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Homeless Individuals' Social Construction of a Park: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

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Abstract

Individuals experiencing homelessness and housed residents have increasingly been in conflict over the use of public spaces, which has led to efforts to regulate how individuals experiencing homelessness use public spaces. However, the discourses around the use of public parks seem to value housed residents over homeless individuals. How individuals experiencing homelessness construct meanings of public spaces has not been given adequate attention in the literature. Drawing on a symbolic interactionist theoretical framework and grounded theory methodology, the researcher conducted 10 semi-structured interviews on how individuals experiencing homelessness construct meanings of a public park. Participants ascribed instrumental and intangible meanings to the park by describing it as a homeless safety hub, a homeless resource hub, and a homeless network hub. This study suggested that homeless individuals' constructed meanings of public parks may be motivated by their interactions with their peers and housed residents. This study recommends policy makers to make an effort to understand factors that force people experiencing homelessness to congregate in public parks and to discontinue regulations that criminalize how individuals experiencing homelessness use public parks.

Keywords

Homelessness, Public Park, Symbolic Interactionism, Place

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Homeless Individuals' Social Construction of a Park: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

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Individuals experiencing homelessness and housed residents have increasingly been in conflict over the use of public spaces, which has led to efforts to regulate how individuals experiencing homelessness use public spaces. However, the discourses around the use of public parks seem to value housed residents over homeless individuals. How individuals experiencing homelessness construct meanings of public spaces has not been given adequate attention in the literature. Drawing on a symbolic interactionist theoretical framework and grounded theory methodology, the researcher conducted 10 semi-structured interviews on how individuals experiencing homelessness construct meanings of a public park. Participants ascribed instrumental and intangible meanings to the park by describing it as a homeless safety hub, a homeless resource hub, and a homeless network hub. This study suggested that homeless individuals' constructed meanings of public parks may be motivated by their interactions with their peers and housed residents. This study recommends policy makers to make an effort to understand factors that force people experiencing homelessness to congregate in public parks and to discontinue regulations that criminalize how individuals experiencing homelessness use public parks. Keywords: Homelessness, Public Park, Symbolic Interactionism, Place

The presence of homeless individuals in public parks has become a contested issue (Foderaro, 2014) engendered by the discomfort housed residents experience in the presence of homeless individuals in public spaces (Snow & Mulcahy, 2001), often resulting in a battle over who has the right to public space. Housed residents have constructed images of homeless individuals in public parks as a threat to the tranquility of public parks because of perceived criminal activities and littering (Toolis & Hammack, 2015). Access to public spaces is defined by behavior, with those whose behaviors are antithetical to local norms being excluded from public spaces (Doherty et al., 2002). This constructed view of homeless individuals' actions in public spaces as violating the norms of society has led local authorities to enact policies to exclude homeless individuals from using public spaces and redefined public spaces as a preserve for only those who possess properties (Mitchell, 1997; Mitchell, 2003). Previous notions of public spaces, including parks, as owned collectively and accessible to everyone, including those experiencing homelessness (Waldron, 1991), has been challenged by substantial efforts to regulate, and in some cases, expel those experiencing homelessness from public spaces (Mitchell & Staeheli, 2006). These exclusion policies have led to increased surveillance of public spaces by security personnel and monitoring devices such as CCTVs (Graham & Marvin, 2001). However, unlike housed residents who have access to private spaces for daily activities, individuals experiencing homelessness have no alternative but to use public spaces for daily activities (Doherty et al., 2002). With increased efforts to regulate and expel those experiencing homelessness from public spaces, the voices of those experiencing homelessness have not been given adequate attention in the formulation of policies around the use of public spaces. Little is known of how those experiencing homelessness construct meanings of public spaces.

