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STORIES ABOUT HOMELESSNESS AND MARGINALISATION

Quantitatively, women's homelessness is a marginal phenomenon in social politics. However, women's homelessness clearly manifests the hardness of marginalisation in the life of a poor, lonely woman with psychosocial problems. A phenomenon is scientifically and socio-politically relevant even when it concerns a small group only: the margin can offer a good view of women's poverty and marginalisation in general.

Women's homelessness manifests itself in many ways. Within a short period of time, a woman can be homeless in many ways. In Finland, women's homelessness typically does not mean living in the street or in night shelters. Homeless women generally stay at public dormitories with a more or less treatmental purpose or as guests of relatives, friends and occasional male friends, so many of them are not represented by statistics about the homeless.

Women, homelessness and alienation constitute the triangle that I had in mind when I started to visit dormitories in order to interview women concerning their lives. During the interviews, these women lived in dormitories for the homeless or in homes for alcoholics and drug abusers. Many of the women had severe alcohol problems; some were drug abusers. Homelessness and problems with intoxicants were at that time, also often in former life, entwined, which made these problems even harder.

Even during the first encounters, the basic question turned out to be who these women actually are, what are my chances of 'entering' their world and what would be the right words for describing their lives. Homelessness is a reality common to these women, but they talked about many other things as well: children, men, alcohol, violence, work, their dreams and their fears. In each story, homelessness emerged differently, in terms of the woman's life and personality.

Most of the women were mothers whose children had been taken away from them. Quite a few told about broken relationships, violence and dependency from groups with intoxicant problems. Homelessness and loss of home were often associated with unstable and terminating personal relations and the increasing doubt about the meaningfulness of life. Loss of home meant much more than merely loss of dwelling. In the stories of homeless women, different aspects of life as action and experience became entwined into a many-layered whole.

Looking for words

I have rewritten the women's stories by organising them in terms of three themes: Broken motherhood, Worlds of violence and Drinking life. These themes are in a close relation to the women's words and main stories. These thematic entities are based on the concept of marginalisation, which here covers not only socioeconomic poverty, psychosocial problems and existential crisis but also creative ways of coping, which is characteristic of minority groups, and the women's wisdom that could benefit even the dominant cultures.

Firstly, I have tried to use concepts that are not too distant from the expressions used by the women, but that summarise and clarify the main themes of their stories. Secondly, I have associated the women's stories with human issues in general: the experiences of being different and an outsider, the loss of the meaning of life, the themes of brokenness, reformation and caring. A conceptual search continued during the whole study. This made it easier to better understand the women's stories, which often inspired me to consider theoretical and methodological questions and literature that I had not originally had in mind.

The theory of my study, fully reported in my doctoral thesis (Granfelt 1998), is based on three concepts: marginalisation, homelessness

and the holding environment. These concepts became increasingly substantial in the course of the study. The women's stories could have been analysed with other concepts too, but I have chosen concepts that have aided my theoretical thinking and that have a close correspondence to the women's stories.

All the concepts I chose are suggestive and theoretically open: the margin is a small narrow area close to the edge. Homelessness means straying in the dark, insecurity and distress. The holding environment refers to caring and to a bounded, familiar space. All this and much else came up when the women talked about their homes and loss of home, loss of children to authorities, longing for their children, violent relations, life in alcoholic groups, and being a client of social and health care authorities.

Constructing stories

My starting-point is that the women have described and interpreted their lives interactively with me. Together we have constructed stories based on the lives of homeless women. My role here has been to enable and restrict. I believe a researcher cannot help the narrator to tell the story if she cannot identify with the subject matter. Following Susan Chase's (1995, 2-14) phrase, I have tried to 'invite stories': to help women assume the role of the narrator and concentrate on themes they really would like to tell about. My theoretical starting-points and personal background have steered the interaction and the stories. When analysing the stories, I have told the women's stories to myself over and over again to make them live and speak in my mind. The empirical data consists of narrated and interpreted lives. On the basis of this data and relevant literature, I have built a three-dimensional picture of homelessness and the home which exists in terms of living conditions, social relations and one's personal, internal world.

