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Counselors as advocates for change in local homelessness discourse: A content analysis of Harrisonburg, Virginia media

Sarah E. Brown
James Madison University

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Counselors as Advocates for Change in Local Homelessness Discourse:

A Content Analysis of Harrisonburg, Virginia Media

Sarah Ellen Brown

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FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Committee Chair: Amanda Evans, Ph.D., LPC

Committee Members/ Readers:

A.   Renee Staton, Ph.D., LPC

Debbie Sturm, Ph.D., LPC

Dedication

For Frances: If there is any justice at all in this world you now have your very own home where you can cook your family dinner every evening and tuck them into bed each night.

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Abstract

Data on homelessness does not reflect the vast numbers of people living without stable housing. Research shows that while the public may feel compassionate towards those without homes, they may also blame and stereotype people experiencing homelessness. Stigmatization can impair public support of policies that would provide the structural change needed to address the housing crisis. Studies have found when media use non-stereotypical examples of people without homes, stigmatization decreases and public support for systemic change increases. Using person-first language and the concept of housing as a moral human right further increase public support. This content analysis examines media in Harrisonburg, Virginia to determine the local homelessness discourse and opportunities for counselor advocacy. A content analysis of media sources posted in Harrisonburg Virginia was conducted. A total of 3 sources were identified as potential media sources. Applying exclusionary criteria, 3 sources were reduced to 2. In total, six articles met the study criteria. The six articles analyzed used dehumanizing language and stereotypical examples of those without homes. This author recommends counselors provide advocacy for those living without homes in Harrisonburg to reduce the stigma and increase behavioral health outcomes. This may include empowering clients, adopting person-first language in homelessness discourse, and speaking out against housing insecurity using non-stereotypical depictions of those living without homes. Counselors should also advocate for policy change by encouraging local media and organizations to recognize housing as a moral human right.

Counselors as Advocates for Change in Local Homelessness Discourse:

A Content Analysis of Harrisonburg, Virginia Media

Home is where one starts from. T.S. Eliot

It is hardly news that people throughout the United States and Harrisonburg, Virginia are living with housing instability (Institute of Medicine, 1988). The annual Point in Time count, a homeless assessment report, provides data on homelessness in the country. On a single night in January 2018, an estimated 552,830 people were in shelters or living unsheltered (Henry, et al., 2018). In 2017, 18.2 million households in the United States were severely burdened by housing costs (National Alliance to End Homelessness, n.d.). To be considered living with a "severe housing cost burden," people had to be spending more than 50% of their income on rent or mortgage. The numbers of people in that category have increased by 17% from 2007 (Veal & Spader, 2018). Of the 18.2 million who were severely burdened in 2017, it was estimated that 4.6 million were living doubled up: sharing a household with family or friends (National Alliance to End Homelessness, n.d.).

Department of Education statistics similarly reflect the severe housing shortage. In 2017, 1.4 million students (ages 6-18) were experiencing homelessness. The 2017 count reflects an increase from 2007 of 688,000 students. Of the 1.4 million students experiencing homelessness in 2017, over a million students were doubled up, reflecting a 150% increase over the number of students doubling up in 2007 (National Center for Homeless Education, 2018). The number of students living in hotels or motels jumped

from 51,000 in 2007 to 93,000 in 2017 reflecting an 82% increase (National Center for Homeless Education, 2018). All around the country, people are living severely burdened by housing costs.

Housing insecurity may substantially impede a person's ability to be a healthy, productive member of a community (Thiele, 2002). Having to choose between food or a roof moves all other concerns down on the list of priorities (Henwood, et.al, 2014). Living each day knowing a child's field trip, a flat tire, or a broken bone could wreak havoc on finances and cause the world to crumble creates a pressure on a person that becomes all-consuming (Desmond, 2016). Housing instability interferes with student classroom performance (Shaw & Goode, 2008). Children dealing with homelessness are "twice as likely to experience learning disabilities and three times as likely to experience an emotional disturbance" compared to children who don't live with the stress of homelessness (Shaw & Goode, 2008, p.6).

