

Happiness And Homelessness: A Case Study Of Happiness Awareness Among Homeless People

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Abstract: This paper deals with the subject of how homeless people feel in relation to their lives, and the prospective of future change in relation to how happy they consider themselves, based on interviews and analysis of data obtained from several social surveys I carried out among 104 homeless people between 2004 and 2010 in several Argentine cities and slums. Contrary to common thought, many homeless did not feel unhappy about their economic conditions. The reasons for this are considered in the conclusion

1. Introduction

Happiness is a very elusive concept. Some consider happiness to be an emotion (Haidt, 2006), a feeling (Gilbert, 2006), a way of expressing the inner world (Hochschild, 1981) or a means to communicate the joys of life to others (Klein, 2006). Happiness has been a paradigmatic subject of study in different disciplines like philosophy (Chan, 1963), psychology (Seligman, 2004), economy (Frey, 2001; Leonhardt, 2008), law (Ross, 1977), medicine (Lyubomir [et.al.](#) 2005), immunology (Loyd, 2006), robotics (Nakagawa, 1999), etcetera.

It is generally defined as a state of the spirit in which the person feels a general sense of wellbeing, or as a state of mind characterized by love, satisfaction,

pleasure, contentment or joy (Cambridge Dictionary, 2008). Yet, a final definition is lacking, due in part to the difficulties for social sciences to quantify an element which is not logical (Macareño, 2006) and very characteristic of the individual, non-communicative inner self (Bericat Alastuey, 2000). In particular sociology has been, since its founding, avert to the treatment of passions, feelings and emotions. Sociology, as the science of social action logic and social structures, has done without the concept of happiness for more than 200 years, and because of this it has paid little attention to the emotional realities of the concrete social beings, and how it affects the social fabric and the world of decisions of people within society.

The main question I had was if happiness had any relevance in how a person defines him or herself within society. That is to say, if the identity of a person in relation to society (or to any social group, for this matter) is weighed by how happy he or she feels within that group. One of the main elements for identity research is the degree of pride a person feels in the belonging to a social group; what are then the relations between identity, pride and happiness. If a person feels happy within a determined society, group or social circumstance, it is more than probable that this person would not try to change his or her commitment to the society, group or circumstance. In other words, happiness maybe consider, coldly, as an element of inertia regarding the belonging to a social structure, and even more, regarding social mobility. Of course there are moral and ethic considerations to take into account, which may change this picture, but as a consideration for quantification of social interactions, happiness may be, at least, a very interesting element for consideration. The description, explanation and sociological understanding of reality would be incomplete if the sentient element that helps take social-bound decisions, like happiness, is not incorporated. (Hochschild, 1975).

2. Background and Literary Review

2.1. Homeless Definition Review

According to the United States Code homeless is defined as:

- an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and
- an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is 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); an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

In this study I use the above definitions as to what I consider a 'homeless person', using both as identifiers of people without proper housing. But, I should also add to them the consideration of homeless of people living in slums, where life conditions are inhuman: lack of basic human needs provision (clean water, sanitation, shelter), lack of proper resting place, destitution, promiscuity-leading conditions, lack of space for personal privacy, lack of boarding space for personal belongings. Life in a slum is, from the perspective of the stress and deprivation people undergo there, not much better than life in the streets.

In the case of homeless living in shelters, it is possible to say that while they remain there, they at least can enjoy of a minimum proper sleeping space and of some decent sanitation; yet these benefits cease as soon as the homeless person returns to the streets when the morning comes. There are other definitions of what a homeless person is which vary from country to country, but considering them all, in essence, 'homeless' is regarded as someone who has no proper, or adequate, means of abode or resting, and needs to use public space for such. Most shelters are public, or are provided by public funding, which subjects homeless people to political ups and downs. A slum may be considered a 'public' space since in most cases the land where people make their precarious residences belongs to the state; in the case of slums built on private land, residents are under continuous risk of being expelled, in a permanent state of insecurity.