From her own starting-points, the researcher creates an interpretation of homelessness and, at the same time, her study-object. One can write stories about homeless with very different emphases. No-one, except the homeless themselves, have the one important ingredient from their interpretations and writings, namely the personal experience of homelessness. One cannot write about homelessness without hearing about

it from the homeless. I have tried to create an intensive interaction with the women in order to better identify myself with their stories. In this way, I have attempted to understand the world and situations about which the women have told. My goal has been to build a common space that primarily consists of the lives the women have told about; this world I, with my own background, approach, steered by my theoretical starting-points.

One could categorise the women telling about their homelessness in many ways. However, I have not tried to do this; rather, I have tried to write about them and their lives so that the women live in the text as the personalities that they are, with their characteristic thinking and speaking habits. But have I understood anything at all about their lives? I have not lived where they have more or less temporarily lived. I cannot claim to know what it really feels like to sleep under a boat turned upside-down, in a space for bank automata, or in a dormitory for sixteen persons. In my fantasies and attempts to identify myself with the women's stories, especially life in the street and in dormitories has appeared to me as frightening, even horrifying. It has been difficult for me to imagine how I would cope in circumstances that have been a reality for the women. This point is also made by a woman called Soile, who participated in the study:

Riitta: "I wonder... is there anything I've forgotten to ask? Anything you'd like to tell me?"
Soile: "Well I was just thinking, how could you... could you live the life I've lived? That you'd just suddenly find yourself in a situation like that? So that you'd lose you home, everything, you'd be all broke?"
Riitta: "Like being on the street?"
Soile: "Yea, I just wanted to know. It's just so awfully difficult – though I'm telling it here. It's not the same, how do you say it, it's not the same when you've not experienced it yourself. You can't, you can't, you can't get it. You can't even imagine what it can be like!"
Riitta: "How can you be so sure that I can't even imagine it?"
Soile: "Dunno. I just thought or that's what I felt like or ... Well, perhaps somehow. How should I put it: living in the street, bumming, living there, staying alive. No, I just feel you haven't got an idea about it."

Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1993) suggest that the researcher gives up the so-called fictive sympathy, the fantasy that we understand. They encourage the researchers to make themselves vulnerable in that the people studied are allowed to voice their opinions about the correctness of the researcher's assumptions and interpretations. Stanley and Wise express this principle as follows: "We cannot claim to know the feelings of a paralysed person; instead we can tell what we imagine we'd feel if it were our reality". (Op.cit. 167-169.)

Stanley and Wise (1993) emphasise the subjectivity of all knowledge and the importance of the need for the researcher to explicate her own position. Thus the starting-point is the reality as construed by the researcher, so the researcher does not claim that she knows the other's feelings. Instead, her task is to write her own reconstruction about the experiences of the persons studied. Depending on the researcher's starting-points, some issues get more emphasis than others; some are ignored altogether. Thus all knowledge turns out to be contextually conditioned and constructed. The researcher's concepts are tools of seeing and interpreting. Her personal history and personality influence the way in which she interprets the concepts, the way she conducts her theoretical analysis and what she can perceive in her data. (Op.cit. 167-169; also cf. Kiianmaa 1993, 18; Saarenheimo 1997, 27-28.)

What is at stake is dissolving hierarchies in the study: the people studied can voice their opinions about the correctness of the researcher's views, in this way supplementing and deepening it with their empirical knowledge. One can speak of connected or incremented knowledge: knowledge 'pierces' the knower, i.e. renders the researcher's understanding open to doubt (Belenky et al. 1997, 115-130). In this way, the researcher can partake in the thinking and world of the persons studied. When these knowledges meet, the researcher and the person studied can share a certain space which enables the construction of a shared story. Interactively construed knowledge and understanding can no longer be fully reduced to the knowledge or understanding of one or the other.

The human relations issues common to everyday relations also emerge in client and research relations. Though they are formed for a particular purpose, qualitatively they are not particularly special.

Riitta: "Do you think it's important that you are with people with experiences like yours?"

Saara: "Yes, I think so. So that all have experienced the dark sides of life... One'll quite soon see whether the other starts to look down on you or something like that, it won't be a long chat, that. At least it's so with me. It's easy to see if ones been through hard times... It depends on the person. Though one can get on well enough with a person who's always been a teetotaller. Depends much on the person. Everyone's got their own experiences."