Point in Time surveys and census counts fail to reflect the millions of people who double up while hoping to save enough money and establish the credit to secure housing of their own. Current homelessness data also fails to capture the millions who live from paycheck to paycheck sacrificing a basic need to pay for housing (National Alliance to End Homelessness, n.d.).

Media Influence on Public Perception and Policy

The media present homelessness as tents in medians, piles of dirty blankets in building entryways, and people addicted to substances or recently released from jail (Greenberg, et al., 2006). While these images and data are upsetting and can elicit

sympathetic responses from the public (Lee, et al., 1991), they provide a limited picture of the current housing crisis, and they fail to reflect the vast numbers of people whose housing is insecure (Henry, et al., 2018).

A recent study by Frameworks Institute, "Reframing Homelessness in the United Kingdom," explored media messages and common cultural assumptions that inform the sense the public makes of the current homelessness crisis. The study examined expert versus public perceptions of the current homelessness situation, including perceived causes. Frameworks Institute surveyed the public to determine the current understanding of homelessness, how it is defined, who it affects, and what is causing it (Nichols, 2018). Most of the public surveyed defined homelessness as being on the street with no housing at all. Further, the public tended to blame the people themselves for the choices they made that led them to be homeless. The Institute also analyzed over 300 media and other publications to determine what frame existed for talking to the public about homelessness (Nichols, 2018). A series of surveys was given to 9900 people testing different ways of framing the crisis to see which approach engendered a comprehensive understanding of the issue and the most support for policy change. The study found that when the public is shown images or told stories of people who are on the streets struggling with addiction or mental health issues, the view of homelessness by the public is narrow and accusatory (Nichols, 2018). People presented with this narrow view are more likely to assign blame and support punitive solutions such as the enactment of laws that provide criminal remedies for loitering, panhandling, and trespassing. Media representation or lack thereof impacts public opinion (Tompsett, et al., 2006).

While experts tend to look at the whole system—lack of affordable housing, low wages, systemic discrimination, and cuts to funding—the public is most often presented with images of homelessness that illuminate individuals instead of the system. This frame fails to represent the big picture and the possible solutions. Keeping the focus narrow and stereotypical encourages a sense of fatalism for which no solution exists (Baran, 2016).

In the US, services for people who are homeless often focus on immediate needs rather than systemic change (Belcher & DeForge, 2012). Donations to support overnight shelters and community soup kitchens might help in the short-term, but they offer no real avenue for lasting stability. Being homeless in the U.S. carries a social stigma that exists in part because of the way those without homes are presented (Hopper, 2003). American culture, the media, and socio-economic power differentials have perpetuated the idea that people lack housing as a result of their own individual choices and problems. This narrow view of people without homes tends to keep public policy support focused on the individual and not the system (Cronley, 2010).

The public stigmatization of people living homeless is evidenced by the media's depiction of those without homes as somehow deserving of their status (Corrigan, Kuwabara, & O'Shaugnessy, 2009). When the media presents negative and narrow views of people without homes, it reinforces public perceptions and increases feelings of blame (Belcher & DeForge, 2012). That "blame the victim" mentality leads to anti-panhandling policies and "Not In My Backyard" (NIMBY) challenges to re-zonings that, if supported, could create the systemic change needed to turn the tide on housing affordability (Forte, 2002).

According to national samples, when asked to reflect on homelessness, most of the U.S. public feels concerned and compassionate about people without homes (Tsai, et al. 2019). But the same participants who expressed compassion also reported fears and negativity regarding the public presence of people without homes in their communities (Knecht & Martinez, 2009). Social stigma regarding homelessness reinforces those feelings of fear and negativity (Belcher, 2012).

