

Conducting a walking interview to explore pathways out of persistent and recurrent homelessness

Keywords: walking interview, participatory methods, homelessness, place, identity.

Abstract

This paper suggests walking interview methodology offers a valuable tool to explore the social phenomenology of homelessness, especially biographies of periods of liminal identity and transition. The method takes seriously the embodied, relational and visual components of attuning to personal narratives, made possible in a shared and leisurely journey to places of biographical significance. It also considers the relevance of the researcher's subjective position in terms of auto/biographical reflection and the issues of power pertinent to researching marginalised communities.

Introduction

My interest in studying the phenomenology of homelessness was born from a decision, taken five years ago, to leave a fulltime academic role in order to spend half my week volunteering with a grassroots community organisation responding to homelessness in my neighbourhood.

In April 2014, several small charities in Newham joined together to tackle rising levels of street homelessness and try to meet the needs of those living with multiple deprivations. They formed *The Purpose and Belonging Project*. The lead charity was *Bonny Downs Community Association* (BDCA). This new alliance launched a day centre for local people experiencing homeless called *NewDay*. In an unusual step, they based their project in a sports pavilion, with access to a playing field and community garden. They began with only two part-time, grant-funded posts, but were quickly awarded a commission from the Department for Work and Pensions 'Flexible Support Fund'. The key distinctive of *NewDay* is its ethos of respectful, long-term relationships and holistic practices that re-establish connection to place and neighbourhood. These practices are homespun: gardening, cooking, communal eating, participating in sports, offered alongside advocacy and skills-building. They adopt an asset-based methodology and, most importantly, offer a community to belong to. I have volunteered in this project for five years. I clearly have an emotional investment in any research that might come out of this period. I am also acutely aware of the power differentials between myself as a volunteer and an academic, and those accessing the project's services. The themes of power and emotion were prevalent in my decision to conduct formal research at *NewDay*. Letherby suggests this is unavoidable,

'All research is an auto/biographical practice, an intellectual activity that involves a consideration of power, emotion and P/politics' (Letherby, 2014:1-2)

That said, might my involvement in the project produce ‘accountable knowledge’? (Cotterill and Letherby 1993, Letherby 2003, Katz Rothman 2007). When researching marginalised communities. Kamala Visweswaren argues that the key question is, ‘whether we can be accountable to people’s own struggles for self-representation and self-determination’ (Visweswaren, 1988:39). My growing confidence to bring activism and academia together rested largely on the possibility that this research might elicit co-produced, accountable knowledge, of a type which might benefit *NewDay* and inform the broader conversation about successful transition. That said, I needed to determine which methodological practices best serve this end.

Reflexive Practice and settling on a methodology

A good deal of reflexive practice took place in order to settle on a walking method. The concept of ‘reflexivity’ has been central to recent academic discussions of knowledge production (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Subramani speaks of ‘reflexive moments’ in her doctoral study, when the researcher turns their gaze upon the practice of research itself:

Who practises ‘it’; what the research is ‘on’; and what the researcher’s agenda ‘is’? Each researcher embarks on their reflexive journey by giving significance to what they think is crucial to their research (Subramani, 2019: 1)

I experienced such ‘moments. I began with the supposition that I would conduct my research using mainly participatory methods. These are part of a broader concern to research everyday life with ‘close’ and ‘sympathetic consideration’ (Stanley and Wise, 1993:2). Participatory methods are also fundamentally an expression of epistemology, addressing the question of how knowledge relates to the process and products of particular methodological approaches (Stanley and Wise, 2002; Letherby et al 2013).

I began my research by asking the community at *NewDay* if they would like to help me better understand the experience of homelessness. Having received a significant expression of interest, I began with focus groups, asking for insights the participants felt were important. I gathered primary data from six formal groups - three a mixture of staff and volunteers and three with project members, all conducted over the period of one year.

There were positives and negatives. The unstructured nature of the conversations went some way to the co-production of knowledge; many of the homeless participants told me what I should be asking. I was finding ways to listen attentively and settled on a narratological or ‘storied’ approach (Thomas and Dittmar, 1995: 498). I hoped that levels of trust I had built might allow the voices of some of the

victims of a national crisis to be heard, and highlight the valuable wisdom accrued by a small community project. The stories gathered were very particular – they came from one community's response and the narratives of a few dozen people. I was to become more yet committed to particularity when I decided to shift my data collection method to an extended walking interview.