I have tried to use the so-called standpoint setting (Smith 1987; also e.g. Pohjola 1994, 32; Ruoho 1990, 3-4), where the central starting-point is everyday life's experiences, from which theoretical concepts are derived. It is essential that homeless women are present in the study – thinking, feeling and active people living their lives – on the basis of whose accounts I have made the study. A central part of the study is interpretations based on the women's stories. My conceptual analysis and resultant discussion is not always based on data, but in most cases there is a close connection to the women's stories.

Dorothy Smith (1987) emphasises how easily theories and their application in the analysis of the data lose what is local and specific, actually everything whereby people could identify themselves and their lives. In these kinds of research texts, no-one is a present any more; it is the concepts that dominate, distant and alien to life. I have tried to use concepts that do not objectivise homeless women but that, on the contrary, emerge from their reality and expressions to identify the essential in their stories. Trying to find the right words, I have tried to identify the central contents of the women's stories, the nuances and relations between things and events. A researcher cannot give an ultimate, unambiguous and consistent account of reality. Therefore I believe that the women tell about things important to themselves, wishing to become understood.

The group I use in my study consists of a selected subset of a small group. My interest is dual. Firstly, I am interested in homelessness and marginalisation in women's lives. Secondly, on the basis of the women's stories and relevant literature I have tried to understand living in the margin, the state of being different, loss of control over one's life, and gradual restructuring as basic questions of social work and of life itself. From this starting-point, I have firstly examined homelessness as a three-level phenomenon. Secondly, I have analysed marginalisation not only as a socioeconomic process but also as an existential and psychological question. In the analysis of the data, I have also used Winnicott's (1971; 1986) concept 'holding environment'. The basic quality of the holding environment is support; it means creativity, a new kind of thinking and a state where new ways of seeing are possible.

My starting-point is thoroughgoing subjectivity. I have chosen a target group for which I care and which I find interesting. This has helped me identify myself and sympathise with the women's stories. Though there are things drastically different in the women's lives, I have also found in them something that seems familiar to me. The theoretical concepts that I have selected communicate not only with the data but also with me. In feminist research, the significance of the researcher's commitment and common experiences is of central importance. Commitment also becomes important when marginalised groups are studied: the responsibility of the researcher for those studied and the significance of shared experiences becomes crucial. On the other hand, extreme emphasis on the significance of one's personal experience results in a situation where everything but research based on one's own experiences becomes suspicious (Matero 1996, 259). Similar experiences are not necessarily profitable for research. On the contrary, it can result in excessive identification and tendentious writing. The researcher may find it difficult to acknowledge the persons studied as separate individuals with their own characteristics.

Living in similar conditions or experiencing the same phenomenon is not necessarily a key to another person's experience; it is important to identify not only similarities but also differences. This condition can be called connected knowledge, for the formation of which empathy is of central importance: personal experience is the basis which helps the researcher listen to the other person and understand how the other interprets reality (Belenky et al. 1997, 115-130).

The living and feeling world of the stories

I have tried to get as far as possible into the specific, from which I have then tried to identify something general, theoretically interesting and relevant for different groups. I have depicted women's homelessness and marginalisation from one perspective, trying to be sensitive to the

difference between the narrators and the uniqueness of the stories. I have not tried to construct a single identity for homeless women; rather, I have tried to make a fragmentary picture of homelessness from differences and similarities. (Cf. Morell 1994; Pelkonen et al. 1994; Enoranta 1996, 131-142; Rojola 1996, 28-39.)

One of the main tasks of social political studies and especially social work studies is to bring into light information about the conditions of people living in difficult circumstances. A central ethical question then is, what kind of view the study renders of those studied and their reality. I have considered this question by using as tools of my thinking the expressions "A story of misery" and "A story of light". Unsurprisingly, a story of misery is characterised by an emphasis on misery in a general that is also characteristic of the people depicted. A story of light, in contrast, creates an idealised and romantic picture of the people involved. Idealisation results in unrealistic research text, so the reader's view of the people studied remains deceptive. It is difficult to identify oneself with a good or virtuous character; besides, this kind of character is hopelessly boring.

My goal has been to understand the women's stories so that my interpretation of them would be motivated by data and theory. By theoretical interest I mean the chance to identify meaningful generalisations at a level higher than the primary themes of this study. I have tried to make an empirical description of what it means to be a homeless woman in the Finnish society; I have also addressed some more general issues related to the human condition, which are observable from the women's stories, at least implicitly. (Cf. e.g. Silverman 1993, 2-3; Saarenheimo 1997, 27-29).