Theoretical Framework

This study was constructed using a symbolic interactionist perspective. Low, Taplin, and Scheld (2005) stressed that places such as parks have symbolic meanings that may define their use. Blumer (1969) posited that symbolic interactionism is based on three simple premises:

1. Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them;
2. The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows;
3. These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (p. 2)

Through the symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective, the researcher sought to reveal the meanings homeless individuals make of using a public park by drawing on the concept of place. This study was positioned in the concept of place to illuminate the experiences of homeless individuals within a specific context. The term "place" has been conceptualized in multiple disciplines such as psychology and geography (Canter, 1977; Cheng, Kruger, & Daniels, 2003). These different perspectives converge on the subjectivity of individuals' and groups' perceptions of place (Cheng et al., 2003; Relph, 1976). From a philosophical context, Heidegger (1958, as cited in Relph, 1976, p. 1) argued that "'place' places man (sic) in such a way that it reveals the external bonds of his existence and at the same time the depths of his freedom and reality." Cheng et al. (2003) posited that "place meanings include instrumental or utilitarian values as well as intangible values such as belonging, attachment, beauty, and spirituality" (p. 89). Cheng et al. (2003) characterized the literature on place as an integration of biophysical attributes and processes, social and cultural meanings, and social and political processes. They defined biophysical processes as both "naturally occurring and human-made physical features" (p. 91); social and political processes as human interactions and political power dynamics; and social and cultural meanings as "ideas, values, and beliefs that order the world" (p. 91).

The researcher presents the voices of homeless individuals through a symbolic interactionist lens to illuminate the construction of the public park as a dynamic process rooted in the experience of participants (Cross, 2015). Gieryn (2000) had earlier postulated the symbolic meanings of places that create social structural differences and hierarchies and form a basis for interactions that engender social networking (Gieryn, 2000).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand how individuals experiencing homeless "construct, sustain, perceive, and experience" (Sack, 1992, p. 11) a public park. Blumer (1969) eloquently asserted that:

This world is socially produced in that the meanings are fabricated through the process of social interaction. Thus, different groups come to develop different worlds—and these worlds change as the objects that compose them change in meaning. Since people are set to act in terms of the meanings of their objects, the world of objects of a group represents in a genuine sense its action organization. To identify and understand the life of a group it is necessary to

identify its world of objects; this identification has to be in terms of the meanings objects have for the members of the group. (p. 540)

Based on Blumer's (1969) assertion, to understand why and how homeless individuals use public parks, it is important to elicit what public parks mean to them. Hewitt (2003) emphasized that the meaning of symbols is shared by users. By revealing the meanings homeless individuals attach to public parks, policy makers may be better informed about how to appropriately respond to the contention between homeless individuals and housed residents on the use of public parks.

Researcher's Context

The researcher previously volunteered in a homeless shelter in the study area, assisting with check-ins and providing orientations for new shelter residents. The study was influenced by a pilot study that the researcher conducted which included 14 hours of participant observation during the Fall of 2014 while the researcher was taking a course in qualitative research. The preliminary findings informed the researcher's decision to further explore this phenomenon with a formal study.

Methodology

This study was situated in an interpretivist epistemology to elicit the subjectivity of the researcher and participants' interpretations based on context (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Consistent with the interpretivist tradition, the study draws on a constructivist grounded theory methodology, which theorizes studied phenomena through the researcher's and participants' interpretations (Charmaz, 2014). According to Strauss and Corbin (1994), in grounded theory methodology, "Theory may be generated initially from the data . . . then these may be elaborated and modified as incoming data are meticulously played against them" (p. 273).

Study Setting

The notion of public space has received considerable attention in the literature. Public spaces may include parks and recreational areas owned by the public. However, increasingly, historical notions of public spaces have been challenged by the private-public or entirely private management of public spaces (Tonnelat, 2010).

The study site is a public park located near two homeless shelters and businesses in a Western city in the U.S.. The city has seen a gradual increase in the number of homeless individuals, partly due to the number of transient homeless individuals moving into the city. The park is owned by a private company but has been leased to the city for more than two decades. The study site is conceptualized according to what Carmona, Heath, Oc, and Tiesdell (2003) referred to as external public space. External public spaces include parks or lands that lie between private properties and are accessible to all (Carmona et al., 2003).

Although the park is available and accessible to all, individuals experiencing homeless frequent the park more often than housed residents. Homeless individuals' use of the park, however, has generated conflicts within the community. While a section of housed residents is in support of the rights of homeless individuals to use the park, others, supported by city authorities, have vehemently opposed the presence of homeless individuals in the park. There have been reports of littering, harassment, and other nuisances in and around the park. Due to the perceived issues associated with the park, the city authorities intended to decommission the park and redevelop it as a parking lot. Redevelopment of public parks has been used as a means

to exclude those experiencing homelessness, demonstrated by redevelopments of Horton Plaza Park in San Diego, California (Mitchell & Staeheli, 2006). This contested issue provides a context to explore the meanings homeless individuals ascribe to the public park.