Subramani (2019:2) claims, reflexivity demystifies the moral and epistemological stances of both the study and researcher. I had a 'reflective moment' where the negative aspects to my chosen method to date became apparent. Having never experienced street homelessness, I am clearly an 'outsider'; but as Arthur (2010) suggests, the 'insider / outsider' dichotomy is overly simplistic and a researcher's identity can shift positions, a process which takes place within a matrix of power. I began to understand that as a long-term volunteer I had become a 'partial inbetween', a trusted outsider. However, my new subjective position, as a formal researcher, reshaped interactions with participants. The power differential was more apparent: *How* had I listened? What had gone unsaid?

I further intuited that deeper insights could be gained from sustained attention given to the theme of *place* prevalent in the narratives. Had the *place* we talked shaped the answers given? I live in the same small neighbourhood as the *NewDay* project; I travel through the same physical space as those who are homeless. We shared place; albeit with very different interactions and potentially divergent understandings of these sites. This was to be an important factor in deciding to adopt an extended walking interview. I was looking for a method which would further the co-production of knowledge, limit my privileged position and would pay greater attention to the theme of 'place'. I needed to be taken to the spaces and places which had been part of the narratives – as a guest rather than a guide.

Why walk?

Walking to undertake social research has a long history within participatory methods, especially when considering issues of migration and marginalisation, and has been particularly valuable in interrogating the notion of borders (O'Neill, 2019). Moreover, O'Neill (2019) points out,

Borders can also be internal[ised] and walking is a powerful route to understand the lived experiences of others as well as eliciting rich phenomenological material.

The data collected from focus groups identified the precarious navigation from an identity based on affiliation with a 'culture of homelessness' to another based on belonging to a settled community.

This theme might be well explored through walking between sites where identity had been created, disturbed, precariously held and finally internalised.

There is a fundamental difference between sitting and talking and moving to intentional places as you do so. All conversations can be powerful experiences of communication, but its embodied nature suggests that putting your body in a certain place will affect what is shared and heard. Walking to specific sites, as O'Neill (2019) says, is a way to "become 'attuned' to another, [to] connect in a lived embodied way with the feelings and corporeality of another." This is surely partly due to how memories are triggered corporeally (O'Neill and Hubbard, 2010). Intentionally setting out to enable this to happen sets the walking method apart from a routine experience of walking. It allows focussed attention to the sensual and relational aspects of being together in a place as you talk: senses trigger memories; the relational connection allows for deeper insight. It is a valuable method to unlock biography. To this extent, the 'Walking Interview as a Biographical Method (WIBM)' has become recognised as a formal methodology, with growing appreciation among many researchers focussing on community issues (O'Neill, 2019). It is part of a broader movement to investigate urban contexts, through 'mobilities' (Smith and Hall 2016; Roy 2016; Ferguson 2016).

In terms of exploring liminal identity, the walking interview has distinct advantages. It encourages reflection on how a person felt at a previous time in a certain place, and how they feel about themselves today and how a place has been part of their navigation through identities. This was evident in Dean's walking interview which took place over a period of almost seven hours on one day – stopping at sites which were important in Dean's story: places where he had slept rough; the community centre where he had first reached out for support; the church building where he slept as part of a volunteer-run winter night shelter and where he became a 'tea angel'; the sports pavilion where he joined in many of the offers from the *NewDay* project, primarily again as a volunteer himself. We later visited his new flat, where he had finally settled into a new way of living and a new identity away from the streets.

A Walking Interview with Dean

According to Somerville, 'although pathways out of homelessness appear to be more clearly patterned than pathways into homelessness, they are less well understood' (2013:409).

I accompanied Dean, a 56-year-old man with over five years' connection to *NewDay* on a journey to significant places in his story. In each location Dean told me what each place meant to him;

discussions of place correlated with shifts in identity which made transition possible (correlating to the findings of May, 2000).