For these reasons is that I consider that either living in the streets, in shelters or in slums, homeless people are (in different degrees) similarly subject to deprivation, in an unstable medium that does not allow them fully develop personally or socially, which works as a constant restriction to any achievement of happiness feeling. So, the main hypothesis would be that most homeless people are unhappy, in a state of resignation and/or depression. Life under such precariousness has not only a physical (medical) hardship: proper sleep deprivation, weather direct influence (extreme cold/heat), hygienic limitations, insalubrious conditions that are "life degrading" and "sickness-leading", but also psychological: lack of a place where to feel alone at times (privacy space), uncertainty of abode, uncertainty of future. It is difficult to imagine any sense of happiness or hope under this state of continuous life penalties.

2.2. Main Reasons For Homelessness

Homeless life starting and reasons for continuous homeless life span sometimes are treated together, yet they are different, although related. Among the main reasons for a person to become a homeless, we can cite unavailability of employment positions, poverty, lack of social inclusive education, social conflicts (social anomie, social distress, widespread political corruption, internal or international strife), lack of proper health care policies, lack of homelessness contention programs, economic crisis, loss of income or job, lack of affordable land or housing, family problems such as domestic violence, natural disasters, criminality and prison service (and lack of prison servers social absorption), discrimination, and depending on the country, alcoholism, drug abuse and/or other addictions culture (Jencks, 1994). If these conditions are kept during long periods of time, the possibilities or opportunities for ascendant social mobility are stalled, and most homeless people have no further choices; indeed, it is possible to assert that the homeless population might grow (Wright, 1989). But if these adverse circumstances change, the probabilities of a homeless person to cease to be so are increased, at least theoretically (Neale, 1997).

The study on the length of homeless careers is not less important than the study on the causes of homelessness (Sosin [et.al.](#), 1990). Among its main predisposing elements, we can mention both structural factors (such as social limitations, social discrimination towards homeless, lack of human capital, lack of reinsertion policies for homeless and cultural identity as 'homeless') and personal vulnerabilities

(addictions, sicknesses, lack of familiar ties, work attitude) which have a weight when it comes for a homeless to revert to a different social standing (Rossi, 1989).

3. Methodology

In this study I asked 104 homeless and slum-residents in a period span of 6 years (from 2004 to 2010) about how happy they felt about their lives, if they were resigned to that life, or if they were unhappy. The questionnaire changed through the years, asking more elements in the later interviews. The interviews took place in different cities and slums in Argentina, although I had opportunity to ask about their perceptions of reality of homeless people in Spain, Brazil and Japan, as well as obtained data of similar nature from researchers from several Asian countries. The problem in methodology surged upon a lack of cohesive question-sampling system, so for this reason, and in order to make the research more coherent, I chose only to evaluate a minimum set of questions that I asked the 104 persons I interviewed in Argentina only. Further analysis of the other questionnaires (other countries) revealed similar patterns, but to further this I will need more samples, so as for this paper only the conditions of happiness are analyzed regarding Argentinean homeless, leaving the remaining task for a further paper.

As the years passed, the Argentinean economic situation fluctuated, so the total number of homeless people has been changing dramatically. In the first years (2004 to 2008), there were very limited governmental assistance programs for the homeless. In many local statistics they were not considered in censuses, so the number of homeless is difficult to assess. From 2009 there have been more assistance from local, state and federal governments, yet this has not been enough to reach minimum basic needs satisfaction in all cases (Perez, 2010).

The questionnaire was in its core, very simple. It asked each respondent to assess how happy he or she felt within the circumstances of his or her life, what made him or her happy, what unhappy, and if there were possibilities of change, would the interviewee feel happy, how was the relation with other homeless people, and if they had family, how did they feel about them; if they did not have family, would they want to have one, and if this was true, would his or her concept of happiness change, and how much. The question about happiness asked the interviewee to assess personally what he or she considered this to be, and the rating was purely personal. They were also asked to imagine if the homeless in general as a group were also happy or not, and happier or not than other social groups. Along the years there were some changes in the answers, but not big enough to alter the final results, so I decided to consider all the data as one set, from 2004 to 2010. The first hypothesis was that although the old adage says that 'money does not buy happiness', a certain degree of material procurement is necessary for a life with dignity, or at least, with satisfaction of basic human needs (Maslow, 1943).