Participants

There were 10 participants involved in this study. All participants in this study self-identified as homeless and were residents of homeless shelters close to park. Participants' eligibility for the study was guided by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) definition of homelessness. HUD's (2013) definition of homelessness included: "An individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, meaning: An individual or family living in a supervised publicly or privately-operated shelter designated to provide temporary living arrangements (including congregate shelters, transitional housing . . .)" (p. 3). Participants' period of homelessness ranged between 6 months to 20 years. All participants visited the park regularly, at least three times per week within the last six months. Participants included three females and seven males. Six of the participants identified as White, three as Black, and one person as Native American.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the researcher's university's Institutional Review Board. Prior to interviewing each participant, the researcher verbally read an informed consent script to participants. The informed consent sought to ensure that participants comprehended the nature of the study and potential risk (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Participants were informed that interviews would be audio recorded; participants were assured that the researcher would maintain confidentiality of participants' identities. Pseudonyms were assigned to transcripts to protect participants' identities. During interviews, the researcher had a list of community resources to provide referrals in case participants appeared distressed. Participants were offered a \$5 Wal-Mart gift card to show appreciation for their participation prior to interviewing; participants were informed of their rights to discontinue the interview at any time.

Data Collection

Data collection began using snowball sampling, a method of sampling whereby a participant is asked to recommend others (Babbie, 1983). The researcher identified and interviewed a gatekeeper among the homeless community; the gatekeeper then led the researcher to other homeless individuals. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. After initial data analysis, which identified initial codes, the researcher continued data collection using theoretical sampling. Charmaz (2014) stated that "theoretical sampling helps you fill out the properties of a category so that you can create an analytic definition and explication of it" (p. 205).

The researcher conducted 10 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with individuals experiencing homelessness. Dawson and Akhurst (2015) contended that semi-structured interviews help to capture rich and reflective data of participants' experiences. To guard against the researcher's preconceptions, interviews consisted of open-ended questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Participants were asked to describe how they use and experience the park. Interview location were at participants' discretion. Interviews were audio recorded with consent from participants.

Data Analysis

During the data analysis process, the researcher was cognizant of his positionality and how it influenced data interpretation. The researcher continually engaged in reflexivity to check preconceived assumptions about participants. The researcher acknowledges his subjectivity in interpreting the studied phenomena. Due to the researcher’s involvement in the community, some of the participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences with the researcher.

Data analysis was guided by Charmaz’s (2014) approach to grounded theory coding and Braun and Clark’s (2006) approach to thematic analysis. Data analysis began after completing the first two interviews and then continued throughout the data collection phase. Coding was guided by the research question: How do participants describe and experience the use of the park? After transcribing the interviews, the researcher made marginal notes on the transcripts and wrote memos. Initial codes were generated using in vivo codes, which preserve a participant’s perspective through an inductive process (Charmaz, 2014). Initial codes highlighted participants’ descriptions and interpretations of their daily activities in the park and included “home,” “family,” “hanging out,” “I felt I was welcome,” and others. The initial coding was followed by categorizing codes and then searching for themes through a constant comparative process. Three major themes were discovered: constructing the park as a homeless safety hub, constructing the park as a homeless network hub, and constructing the park as a homeless resource hub. Table 1 shows the coding process using excerpts from three participants’ transcripts.

Table 1
Coding Process

Participant	Transcript	Initial Codes	Categorical Codes	Thematic Codes
African-American female	There’s always those people that are there that are chill, not full of drama. They’re respectful and happy people. Those people that are actually there for you, and they’ve been there with what you’re going through, and they’re not trying to make it harder, because, they’re going through the same thing. You know?	People that are actually there for you	Comfort	Constructing the park as a homeless safety hub
White male	When I go to the park, I’ve had a lot of different experiences, such as that. I’ve had good experiences too. One of my friends, [Tay] I met him there. I’ve known him since 2012 and me and him became very good friends	Met him there	Meeting new people	Constructing the park as a homeless network hub
Native American female	Well, a few of the times that I was there, I don’t know the name of the organization or anything because like I said, I only go there when my sons are there. Or otherwise, I just go on by but there will be like people from here . . . they would like take them like pizza or they would take them like clothes	Clothes	Resources	Constructing the park as a resource hub

Findings

Study findings suggest participants constructed the park as a homeless safety hub, a homeless resource hub, and a homeless network hub. These three constructions occur simultaneously and are created through an integrated process, similar to previous research on meanings of place (Cross, 2015). Through their interactions with their peers and housed residents, participants subjectively construct meanings of the park on the premise of their shared meanings. Participants' constructions are elaborated below.