Dean was made homeless through a 'perfect storm' of his wife's worsening mental illness, the loss of one of their children to the care system, spiralling substance addiction, his own mental illness and unmanageable debt. During his initial breakdown he spent three months in a psychiatric unit in an unfamiliar part of London. On release he was sent to the "wrong housing office". He remembers having "just one set of clothes and my PJs in a bag". Turned away from the building he rang friends and acquaintances and one of them took him in. This kindness meant that Dean had been lost to the rehousing process and began many years 'sofa surfing' between friends' homes, time "AWOL" on the streets and eventually five years of sustained rough sleeping. He suffered with undiagnosed PTSD. He took loans from 'loan sharks to repay friends. They took his back card; any benefits he received went directly to them, and still the debt was spiralling – reaching £12,000. As he told me his story Dean took me to where he slept rough for five years. The fondness in his remembrance of that place was striking:

It was nice. It was very nice. It felt homely because there's an overhang here, see, so you stay dry. I didn't need a tent like some poor blokes in the park. I had my sleeping bag. I never begged but people would get to know me and bring me coffee and smokes. [five years of rough sleeping] It flew by. It was wonderful. I would watch the college kids turn out in the evening and think 'Here I am.' Calm. It was like I disconnected but I was coming to terms with where I was at. I think it's what I needed. I started to get a peace of mind... People probably thought I needed help. But I was idle. I couldn't look at making choices. I didn't want anything to do with it all.

The emotions recalled in that site helped me to understand what this place had meant in a way that I had not previously appreciated; a way I could not have understood without listening to Dean in that specific context.

Dean then took me to the places where he began to reconnect to mainstream society. Each of these sites networked 'offers' through the *NewDay* programme. His story was of a long, tentative journey to begin working through his problems. It was clear that 'homelessness' for Dean was far more than 'rooflessness'. It had become both a retreat from problems he was not able to face and an identity through which he could disconnect and, at times, elicit

the kindness of strangers. But it had also trapped him in spiralling poverty, robbed him of his health and had become increasingly isolating.

Dean showed remarkable insight and a disarming level of honesty. He shared a whole life story, not just the experience of homelessness. Somerville (2013) argues that we need a 'multidimensional and storied' approach which considers 'the whole life of the homeless person, rather than just at selected episodes of rooflessness' (2013:384). Homelessness is multi-faceted experience: it is physiological (lack of bodily comfort and warmth); emotional (lack of love or joy); territorial (lack of privacy); ontological (lack of rootedness in the world, anomie) and spiritual (lack of hope and purpose) (2013:384). People who are homeless will experience each dimension differently. Dean's recollection of rough sleeping is a good case in point. The experience of being disconnected from social responsibility and occasional random acts of kindness outweighed the negative physiological or territorial aspects of rooflessness. In fact, emotionally and ontologically, Dean recalls these years as positive – as 'giving him space'. Only when problems with debtors compounded his situation did he begin to seek ways to move away from the streets. Eventually a friend brought him into the BDCA community centre – but not to a homeless project, to an elders' group, and not directly to access support or advice.

I was getting into a cycle with not having money and the debt going up and up.
People here offered me meals, but I said no. I was foolish. I didn't want pity. But they let me just hang out. It was mostly old people. They were very understanding.

We then went walked to the church building around the corner. The building hosts the winter night-shelter, community meal and foodbank. It has a bench in the garden where we sat because it was significant to Dean and I asked him to explain what this place meant.

This is a 'home place' too. I walked in and I was the bottom of the barrel. They gave me a bag of grub...I felt humility. I think these people are stunning. The help they give people. I thought if they are doing this, I can do this. It put me in perspective.

Dean became a volunteer on the second week he went to the project.

I became the 'tea angel'. That's what they call me here

Parsons' (2017) consideration of liminal identities is relevant in Dean's recollection. His transition from an identity based on homelessness was aided by becoming a 'tea angel'. He had navigated through a period of liminal identity. The precarious journey was made more possible because he was immediately allowed to perform acts of 'commensality' (Parsons, 2018). Parsons and Pettinger (2017) describe 'foodways', everyday social practices around food and meals, as playing an important role in transition in their case-study at a homeless centre. Dean's role as a 'tea-angel' was a tool of empowerment and resistance against his identity as a 'homeless person'.