Social stigma can do worse than hinder systemic change: It breeds prejudice and discrimination that cause real harm. As human beings with a full range of feelings, beliefs, thoughts and aspirations, those without homes know they are the object of disgust and stigmatization (Crocker, 1998). As stigma is internalized, shame increases and self-efficacy decreases (Corrigan & Wassel, 2008). Many people who are homeless say they feel hopeless (Belcher, 2012). Society tells them they are to blame for their situation, and they believe it.

The Frameworks study found through its testing of different frames that three key aspects when used together in media messages worked to expand public understanding of homelessness and increased public support for policy change. The Study stressed the necessity of combining an appeal to fundamental commonality, non-stereotypical depictions of homelessness, and an appeal to stable housing as a moral human right. When the three aspects were used at the same time in a single media message it often produced the desired response from the reader (Nichols, 2018).

It is firmly established under international human rights laws that all human beings have the right to adequate housing (Thiele, 2002). The right to housing is more than a legal right; it is a moral responsibility people have to each other as fellow citizens.

In *Evicted*, Michael Desmond described a secure home as the bedrock for all the other things we can achieve (2016). He wrote, "Life and home are so intertwined that it is almost impossible to think about one without the other." (2016, p. 300). Focusing on fundamental commonality reminds people that healthy housing is necessary for human dignity and self-reliance (Nichols, 2018).

The media's stereotypical descriptions of people experiencing homelessness, using words such as addiction, criminal, "on the streets," and mentally ill, paint a narrow frame that increases stigmatization (Hopper, 2003). Using identity-first language and referring to those experiencing homelessness with the label of "homeless" dehumanizes people and creates fear and pity in the reader (Takahashi, 1997). Focusing on individual failings does not accurately reflect the bigger structural problems that experts identify as the main causes of housing instability (Baran, 2016). Further, it creates a fatalistic response that makes the reader feel hopeless making it easier to dismiss long-term policy solutions in favor of restrictive or punitive policies (Hays, 2002).

Counselors as Advocates for Social Justice

Historically, counselors have spoken out against bias and stigma. Since the early 2000s, advocacy has been accepted "as being at the core of their professional identity" (Toporek, et al., 2009). Social justice advocacy for counselors has come to mean advocacy with two goals: client empowerment and environmental changes that respond to a client's/client group's needs (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). In social contexts that stigmatize or prejudice a group, counselor advocates speak out to influence the people and institutions affecting clients' lives (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001).

In 2003, the American Counseling Association (ACA) adopted Advocacy Competencies to help counselors understand their role as advocates. One demonstrated competency is in the area of Systems Advocacy. In this context, the ACA Advocacy Competencies provide that counselors act "to identify and address systemic barriers and issues," to understand the context, investigate the issues, provide and interpret data, present research, and help to "develop a vision to guide change" (Toporek & Ratts, 2010, p.7).

When a counselor experiences clients whose lives are adversely affected by systemic barriers such as housing instability and stigmatization, they are called to prioritize the client's welfare. In this case, they are called to make the client's and client group's environment more supportive of growth and development (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009). The Code of Ethics provides, when appropriate, counselors should advocate to address barriers to human development (ACA, 2014). Former ACA president Loretta Bradley embraced and inspired counselor advocacy in her presidential theme saying when the client's environment negatively impacts a client's well-being, "effective counselors speak up!" (Bradley & Lewis, 2000). Given the historical and professional obligations inherent in counseling work, social justice prescribes an examination of advocacy needs in each counselor's local community.

Harrisonburg, Virginia Demographics and Homelessness Data

Harrisonburg, Virginia is a city of 53,000 residents with a median income of $43,800 (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Harrisonburg includes a 52% female and 48% male population. The racial/ethnic demographics for Harrisonburg consists of 67% White residents, 18.7% Latino residents, and 6.4% Black residents. The poverty rate in

Harrisonburg is 28% (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). The poverty rate is defined as the level below which people have to do without basic needs, meaning 28% of Harrisonburg residents are living without a need such as healthy food, clean water, medical care, and stable housing (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Harrisonburg's median gross rent from 2014-2018 averaged $875 per month (including utilities). The state minimum wage is $7.25 (United States Department of Labor, n.d.). A person earning minimum wage and working 40 hours a week makes $1160 per month before taxes. Assuming a take home pay of $1000 a month, anything over $500 in rent would mean that person is severely housing burdened. The number of people living in shelters or unsheltered identified by the 2019 Point in Time count was 132 (2019 Western Virginia Point in Time Count Results). This number does not reflect the severely housing burdened or those living in motels or doubled up with friends and family members.