Constructing the Park as a Homeless Safety Hub

All participants constructed the park as a homeless safety hub—describing the park as a safe place where they are treated equally by their peers, irrespective of their presenting challenges such as mental health or substance abuse. Maslow's (1954) conception of safety, which includes security, protection, and freedom from fear, summarizes this theme. It is important to point out that this sense of safety in the park stems from a general feeling of a lack of safety in the larger community; some of the participants reported some community residents were unwelcoming toward them in other public areas in the community. The experiences of two participants, Joana and Bill, illustrate this perception. Joana is a Native American mother who only visits the park when her sons are there. She describes residents' attitudes toward her and her sons in the city's downtown:

We're Native American with a brown skin. They don't see us very much downtown. But when we're downtown, everybody is just like looking at us all crazy and I was like . . . my sons take it, I said to them, no, don't stoop to their category. Just keep on walking and just saying, "Good morning," or "Have a nice day."

Joana describes how she and her sons are perceived when they are in the downtown area of the city. She perceives residents' attitudes toward her as unwelcoming due to having "brown skin" in a predominantly White city.

Bill, a young adult White male who has been visiting the park since 2012, narrated his perception of residents' attitudes when he encounters them in other public spaces:

Every day I walk down the street and I get, "Oh let's walk to the other side, walk to the other side of the street, get away from him." I'm one of the nicest people, most calm, most happy people, just trying to make a difference in the world. You would never know that because you look at my dirty jacket and it's "Oh, jacket."

Bill's narration further alludes to how homeless individuals in this study are perceived in other areas of the city. In contrast with Joana's experiences, which are influenced by the color of her skin, Bill believes community residents avoid contact with him because of his jacket, which suggests his homelessness. Some participants shared similar perceptions about the attitudes of residents and businesses in the community. The perceived attitudes of local residents lead them to the park, where they do not experience stigma as they do in other public spaces in the community. Joana's construction of the park as a homeless safety hub is illustrated below:

Everybody is like family oriented there. They see each other and say, "Oh, hi." Everybody gives each other a hug. That's because there's love between each

other. Everybody just sits there and talks, talks about their day or something that happened in their lives before, and how they got to where they're at. Everybody gives each other encouraging words.

Like I said, nobody's above anybody or nobody is lower than anybody. It's all equal. What do I see when I see the park? I see a family-oriented place where everybody is a loving, caring group of people and the city needs to do not have that stigma about the homeless people. They all have hearts and they're caring people and they're not like how they say like they have this perception that's like where there's drugs involved.

There are some people that are drunk there because they have nowhere to go. They can't go to the Mission. They can't eat, so they have to sit there and sober up. That's their safe zone. How I see it is it's a place where there's a lot of caring people. There's good-hearted people. There are loving people, and everybody treats each other equally, like I stated earlier. Nobody is above one another. Nobody is lower than the other. It's all equal, equality.

Bill stated the following about construction of the park as a homeless safety hub:

When I walk into that park and a group of 10 people all scream, "Hey, how you doing? Come sit with us." You can't help but be like, I'm wanted, I'm loved, I have people who are happy to see me. There they don't care if you're clean, you're dirty, you smell, you're broke, you're busted, you're an alcoholic; as long as you're happy and bringing good energy, you're home and we love you. You don't get that anywhere else.