Still street-sleeping, Dean stepped up his volunteer responsibilities collecting donated food. He secured the agreement of a local bakery to donate their unsold items. He asked another homeless man to help him make twice weekly collections.

Me and J – we became the 'trolley dollies'. We did that rain or snow. It was the right thing to do. People would say, 'why are you doing this, you are homeless yourself?' but I wasn't discontent. And people know me now. They know my trolley. I would make some stop-offs to the other men [rough-sleeping] and I'd put a 'cheesecake' through A's door for her husband [A is the project manager] and then I had the keys to this building [the church] so I can drop my trolleys off for Wednesday.

After several year's affiliation with the foodbank, Dean eventually accepted an invitation to join the night-shelter and spent six weeks sleeping in church buildings across the borough, moving between venues and meeting with a support worker to assess his needs. He described the spiritual meaning he took from sleeping under the wooden cross in the church building we were visiting. He couched his recollections in terms of 'knowing things would be OK' and 'having time to try and pull it all together'. Dean describes himself as always having had a personal faith. The night-shelter became a significant time of transition.

I just stayed here and slept under this cross and I'd feel peace. I'd stay awake and think 'it's all going to be OK' then I did my usual things in the day. I did my work with the tea and the trolleys... J [his advocate] he's a diamond. He is a good man. He did not rush me. He knew I had a lot going on in my head. That's what we do here. We give people time. We welcome everyone. It's about being here for people.

Dean's use of 'we' to describe the service provision and ethos of the project is noticeable. There was no sense that he was a 'service-user' in his account. He couched his relationships in terms of community affiliation. After five years of street homelessness Dean was surprised to hear that he had secured accommodation locally.

I didn't know I was getting it. I was stunned. Seven years of not having my own place. Everyone else was so pleased but I didn't know what to think.... but it's only a bus ride away though...they sorted me out carpets and bought me a new fridge. The flat was just a shell...I felt so isolated. I made the mistake to stay in and sit in the quiet. Big mistake. My brain started to tick over too fast and invent things. It sounds stupid to you, and I don't tell people this, but a few times I went back to sleep back at the library. It was the shock of having my own place. I could not cope. I needed to get out and away. I go AWOL sometimes. It's happened a couple of times...now I'm over it

Through careful narratological methodologies, McNaughton (2008) postulates two pathways within homelessness: downward 'spirals of divestment passages' and upward 'integrative passages' (2008:91). 'Divestment passages' include practices undertaken to numb trauma, such as drug use, which end up increasing the risk of further trauma. These lead to a downward trajectory; usually to crisis points of rehab, hospital admittance or death. The second pathway is an 'integrative passage'- a long, upward process, often marked by 'flip-flopping' between integrative and divestment passages. McNaughton (2008) explores the potential for services designed to assist homeless people to be complicit in the cycle between upward and downward spirals. For example, those lacking the resilience to cope in hostel accommodation can respond with 'edgework' such as drug taking within the hostel, be expelled and spiral back down into homelessness. Integrative passages are fraught with danger. Dean speaks of his 'flip-flopping behaviour' with a level of self-awareness. He went on to describe how, in time, he came to settle into more sustained 'integrative process.' I prompted Dean about what had helped him settle:

I have these jobs I do here. I get up and out every morning. Though now I listen to the morning chorus first. I can sit quiet now. Peace and quiet. But I've been ill, and in and out of hospital. I'm getting back my rounds [collecting food] and I still make tea... I'd been away, everyone had been asking after me. When I came back it was 'Good! Now put the kettle on!' ... We do our [food] collections and chill out here. And

everyone walking by, look, like that person, they all look out for me, they all know me here.

