

# *The Big Issue:*<sup>1</sup> empowering homeless women through academic research?

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**Summary** *This paper discusses academic research as a means of empowerment for people in marginalized groups, using the example of homeless women. Issues connected to the position of the researcher in relation to both the agencies dealing with homeless people and the homeless women themselves are discussed. Many agencies have underlying ideologies and overt practices that reinforce hierarchical relations and certain gendered expectations. The paper considers the difficulties this creates when working with and presenting findings to agencies whose principles are in conflict with one's own, and also discusses the social relations of conducting empowering doctoral research.*

## **Introduction**

In late 1997, I was asked to participate in a conference session at the RGS-IBG Annual Conference entitled 'Social exclusion/social action', focusing on the ethical issues raised by research about people who are socially excluded; this forced me to think about whether and how my own research has the potential to empower those who have participated in it. From the project's inception, I have been trying to use research methodologies and practices that do not exploit either the homeless women I speak with or the agencies I work through. These considerations have been prompted by the relatively recent surge of literature concerned with participatory and non-exploitative academic practices, particularly that which has been written from feminist stances. Having now had time to reflect upon these debates in relation to my research, I realize that, despite a conscious attempt to conduct empowering research, there are limitations implicit in the academic research process (and, more specifically, in the process of conducting doctoral research) that compromise these intentions. The first section of the paper briefly outlines the project undertaken; the second section locates the research methods used, in terms of recent debates in the social sciences about partici-

patory and 'fair' methodologies and practices; and the final section elucidates my relationship with the agencies through whom I accessed respondents.

## **The research project**

My doctoral research explores conceptualizations of the spaces of 'home' presented by women who are or have been homeless, in relation to the effects of societal expectations, personal identities and social exclusion on such conceptualizations. I undertook in-depth interviews with 55 women in three British cities,<sup>2</sup> whom I contacted through voluntary and state agencies that had been established to work with homeless people. The research aimed to bring homeless women's voices to the fore when considering issues affecting their everyday lives, and was therefore considered to be empowering.

Before discussing the intricacies of research methodologies, it is pertinent to analyse the context in which this research was undertaken and some of the issues raised as a consequence. There were two principal influences on the project. First and foremost were my own personal identity politics and how they were (or were not) allied with those I was

researching. The project itself developed out of a personal political motivation, as I identify as a feminist and am interested in issues of social justice; my concern about the increasing incidence of women's homelessness in Britain resulted in my investigating the issue in detail. However, there was another motivation—an academic one. This thesis is aimed towards a PhD which, when completed, should provide me with academic credibility and 'capital'. The fact that this is an academic piece of work has undoubtedly affected the way in which I have carried out and written up the research. The finished product will be a doctoral thesis consisting of 90 000 words, which is likely to be read only by examiners and those on my research committee. Even when the research is published in academic journals, the audience is of a limited, academic nature; such a publication route may well hinder any potential empowering effects (although some measures have been taken to counteract this, and these are discussed later).

The second primary influence upon the research has been academic feminism. Of particular significance in guiding this research was the stress placed by academic feminists on the value of researching how women experience their everyday lives. The thesis explores the 'meanings of home' debates that have been discussed over recent years within housing studies, sociology and, more recently, geographical research (Madigan *et al* 1990; Saunders 1990; Somerville 1992; Darke 1994; Christie 1996; Bowlby *et al* 1997; Gurney 1997). The research has not been 'policy led' in relation to factors such as hostel provision, putting figures on the extent of women's homelessness or their paths to homelessness. However, it is hoped that the findings will be useful to organizations lobbying on behalf of homeless women by providing case-study material. National campaigning groups such as the charity 'Shelter' utilize such material in their attempts to bring about legislative change and attract funding. By telling the stories of particular homeless people, these organizations can highlight experiences of homelessness and the loopholes that exist in present legislation. On a more local scale, individual agencies involved in the project may be able to use my research to justify their services and attract funds, by illustrating their importance within the three cities under investigation. My political identification with feminism and issues of social justice led me to the burgeoning feminist literature concerned with the ethics of research practice.