Analysis of Harrisonburg Media Depictions of Homelessness

The purpose of this content analysis of Harrisonburg media is to examine local discourse and attitudes regarding homelessness, and to recommend opportunities for counselor advocacy on behalf of those living without homes. Considering research on stigma, public perception, and effective framing, this author sought to determine how homelessness is framed locally. To get a sense of local discourse, this author analyzed media published online. Public opinion and mass media influence each other, and the media often reinforce attitudes and focus the public's attention (Davison, 2017). Analyzing local media, then, is one way to get an impression of local discourse and attitudes towards homelessness. This author wondered, specifically: 1) what is the occurrence of person-first vs. identity first language in print media? 2) How many times

do articles categorize people without homes stereotypically vs. non-stereotypically? And 3) how many articles mention systemic involvement and the idea of housing as a moral human right?

Content analysis determines the use of certain words or concepts within a medium (McLeod, 2011). To conduct content analysis, the text is broken down into categories and analyzed to determine the existence of terms, concepts or themes. After coding, the results are analyzed. This author coded for single words, sets of words, and phrases. A set of concepts was determined before coding with flexibility allowed for incorporating new terms as they appeared in the texts (McLeod, 2011). The first four categories— person-first/identity-first and stereotypical/non-stereotypical, were coded for frequency of occurrence in each article. The last two categories, systemic involvement and moral human rights, were coded for existence in each article. Table I shows the terms and phrases identified before coding.

Table I. Terms and phrases identified before coding

Concept	Terms and phrases coded
Person-first	Person without a home, people living in shelters, those without homes, people/person experiencing homelessness
Identity-first	Homeless, homeless person, addict, (other mental health or legal status first), couch-surfer
Stereotypical	On the streets, addicted, criminal, jail, alcohol, drugs, mental illness, mentally ill
Non-stereotypical	Doubled up, couch surfing, living with family, working, struggling to make payments
Systemic cause	Low wages, working two jobs, affordable housing, access to services, healthcare, healthcare costs

Moral human right	Dignity, decency, other (phrase or sentence identifying home as a basic human need or right)

To select articles for coding, this author identified three local news sources: The Daily News-Record, The Harrisonburg Citizen, and WHSV TV-3. WHSV TV-3 was excluded because of the brevity of their reporting on homelessness and the unavailability of transcripts. The Daily News Record and The Harrisonburg Citizen were identified as sources suitable for analysis because of the availability of articles online.

The Daily News-Record. The Daily News-Record and its earlier iterations have been serving Harrisonburg, the Shenandoah Valley, and neighboring West Virginia for over 100 years. Its daily combined print and online readership is 70,000 readers.

The Harrisonburg Citizen. The Harrisonburg Citizen is an online only news source serving Harrisonburg and the surrounding area since 2018. It averages about 30,000 page views per month.

A search was conducted within those sources for articles occurring in the previous 8 months and including the word "homelessness." This author wanted to get the most current picture of local media discourse on homelessness that also covered seasonal changes that might impact coverage. The search included stories occurring early summer through winter. Both special interest and news articles were included in the search. Many articles including the word "homelessness" that were published locally were Associated Press (AP) articles that originated in other cities. To accurately measure local attitudes, those AP articles were excluded and six of the most recent locally originating articles were selected for coding. Stories selected included news and special interest coverage.

The date range for the articles was from June 28, 2019 to January 23, 2020. Results of the coding are incorporated in Table II and identified by date and by "Citizen" for The Harrisonburg Citizen and "DNR" for The Daily News-Record.

