

The right to exist: Homelessness and the paradox of leisure

By: [Justin Harmon](#)

Harmon, J. (2019). The right to exist: Homelessness and the paradox of leisure. *Leisure Studies*. doi: 10.1080/02614367.2019.1640775

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Leisure Studies* on 07 July 2019, available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/02614367.2019.1640775>.

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Abstract:

This essay explores one man's life as a person experiencing homelessness and the societal impositions (stigma) and barriers (criminal ordinances) that shape his sense of self and perceived ability to transcend homelessness. The focus is on trying to understand what leisure is – or if it can even exist – for someone experiencing homelessness. As will be demonstrated, much of the societally available resources are lacking (shelters, legal help, access to water and hygiene needs) for those who need them; yet still others are wary of using anything in the 'system' because it saps whatever sense of agency they may have left. Still others prefer to stay on the periphery of society and focus solely on their daily survival. As public space is contested and evermore privatized, how do those without spaces of their own fight for their right to exist?

Keywords: Homelessness | leisure | stigma | public space | criminalization

Article:

'Free time is an interesting concept for me. I guess the way I live now, without a permanent place to stay or a permanent job, some would say all of my time is free. But the reality is, most of my time is spent simply surviving. That isn't to say that every minute of my life is a struggle, because it's definitely not, but that every day of my life has some degree of uncertainty. That can be troubling. Honestly, it often is.' – Dancing Deer¹ (58, 'homeless' for seven years)

Introduction

Just what exactly *leisure* is from a definitional standpoint has been pondered for years. Most are willing to accept, at a bare minimum, that leisure involves a degree of intrinsic motivation with some growth or edifying properties, and that there is some element of freedom in its undertaking (Blackshaw, 2017). But as Blackshaw further considered the meaning of this quixotic idea, leisure also implies, at least etymologically, a degree of license or permission. That is, there are external, structural forces that guide our ability to partake in leisure, just as we are limited by the extent of our internal interests and capabilities. A question worth considering, then, is, what

societal barriers are there to being able to engage in leisure for a marginalized population? As Johnson and Glover (2013) indicated, 'it is incumbent upon leisure researchers to consider who is excluded from "public" spaces, for no space is fully accessible to everyone at all times' (p. 195). One group that is consistently pushed out of public spaces and marginalized are those experiencing homelessness.

People experiencing homelessness have been called 'the strongest symbol of disenfranchisement' in a city (Mitchell, 2003, p. 168). The homeless have a unique, if not imperiled, relationship with the cities they reside in due to the extent the environment structures their survival needs, identities, and the opportunities available to them to attend to their personal goals (Wolch & Rowe, 1992). That homeless people are at the mercy of the city in most situations, yet not really seen as part of the cities in which they reside, creates a problem of agency and a lack of respect for those experiencing homelessness (Langegger & Koester, 2016; Somerville, 1992). Frequently, and quite unfortunately, the homeless are viewed as 'failures' (Rose & Johnson, 2017), and perhaps more accurately, as seen through the lens of western capitalist societies, the homeless are simply 'flawed consumers' (Casey, Goudie, & Reeve, 2008, p. 903). Amster (2003) said that 'homeless people embody the social fear of privileged consumers' (p. 198), forcing us to consider the polis and the public sphere – who is it really for? Only those who can afford to opt in?

Johnson and Glover (2013) put forth the notion that as public spaces have become ever more privatized, the communal locations that formerly 'belonged' to the masses have evolved into spaces explicitly for consumption; preference is given to those with purchasing power (Casey et al., 2008). In tandem with this is the increased efforts at policing these 'public' spaces which results in the criminalization of poverty for those experiencing homelessness (Wilking, Roll, Philhour, Hansen, & Nevarez, 2018). When one stops to consider the reality of life for those who are homeless, they are dependent on public space to live (Mitchell, 2017); the privatization of public space, then, usurps their *right to exist*. This study sought to address how homelessness affects one's ability to have leisure in light of the daily struggle simply to survive (Langegger & Koester, 2017).

