



Volume 32

Issue 1 March - Special Issue on Aging and Older Men:
Thoughts, Reflections and Issues

Article 17

March 2005

Being Homeless: Textual and Narrative Constructions. Amir B. Marvasti. Reviewed by John Q. Hodges.

John Q. Hodges

University of Missouri-Columbia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hodges, John Q. (2005) "*Being Homeless: Textual and Narrative Constructions.* Amir B. Marvasti. Reviewed by John Q. Hodges.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 1 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol32/iss1/17>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



Amir B. Marvasti, *Being Homeless: Textual and Narrative Constructions*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003. \$60.00 hardcover.

Scholars have long debated the definition of "homeless", causal factors of homelessness, how many homeless people there are in the United States, and ameliorative strategies for homelessness. Few, however, actually offer to the reader the *voice* of homeless persons. In fact, it is seldom even acknowledged that homeless identities are socially constructed phenomena resulting from a collaboration of societal, personal, and historic factors. Amir Marvasti sets out to let the homeless speak for themselves, and to help the reader understand how these homeless "narratives" and identities are constructed. Where this book truly excels is its review of prior discourse on the topic, with special emphasis upon the limitations of the positivist research tradition that has thus far defined our knowledge of what it is truly like to be homeless. The book is an excellent review of the failings of prior studies of the homeless, a very good primer on ethnographic research methods, and finally, as a brief introduction to the homeless themselves via their own words.

However, the book feels theoretically "top heavy", with actual voices of homeless persons not heard until chapter nine (of nine chapters). At times it also feels like an ethnographic research methods primer rather than a unique study contributing new knowledge to our understanding of homelessness. Preceding the homeless client narratives are rather lengthy and jargon-heavy critiques of theory and methodology. This leaves the reader very well prepared for putting into sociological context homeless persons' narrative constructions of their own lives, but only gives a brief glimpse of these narratives, and then offers very little in the way of interpretation or conclusions. This structure feels awkward in a book that places so much emphasis upon client narratives.

Of twenty interviews with homeless persons, six are presented in this book. Only one sentence is devoted to describing the selection criteria for these six interviews. One wishes for a more detailed description of why these particular voices were chosen. As mentioned above, the book could also be stronger if more space was devoted to each of the six interviews, for this is

where the book truly comes alive—when it allows the homeless to speak for themselves.

Nevertheless, this book has many strengths. It pays special attention to the homeless mentally ill, perhaps one of the most vulnerable of the subpopulations among the homeless. The book excels at describing how the homeless in general, and especially the homeless mentally ill, often have their needs ignored in favor of the needs of agencies and organizations, and how the homeless are consistently portrayed as pathological in order to meet the needs of agency funding sources.

Also excellent is the discussion of the parallel scientific and literary traditions around homelessness, and the ways in which each offer an understanding of the phenomenon. The author has deeply held views about the nature of inquiry and the utility of “data” for understanding highly individualized issues such as homelessness. At times, however, these views seem to get in the way of an objective presentation of the data. For example, of the three shelter workers interviewed for their narrative constructions of homelessness, the reader cannot help but feel that the shelter director is not being given a fair chance, due to the apparent antipathy the author holds toward this person. To Marvasti’s credit, he does acknowledge the highly personal and subjective nature of his methodology throughout the book.

In other places, it feels as if the author is making cognitive leaps that are unwarranted, especially considering his critiques of earlier studies and their assumptions about homelessness. For example, it is a big jump to compare the differences in ethnic characteristics of clients at one relatively small homeless shelter who have been given restrictions (for infractions as perceived by shelter staff) to differential ethnicity rates for national crime data. There is no direct or logical correlation between the two subjects. Likewise it seems a bit superficial for Marvasti to assume that university students were “either too drunk or too scared to turn down a street person asking for change” (p. 61). Needless to say, there are many complex reasons why a student might or might not give money to a panhandler aside from being drunk or scared. It is in areas such as these that the reader is left wondering “how did we get from point A to point B?”

Perhaps the biggest contribution of this study is gift the author has for detailing how homeless client narratives can be constructed by agencies in order to suit institutional purposes. He clearly conveys how client narratives are edited by agency staff to suit purposes not based on actual client needs or priorities. This acknowledgment of powerful social forces and power imbalances is astute and skillfully conveyed, and while all of us deal with our social narratives being "edited" by powerful others, homeless persons are particularly at risk for having their voice minimized due to their lack of societal resources and privilege. It is unfortunate that this book does not do more to let these voices shine through.

John Q. Hodges
University of Missouri-Columbia