Ravenhill (2008) describes four identifiable 'catalysts', divided into 'push and pull factors', in the transition from homelessness. Dean's story fits with Ravenhill's (2008) theory. The first 'push' is 'reaching rock bottom' (2008: 185). Dean described being at the 'bottom of the barrel'. Spiralling debts pushed him to accept help, but he could only do this in his identity as a volunteer. Then, 'pull factors' such as new affiliations need to exert enough traction to enter an upward 'integrative' passage. Their strength plays a large part in setting the direction of travel. In Ravenhill's study the first pull factor is to appreciate that someone outside of the homeless culture cares about them and expresses this in an unconditional way (Ravenhill, 2008:186). This fits entirely with Dean's experience of acceptance and the unconditional and reciprocal relationships he had while still on the periphery of *NewDay*. Holistic care, offered in a careful and respectful way, led to a sustainable speed of gradual but successful transition. This correlates with the findings of Cornes and Manthorpe (2011) who argue that community based holistic care is a better approach than models separating out the multiple deprivations and complex needs into separate spheres of intervention.

The second pull factor is the ready availability of networks of support within the 'homeless industry' outside the homeless culture. Ravenhill (2008) suggests that this catalyst is rarely how the pathway from homelessness starts but is a precondition for its success. Dean's story suggests that timing and ongoing offers to connect with are vital. Other participants also described *NewDay* as a 'pull factors' offering a sense of belonging:

I come here because I feel like this is home. I can have a shower, put telly on, read a paper...all the things you might do at home and don't think twice

Meals, sports, positive engagements, people missing you when you are not there, were identified reasons why guests at *NewWay* access services. They describe substantial pull factors into an alternative community from the street. These reciprocal encounters all happened in specific places; visiting them brought these remembrances to the fore. Dean's description of being part of *NewDay* was peppered with memories of kindness, which he described as 'above and beyond' from those working with him: from gifts and practical help to move to trusting him with keys to venues. Cloke et al (2010) argue that charitable settings are often better able to provide a

level of unconditionality than statutory. They foster closer, personal relationships between the volunteers and 'service-users'. The looser fit of expectations also better allows for the inevitable 'flip-flopping' during a long period of resettlement. This is not to say that staff are not affected by the spirals of divestment in those they work with. *NewDay* staff reflected during a focus group,

It happens a lot. You are never really ready for it. We have people who make a lot of great steps forward and then suddenly it all goes haywire and you feel, like, kind of let down, frustrated...We do see progress collapse. It always hurts.

Part of the explanation for destructive 'edgework' can be found in an exploration of the cultures of homelessness. At times, the close emotional ties among those ostracised from mainstream society mitigate against an individual breaking free of a 'culture of homelessness' (McNaughton, 2008: 149). Ravenhill's (2008) ethnographic work defines homelessness as a set of relationships: the social networks the homeless person participates in, and the 'cultures' these foster. These 'include emotional support and positive experiences of shared care, as well as the negative 'edgework' risks of threatening and risky behaviours. These occur within the same relationships. The marginalisation of homeless people creates tight subcultures which are difficult to leave. They exert 'pull' factors:

Once an individual has acclimatized to rooflessness and survived the first few days and weeks, it becomes increasingly difficult to help them move back into mainstream society. This is, in part, because of the intensity and strength of the networks and friendships formed early on. Separation from such intense friendships can be painful and may become increasingly difficult the longer a person remains within the homeless culture (Ravenhill, 2008: 161)

There is one final fundamental point to raise from Dean's story. Exploring the positive benefits of the therapeutic community Dean eventually connected with should not detract from the initial failure of institutions to meet statutory obligations - described by Dean as 'being sent to the wrong housing office'. No matter where Dean presented himself, he had a legal right to have his application taken, the offer of temporary accommodation and a referral to the appropriate housing office. The failure to meet these legal obligations led to eight years of homelessness, sofa-surfing and rough-sleeping. Unfortunately, Dean's story can be read not only as an example of negligence but as part of a political culture exhibiting increasingly punitive attitudes towards the poorest and most vulnerable

members of society. The trend within neoliberalism towards punitive attitudes towards people experiencing poverty and homelessness is described by Wacquant (2012) and Herrmann (2011). It begins with the 'economisation of the social': cuts in benefits; the reduction in affordable housing and increase of insecure tenures and is exacerbated in the withdrawal of funding to support services which leave the public sector ill-equipped to comply with statutory obligations.