Literature review

People experiencing homelessness and the spaces they spend their time in – the public forum, typically – have been a contentious pairing, seemingly since time immemorial. As public spaces have become increasingly more privatized and policed (Amster, 2003; Johnson & Glover, 2013; Mitchell, 2017), there has been an increased focus on criminalizing acts typically committed by those without stable homes and/or jobs. These trespasses include vagrancy, sleeping in public, loitering, and panhandling, thus leading to the criminalization of poverty (Adcock et al., n.d.; Wilking et al., 2018). Foucault (1967/1984) indicated that society and our lives are governed by a number of oppositions that remain 'inviolable,' such as the false dichotomies of public-private space, and the work-leisure divide. However, some dualities are more pronounced, such as whether one is housed or unhoused (Somerville, 1992). Others remain culturally contrived, such as the distinction between who is respectable member of society and who is a deviant outsider (Amster, 2003); the latter often being a classification where the homeless are relegated. It is troubling to see a group of people ostracized and stigmatized in such a manner. The emphasis of

future explorations needs to explicitly focus on the social problem of homelessness (Fitzpatrick, 2005) – a need to transform the rules of inclusion for those who have been excluded (Martin, 2005) – with less emphasis on the homeless people themselves as the problem to be addressed (Clapham, 2003).

Homelessness and leisure

Several scholars have made significant contributions to the exploration of homelessness and leisure, though there remains greater need for further investigations in this area. Researchers inside the field of leisure studies have focused on coping, stress, and mental health issues as it relates to the homeless and their pursuit of leisure (Klitzing, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Knestaut, Devine, & Verlezza, 2010), and as a resource for social integration into communities (Dawson & Harrington, 1996; Trussell & Mair, 2010). Rose (2014, 2017) has explored the intersection of placemaking, nature, and homelessness, and Rose and Johnson (2017) have investigated masculine identities in homeless men. Scholars outside the field have used leisure as a lens to understand personal choice in leisure decisions for the homeless (Borchard, 2010), as well as integration into the urban social landscape (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2016).

Due to the perceived excess of ‘free time’ often attributed to those experiencing homelessness, studies such as those done by Borchard (2010) that seek to emphasize the agency of the homeless in parallel with their personal characteristics and daily survival regimens are beneficial in understanding the fluidity of leisure in the lives of the homeless. Related, Hodgetts and Stolte (2016) sought to delineate that leisure, for the homeless, can be both an escape from adversity but also an ‘escape into society’ (p. 912), thus reinforcing that extreme poverty does not reduce the need for leisure, nor differentiate the less-fortunate from the well-off in terms of their desire to be part of the broader community. Building on the latter, Trussell and Mair (2010) endeavor focused on access to community services for the homeless and how they might be improved in order to be the most effective for those who need them. That being said, not all homeless people seek out assistance from the community (Zimmerman, Singleton, & Welch, 2010); and in many cases, the community simply does not welcome the homeless into leisure spaces (Harvey, 1992).

One area that remains underexplored in the leisure literature is the fluidity and ephemerality of leisure for those experiencing homelessness. Can leisure ever really be a given when most other aspects of life are not? Taking into consideration the various hardships and responsibilities that the homeless must endure on a daily basis, we are well-advised to return to Blackshaw’s (2017) reminder that leisure never has to ‘look a certain way or be of a certain style’ (p. 16). However, when societal stigma and the imposition of segregation and criminalization efforts become the foreground of life for the homeless, what, then, really is leisure?

Societal stigma

Those experiencing homelessness are placed in a double-bind, often simultaneously being viewed as unable to contribute to society – and more often than not are seen as detracting from it – and in many instances, they come to view themselves as failures in their own lives as well (Mitchell, 2003; Rose, 2014; Rose & Johnson, 2017; Takahashi, 1996). W.E.B. Du Bois (1903/1994) first explored this juxtaposition in a concept he described as ‘double-

consciousness,' or the ability to embody two distinct views of the self: how society sees the individual (often in a negative light), and how the individual sees themselves (typically in a more positive light). And while society habitually views the homeless as 'flawed consumers' with 'spoiled identities' (Casey et al., 2008, p. 909), the unfortunate accompanying, subjective identity for many homeless is that due to their dependence on social resources and inability to provide for themselves consistently, they have failed in their existential personal responsibilities to care for themselves and contribute to society (Paccaro, 1996). This relegates one's double consciousness to the double-bind through the lesser likelihood of a positive self-image, thus making the potential to transcend homelessness all the more difficult (Amster, 2003; Langegger & Koester, 2016; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Somerville, 1992). When society has pre-determined the worth of those experiencing homelessness, it renders their voice speechless in the public sphere (Johnsen, Cloke, & May, 2005).

