

Observation of the Homeless: Writing Qualitative Research

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For my qualitative research assignment, I observed homeless people and their environment in Charlotte, NC. I chose this population of people because I have noticed them more often in various places, which has piqued my curiosity. When shopping or running errands, I see them clinging to the street corners with "help me" signs or propped up on the curbs of significant retail outlet parking lots with nothing but their pile of belongings. It has concerned me and saddened me at the same time. I have often passed by them on the streets, wondering how many others notice them or stop to help? How long do they stand there on the street corner? Why have they chosen this particular place? And what has happened to lead them to such destitution? This assignment gave me the reason to pursue and answer some of these questions, whereas I would not have ever taken the time to do so otherwise.

In North Carolina, it's estimated that there are currently 9280 homeless people. There are approximately 8.9 homeless people per 10,000 residents (USICH.GOV). Statistics have shown that during the pandemic, the numbers have only increased. In Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, many families have struggled to keep up with rent payments due to loss of income from unemployment, which has slowly exacerbated the problem. At first, the homeless population decreased during Covid, "but then, as the pandemic wore on, and especially into the winter of last year, homelessness in the county began to rise very quickly (De La Canal, 2021). There has also been an increase in families that become homeless. Statistics have shown that not only are there single individuals without homes but whole entire families have been shown to rise in numbers.

For this assignment, my qualitative research consisted solely of observations: recording what you have seen, heard or encountered in detailed field notes (Bhandari, 2020). I closely observed two different sets of homeless people on three separate days. I took notes on what they wore, what they were doing, what was around them, and how they acted. I used all five senses when observing, and I reflected not only what I thought but also what I believed they might be thinking as well. "Qualitative researchers often consider themselves "instruments" in research because all observations, interpretations and analyses are filtered through their own personal lens." (Bhandari, 2021).

Observations

My first observation was an African American lady that I have seen multiple times before when shopping at the nearby Walgreens. I remember the day I first saw her. It was a quiet Sunday morning in mid-February. A short, stout middle-aged lady sat on the steps outside of a Walgreens. "Can you help me with some money for a hotel room tonight?" She asked me. I stood, dumbfounded, as I was not expecting someone to be sitting on the curb. Interestingly, I didn't recall her sitting there when I first arrived. Maybe I just didn't take the time to notice. She didn't wait for my response. "I don't have a home; I just need enough for a hotel room," she said again. I felt horrible, as I did not have any cash on me. I held my head down low and responded, "I am so sorry, I don't have any cash on me." "That's okay," she said. I remember the guilt as I walked to my car and opened my door. As I threw my Walgreens bag to the empty passenger seat, I quickly shifted my attention to other things, and continued about my day. Little did I know that I would soon be coming back here to observe her for this class.

After choosing this subject to observe for this assignment, I drove back to that same Walgreens to see that she was again sitting on the curb in the exact same spot as that very day. I

parked about a hundred feet away in an inconspicuous area of the parking lot and rolled down the window. She had one shopping cart full of bags and clothes edged up near her feet with a metal walking cane leaning against one side. She wore light green baggy pants that almost looked like surgical wear and a dark black heavy coat with the hood up over her head. She was wearing a large white mask, and she wore white high-top sneakers. The weather was sunny, cold, and clear, roughly 45 degrees. There were not many cars in the parking lot, and it was a relatively quiet day. I could not hear much noise at all in the parking lot, only the sound of the buzzing cars driving along the main road behind the store. Caddy corner to Walgreens was a McDonald's, and I could distinctly smell the taste of a happy meal. She sat very still, but within a few minutes, a young boy walked outside of the exit door and she began to ask him a question. I was unable to hear their conversation from where I was parked, however, I could still see everything very clearly. He had a scooter with him as I assume he had rode the scooter up to Walgreens to buy something and go back home. I also assumed that she asked him for money, and he would probably decline. But after a few seconds, he casually rode his scooter all the way to the center of the parking lot and grabbed another shopping cart and rode it back over to the lady. He placed the shopping cart right beside the other cart. He then walked over to the trash can about 20 feet away from her and proceeded to pick up different suitcases. I realized she had other items that belonged to her sitting behind the trash can. He carried them over to the other empty cart. The homeless lady kept asking him something and his body language appeared as if he was listening and wanted to help. He kept going back to the trash can until he picked up all the bags and put everything in the two carts. Afterwards, he scooted away. This surprised me. I realized that not only did she need money, but evidently, she needed help moving her stuff closer towards her. I was very moved by the fact such a young boy had taken the time out of his day to help a

stranger on the side of street. The boy wore a gray sweatshirt, shorts, black socks and sneakers. He had long brownish-blond hair underneath a hat, and funny enough, he resembled Justin Bieber.

The next day, I observed the same lady as I watched different people walk in and out of the store. She never moved from where she sat and she wore the exact same outfit as the day before. Out of about fifteen different people, I only noticed two people that actually gave her some money that walked out of the store. Each time, she would place the money in her bag inside of the cart. However, there was one incident that confused me. A Walgreens employee kept walking out of the store and talking to the lady. She handed her a bag of stuff from Walgreens. This happened twice, and from observing their encounter it seemed as if they knew each other. The homeless lady never opened the bag. She just placed it in her cart full of belongings. I am honestly not sure what was in the bag, but I will just assume it's something that the employee bought from the store to help the woman.