Joana and Bill's narrations indicate similarities and differences in how they construct the park as a homeless safety hub. Joana imputes a sense of family and describes other homeless persons in the park as caring and loving, treating each other equally regardless of their personal issues. Joana's narration describes the park as a "safe zone" for those who are drunk and have nowhere else to go. Apart from the park, there is nowhere else where they can go to sober up and not be cited for public intoxication. Through her motherly view, she describes the park as a hospitable place for the homeless, projecting herself on to other homeless individuals who regularly use the park. Bill, on other hand, experiences a sense of belonging when he visits the park. He illustrates his feelings of being wanted and loved by his colleagues. In contrast to how Bill feels when he is in the park, he feels unwanted in the community. Bill's experiences in the park affirm Marin's (1995) earlier observations that homeless men in public invoke a sense of danger and fear in people and are "avoided and suppressed rather than helped" (p. 168).

Although all participants constructed the park as a homeless safety hub, some provided contradictory interpretations of the park. On one hand, some participants described the park as a homeless safety hub, and on the other hand, they described some activities in the park as unhealthy. Lisa, a young African-American woman in her early 20s, eloquently explains this point: "They're respectful and happy people. Those people that are actually there for you, and they've been there with what you're going through, and they're not trying to make it harder, because, they're going through the same thing." Although she lamented, "Unnecessary drama, over stupid stuff. It's always something new, or there's always a fight. I just stay away from it now. It's annoying." Lisa's narration shows there were some behaviors in the park that made other homeless individuals uncomfortable.

Constructing the Park as a Homeless Resource Hub

Constructing the park as a homeless resource hub was identified across all participants' interviews—a place where they can get immediate assistance such as food, work, information about community resources, and other pertinent information vital to their survival on the streets. This theme is similar to Maslow's (1954) conception of physiological needs. Participants seem to describe the park as a place to where they go to meet their physiological needs. Excerpts from two participants, Jeff and Diego, illustrate this theme. Jeff is a White male in his late 20s who was a regular in the park in 2010 but visits less often than he used to because he found a job in a local restaurant.

I was going down there because I wanted to share that stuff with people and give them information if possible or there's people sharing information about food stamps. "Oh, you need food stamps? You can go here and do that." We do that in more places than just there, but that's where I first started seeing people doing that and learned about it and started sharing my knowledge of things at the park. Some of it the shelters don't provide and some of its information on the shelters. Which ones are better to stay at, how their programs work and stuff like that, from an inside point of view, from someone that's been in the programs and the stuff that they want and stayed at the places. So you get a different view and insight. Some of the information like food stamps and bus passes and stuff like that, yeah, you'll get at shelters and you can get from people that are at the park. I personally think it's faster and easier if you just ask somebody that's been there and done it and knows where it's at to really help you because they can explain it to you from the same point of view that you need to understand it and be able to get it done.

Diego, a Black male in his late 30s, began visiting the park in the Summer of 2014.

I must also mention that sometimes, that park also serves as a place where people who need fast human resource to complete a job is picked up. You might find a painter who would stop by and say, "Hey, how many people want to work? I have some jobs that I want to give you to do today." If you are lucky, you might find something like that, whereby you can earn some money for that. It's like a spot where people who need emergency workers stop by and ask if anyone is interested in making a few bucks.

Jeff and Diego's narrations illustrate different categories of constructing the park as a homeless resource hub. Jeff discusses how he learned about community resources from his peers and also continued a reciprocal process of sharing his knowledge with his peers in the park. Jeff reveals that information about resources they gain from their peers is more comprehensive than information from formal organizations. Diego on the other hand, describes the park as a place where homeless individuals can find temporary employment. The park is used as a job recruitment site for housed residents who need temporary workers, indicating that some positive interactions may occur in the park with housed residents. These interactions are contrary to the general perception of some housed residents that visitors to the park only engage in illegal activities.

Constructing the Park as a Homeless Network Hub

Some participants constructed the park as a homeless network hub—a place where they go to socialize with their friends and associates. This theme describes the feeling of belongingness (Maslow, 1954). Previous research in other jurisdictions reported those experiencing homelessness perceived public park as a place of socialization (Meert et al., 2006). One participant described several activities that they perform in the park, such as storytelling, wrestling, and hacky sack with other homeless individuals. Steve, a White male in his late 20s who has been a regular in the park for a decade, describes his experiences in the park.