The right to the city

In Henri Lefebvre's (1968/1996) classic work, 'The right to the city,' he illustrates the contradiction between 'the socialization of society and generalized segregation,' (p. 157), highlighting the inadequacy of the 'working class' to overcome the 'segregation directed essentially against it' (p. 154). For Lefebvre (1991), the 'social space' that comprise our cities serves as a means of domination for the marginalized and disaffected, such that the powerholders (e.g. municipal governments, police) seek to control the agency, visibility, and patterns of mobility that make 'public' the problem of homelessness (Langegger & Koester, 2016). Lefebvre saw the 'right to the city' as a struggle to 'de-alienate urban space' through political struggle (Purcell, 2013, p. 149). The problem is, however, all residents in a city do not share equal political or social capital to engage in that struggle, especially the homeless (Herring, Yarbrough, & Alatorre, 2019).

In a sense, then, people experiencing homelessness embody Foucault's (1967/1984) heterotopias of deviation, in that they are 'deviant' in relation to the societal norms, and that aberration is essentially compulsory due to the inadequacy, or unavailability, of the requisite resources needed to transcend their station in life (Herring et al., 2019). Public space, then, remains a 'locus of exploitation and oppression' for the homeless (Harvey, 1992, p. 590), where those that 'have' operate by an 'accumulation by dispossession' over those who 'have not' (Harvey, 2008, p. 33). The homeless, in effect, are put through 'material and psychological harm' through 'pervasive penalty' due to constant harassment for living in extreme poverty (Herring et al., 2019, p. 16).

Mitchell (2003) stated that, 'anti-homeless legislation helps institutionalize the fact that [the] homeless are not really citizens by assuring that the homeless have no place in public to be sovereign' (p. 183). Pawson (2007) felt that citizenship is embodied with indelible rights, however, this is not something we often see extended to the homeless (Mitchell, 2017; Takahashi, 1996). Therefore, the dialog over what rights individuals truly have, and whose rights are favored more in the public sphere remains contentious (Casey et al., 2008). Because of this, there needs to be a greater embrace of strategies looking at how society reifies the institutional barriers that hold the homeless in abeyance (Clapham, 2003). The supposed 'civil' efforts that focus on criminalization of life-sustaining activities typically undertaken by the homeless (i.e. sleeping, elimination of bodily waste, securing food), when accompanied by the perpetuation of

the status quo in regards to provision of homeless services, will solely result in people continually being trapped in endless cycles of poverty with few options out (Fitzpatrick & Jones, 2005).

Writing more than a quarter of a century ago, Somerville (1992) stated that there is a need to 'place home and homelessness in the context of the economic and political system' in order to understand how societal decisions and civil ordinances disenfranchise the poor (p. 536). What has instead been the case is that the focus has been heightened to improve the private, commercial, and privileged interests in the public sphere (Adcock et al., n.d.; Wilking et al., 2018). Holding out a glimmer of hope, Amster (2003) intimated that the homeless may be the last best chance at preserving 'public spaces as democratic, spontaneous, and inclusive' (p. 206); while aspirational, it will require a coordinated effort, and improved understanding of what it means to build social cohesion for all. For as Mitchell (2003) indicated, the homeless are an 'indicator species' (p. 136) – the proverbial canary in the coalmine letting us know the health of social relationships in society and our willingness to help the homeless simply *exist*. Currently, measured this way, our collective health is not good.

Methods

Background of study

A homelessness advocacy organization, Homeless Awareness Group² (HAG), was established in February, 2018 as an offshoot of a larger political activism group in a mid-sized, Southern city in the United States. Its establishment was deemed necessary in order to be able to adequately respond to pressing issues regarding homelessness in the community which included access to resources and recent criminalization efforts initiated by the city council (CC) and the local business improvement district (BID).