Results of Analysis

In all six articles there were 13 instances of person-first language and 37 instances of identity-first language. No words or phrases other than those predetermined in Table I were identified. This author included homeless used as a noun, for example, "nobody really wanted to do anything when it came to the homeless" (Manley, 2019, June 28), in addition to times when homeless was used as an adjective, as examples of identity-first language.

Stereotypical words or descriptions of people experiencing homelessness were identified 62 times throughout the six articles. Non-stereotypical descriptions or references occurred 7 times. This author counted an occurrence each time the words or phrases in Table I appeared separate from one another. For instance, "She also has struggled with alcohol and drug use" (Munro, 2020, January 23) counted as one occurrence because alcohol and drug use were linked as part of one phrase. In the sentence "We are not trying to criminalize anyone, however if you are breaking the law that is something we have to address" (Manley, 2019, June 28), 'criminalize' and 'breaking the law' were each counted as separate occurrences because they were separate phrases. In addition to the words in Table I, this author recognized several other words and phrases as examples of stereotypical descriptions of people experiencing homelessness: sleep in the business entry way, falling into homelessness, and live/living in the shadows.

Five of the six articles mentioned a systemic cause at least once throughout the article. In addition to the words and phrases determined before coding and indicated in Table I, this author counted the following phrases as indicative of systemic causes: zoning and incentives for tax credits, systemic problems, barriers that exist in gaining employment and housing, complex problems, society is very individualistic.

Of the six articles coded, one referred to housing as a moral human right. In "Officials Say Affordable Housing Continues To Be An Issue," the reporter quotes a local homelessness activist who said, "Many homeless folks don't have connections anymore to family or have burned bridges in their lives, and they just really need a social connection and a place to call home" (Aug 31, 2019, p.1). This author considered "social connection and a place to call home" as indicative of moral human rights; however, its position in a sentence that also used identity first language and negative depictions of "burned bridges" arguably negates the positive effect of this particular reference.

Table II. Results for each article and totals.

Article by date and paper	Person-first (frequency)	Identity-first (frequency)	Stereotypical (frequency)	Non-stereotypical (frequency)	Systemic Cause (occurs)	Moral Right (occurs)
6.28.19 Citizen	2	7	21	0	Yes	No
7.1.19 Citizen	6	4	16	5	Yes	No
8.31.19 DNR	0	9	7	0	Yes	Yes
9.27.19 DNR	1	6	5	0	Yes	No
12.24.19 DNR	2	5	5	0	No	No
1.23.20 DNR	2	6	8	2	Yes	No

Totals:	13	37	62	7	5 of 6	1 of 6

Limitations of Analysis

This content analysis is limited by the subjective nature of content analysis. This author was the singular coder for the articles analyzed and this author alone decided what words and phrases satisfied the parameters set forth. Further, six local articles were identified to be coded through a google search for "homelessness." Local media publishes many articles every month, and some articles that discuss those without homes may not have been identified with a search for "homelessness."

Recommendations for Counseling Professionals

A first step for counselors would be to examine their own biases in the way they think about homelessness. To be culturally competent, counselors should monitor their own thoughts and prejudices (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). Every person has a unique culture, and counselors should always be aware of that difference. In Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) No. 59 from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, it is stated that: "Culturally competent counselors are aware of their own cultural groups and of their values, assumptions, and biases regarding other cultural groups" (2014, 2). Counselors should consistently self-evaluate for biases with any client or client group.

Counselors should also work with clients towards self-empowerment and self-advocacy. Counselors can assess how a client sees themselves in relation to their environment and their ability to change it (Savage, et al. 2005). The collaborative relationship between a counselor and client is an empowering process for the client.

(Zimmerman & Warschausky, 1998). Counselors would benefit their clients by modeling language that humanizes and by speaking of housing as a moral right.

