

PAINTING THE NAILS OF HOMELESS WOMEN: USING MANICURES AS A METHODOLOGICAL TOOL

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Abstract

This article introduces the method I am planning on using for my PhD research: rethinking the traditional semi-structured interview by offering manicures to homeless women during conversation. There are several aims to this approach including creating a more comfortable research environment; open up unexpected conversations relating to the manicure; allow the participants to have autonomy over their body through choosing, designing or refusing their manicure; and thanking the homeless women for their participation. At face value, a manicure might seem like a strange, if not trivial thing to bring into a research environment. However, as this article will argue, offering manicures to homeless women has the potential to not only benefit the participants themselves, but to enrich the research process itself and the findings which consequentially emerge.

This article argues that this approach aligns with both creative geographical approaches to research (which allows the research to go in unexpected directions, often yielding interesting results) and feminist approaches to research (which emphasise participant wellbeing, empowerment and an alleviation of power relations). Together, this approach can contribute to more flexible and more ethical research, which is useful when researching with vulnerable groups such as those experiencing homelessness.

I. Introduction

Homelessness is a significant issue, with people experiencing homelessness more likely to face assault and abuse; physical and mental health issues; and be exposed to significant amounts of trauma (Thomas 2012; Sanders and Albanese 2016). Hence, researchers from many disciplines have approached homelessness in order to improve knowledge on this issue. My PhD research will join this body of work, using a feminist approach to more deeply understand the lives, experiences and issues of homeless women. However, researching homelessness and working with people experiencing homelessness throws up multiple challenges.

People experiencing homelessness have often experienced significant amounts of trauma (Berkum and Oudshoorn 2015). Their daily lives are often quite chaotic, with little stability regarding where they will sleep, how they will eat or whether they will be safe that night. On top of this they are likely to be facing one or more

mental health issues which altogether places them in a vulnerable position (National Health Care for the Homeless Council 2018). As such, working ethically with homeless people takes on greater significance and therefore, researchers have adopted particular approaches when working with people experiencing homelessness. For instance, this might involve volunteering long-term within these organisations in order to establish trust and relationships with service users and staff, as well as 'giving back' to the organisation supporting their research (Cloke *et al.* 2010). This paper argues that part of this might involve experimenting with alternative methodologies in order to work more ethically with particular groups of people. For example, Johnsen *et al.* (2008) used auto-photography (giving participants disposable cameras to capture the people and spaces which were meaningful to them) to gain insights into the more intimate aspects of the lives of people experiencing homelessness. These photographs then structured the follow up

interviews, making them less invasive than a traditional interview, and mitigated the need for the researcher to visit these places themselves (which could have been dangerous for both parties). In this case then, adapting a traditional interview enabled the researchers to practice research in a more ethical manner. It is this approach that inspires my own methodology for my PhD. The remainder of this article discusses how I plan on shaking up a traditional semi-structured interview by offering homeless women manicures during their interviews, in order to make it easier to talk through difficult topics. I argue that 'thinking outside the box' in this way can help work more sensitively and ethically when researching sensitive topics and/or with vulnerable people.

II. Semi-structured Interviews as a Feminist Method

Feminist approaches to research have been used widely across the social sciences. Moss (2002) argues that being a feminist extends to how we do research as much as the topics we choose to study. In addition to reducing the unequal power relations during the research process, feminists argue for the empowerment of research participants which can be achieved through taking a more collaborative rather than exploitative approach to our relationships with the people we research with (McDowell 1992). With a lot of feminist research focusing on marginalised groups, empowering them through the research is important. McDowell (1992) argues that this empowerment can be achieved by allowing the voices of the participants into our research and allowing them to raise their own themes, points and questions. This can be achieved through the use of semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are not concerned with finding an objective 'truth'. Instead, the emphasis

is on developing knowledge on individuals, their experiences and opinions on an issue.

