I would learn to all this with cool people, right? My art will be displayed at the café for two weeks and we are going to have a private viewing that is so nice. We had a difficult time in the past and now we have the opportunity to show our work to others [Sic].

Exhibition

After weeks of preparation, the art exhibition consisted of 15 pieces of art produced by the research team, which taken together set out to explore homelessness. The artwork produced by the research team was displayed at the Brighthelm community Café in the city centre of Brighton for
two weeks in August (Plate 2). The research team designed and produced a flyer for the event named visual arts PAR. The brochure was distributed in various locations in Brighton such as community centres, universities, local council and, cafes. The art exhibition had a private viewing where the community, the local media and many stakeholders where invited to attend. In total, over 500 people saw the art display at the Brighthelm Café, and 51 people attended the private viewing. There were a diverse set of people attending the private viewing with a wide range of professions ranging from CBT trainee, housing manager, psychologist and students from the University of Brighton and the University of Sussex (Plate 3). The research team produced a mural with factual information about homelessness in the UK. The mural was meant to complement the artwork by informing the viewers on the issue. The wall provided context to those viewing the exhibition. Also, the mural included the discourse analysis produced by the research team where the team investigated and challenged how the media, at times, construct homeless people in Brighton.

In the news: perpetuating stories

This paper was a media report of homeless people in Brighton.

Seafront homeless camp moves on

*HOMELESS people who pitched tents on Brighton’s seafront have moved on.

The tents were spotted on Max Miller Walk, above Madeira Drive, last Thursday (19 June). Passers-by reported seeing people urinating on the floor and spitting down on to Madeira Drive. Brighton and Hove City Council investigated reports of many rough sleepers camping along the seafront and said yesterday the numbers were exaggerated. A council spokesperson added: “The city does experience individuals camping in unauthorised places including the seafront. We are grateful for the support and intelligence of the local business community. While we aim to deal swiftly with acts of antisocial behaviour, our actions also reflect the fact that we are also often dealing with vulnerable people with health, mental health and substance abuse problems. “We are keeping the situation under review including stepping up patrols and prosecution where required and practical” (The Argus, 2014).
The research team met to reflect on the entire process and write a critical reflection of the PAR process. It set out to ask what forms of participation and action research are effective. With this in mind, the research team was delighted with the result of the art exhibition. The research team was pleased by the level of critical dialogue with the local community created by the exhibition. The display encouraged people to critically engage with the issue of homelessness. Also, it also challenged some of the misunderstandings that people had about homelessness in the UK.

A particular strength of the project resided in the fact that it was participatory from the planning to the reflection. For example, all the research team got tangible outcomes out of this process such as learning about FDA, enhancing their art and organisational skills by organising an exhibition with space to co-generate knowledge. The research team noted that bringing people to discuss a topic like homelessness is not a simple task. There was a corresponding recognition that art can play a mediating role in critical dialogue. However, it is important to note that it was a small project and the overall impact was limited. This project achieved its aims of raising awareness about the lived reality of homelessness and to challenge negative media
constructions through the use of FDA. The research team through the use of art acted to demonstrate that homelessness is a topic that needs to be reframed, so as to capture and reflect its complexity. The research team also challenged how the media discursively portrays homeless people in Brighton. The local media wrote an article about it entitled “Exhibition to counter negatives attitudes towards the homeless” (The Argus, 2015). That report presented a more accurate view of homelessness, and the local media itself changed to some extent its opinions on the issue as a result of the research (see extract below):

“The exhibition and he’s talk to us has definitely had an impact. I’ve always been an artist. My main passion is letter work but I am apprenticing as a tattooist now. Making furniture and tattooing are what I want to be doing when I leave here.” and “I accidentally came across Emmaus when I was looking around to see what I could do in terms of volunteering. I really liked their ethos because it’s not just about homelessness here. You earn your way through life at Emmaus, which is what I believe everybody should do” (The Argus, 2015).

The research achieved its primary aim, which was to challenge the misrepresentation of homelessness by the local media. It also provided the co-researchers with a voice in the local community. The research team further noted that the research challenged the media’s perception of homelessness. It opened a space for reflection such as if someone has experienced homelessness for three months, is that three months their life? What about the 40 years beforehand? What about what their previous contribution to society? The research team also reflected on how empowering it was to challenging marginalisation and test the usefulness of PAR as an active approach in enabling seemly powerless individuals and groups to contest seemly powerful institutions such as the media. There is a need for future participatory to scrutinise media based narratives on public policies. There is also a need to for “experts by experience” to scrutinise local and national policies in an effort to ensure that it is better informed and relevant to the needs of people affected by homelessness. Furthermore, Breeze and Dean (2012) have pointed out that homelessness charities regularly use stereotypical images in their fundraising, focussing on the arresting issue of rough sleeping as opposed to other, more widespread experiences of homelessness such as couch surfing. There is, then, a need for more participatory and collaborative research aimed at scrutinising how organisations that are meant to help homeless people are in actual fact legitimising homeless people’s marginalisation and exclusion (Breeze and Dean, 2012).
FDA: the co-production of knowledge