Okay, well, Hobo Park means many significant things to people because that is where we go to hang out, and there's a lot of memories tied with the park. Everybody knows each other out there. We depend on each other, and it all stems from that park. If we didn't have each other, I wouldn't know where I would be at this point. I wouldn't even know where I would be tonight. For all I know, I could be dead, if it weren't for them. Mm-hmm . . . yeah, it's like the park is a collection. Okay, let me rephrase this. It's like when you go to the park, you go over there and you find people and you sit in their circle, and immediately, you feel a connection with them because you realize that this park is also significant to them, and it brings a new consciousness, a new singularity or whatever you want to call it.

Steve's perspective on constructing the park as a homeless network hub portrays his dependency on the park to network with other homeless individuals. Here, Steve perceives the park as an embodiment of his existence, because it is where he developed relationships that are essential to his survival. Although Steve's narration encompasses a strong social interaction among the homeless community in the park, other participants did not share his perspective. Some of the participants felt there were intragroup differences among the homeless community in the park, which defined their socialization patterns in the park. Jim, a White male in his 60s who has been a regular visitor in the park for 20 years, sums up this category.

I just hang out with certain people. I don't like the kids because they're nothing but a bunch of riff raff always causing problems. The kids are always wanting to fight and argue. The older ones, they're just laid back. They just like to kick back and relax.

Discussion

The study's findings suggest participants' use of the public park is motivated by the need to meet tangible and intangible values. However, the actions and meanings they construct of the park are premised on their interactions with housed residents outside the park and other individuals experiencing homelessness in the park. As noted earlier, Blumer (1969) posited that people act towards objects based on the meanings people construct of the objects. Similarly, participants created images of the park on the basis of the tangible and intangible benefits that they received from visiting the park. Participants' construction of the park as a homeless safety hub appears predicated on their perception of housed resident's negative attitudes toward them in other public spaces in the city. Mitchell's (1992) study at the People's Park, Berkeley, California, similarly observed that the People's Park served as a refuge for the homeless and street people because of the exclusionary attitudes of housed residents.

The study further suggests participants' frequent patronage of the park seems to be motivated by the need to meet their physiological needs, including the need for food, clothing, and information on where to locate available resources in the community. Maslow (1954), rightly noted that, "The physiological needs, along with their partial goals, when chronically gratified, cease to exist as active determinants or organizers of behavior" (p. 84). Thus, this study suggests people experiencing homeless continually seek other sources of support beyond formal institutional settings. Another aspect of this is that although there were service providers located close to the park areas, participants seem to be circumventing formal institutions providing homeless services to meet their resource needs. Deward and Moe (2010) observed that bureaucracies within homeless services disempower individuals experiencing homelessness and reinforce a paternalistic view of homeless services. A previous study by Reitzes, Crimmins, Yarbrough, and Parker (2011) at Robert W. Woodruff Park in Atlanta, Georgia, found individuals experiencing homelessness may seek resources, including service agencies, at the park.

In addition, this study suggests that individuals experiencing homelessness frequent the park to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance. Research conducted in parts of Europe have shown individuals experiencing homelessness may use public parks to socialize (Meert et al., 2006). Deward and Moe (2010) alluded that homeless services should go beyond meeting the physical needs, such as food and shelter of homeless people, and address other needs such as acceptance, affirmation, and amity. This study suggests the need for homeless service providers to develop programs that would foster socialization among those experiencing homelessness and housed residents. Although homeless peer groups provide group solidarity and support, they may also undermine individual efforts toward leaving homelessness (Show & Anderson, 1993). Thus, building friendship ties with housed residents may be an important additional aspect of addressing homelessness.

The study sample was limited to a midsize Western city and may not represent the entire homeless population in public parks. However, the methodology employed in this study could be replicated in other locations to inform the literature. Guba and Lincoln (1982) have stressed the transferability of qualitative research studies. Also, the study was limited to a single research question, whereas multiple research questions might have elicited other aspects of participant's experiences in the park. Also, more prolonged engagement with participants may have revealed other aspects of participant's construction of the public park. However, this study adds to the body of literature on homeless individuals' lived experiences in public spaces and informs the literature for further exploratory studies in other contexts. This study implies that resolving the contention over the use of public spaces may involve addressing the social factors that lead homeless individuals to congregate in public parks. Thus, policy makers may engage with people experiencing homeless to find how to address their concerns and not impose regulations to restrict or expel them from public parks. Future research could explore the interactions between people experiencing homelessness and housed residents.

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