The founder of HAG, John,³ has worked with the homeless population for more than a decade in two cities. He was previously homeless himself starting at the age of 15 when he was a victim of domestic abuse. He is a frequent speaker at CC meetings and I met him through our participation in a political activism group in town. He had conducted research on homelessness and homeless rights in his prior city of residence with researchers from a university there, and he was seeking support from those conversant in data collection and analysis skills in his new hometown. I offered to help because his plight aligned with a project I was then involved in, exploring the allocation of public resources in our city. Several other faculty members from two academic institutions collaborated to improve a survey instrument he was using and coordinated a plan for collecting data in three parts: short surveys, smaller focus groups ('lunch n' learns'), and more in-depth semi-structured interviews with individuals experiencing homelessness.

The goal was to create a store of data that will be used to present to the CC and challenge aspects of their criminal ordinances that target the poor, thus leading to the criminalization of poverty, as well as to make reasoned arguments for improving the resources and services available to help combat homelessness and improve the lives of those experiencing homelessness in the city. Additionally, all data will ultimately be housed in a repository for the faculty of these two institutions to analyze through their respective disciplinary lenses.

The effort at hand focuses on the lived experiences of one homeless man in town in order to tell *his* story about how homelessness has impacted his life, taking into consideration how currently available resources and criminal ordinances affect his right to exist, and his (in)ability to have leisure.

Duoethnographic approach

Autoethnography as method draws from the personalized accounts of an individual's experiences to tell the story of what transpired in/with the phenomenon of interest (Denzin, 2006). Ellis (2004) said that autoethnography is often deeply personal and that its emotional components are comprised of introspection that result in a narrative style of representation. Because this essay is the story of one man's (Dancing Deer) experiences of homelessness, it is more accurately duoethnographic in nature. While duoethnography is conceptually understood as two researchers working together to build a narrative, in this instance, my understanding of what took place is an interpretation of Dancing Deer's experiences and story (Breault, 2016).

In duoethnography, 'the journey is mutual and reciprocal' (Norris & Sawyer, 2012, p. 13), thus suggesting that what is read here was ultimately reached through my interactions with Dancing Deer. He is a late-50s, Native American, retired Army veteran with some serious health conditions (kidney and spinal issues). He has never been married, has no children, and has minimal contact with his family, though he considers many of the people he 'camps' with to be as close as family. At the time of writing he has been homeless for approximately seven years. I spent about twenty-five hours with him over the course of three months (roughly two hours per week, most weeks), and this is where trustworthiness was established (Tracy, 2013).

Because of my desire to accurately present his story, this manuscript is a co-constructed effort. As an auto/ethnographer, I saw it as my charge to provide adequate detail in order to create an opportunity for the reader to transfer the relevant aspects of the essay to their lives and their work (Ellis, 1998). The narrative ethnographic method of this essay attempts to emphasize the reality of one person's ongoing experience of homelessness and how his reality is constructed, and then presented, through my writing (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008). As the author, and as someone who has never experienced homelessness, I have approached this essay delicately and respectfully due to the simple fact that I am choosing to use another's perspective to understand a systemic, societal problem.

Results and discussion

Introducing Dancing Deer

I spend a lot of time out on that corner you first met me on. On an average week, I might be out there 30 hours, maybe less. All I need to do is earn enough to get the essentials for camp. But sometimes that takes a little longer than I'd hope – but I understand I'm at the mercy of strangers. Though some of these people, like you, well, some of 'em are more like friends now, at least a little. I do feel I'm working out there though; it ain't easy standing at the on-ramp all day, especially when it's beating down sun or cold and rainy.' – Dancing Deer

Dancing Deer was not a user of any of the amenities or services provided for the homeless in town. While he had briefly used some when he first came into town about five years earlier, he found that many of the patrons of the day centers and shelters to be volatile and they often made him uncomfortable (Johnsen et al., 2005). He felt that through an explicit reliance on community-provided services, he would be forfeiting his dignity, and therefore, he was better able to hold on to some semblance of agency and control by living outside ‘the system’ as he called it (Rose & Johnson, 2017; Zimmerman et al., 2010). Because of this, he stayed on the periphery of town when he panhandled, which is where I met him, and retreated to his camp after he had collected enough money or supplies to return ‘home.’ Dancing Deer was wary of the potential for violence, abuse, and getting caught up with law enforcement, something he knew to be a problem, especially in the downtown area. Due to the increased enforcement of criminal ordinances, he felt downtown was simply not a place he was welcome (Casey et al., 2008; Wilking et al., 2018).