## 'Fair' geographical research and homelessness

Feminism challenges traditional epistemologies of what are considered valid forms of knowledge. Feminist epistemology has redefined the knower, knowing and the known ... It questions notions of 'truth' and validates 'alternative' sources of knowledge, such as experience. Feminist epistemology stresses the non-neutrality of the researcher and the power relations involved in the research process ... It also contests boundaries between 'fieldwork' and everyday life, arguing that we are always in the field. (WGSG 1997, 87)

The above quote lists some of the important ways in which feminist epistemology has set up challenges to what many social scientists over the last two decades believe to be 'appropriate' methodologies. Initial challenges came from feminists arguing that objectivity in research is neither achievable nor particularly desirable (Oakley 1981; Bowles and Duelli Klein 1983; Stanley and Wise 1983). In an attempt to destabilize the fallacy of objective research, feminists turned towards qualitative methodologies<sup>3</sup> in order to prioritize women's voices and experiences and acknowledge the subjectivities in all research. Stanley and Wise's work explored issues surrounding feminist epistemologies, highlighting implications for the research process itself. They argued that:

precepts drawn from feminist epistemology need to be integrated: in the researcher/researched relationship; in emotion as an aspect of the research process which, like any other aspect, can be critically interrogated; in critically unpacking conceptualizations of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' as binaries or dichotomies; in the intellectual autobiography of researchers, that is, in the processes by which 'understanding' and 'conclusions' are reached; in the existence and management of the different 'realities' or versions held by researchers and researched; and in issues surrounding authority and power in research, but also and perhaps more crucially in written representations of research. (1993, 189)

Since the publication of Stanley and Wise's original text (1983), much discussion has taken place within the social sciences concerning the application of these principles to feminist methodologies. Although it is acknowledged that there is no singular 'feminist methodology' (Moss 1993; *Professional Geographer* 1994; 1995; WGSG 1997), consideration of the aspects of the research process highlighted by

Stanley and Wise have fed into the ways in which feminist social scientists go about their work. Consequently, there are a set of practices that are often considered appropriate to this particular type of research. The rest of this paper will therefore discuss these practices in relation to my research project. This discussion is broken down into two parts: my relationships with the women participating in the project are analysed, followed by a section outlining the methodological issues surrounding the agencies with whom I worked.

For the purposes of the project and this paper, I have grouped the practices associated with feminist methodologies into three precepts, which are discussed below in terms of my experience of the research process.

#### *Formulating non-exploitative and empowering relationships with those being researched*

Many feminist social scientists have advocated the development of a close relationship between those being researched and the researcher themselves (Oakley 1981; McDowell 1992). The aim is to make the research process less exploitative and more empowering to the participants by forming a relationship over a period of time so that the researcher and the researched come to know each other. As this involves some degree of 'closeness', it is believed that the researcher will be less likely to exploit those involved. This approach was a response to previous research practices which privileged distance between the researcher and those being researched in order to obtain supposedly scientifically objective results. However, it has been met with criticism such as that of Judith Stacey (1988, 23), who argues that such closeness can leave participants vulnerable to 'manipulation and betrayal'. Such arguments highlight the power relations inherent in research and it is these issues that are discussed below.

In this project, the principle of non-exploitative research was crucial, but there were significant difficulties involved in formulating good relationships with the women who participated. Whilst the positive effect of such relations on the outcome of the project is clear, it also needs to be recognized that this can often be impossible to achieve. The nature of my research resulted in my being in contact with the women for only a short period of time—usually the duration of the interview. The time and budgetary constraints inherent in doctoral research meant that I could spend only two fortnight-long periods in

each of the three cities, during which time I visited many different agencies dealing with homelessness. The brevity of the contact obviously created problems in forming any 'meaningful' relationship with the women who spoke to me or the workers in the agencies. When conducting the research, I was conscious that the process would not change the positions of the women I interviewed (except perhaps in providing them with an 'outsider' with whom to talk). Before each interview, I explained that I was carrying out independent research, making it clear that I was not in a position to influence housing situations. However, I believe that the brevity of this contact was not entirely negative: this was highlighted to me by a woman who had conducted research in the hostel where she was working as a volunteer. Her status as a worker caused problems during the research, as the people she was interviewing expected her to be able to help them. This was something that she could not do, leaving participants feeling disappointed—whereas their motivations for taking part in the research might have been different if she had been an 'outsider'. Also, my status as a 'stranger', independent of those providing services, potentially empowered the women to air their views about their experiences within hostels/refuges without fear of *recrimination* from those agencies.

However, the ambiguity of my relationship with the participants has resulted in confusion about my role in some contexts. I have encountered problems surrounding what I call the role of 'researcher as counsellor'. I am dealing with a sensitive topic: women spoke about psychological, physical and sexual abuse within their homes, as well as rape when homeless. Some have drug, alcohol and mental health problems, as well as eating disorders. This created difficulties when women appeared to be looking to me for help and reassurance. I did not attempt to work through these issues with the women during the interviews both because I am not a trained counsellor and because it would be inappropriate and unhelpful (or potentially damaging) behaviour in an interview context. The brevity of our contact was noticeable here, as it resulted in my leaving with a feeling of frustration. However, this particular problem was one for me to deal with, not the respondents.

