

Public libraries and the difficulties of targeting the homeless

Thomas H. Muggleton

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There is always a tendency to simplify reality for the purposes of analysis.

Abstract categories can often become reified and no longer questioned or even seen.

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“...if I meet someone new I don’t automatically say oh, I’m homeless or I stay in a hostel or whatever. I get them to know me first before telling them stuff like that, because in the past it has caused, I wouldn’t necessarily say conflict, but it’s just caused problems.”

(Quoted in Muggleton, 2010, pp. 51-52)

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If those responsible for public libraries and their policies are to enhance provision for marginalised and underrepresented groups effectively, it is imperative that they first address various definitional issues concerning such groups.

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- Defining homelessness
- Practical and political implications
- What libraries can do

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Defining homelessness

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There remain robust prejudices against people who are thought of as 'homeless people'.

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“Oh, definitely; not so much [in] libraries but in shops and cafes and that, definitely...you feel as though [people are] looking down their nose at you just because you’re walking about with your big rucksack and maybe your sleeping bag and they automatically think [that] because you’re homeless you’re up to something, you’re going to steal from them or you’re up to something bad.”

(Quoted in Muggleton, 2010, p. 50; and Muggleton and Ruthven, 2012, p. 230)

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“...if you take advantage of [free facilities] you can stay clean every day, shave, and you don't look homeless; then everybody treats you like normal. ...it's all about mental attitude: do you think of yourself as a homeless person. If you start behaving like a homeless person and not shaving, not taking care of yourself, people will start seeing you like that and then they'll behave [towards] you differently. If you don't behave like that and you try not to look like that, then people will just deal with you as normal, which is the thing that a certain group of people in the other room are probably not aware of.”

(Quoted in Muggleton, 2010, p. 51)

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“...the term "homeless" or "homeless individual or homeless person" ... includes -

- (1) an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and
- (2) an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is –
 - (A) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);
 - (B) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or
 - (C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.”

(Office of the Law Revision Counsel, 2009, Sec. 11302)

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Those who are homeless make up a very diverse grouping.

A person's experience of homelessness will be heavily influenced by the initial reason or reasons for them becoming homeless, as well as by the duration of their homelessness.

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Being termed homeless does not in itself denote age, sex, ethnicity, educational background, class, mental health status, or even a complete picture of housing status.

Given the diversity of those who are homeless, it is necessary to question whether the term is meaningful enough to have much practical usage when considering library policy.

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Practical and political implications

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When one applies broad categories in order to conceive of library users and their needs, these should not be considered as immutable truths integral to the people in question, but rather as expedients to serve a practical purpose.

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It is important to consider whether framing initiatives in terms of homelessness is actually helpful or necessary.

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There is a significant risk that, by developing initiatives specifically targeting homeless people, a dichotomy develops whereby homeless library users are perceived as distinct from non-homeless library users.

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Occupying public spaces, such as public libraries, allows homeless people to undermine exclusionary practices and perceptions of 'otherness'.

(see Hodgetts et al., 2008)

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The difficulties associated with homelessness need to be addressed at an individual level, rather than considering these as consistent and unchanging across homeless populations.

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It is important that benefits already derived from public libraries are not undermined, either by emphasising someone's homeless status, or by setting up unconsciously patronising classes for 'people like them'.

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Given the negative connotations and prejudicial attitudes associated with homelessness, initiatives that explicitly target the homeless may create unnecessary obstacles for themselves in some contexts.

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Despite the major flaws in arguments against the legitimacy of homeless people making use of library facilities, it also seems wholly unnecessary to enter into a nuanced and potentially politically difficult argument every time a new policy is suggested.

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What libraries can do

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The responsibility of public libraries to serve all communities and demographics equitably and according to need makes it imperative that public libraries direct significant efforts towards the most marginalised groups in society, which obviously includes those who are homeless.

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However, such efforts must be undertaken in ways that advance inclusion rather than accentuate difference, and should be humble in their awareness of extant realities, potential difficulties, and limitations.

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A good starting point to extend inclusion is to consider:

Firstly, how homeless individuals make use of public libraries already; and

Secondly, what obstacles, if any, they encounter when trying to do this.

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Contrary to the beliefs of people who oppose their use of libraries, homeless people tend to use public libraries in much the same way as anyone else.

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“Even if there was something good on [TV], just because of the place you were in, you’re not happy being there; you feel as if you always want to be on the move and doing something else.”

(Quoted in Muggleton, 2010, p. 64)

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Presenting libraries as an important refuge in a purely physical sense seriously underestimates the role that they can play in individuals' lives.

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Simply through the same non-discriminatory provision of resources that is at the heart of public libraries' mission, libraries will fulfil a number of significant functions in relation to homeless individuals.

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There are often necessary steps to take to ensure that public library provision of services is actually non-discriminatory.

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Far from subverting the role of the library, policies which extend inclusion are essentially attempts to ensure that public libraries are fulfilling their duties to those most in need of their services.

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If one really wants libraries to engage with those at the margins of society, any opportunity to subvert rather than reinforce the idea of the homeless 'other', even if it seems completely insignificant, should be considered as a step in the right direction.

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By ensuring that marginalised individuals are included in the everyday activities and routine of the library, their presence will take on the attitude and appearance of the ordinary rather than the extraordinary, both for these individuals and for the people around them. This may seem like a modest goal, but if social barriers could be thus dissolved, even if only within the confines of the public library, it would be no small achievement.

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