Just before I was about to finish observing the homeless lady, she stood up from the curb and proceeded to gather up all of her belongings and walk into the store. Sadly, she could barely get up and walk. She appeared to be somewhat disabled. However, she still managed to gather all her things in both carts and slowly but surely she walked into Walgreens. This confused me, as I wondered even if she was going inside to buy something, why she would need drag all of her stuff into Walgreens? What was she going inside to do with two shopping carts full of suitcases? This struck me as very bizarre.

During my second observation, I parked across the street of the CATS (Charlotte Area Transportation System) building as I noticed a homeless man laying right near the edge of the street. This man caught my attention immediately, as he was different from all the others I have

seen before. This man was the epitome of the tragic homelessness scouring the streets of uptown Charlotte. I saw the pain in his eyes and the famine in his heart while hundreds of cars drove hurriedly past him. To them, it was just another day. To him, it was the hope of the one day that someone might stop to help him. As I rolled down my window a little bit to get a better look, I could taste the bitterness of his appearance. I had to look away for a second. The air was clear, crisp and cold. And the wind circled through up the perfect blue sky. Even though it was cold, the sun was strong and bright. It shined down around the outskirts of the city. There was a smell of flaming hamburgers wafting through the air from the nearby uptown restaurants. I could hear the birds chirping behind the very loud heavy traffic. His unkept hair was dark brown, long, and wavy. His hands shook a little bit as he raised his head to look across the street. He was continuously motioning one of his hands to the cars that drove past. Over and over, he motioned to them almost as if he was trying to say something to them, but no one heard. His clothes were old, worn, dirty and his boots were not even on his feet. One of them laid off to the side of his body that tumbled past the curb of the street. Encircling him were the cars that continued to drive past about 55 MPH, merely running over his boot. His belongings consisted of dark-colored messy old bookbags, suitcases, a cart with wheels, a cane of some sort, and a large, oversized coat. There were a few people in the parking lot of the nearby bus transportation system just going along with their normal everyday business, but not one person stopped to engage with the man. No, not one. This man was dirty, dingy and his face was weathered. His brown hair was mixed with a peppered-gray color and his face had a light brown skin-tone color. The more I observed, the drier the air felt. I could literally feel the thirst in his bones. I wondered about his past; where did he come from? What was his story? What led him to this cruel fate? I envisioned the nefarious stench of his clothes as he laid there on the streets for days at a time. Obviously, I

didn't know his name and I never will, but I gave him the name, James for this observation. If only James could behold the life that meant for him. Observing James was chilling and the solidarity and inhumaneness of those moments in my mind still haunt me today.

Reflection

I will be honest and say that I was biased towards homeless people before this experiment. Yes, I have had preconceived opinions that they have been primarily at fault for their situation. Whether it be drug use, mental health disorders, or people with criminal offenses that prohibit them from finding a job, I have unfortunately had these prejudices against this sad population of people. But this assignment has challenged me to dig deeper, think more profoundly, and empathize. With research, I have learned that not all homeless people are the same, and not all are homeless based on their poor decisions. Perhaps, it is a series of life events that have unfolded and led them to a place where many people would have been helped instead. There are multitudes of reasons for their situation. Whether it be people that no longer can afford to pay rent, health issues, deaths in the family, veteran injuries, domestic violence against women, systemic racism, being born into poverty, or maybe it's just a family struggling to make ends meet, regardless of the reason, there are many circumstances. Many different explanations have pushed homeless people out into the streets. And when self-reflecting on this issue, I have thought about the world and the structure of our society. In recent years, rents have increased while some people's wages remain the same. Inflation is rising, and many people have lost their jobs. The pandemic halted rent payments by law, but now they are legally allowed to evict tenants who can't afford the rent. This has only increased the chances for some people without any other financial means to receive the help they need. I believe this is why some have resorted to begging on the street corners or retail parking lots. There is such a stigma around homeless

people. Society pushes them down further without even realizing it while facing discrimination when trying to reach out for help.

When working on this assignment, one question kept coming to my mind; Why does it have to be this way? We live in a world that is so blessed yet so poor at the same time. This project gave me the opportunity to self-reflect on this dichotomy and conceptualize my own personal gratitude for all the things I have in life; a warm house, a safe place to go every day, food and water, a family, and all of life's necessities. I truly hope for a day when our world can come up with laws, policies and solutions to help the homeless more than we do now. Can we? Whether it be a temporary home or just a place to receive the help that they might need to transition forward, I hope that the world can help even and level out our society to a place where everyone can share the fruits of this earth. I know there are organizations in place to fill this need, but there are not enough.

If had to do this assignment again, the only thing I would do different is park closer to the subject so I could hear their conversations, as I was not able to hear them. When I think about the two homeless people I observed, I still wonder if the lady at Walgreen's was ever able to get the money she needed to stay in a hotel room. I plan on checking back with her in that same spot and bringing some extra cash to give her. In particular, I wonder where James is today. Is he still lying there? Or did he move somewhere else? I do not plan on going back to that location as it was too far away from my house, and it just was too painful to see. The questions that burn in my memory are; why was he lying so close to the road? Had the bus dropped him off? Or did he travel to that location in anticipation of trying to get on the bus to somehow? These are questions that I will not ever know. He opened a solemn door of compassion in my heart that I will never forget.

References:

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