#### *Following up and providing the participants with feedback*

Over recent years, critical thinkers have questioned the way in which much traditional social scientific

research relates to those being studied. Criticism has been levelled predominantly by feminist, poststructuralist and post-colonial theorists at research conducted on particular groups but ignoring the participants, never informing them of what was 'found' or using the research against them (Mohanty 1991; Sidaway 1992; Robinson 1994). Consequently, it is considered desirable to provide individuals and agencies with the findings of projects, to enable them to use the findings if they wish. This is seen as being of particular importance when research is carried out in conjunction with people lacking social power; academic research can sometimes be used by respondents for their own gain (be it political, financial or otherwise). With this in mind, some researchers show respondents their 'findings' for ratification before writing the final version. The respondents have an input to the final conclusion, so that difficulties concerning representation are reduced.<sup>4</sup> Others advocate that 'findings' should be debated with participants in order to reduce problems of representing less powerful groups inadequately or in a misleading way.

There were several difficulties preventing me from conducting follow-up interviews. First of all, because of the transient nature of the group, interviewing participants a second time was problematic. Secondly, I gave assurances of anonymity at the beginning of each interview (and did not take the names of the person with whom I was speaking). For the same reasons, there are problems with giving feedback to the individual women who participated in the research. Indeed, by the time the thesis is completed, the women I interviewed may no longer be in the same hostels/refuges/drop-in centres where I first made contact with them, nor even homeless.<sup>5</sup> However, there are ways in which I can show agencies the 'findings'. As mentioned previously, I will not be providing them with copies of the finished thesis, but I am producing a separate report for them, as I do not want to abuse their services by leaving them unaware of my conclusions. The report will be produced separately so that people from the agencies do not have to work their way through academic protocol and terminology in order to gain the information they may be interested in. I will request that they let the report be made available to women who use their services if they so wish. This means that I can inform homeless women in general, even if the reader did not personally participate in the project.

### *The author should be reflexive about their positionality*

Since the first challenges were made to the concept of objective research, social scientists have questioned where the researcher is positioned in relation to the researched. A plethora of literature discussing issues of positionality has resulted (eg McDowell 1992; Eyles 1993; England 1994; Kobayashi 1994). Critical social researchers recognize the power relations imbued in academic research, particularly those concerned with less privileged people. The widespread rejection of the concept of objective research has brought about a re-evaluation of the way in which researcher and researched interact. This involves a consideration of who the researcher is in relation to those they are 'studying', and goes beyond issues such as the privileges of the academy to include an examination of the researcher's identity in relation to such social characteristics as gender, race, sexuality, ability and experiences. Researchers are urged to examine how assumptions stemming from their own social background may affect their interpretations of the experiences of the respondents. Those researchers whose experiences ally most closely with their respondents are seen as having more insight and a greater chance of formulating the kinds of relationships discussed earlier in this section. Those who share few commonalities with their respondents are encouraged to be reflexive about their relationships and their findings, and be aware of the lack of 'authority' they have over their subjects' experiences.

Methodologies that recognize and value the subjective nature of research do not necessarily equate to non-exploitative and non-hierarchical research. This consideration is of great importance when working with socially excluded groups. In these situations, researchers always occupy a more privileged position than those they are engaged with. In this respect, reflexivity by the author is crucial.

When interviewing these women, I appreciated that I was in a position of power and privilege, but this recognition alone did not automatically improve the situation, as Kim England (1994, 86) elucidates: 'Reflexivity can make us more aware of asymmetrical or exploitative relationships, but it cannot remove them.' I have never been homeless and I have the final decision on which stories to present in my thesis and publications. Although I advocate closeness and subjective research, I do not wish to pretend that I have anything in common with most of the women other than my gender. Being a woman

does not necessarily mean that I understand them better than I would if I were a man, nor that they are more likely to divulge personal stories. During some interviews, certain commonalities did become apparent and this helped bolster trust between us. However, these commonalities were fairly limited. In terms of giving the 'researched' a chance to influence the final analysis, the problems highlighted above make it virtually impossible. This factor brings the issue of power relations to the fore.

Consideration of power relations and notions of positionality are important in terms of both interaction with the participants and issues of representation. I have experienced additional problems concerning the actions and opinions of some of the participants. Whilst I want to support all homeless women, some of the interviewees behaved in ways I felt should be challenged. For example, I was present whilst a woman was hitting her children, and have also listened to racist and homophobic opinions. I did not challenge these opinions during the interviews for the reasons stated by Patai (quoted in Gilbert 1994, 93):

to turn interviews with other women into opportunities for imposing our own politically correct analysis requires an arrogance incompatible with genuine respect for others.