Aside from allowing additional topics to be raised, the conversational nature of a semi-structured interview can make the research environment a little less 'intimidating' for both the participant and researcher. This can foster more open, in-depth conversations about particular issues, allowing the researcher to gain a deeper knowledge on the topic being discussed. As a result, interviews are seen as one of the more appropriate methods for exploring and revealing particular opinions, experiences and concerns from a particular individual. However, traditional semi-structured interviews can still sometimes feel a little 'awkward'; they can still be quite intimidating spaces and therefore not always the best environment in which to have sensitive conversations. Sometimes the participant might feel like they are in the spotlight, which can be uncomfortable when discussing emotional topics. One way to avoid this uncomfortableness can be to change up the traditional semi-structured interview environment by incorporating an activity into the interview, so that the activity becomes the one in the spotlight, not the participant.

III. Interviews Focused on an Activity

Following the cultural turn within human geographers, increasing numbers of researchers have engaged with more creative methods of research. Part of this has included adapting and rethinking the traditional semi-structured interview. For instance, in a project concerned with student experiences with place in a city, Holton and Riley (2014) conducted walking interviews with their participants. This enabled them to see first-hand the students' experiences with place and resulted in a more in-depth understanding

of students' 'dynamic relationships with place' (Holton and Riley, 2014: 59). In a similar attempt to 'open up different conversations around the notion of place', Truman and Springgay (2019: 527) conducted 'queer walks'. This involved walking through different places, with pop up lectures led by scholars, educators or artists offering different, sometimes contrasting, perspectives on each place.

These alternative methods allowed for spontaneous and speculative ideas, with participants able to take the conversations into areas outside of what the researcher had planned. However, some creative approaches have been successful by creating a more relaxing research atmosphere for participants, which fosters more open conversations. For instance, Dwyer *et al.* (2019) worked on a creative embroidery project with a group of women, with the participants feeling increasingly comfortable when talking about sensitive issues relating to faith, migration and home. These conversations arose as they engaged in 'embodied practices of creativity' (*ibid*: 133). In the same vein, Colls (2004) went on shopping trips with her participants, whilst exploring women's relationships with their bodies, in particular with their body size. This is often a sensitive subject for many individuals and could be quite difficult to talk about comfortably in a quiet room. However, many of the conversations happened openly during the shopping trip, with the activity opening up these conversations. As a result, Colls was able to talk about sensitive issues in a more relaxing way, which resulted in rich and interesting results. This is the approach I want to take with my research.

IV. Manicures

During the interviews, the women will be offered the option of receiving a manicure.

This might involve myself providing the service; providing the tools for her to do her nails herself; or the woman declining this aspect of the interview. At face value, a manicure might seem like a strange, if not trivial thing to bring into a research environment. However, as this article will argue, offering manicures to homeless women has the potential to not only benefit the participants themselves, but to enrich the research process itself and the findings which consequentially emerge. Perhaps most importantly, the manicures will serve as an incentive or way of giving back to the participants. During an interview for my Masters thesis, a homeless woman proudly showed me her manicured nails. They were red, with little gems on the ring finger. She'd cut back on other areas of her finances in order to afford this luxury, but the way that these manicured nails made her feel about herself was worth it to her. She showed me photographs in her phone of previous manicures; a library of colourful nails, sometimes with elaborate nail art (the Christmas ones were a personal favourite). Additional conversations with other homeless women revealed to me that some homeless women do enjoy having their nails manicured as it enables them to retain a sense of identity and femininity. Some, like the woman I interviewed, got them done professionally, whilst others kept a couple of bottles of nail polish in their bags and painted their nails themselves. One woman told me the coloured polish also serves to hide the dirt under her nails, allowing the women some respite from the judgement of being visibly homeless and 'dirty'.

The manicures will also form part of the research process itself, creating a comfortable atmosphere and space for the women. As discussed in the examples above, embodied activities can create

distinctive spaces where participants feel comfortable to share personal stories, especially those surrounding sensitive subjects (Dwyer *et al.* 2019). This might offer a gentler way of talking about topics such as body grooming, body image and bodily trauma- which might not come about as naturally in a formal interview environment. For instance, whilst talking about the desired shape of the nail, a conversation could open up about how the woman prefers her nails to look; how she feels when she has her nails manicured and how she feels when she does not. From personal experience I know it can be easier to talk about something sensitive when you can distract yourself through an activity, and whilst the women are not obligated to share anything they do not want to, providing a 'distraction' might help make it easier if they do decide to share a particular experience. This creative approach to an interview will also hopefully provide a space where the women can take the interview in unexpected directions; opening up conversations I might not have thought of or raising points and issues important to them. This, I hope, will give them more power in the researcher/participant relationship.