Dancing Deer’s path to homelessness

‘Once I got into the military, I thought I’d left behind all the problems from my childhood. Man, I tell you, that sure wasn’t the case. They just got put on a shelf for a little while, I guess, but I pulled ‘em off once I got out. Throw a bunch of other life shit in the mix to follow, and well, it wouldn’t be a lie to say my life now is not what I expected – or what I hoped for.’ – Dancing Deer

After he left the military in his late-20s, Dancing Deer never felt he had established a firm footing, something he viewed as, at least in part, a consequence of his unstable upbringing. While he did not have abusive parents, his home-life was scattered and often void of support. His mother was an alcoholic, something he had had problems with over the years as well, and his father was in and out of the picture for the duration of his youth. Both his parents, he believed, were deceased now, and he had lost touch with a sister years ago.

In Clapham’s (2003) work on homelessness pathways, he stressed the need to evaluate the intersection of both structural forces and individual choices in understanding the trajectory of those experiencing homelessness. For Dancing Deer, his upbringing held many of the ingredients for instability in his transition to adulthood, and when he left the regimented structure of the military, he lacked a positive framework to guide him into the future. He had one bout of homelessness in his mid-30s, something he attributed to his problems with alcohol, but he was able to find stability for almost fifteen years before a run of bad luck forced him into his current situation, including health problems and the loss of a job that prevented him from being able to afford his rent. As Greer, Shinn, Kwon, and Zuiderveen (2016) suggest, those who have experienced homelessness in the past are far more likely to experience it again in the future, signaling the need to better understand the inadequacies in social support systems to help people cope through their socioeconomic struggles and be resigned to homeless recidivism (Shinn et al., 2017).

Identity, stigma, and homelessness

'I don't know, man. I know I've made some poor choices in life, but I also know I've been a good person more than I haven't, at least, I hope. While I've come to accept my life as someone without a fixed address, that doesn't mean I wouldn't like a permanent roof over my head, and it certainly doesn't mean others should view me as lesser than them. I've had people tell me to "get a job," or just give me the look that reeks of disgust. I try not to let it get me down, but it does, sometimes.' – Dancing Deer

Casey et al. (2008) put forth the notion of 'spoiled identities' for 'those who are unable to conform to standards that society regards as normal' (p. 909). This was a topic that I broached with Dancing Deer: whether or not he felt either societal stigmatization because he was homeless, or if he felt any sense of shame because he was not housed or living within the confines of a more 'traditional' way of life. He said that he had come to find comfort in his life, and that camp had become something that was stable for him, giving him some sense of continuity in an otherwise uncertain life. Dancing Deer stated that, 'I guess I can't control what others say or think about me, so I sort of have to be the one who's got to view my life positively, because not many others are. That can be tough at times, most certainly, but it's something I try to hold onto.' Rose (2014) echoed this sentiment in his work on the intersection of social and environmental justice, suggesting that a 'politics of justice' needs to be established to redirect the narrative of the homeless as unproductive or less-than-valuable members of society.

Unfortunately, the policies and preferences of many city's decision makers, business owners, and by default, by proxy support from voters (or simply apathy), favor cutting off access to life-sustaining necessities for those in extreme poverty and a strategy of extradition from the city center as the preferred method of 'fixing' the homeless problem (Langegger & Koester, 2017; Wilking et al., 2018). Those who are reliant on shelters to provide some modicum of normalcy in their lives also face issues. This points to the extreme inadequacy in much of the societally provided support mechanisms (Herring et al., 2019; Langegger & Koester, 2016).