The research was concerned with the opinions of my respondents, not mine, therefore forcing my thoughts upon these women would be wrong. However, I still feel unease about writing these things in my research. I wish to highlight the problems that these women face but not to ignore the negative aspects of what I have seen and been told—I want to give a more 'truthful' representation. This may lead to criticism from agencies who do not wish homeless people to be portrayed in a negative way.

Another problem arises over the way in which I present some of my material. I am aware of the possibility of selective political interpretations of my findings. Many women have talked about 'homeless' situations in very positive ways (relative to their previous experiences of more traditional 'homes'). There are difficulties in reporting this without appearing to endorse homelessness.<sup>6</sup> Homelessness can be considered a liberating experience for some women, particularly those who have fled domestic violence, but this must be looked at in relation both to the 'homes' they have left and to possible alternatives. Research such as this, which deals with politically sensitive issues, is always going to be vulnerable to

selective interpretations by varying groups. Reports of positive experiences of homeless situations could be interpreted as supporting right-wing rhetoric, which implies that homelessness is a choice for those who 'run away' and 'drop out', as the reality of homeless life (rooflessness in particular) is not interrogated. Consideration must also be given the outcome of the work. As Kobayashi (1994, 79) points out:

every discursive field is a site of negotiation and struggle for power, and the politics of fieldwork will inevitably come up against the politics of the field.

In my research, the politics of the field concern the homeless women themselves (heterogeneous in identity, character, political opinion and desires for their futures) and the agencies through which I work, who occupy very contrasting positions in their dealings with and attitudes towards homelessness. These agencies are very often ideologically opposed in the way they deal with issues such as drugs and alcohol, so it is very unlikely that the findings of my research will be met with universal approval or disapproval. This leaves me in the uncomfortable position of knowing that those I wish to help may deem my research problematic.

Despite encountering the problems voiced above, the quest for (and discussion surrounding the use of) non-exploitative and participatory methodologies led by feminist social scientists has made me more sensitive about the practices I am employing. Suggestions have been made concerning the use of multi-methods in an attempt to establish a more 'complete' picture (Akilu 1995), but this did not appear to be achievable in my specific case.

The interrogation of our research in relation to the people we work with should also be extended to those agencies and organizations who work for/with these people (where appropriate). These become our audience too and our findings can affect the way they work with, and view, outside researchers. The next section of this paper discusses the relationship I had with the agencies that facilitated the research, and the work they carry out with homeless people.

## Relationships with agencies

To gain access to homeless women, I worked with support organizations. Within these agencies, workers would approach the women for me, thus providing a point of access through a trusted person.

The range of services provided to homeless people varied greatly between the organizations: they were not always catering solely for homeless women, and some had specific remits concerning the clientele they dealt with (such as working with 16–25 year olds, those who have left violent homes or women only). The services provided, and the ways in which issues that often affect homeless people were dealt with (such as drug, alcohol and mental health problems) depended very much upon the ideologies behind sources of funding (eg charities, religious groups, local authorities) and the personal attitudes and motivations of the workers themselves. There were also restrictions in terms of the nature of help they could provide in relation to the amount of contact they were able to have with the homeless people. I worked with agencies that opened from Monday to Friday for two hours at dinner time, as well as projects that housed women for up to two years (with constant reviews, counselling and advice). The ways in which two such projects deal with their users will inevitably be very different and it is likely that the impact of their ideologies will vary as a consequence. The following extracts from two agencies' annual reports illustrate the variation in the basic principles of projects with whom I have worked:<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of [name of organization] is to be a living reality of God's kingdom by respecting the dignity of the poor. This process is truly lived in solidarity, living on the margins of society. The purpose of [name of organization] therefore, is not merely 'doing something for the poor' but being made aware that all are in a process of evangelization and that the poor will also evangelize us in this ever transforming and redemptive journey. (emphasis in original)

During the early years [name of project] had already begun to develop ways of working with young women which encouraged them to take responsibility for themselves and prepared themselves for an independent life. Pioneering work was carried out in encouraging user involvement which is still used in our work today. [Name of project] also became established as a powerful campaigning organization basing our policies on practical experience. Our work provided evidence that women-only housing was essential for vulnerable young people caught in unemployment and poverty. Many women who had also experienced discrimination because of their sexuality, lifestyle or race found safety and support at [name of project].