Hence, I hope that the manicures will be in some way, an empowering experience for the women. As discussed earlier, this empowerment is an essential principal of feminist research. This empowerment is even more important when working with vulnerable, marginalised groups who often face oppression in their everyday lives. Ultimately, the women have the option of receiving a manicure or not; the choice over how they receive the manicure; and the opportunity to make decisions over the colour and shape of the nails. For a group who often lack control over their bodies and what happens to their bodies, offering

a manicure provides them the opportunity to have some agency over how a part of their body is treated and appears. This, I hope, will enable them to feel a sense of empowerment over their bodies. Whilst a manicure might seem like a small gesture, it is one I believe will be meaningful to the women who choose to receive them.

V. Challenges and Potential Problems

Whilst this approach offers up lots of exciting possibilities, there are also some new problems which might arise. For instance, many homeless women have not only experienced trauma, but trauma relating to the violation of their bodily boundaries. As a result, being touched is something they may find really uncomfortable, and a manicure with washing, massaging, filing and painting would be beyond their boundary of what they feel comfortable with.

Alternatively, it is important to note that just like the housed population, homeless women are not one homogenous group. There are likely to be many homeless women who do not like having their nails painted. Some homeless women reject traditional notions of femininity entirely, and their voices are just as valued as those who adhere to these ideas. Hence, it is important to ensure these women are not only not forced into doing something they do not want, but that the optional manicure aspect of the research method does not deter them from participating in the project altogether.

There is also the risk that the offering of manicures might be seen as bribery or enticement. However, many projects offer participants a reward (often in the form of money or a voucher) in exchange for their participation. Offering financial incentives to people experiencing homelessness would be inappropriate as it would breach

the rules of the service who are hosting my research. In previous projects working with people experiencing homelessness, the 'reward' has been a free hot meal provided by the service. In this sense then, the manicures are no more inappropriate than a hot meal.

Following some of the principals for good ethical practice outlined by feminist researchers will hopefully help negotiate these issues. Whilst there is not the space to cover the extensive discussions surrounding what constitutes 'good feminist research' Moss (2002) outlines that good feminist research pays attention to issues surrounding power, knowledge and the context in which research is conducted. This involves ensuring the participants feel empowered and feel able to withdraw will ensure that they do not feel pressured into doing something they are uncomfortable with. It also includes making sure that women who are not interested in receiving the manicures are still sought after during the recruitment stage in order to capture a wide range of homeless knowledges and experiences. Finally, it also means setting up a research environment where the women are clear that their participation or non-participation will have no impact on their access to homeless services; where they are confident that their data will be kept anonymous; and where they feel comfortable throughout the process (and adapting accordingly if this changes).

VI. Conclusions

Semi-structured interviews are a good method for conducting reflexive, ethical and feminist research. However, the cultural turn has provided opportunities for geographers to engage and experiment with creative methods, which can be less intrusive and more relaxing for participants. Sometimes, an interview can

be too intense and can make the individual feel uncomfortable about talking through certain topics. Hence, using methods which enable the focus to shift from the participant and onto the activity, might make it easier for the participant to share their experiences without the pressure of a formal interview situation. This can be useful when working with vulnerable groups, such as those experiencing homelessness, who often require particular methodological and ethical considerations (Valentine *et al.* 2001).

There are multiple challenges associated with incorporating manicures into the interview process, especially when working with a group who might have previously experienced bodily trauma. However, these can be negotiated with good ethical practice, following some of the guidelines set out by feminist researchers such as ensuring participants feel comfortable enough to withdraw from the research and feel as though they have some degree of control over where the interview goes. Getting creative with the ways in which these interviews are approached can yield interesting results and I am excited to see what the results of incorporating manicures into methodology could be.

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Biography

Harriet is a second year PhD student at the University of Exeter, based within the Geography department. Her PhD is a qualitative study into exploring women's experiences of homelessness; the particular issues homeless women face and homeless women's relationships with their bodies. Harriet previously completed a BA (Hons) in Geography at the University of Plymouth, a PGCE in Secondary Geography at the University of Plymouth and an MRes in Critical Human Geographies at the University of Exeter.