Having outlined the strengths of a Walking Interview as Biographic Method (WIBM) I now identify some of its weaknesses and potential dangers, especially in exploring experiences of homelessness. Firstly, WIBM within this cohort may reasonably be expected to include recollections of personal tragedy. In this, it might fall into 'sin talk' discourses. Gowan (2010) delignates three discursive categories within discussions of homelessness: 'sin', 'system' and 'sick talk'. Gowan argues that 'sin talk' dominated until the 1960s. This approach rooted homelessness in personal recklessness or moral failure. There is an ongoing legacy of this discourse in representations of homeless people today (Wagner 2015; Chauhan and Foster 2013). There is a danger that WIBM, given its particularity and turn to the individual, risks falling into 'sin talk' and its inherent mistaken notions of causation. Dean was unaware of the extent to which bureaucratic failure was part of his story and he did not recognise the systemic shifts in housing provision and welfare encompassing his experiences. Adopting WIBM alone, without attention to structural context, risk a return to 'sin talk'. For good reason, 'sin talk' was replaced by 'system talk', focussing on structural causation, which became more pronounced between the 1960s and 1980s. Today, systemic explanations of homelessness are giving way to a newly developed 'sick talk' attempting to bring structural and individual aspects together, exploring what makes an individual less able to cope within changing adverse structures. Somerville (2013) identifies problems with the new orthodoxy of 'sick talk'. Categories of structural and individual causes can blur and break down. The same blurring can occur within WIBM. The danger is that structural causes are disguised beneath the narrated accounts of those who are victims to a crisis but can only understand their own story in terms of personal events and decisions. This situates the narrative to be one of personal tragedy at best, which can be read as a 'sin' discourse. To redress this, researchers need to carefully contextualise WIBM accounts within wider structural realities.

In terms of this paper, Dean's story takes place within a national crisis with structural causes. The seventh instalment of the *Homelessness Monitor* for England (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018) details a desperate situation. Changes to welfare systems, especially the implementation of Universal Credit, has heightened what was already a crisis in affordable housing. The most visible form of homelessness is rough sleeping. According to the *Monitor* (2018) the official national estimate increased by 169% since 2010. Political measures have been taken. 2018 saw the passing of the 'Homelessness Reduction Bill' placing statutory duty on councils to help people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The 'Rough Sleeping and Homelessness Reduction Taskforce' was set up to ensure action is taken. However, the *Monitor* argues that substantive changes within multiple policy areas are necessary to halt, let alone reverse, the housing crisis in England. These measures would include dramatic changes in building and managing larger numbers of affordable houses, addressing the impacts of changes to welfare and countering the growing exclusion of those on lower incomes from the private rental sector.

Social geography further explicates structural causes of homelessness in the UK. The *Lankelly Chase Foundation's* 'Hard Edges' report (2015) found strong geographic trends when mapping those living with Severe Multiple Deprivations (SMD). Homelessness, addiction and offending were chosen as markers due to the significant impact they have on quality of life and their associated social stigma. Whilst all regions will have some levels of people facing one, two, or all three SMD criteria, local authorities at the top of the incidence list typically have prevalence rates between two to three times that of the national average; SMD incidence appears in clusters. These can be predicted by mapping *types* of poverty and the structural changes which have produced it; whereby patterns of post-industrial decline and the loss of work-based security compound the negative impacts of poverty. Homelessness in Britain is scandalous, but it is geographically predictable, pointing to its underlying structural causes. Those at greatest risk have family and personal factors coinciding with structural disadvantages. WIBM methods need to explicitly contextualise the particular account within its broader socio-economic context.

Conclusion

Recurrent or entrenched homelessness has a devastating impact on quality of life, happiness, wellbeing, health and life expectancy (Bramley et al 2015). The experience is best attended to by careful attention to the stories of those with first-hand experience; WIBM deepened disclosure and to some extent countered the subjective power differential between researcher and participant. Dean's walking interview highlighted the role community affiliation played in navigating liminal identity. It needed to be heard within its broader social context; one of structural and systematic changes to housing and welfare. Grassroots projects, at their best, situated locally and through sustained efforts to connect people through therapeutic conversations and activities, can go some way to help the victims of a national crisis restore a sense of 'place' and belonging which are essential in successful transition. Resource decisions made by those administering resources following the Homeless Reduction Bill (2018) need to be mindful of the importance of locality and place in identity and transition.

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