Having read mission statements such as these, and by visiting agencies and talking to women, I some-

times found myself in conflict with the ideologies and practices employed by particular projects. The two examples above are quite different. I would personally ally myself to the second one, but some people may find that as oppressive as I find the first, in its suggestion that this agency is indoctrinating residents into 'radical' feminist thought. It must also be borne in mind that conflicts exist between agencies (for example, the first agency would not necessarily approve of the way the second project went about its work with homeless women). Workers in certain projects were hostile (off the record) about others in their area. Such feelings make it difficult for forums to be established whereby different projects meet to assess how they are dealing with homelessness and how they can improve things together.<sup>8</sup> I was sometimes left with the impression that agencies felt in competition with each other, and that they truly disagreed with others' practices.

Negative judgements about services extend beyond those dealing with homelessness to the public at large. Disapproval has been expressed towards the way in which agencies go about their work, particularly in the case of projects that run 'wet' hostels (where residents are permitted to drink alcohol) and those where drugs counselling is given (such as telling people how to take drugs more safely and providing needle exchanges).<sup>9</sup> When people discover that these services are in place, it can exacerbate local opposition to the projects—a well-documented phenomenon in geography in terms of the location of facilities for socially stigmatized groups (Burnett and Moon 1983; Sibley 1995; Wilton 1998).

Having noted tensions concerning homelessness projects as felt by myself, at the intra-agency level and by the public at large, it is important to reflect upon how these issues affect homeless women themselves. After all, they should be the most important consideration in this context as we are discussing essential (often life-saving) services that are provided for them. In terms of how the underlying ideologies become incorporated, some women I have spoken to have stated that they left hostels because of certain practices:

LD: How did you find it there?

First respondent: It was horrible. They like, they're all like 'God this and God that, Jesus this and Jesus that'. In the morning, they'd just be singing all them songs. Everything you do or good or bad things, Jesus still loves you. That's all you get all day . . . Oh God and God, shut up [laughs]. Every time you eat, everyone would be like

praying. Half the people wouldn't believe. They tried, um, how can I put it, make you come reborn sort of thing.

*Second respondent:* Um, I didn't get on with the people stopping there, like. In one hostel, like, coz my rest of the family are half-caste [*sic*], like, they'd come to see me and the staff would be racist, and I just really didn't get on with the staff.

The practices that I have ideological problems with become even more difficult for me to reconcile when homeless women themselves described their experiences in such negative terms; apparently their homelessness was made worse than it could have been had they found themselves in a different kind of hostel. Whilst wishing to support these essential services for homeless people because of the vital services that they provide, I also wish to be able to criticize some of their practices, without undermining the case for providing services. April Veness's (1994) work in an America context is particularly inspiring here, as she examines ideologies of home and how they translate into overt practices within shelter provision. There is no 'solution' to this problem but I need to be wary of what I say to whom. I will need to make judgements and draw conclusions based on what women have said, but try not to dwell only on those ideas with which I agree.

## Conclusion

This paper has highlighted some of the tensions surrounding my doctoral research project. Despite the intractability of some of these issues, I do believe this kind of research must be undertaken. Homeless women are disempowered and disenfranchised, so, at the least, such research brings their voices into debates that affect their everyday lives. I appreciate that the way these women are represented is very much in my control and that there are unequal power relations at play when I am interviewing, but being reflexive about these issues goes some way towards furthering an understanding of their lives. It is my opinion that reflexive research on socially excluded groups that is aware of power relations is better than no research at all.

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## Notes

- 1 This title refers to *The Big Issue* magazine, which is sold on the streets of many British cities. The vendors have to be homeless or 'vulnerably accommodated' to be eligible to sell it. Vendors purchase copies of the magazine for 45 pence and sell it on to the public for £1.
- 2 The cities where the research was conducted were Birmingham, Cardiff and London.
- 3 But see *Professional Geographer* (1995) for a discussion of the uses of quantitative methods in feminist geographical analysis.
- 4 Recent work in geography has attempted to incorporate the groups being researched at every stage of the project, so that they also design and conduct the research (Kitchin 1999).
- 5 Many of the agencies I worked with have limits on the amount of time people are allowed to be resident within their establishments. This created additional problems in terms of following up.
- 6 Although it could be argued that agencies could use these 'positive' stories of homelessness to show how good their services are, therefore justifying their existence and perhaps helping them to attract more funds.
- 7 I have not named the agencies quoted here, to protect their anonymity.
- 8 Such a forum exists in the town where I conducted my pilot research. Among other things, this forum provides annual statistics on those who approach the agencies so as to give an indication of the extent of the problem in the area.
- 9 Interestingly, the project responsible for the second mission statement included in this paper was the subject of much controversy in the early 1980s, when they advertised in the British national press for a 'Black lesbian worker', having already experienced local displeasure when their first hostel was established.

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