As Mitchell (2003) and other have pointed out, municipal efforts at creating and enforcing anti-homeless legislation seeks to 'institutionalize the fact that homeless are not really citizens' (p. 183) and this then gets perpetuated by constituents writ large as the master narrative, and in many cases gets embodied by those experiencing homelessness (Amster, 2003; Takahashi, 1996). As the cultural dialog of self- and social-worth becomes engrained into the fabric of society, the homeless are relegated to either invisibility or problem-status, more often both (Somerville, 1992). The conflicting social identities (what others attribute to an individual) and personal identities (what one ascribes to the self) of the homeless become the base ingredient for the self-concept, or the overarching view of one's value as a human in light of their social position (Snow & Anderson, 1987). For Dancing Deer, he said that,

My place in society isn't really my decision to make any longer. At this point, my sole focus has to be on existence, survival, and that doesn't leave me enough time to fight others about how they should view me. It wouldn't be worth my time to try, anyways.

The amount of stress that befalls a homeless individual's life is staggering, and in some cases can be insurmountable (Klitzing, 2003). Unfortunately, in addition to a lack of, or inadequate, facilities and support resources, issues of mental health and substance abuse, and the societal

disposition to stigmatize the homeless, there are not many options other than street life – and now that is being challenged by municipalities (Adcock et al., n.d.; Langegger & Koester, 2017; Wilking et al., 2018).

Who belongs in a city?

'I'm plenty comfortable on the outskirts of town. I'm in an area that doesn't get much traffic, no one bothers us out there, really. It's quite a commute for me to come in to work (panhandle) and get supplies, go to the veterans' center, you know, but out there, at least there's some consistency. I'm not bothering anyone and most (the housed) are probably happy I'm out at the camp more often than not anyways.' – Dancing Deer

As mentioned, Dancing Deer had little interest in spending much time in the city center. While he used many of the resources in town out of necessity, like grocery stores, thrift shops, and libraries, he rarely spent any more of his 'free time' there than was necessary. His time spent in commercial space was for just that, commercial transactions, but he did not feel that the public space was truly public, at least not for him or others experiencing homelessness. Waldron (1991) asserted that the homeless can only exist to the extent that they have access to public space, something that Dancing Deer was clearly reliant on – just not in the city center.

This notion that he was left alone and out-of-sight, and therefore out-of-mind to most people, was somewhat comforting to Dancing Deer. However, as Mitchell (2017) reminds us, 'the ideology of public space is problematic because it can be easily co-opted by those who seek to exclude undesirable people' (p. 503). This is something Rose (2014, 2017) found in his work with the homeless population at 'the Hillside' – those reliant on public spaces to live are 'safe' until someone more powerful finds them and decides they do not approve of how they live their lives (Langegger & Koester, 2017). This is something quite commonly found in the literature on homelessness: that the privileged, even in their leisure pursuits, often seek to privatize their personal experiences to cater to their wants and needs (Langegger & Koester, 2016). As Rose (2014, p. 266) asked, 'How can a single activity – camping – be both a necessity of life and recreational pursuit?' The concern then becomes how society and its privileged inhabitants feel empowered to determine how those less fortunate get to exist at all (Johnson & Glover, 2013).

Homelessness, free time, and the sticky problem of leisure⁴

'For fun? Oh, I read a lot. Back at the camp we chat, play cards, shoot the shit, you know, typical stuff people do. I guess I don't really have any hobbies. I used to play guitar years ago, but I don't have one anymore. I really have to keep my possessions to a minimum. There are some things I'd love to own, things I'd love to do, sure, but I guess in some way I'm better off not having so much stuff. A simple life is really the only one that works when you don't have a roof, I figure.' – Dancing Deer

While Dancing Deer had no formal education beyond high school (which he could not remember if he had finished 'properly'), he was a very intelligent and well-read individual, thus making our discussions very enjoyable. I asked him directly to put in order the priorities in his life on a daily basis and he said, 'Stay dry so I don't get sick; earn enough money to get food; get to the doctor

to make sure my kidney issues don't get worse; and try not to bother nobody so I don't get myself in trouble. Oh, and eat. I guess those'd be the most important ones.' Since I wanted to learn more about what he did for intrinsic enjoyment and personal growth, I pried a little further asking him, 'Is that it?' Since he knew about my job as a professor in a recreation department, that triggered his response a little, to which he replied, 'Well, if you're trying to get at what I do for fun, for improving myself and whatnot, not much. Like I said, when the focus is on staying alive and safe, that doesn't leave a whole lot of time or concern for recreating. Sorry, professor.'