There are also many opportunities for counselor advocacy to encourage change in local discourse on homelessness. Messages from the media affect public perception (Milio, 1987). When media reports focus on what those without homes do wrong, the public may infer causation, perpetuate stereotypes, and not support systemic solutions (Kitzinger, 2007). The data from this content analysis show that the local media in the six articles researched used stereotypical depictions of homelessness 89% of the time when a description of a person experiencing homelessness occurred. That repetition of negative frames creates a feeling of "us and them" in the reader and has a dehumanizing effect (Shields, 2001). Counselor advocates should be leaders in offering non-stereotypical depictions of people experiencing homelessness to influence the media and expand the public's awareness of what housing instability looks like. Counselors have an ethical duty to promote social justice (American Counseling Association, 2014), and should work within communities and systems to address barriers to human growth (Toporek & Ratts, 2010).

In the six articles coded, person-first language was used to identify those experiencing homelessness just 26% of the time. Put another way, people who are without a home were referred to by housing status or other identifier first 74 % of the time. The American Psychological Association (APA) suggests using person-first language for referring to people with disabilities unless the group or individual prefers identity-first language as a point of pride, cultural identification, or any other reason (Dunn, 2015). Person-first language was first adopted by the APA to counter negative

attitudes or bias (Dunn, 2015). Since adopting person-first language for disabilities, the APA has also endorsed identity-first language, with the overarching goal being to empower people and foster inclusivity (APA, 2019). This author suggests given the stigma associated with homelessness and the effect stigma has on public perception, it would be helpful if media and other sources would mostly use person-first language to identify people experiencing homelessness. Until evidence shows that those without homes prefer to be referred to with identity-first language, person-first language is preferable because it has a humanizing effect (Jensen, et al., 2013). McCoy and DeCecco said, regarding language in the area of civil rights, "Our culture has evolved and sought out the politically and morally correct replacements for derogatory characterizations of each of these groups and integrated them into popular culture" (2011, p.2). Counselors should assist the evolution of language for those without homes and in doing so promote dignity.

Five of the six articles referred to systemic causes of homelessness. Mentioning structural problems such as low wages and unaffordable housing helps the reader to understand the complex nature of the housing crisis (Baran, et al., 2016). Framing a report about homelessness alongside systemic causes may help the public perceive the problem as less individualistic and more collective. If readers are exposed to all the factors that contribute to the problem, it may be easier for them to conceptualize that homelessness is not about individual bad choices (Cronley, 2010). Counselors should take opportunities to speak to community organizations and stakeholders regarding the systemic issues that contribute to homelessness.

Just one article coded referred to housing as a moral human right. The Frameworks Study found that appealing to moral human rights significantly increased public support for a broad range of policy changes. It also increased respondents' sense of collective responsibility and efficacy (Nichols, 2018). In Madden & Marcuse's "In Defense of Housing," the authors suggest that if most people believe that housing is a human right but current conditions make that an unrealistic goal, the answer is not to change the goal but to work incrementally to change the conditions (2016). The authors go on to say, "The right to housing should not be rejected as an unrealizable fantasy but upheld as an object of struggle towards making it a reality" (2016, pp. 129-130). If local media remind its readers that one of the dignities all people deserve is a safe place to call home, it could help in achieving the goal of affordable housing for all. This author believes, when given the opportunity to think about it, most people would agree housing is a moral human right. As Michael Desmond wrote in *Evicted*, "…it is hard to argue that housing is not a fundamental human need. Decent, affordable housing should be a basic right for everybody in this country. The reason is simple: without stable shelter, everything else falls apart" (2016, p. 300).

Desmond's statement calls to mind Maslow's hierarchy, a foundational concept most counselors study early in their educational journey. Maslow thought all people have the drive to move towards self-actualization, but to do so certain needs must be met. Among the most basic needs is shelter. Maslow believed everything else is secondary until those basic needs are met (Maslow, 1943). It is imperative, especially for counselors whose clients are lacking secure housing, to advocate for those without homes until every person has a secure place to live. Counselors have a responsibility to their Code of Ethics,

the ACA Advocacy Competencies, and basic morality to be agents of change so that all

people have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

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