To explore the way in which the local media framed homelessness and homeless people, the research team wanted a method of analyses that was useful to investigate and to challenge local media framed homelessness and homeless people. FDA was chosen for this research because FDA is an epistemological, social constructionist method of qualitative inquiry concerned with interrogating the role of language in the construction of genealogies and archaeology that form a subject (Foucault, 1970, 1994, 1998, 2002). According to Foucault, genealogy is a method of deconstruction of history previously seen as usual and natural. It aims to enable a critic to challenge whether such constructions are normal and natural (Foucault, 1970, 1994, 1998, 2002). The focus of FDA is on the purpose of language in constructing subjects framed and restricted through power relations validated and legitimised by social practices. For example, Foucault (1990) in the History of Sexuality argues that sex is perceived as healthy and natural only in a heterosexual discourse. Thus, other forms of sexuality are constructed as abnormal when compared to the dominant heterosexual discourse. Foucault goes on to link this with forms of institutional power that validates which sexual practices are legal and which sexual practices are not permitted in society. Thus, FDA is a method that helps to investigate how acts are validated, maintained and legitimised in society. Discourse can restrain, frame and limit the action of social subjects. Importantly, though, discourse constructs ways to understand the world (Willig, 2008). Indeed, prevailing discourses privilege those versions of reality that legitimise standing power relations and social structures. The research reported here challenges on a micro scale such prevailing practices in regards to media framing of people experiencing homelessness in Brighton and Hove.

Discussion and conclusion

The original contribution of this research is the involvement of people with experience of homelessness in methodology. The research team used FDA to analyse an article titled “Seafront homeless camp moves on”, taken from the local newspaper, The Argus. The FDA followed Willig’s six steps guide to FDA discursive construction, discourses, action orientation, positioning practice and subjectivity (Willig, 2008). The newspaper article constructed homeless people as a group of people who consciously moved to a location where homeless people supposedly had no right to occupy or be in, namely, the seafront in Brighton (lines 1-2). The article served to frame homeless people as people with limited right to be occupy specific places in the city. The article does not give an account of any literature or any context to homelessness in Brighton. A background would enable the reader to position the issue and to have a better understanding of homelessness in the city. The article contends that homeless people have fewer rights to use public spaces especially public spaces that make them visible, this raises another established conversation about visibility (Lyon-Callo, 2000).

The news article states that homeless people are camping in an unauthorised place. It constructs of marginalisation and a struggle for survival as camping and reduces exclusion and a disempowerment to leisure activity (line 8) (Agamben, 1998; Bullen, 2015; Foucault, 1979; Kingfisher, 2007; Scanlon et al., 2008). The article simplistically constructs a scene of the homeless as uneducated and anti-social capable of an un-civilised behaviour, which is a form of dehumanisation (line 4). The article is constructing a clear discourse that action to combat that scene of the un-civilised act is needed (Agamben, 1998; Bullen, 2015; Foucault, 1979; Kingfisher, 2007; Scanlon et al., 2008). The article constructed homeless people at the seafront as a motive of public concern without providing a context in which people end up living on the streets and in open spaces (lines 5-6). The article does not give numbers for what it perceives to be an adequate number of homeless people at the seafront. This discourse acts to position people that the seafront is not a place to be occupied by the homeless and thereby encourages a positioning that intensifies the marginalisation of homeless people. The article quotes a council spokesperson about the importance of businesses in monitoring the homeless people at the seafront (Agamben, 1998; Bullen, 2015; Foucault, 1979 and Kingfisher, 2007).

The article uses a council spokesperson as a mechanism of power and validation (lines 9-12). The council is policing homeless people and the physical environment. The news article does not mention of support to people but an administrative maintenance of the issue which legitimises the marginalisation of people experiencing in the city (Cloke et al., 2010). The article does not quote a homeless person or an organisation that works with homeless people, which produces a
problematic, uneven and imbalanced account of the event. That is, the homeless people are not given a space to voice their side of the story. Also, the quote from the council spokesperson to some extent constructs homeless people as anti-social and deviates even though they are being oppressed and marginalised blaming them and not the political and social structures of society for not acting to end homelessness (lines 14-22). The council spokesperson does not offer an evidence-based solution for that complex social problem. This act leads to a normative view that homeless people should be in places that they cannot be seen, and the homeless people should not be visible. Also, instead of offering policies, the council spokesperson makes a point that the situation was under review with increased patrols and persecution (lines 23-24). That is, the article constructs homeless people as criminals who need to be punished for their acts. The article does not give the humanised account of people’s experience using its power to communicate to construct a discourse of criminality. The subjectivity emerging from such discourse influences people reading that paper to think of homeless people as people who should not be in certain places. It misses the opportunity to inform people about homelessness as a complex social issue (Agamben, 1998; Bullen, 2015; Foucault, 1979 and Kingfisher, 2007).

To summarise, this research worked with people with experience of homelessness to interrogate the impacts of the dehumanising framing of homeless people by the local media. The impact of this study can be seen in the way in which it allowed people impacted by a social issue to collaborate on a research project that allowed the local community to engage an open a dialogue. This work was vital a resource in allowing homeless people to challenge processes of victimisation and stigmatisation (Crane and Warnes, 2001). As the research reported here indicates, people who have direct experience of homelessness are not passive objects of avoidance and marginalisation but critical agents of transformation and dialogue. The article has sought to demonstrate the emancipatory potential of a PAR to challenge critically the power of the media to (mis)represent marginalised groups.

References


Further reading


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