Dancing Deer was largely averse to receiving help from any social services for the homeless. The only agency in town he frequented was the veterans' health system, something he felt he had earned through his time in the military. Because of his reluctance to use social support services, and his wariness of being in the city center, he also never attempted to use any of the public recreation offerings because he simply felt they were 'not intended' for him. This echoes Trussell and Mair (2010) findings that the overriding stigma that pervades society permeates the self-perception of the homeless, and that in absence of 'judgment free zones,' many potential opportunities for leisure for this population would not be successful. While Knestaut et al. (2010) found that recreation programs targeting the homeless could have some existential benefit, even if only in the moment, it still remains that the unhoused who do not feel a part of the community are going to be far less receptive to those types of programs.

Dancing Deer, while he believed that taking care of himself needed to include rest, mental stimulation (e.g. from reading), exercise (walking from camp to 'work'), and personal growth (i.e. as in a preferred hobby), the simple fact any extraneous activity could divert from his ability to simply exist could prove detrimental, especially in light of his health conditions. For him, the multiple society-wide *structural* failures, as well as some of his self-admitted poor decisions along the way, relegated him to a position where his personal choices, his *agency*, had to be streamlined to focus on mere survival. What was leftover, the *culture* of stigmatization and the privileging of the consumer society (Casey et al., 2008) over the health of the community writ large that views the homeless as 'social waste' (Rose, 2017, p. 18), left him wondering whether or not leisure was something that could really be 'understood, or taken part in, for those of us without a roof.'

Conclusion

I asked Dancing Deer if there was anything that I could do to help him, and he simply said, 'Just keep doing what you're doing. I don't need any help, at least not right now. But the people who need help, those are the people that view us (the homeless) as failures, or as the dregs of society. I mean, it's surprising the stories of how people end up without a home. A lot of times a whole lot has to go wrong to get here. Even if some of us are at fault along the way, we shouldn't be thrown out [of society]. Although, I guess broadly speaking, I've kind of accepted that I have.'

What is leisure when the bulk of one's time and focus is spent merely on survival? This question cannot be definitively answered in this essay if for no other reason than the deeply engrained systems of power in many Western cities have dictated that the homeless will not be the executors of their lives; only the forces that uphold the system of power currently in place will determine that (Amster, 2003; Wolch & Rowe, 1992).

This study sought to address how homelessness affects one's ability to have leisure in light of the daily struggle to exist, and while the emphasis was on one man's cumulative story of seven years of homelessness, it is evocative of countless others in its sentiment (Borchard, 2010; Hodgetts & Stolte, 2016; Klitzing, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Rose, 2014, 2017; Trussell & Mair, 2010) in that failures in society have largely paved the road to a system that suppresses the potential for transformation for those experiencing homelessness (Mitchell, 2003).

Hodgetts and Stolte (2016) and others (e.g. Knestaut et al., 2010) found that 'leisure is foundational' to a homeless person's identity and 'offers opportunities for being something more' (p. 911) – this is not in contest. For Dancing Deer, and numerous others, however, leisure is largely inaccessible to those society has deemed undesirable and chosen to prohibit from public space (Mitchell, 2017). The pervasive reality is that, while many homeless people may find time for recreational or leisurely activities, those activities are often relegated to the fringes of their existence due to the simple fact that the struggle for many, life-sustaining activities have been criminalized, thus criminalizing poverty and the right to exist (Mitchell, 2003); there is simply no time, nor space, for leisure.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. A pseudonym.
2. A pseudonym.
3. A pseudonym.
4. See: Hays, S. (1994). Structure and agency and the sticky problem of culture. *Sociological Theory*, 12(1), 57–72.

Author information

Justin Harmon, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Community and Therapeutic Recreation at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. His research includes exploring the use of music for life course development, recreation interventions post-diagnosis of cancer (nature immersion and music making), and community development through leisure. When not in the classroom he is typically found in the forest with his dog or at a concert.

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