

Trenna Valado and Randall Amster (2012)

Professional Lives, Personal Struggles

Maryland: Lexington Books, 215pp.

This book is a collection of eloquent essays about ethical quandaries experienced by ethnographic researchers who study homelessness. The focus for the most part is on adults who are on the streets or (less often) interacting with social service agencies. Youth, families, and people residing in shelters or doubled up with others do not make an appearance. All but one of the researchers worked in the United States (Jürgen von Mahs studied adults experiencing homelessness in Berlin), but the dilemmas they describe transcend national boundaries.

The authors hope to empower participants and reduce stigma by giving voice to their stories. They strive to document participants' dignity and resilience without romanticizing homelessness, and worry about reinforcing stereotypes by acknowledging substance problems and mental illnesses. They grapple with questions of moral responsibility and whether they should simply document or intervene, whether advocacy might compromise their research, whether radical critiques of social structures might close listeners' ears to the message. They wrestle with their own power and privilege – their ability to go back to a home at the end of the day – and ask whether they are exploiting the people they study for their own gain, advancing their careers, pocketing their royalty checks, and (sometimes) moving on. Most poignantly, they struggle with their own impotence. As David Cook put it, "I do not know if one single individual has found an end to his or her homeless life because of my research and activism" (p.158).

For the most part, the authors' activism consists of writing about both the lives of people who experience homelessness and the neoliberal policies that spawn poverty and homelessness for those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Some simply publish their analyses and recommendations in journals or books unlikely to be read by many outside the scholarly community. Others work collaboratively with coalitions of people experiencing homelessness who fight for their rights, or publish people's stories in outlets like newspapers where they will be widely read. Still others, such as Trenna Valado prepare customized short reports of their research for audiences such as police and a coalition of social service

providers, and can see some local impact of their work. But the lack of broader impact leads Vin Lyon Callo and others to ask, “Do we really need more research on homelessness?” (p.119).

My view is that the solution Lyon Callo suggests – research that “connect[s] homelessness to broader issues of economic and political restructuring, involve[s] working in collaboration with the subjects of the research, and resonate[s] emotionally with the broader public” (p.130) – is useful but still insufficient. What is lacking in the book is discussion of a middle ground between indictment of broad social structures and local description or local intervention, for example in the treatment a desk clerk at a homeless service agency affords clients. Scholars may rail against structures of income inequality and social exclusion (as others and I have done, if only for our own sanity or intellectual integrity), but I have little expectation that such analyses will provoke change. However, there are interventions at an intermediate level that make meaningful improvements in peoples’ circumstances and prospects.

In response to the Great Recession, the United States invested \$1.5 billion of stimulus funds, a non-trivial sum, in the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program, which the U.S. National Alliance to End Homelessness credits for the slight decrease of homelessness in America from 2009 to 2011 in the face of economic disaster (Witte, 2012). Cities like New York have used local government funds to offer homelessness prevention services to over 10000 poor individuals and families. Of course, we would be better off in a society where such interventions were unnecessary because social and economic structures did not put people at risk, but programmes such as these make a difference. So also do Housing First programmes that give longer-term support without coercion to people who may need it to end repeated bouts of homelessness. Research of a sort not documented here, along with collaboration between researchers, service providers, advocates, and local and national officials have helped to shape such efforts. Anthropologist Kim Hopper, himself an ethnographer of homelessness and an advocate, argues that researchers should move beyond chronicling the failures of existing social structures and engage actively with officials to improve them, even if the engagement feels like “waltzing with a monster” (2003, p.211). Such collaboration creates its own ethical dilemmas, which I wish the authors had chosen to analyse, alongside the dilemmas of ethnography that they illustrate so movingly.

Three chapters in *Professional Lives, Personal Struggles* stand out because they go beyond the ethical decisions of ethnographic work about people who are homeless. Michael Rowe describes the evolution of outreach work in New Haven into social programmes to restore citizenship (rights, responsibilities, roles, resources, and relationships) for individuals who have lost those rights through homelessness and marginalization, with each new effort arising from analysis of the limitations of earlier ones. Creating programmes like these has its own ethical dilemmas, but the work, Rowe argues, is ethical at its core.

Randall Amster documents the displacement and abandonment of poor African American residents of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and the remaking of the city in favour of moneyed whites. The transformation of flood victims into homeless people, their deaths and their dispersion, has been likened to ethnic cleansing. Amster's strategy of relying on published reports more than ethnographic description is persuasive; the narrative would seem implausible if not repeatedly verified from myriad credible sources.

Finally, Don Mitchell and Lynn A. Staheli discuss the ethical dilemmas involved in following the recommendations of several other authors to 'study up' rather than down, that is, to study the decision-makers and decision-making that "produce homelessness in specific forms and specific places" (p.162). A central dilemma arises from the usual ethical stricture to do no harm to research participants when one's political/ethical goal is to work against their interests. Researchers usually promise confidentiality, when ethics might be better served by naming names. The bureaucratic approach of Institutional Review Boards that vet research in the United States is unequal, they argue, to the task of ethical guidance here. The authors ask whether researchers' ethical obligations change with their political orientation. (An interesting extension might be the differential ethical obligations of researchers and journalists – does one's ethical obligation change when the task is re-labelled?)

Professional Lives, Personal Struggles provides a nuanced examination of the ethical issues faced by ethnographic researchers who work with or on behalf of people who are dispossessed. Even experienced researchers are likely to find the analyses consistently thought-provoking and at times original. Novice researchers might particularly benefit from insightful discussion of the ways in which others have come to grips with the quandaries they are sure to face.