That is to say, that people that were under such hardships, where the minimum need of shelter was not covered, or covered in a precarious way, would not be happy with their lives, and certainly would want to change this if possible. But then I considered that there might be an alternative to the happy/unhappy pair, and that would be resignation, a state in which the person somehow feels unhappy but that is not enough to make him or her desire for a change, accepting the situation as it is. So I

devised a scale of 'happiness' ranging from 0 (zero) as the feeling of most unhappiness, or feeling of misery and deprivation affecting totally the person and making him or her desire for changes, to 10 (ten) meaning the most happiness and satisfaction with the situation. The midpoint 5 (five) was considered as a state of resignation, where the person was half happy, half unhappy, with desires of change, but not so strong. The usage of this scale was intended as a measure of how happy the person felt and simultaneously infer from this if the person did want any changes in life or not. The interviewees were asked to rate happiness and satisfaction differently. Satisfaction was seen as a 'degree of material fulfillment' with life, and happiness as the feeling arousing from life experience itself. The second hypothesis was that the degree of happiness and the degree of fulfillment were interrelated, so those who had a slightly better housing condition (like living in shelters and/or slums) would be happier and more satisfied than those in worse conditions (like homeless living in the streets).

A third hypothesis was that people that had shorter homeless life would be less happy than those who had longer ones, since in their case they presumably had gotten habituated to the hardships of life, adapted better than people with less experience. I analyzed this from the perspective of former social class extraction and education level. The hypothesis was that the more higher the social standing before homeless life, or the higher the education level the person had, the worse he or she would feel regarding homeless life. Finally I believed that age might have an effect on the feeling of happiness. For methodological purposes, I divided the interviewees according gender, age (three groups: 20 to 40 years, 40 to 60 years and 60 and over), education level, former class extraction (three classes: high class, middle class and lower class; based on the description given by the interviewees, and not based on actual income documentation), homeless life style (life in the streets, life in shelters, life in slums) and finally according to homeless life span (three groupings: less than a year, less than five years, more than five years).

According to private estimates (Caritas, 2010) the possible number of homeless people in Argentina would be around 6000 people, yet this number is still contentious. National statistics have been unreliable (Calvo, 2009). Although a sample of 104 respondents is relatively small, it can provide a rough idea about the hypothesis indicated, which in turn can be used for further studies, at least as a starting point. In the future I intend to enlarge this continuous research and expand the number of interviewees. So, from this point of view, results can be said to be somehow limited.

4. Results/ Analysis

The interviews were carried out among 104 people, 53 men and 51 women. In table 1 there is an indication of how this people were divided: with or without family, and by age-brackets.

Table 2 shows the basic questionnaire addressed to all interviewees.

Table 3 indicates the degree of education (1: did not finish primary schooling, 2: primary schooling complete, 3: secondary schooling complete, 4: university degree) by gender and by life location (street life, slums, shelters).

Table 4 indicates former class extraction (prior to homeless state) by gender and life location

Table 5 indicates degree of Happiness, degree of satisfaction with present life, desires of change of life situation by gender, family existence and location.

Table 6 indicates degree of Happiness, degree of satisfaction with present life, desires of change of life situation by educational level

Table 7 indicates degree of Happiness, degree of satisfaction with present life, desires of change of life situation by former class extraction.

5. Conclusion

Contrary to what I considered as first hypothesis, that homeless people and slum residents would feel very unhappy, or at best, resigned, showed a different result. Although the happiness degree was in general of level 7, above the level of resignation (level 5), it had a big spread, so we can conclude that in general homeless people are not so unhappy with their lives, and more or less resigned.

I had thought that the results would be lower. As for hypothesis number two, that the degree of happiness would reflect the degree of satisfaction with life conditions, this also showed a contrary result: in most cases, homeless people were not satisfied with the material conditions and in this sense they did want a change. This can be summarized as follows: homeless were relatively happy with their lives, from an emotional or feeling point of view, which shows that they possess a high degree of resilience (Masten, 2009), and that also they feel happy in relation of the group of homeless as one big family. They felt comfortable as much as they considered there was support from other members, and also they considered there was also respect from society in general, but not much from official sources (legal discrimination, lack of housing rights, etc.)

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