When studying the data, I have tried to identify myself with the women's stories, and I believe that I have understood their experiences. On the other hand, mental immersion in the stories has inspired thoughts and memories about my own life, so ultimately I have seen connections between individual experiences on the one hand and the human condition in general on the other. I have read my data several times. Yet I constantly find something new; constantly something new gets my attention; I often start to wonder, what is at stake. The stories are sufficiently different from my own life to challenge me emotionally and intellectually. On the other hand, they are familiar enough to enable me to identify myself with them. The women's stories are not scientific

texts; rather, they are renderings of experiences of different aspects of homelessness that inspire the researcher theoretically and methodologically.

Empathy means becoming emotionally touched while preserving one's separateness; momentary sharing, an experience of togetherness, yet simultaneously a respectful distance and appreciation of differences. Many feminist researchers have written about the significance of empathy not only during the collection of data but during the entire research process (e.g. Haraway 1992, 293; Josselson 1995, 28-32; Kaskisaari 1995, 16-22; Aro 1996; Jokinen 1996, 199-204; Vilkko 1997, 184-190).

Empathy is a means to overcome distance, a means to understand another person's way of interpreting one's life and stories. However, it is not a sufficient condition for interpretations; it mainly deepens and supplements theoretical thinking (Saarenheimo 1988, 262). Even if the researcher does not consciously try to adopt an 'understanding' attitude, shared experiences during the research process can result in empathy and understanding. The emergence of empathy generally means that a particular phenomenon or way of acting starts to seem understandable in its context. The researcher starts to give new meanings to the phenomenon, so she makes a new kind of interpretation of it. Empathy emerges and lives as part of interaction, be the other party another person, a literary work of art, a research text, a movie etc. This phenomenon occurs at the boundary between empathy and separateness; what is at stake is becoming touched so that one's emotions and thinking are activated. Becoming touched is essential.

Conscious use of empathy is possible only when the researcher is not controlled by her emotions but can use her emotions for deepening and clarifying her understanding. Experiencing empathy does not necessarily mean strong emotional experiences; it can also result from careful thinking. An understanding research attitude presupposes concentrated, analytical thinking, so it cannot be entirely reduced to feelings. Empathy is a dialogue between emotions and thinking as well as a simultaneous dialogue between oneself and another person. It helps produce connected knowledge, a result of interaction. (Belenky et al. 1997, 115-130.)

The researcher can understand the phenomena she studies if the people who experience the phenomena tell her about them, and she

can attentively and emphatically listen to their stories. As a result of the empathic attitude, also black-and-white dichotomies become questionable: the stories are contradictory; so are the experiences and people. In this way also new, contradictory interpretations can emerge. One should not explain contradictions away; rather they are possibilities for continuing the stories and for understanding more. Maybe it is not so essential to find answers and explanations to everything. (Stanley and Wise 1993, 167-169; Josselson 1995, 28-33.)

The researcher is a part of the reality she studies, and her way of seeing, understanding and ignoring things is dependent on her personal life history and theoretico-methodological starting-points. Even very important parts of the data can remain unanalysed if the researcher cannot grasp them on the basis of her personal experiences and theoretical understanding. The researcher cannot bypass her feelings and commitments when conducting her study. The researcher's life history has an influence on all stages of the research process even though she may not be aware of it. It also influences her way of writing and her various substantial solutions irrespective of how 'objective' and 'hygienic' the study is intended to be. (Stanley and Wise 1993, 153-169.)

Donna Haraway (1992, 293) argues that the feeling of relatedness and empathy are necessary preconditions for the possibility that the researcher starts to understand the phenomena she studies (also cf. Jokinen 1996, 199-200). What empathy is about is the state of caring, which cannot be produced artificially. Compulsive trying and striving can prevent one from understanding. The emergence of understanding requires a freedom to think and feel; actually, a play-like spontaneous state (Winnicott 1971, 53-56; 1986, 41). Experiences common with those studied can help one to understand, but also the risk of seeing another's experience as one's own is involved. The most important thing is to attentively listen to the story-teller, to identify oneself with her situation and yet not to project one's personal properties to the other's story. This can also be called the attempt to respect another person's otherness (Myyrä 1993, 54).

Suffering can be heard and read from the stories of nearly all the women interviewed in my study. Some of the stories were rather shocking. Sometimes I could say nothing on my part; my own feelings were hard for me to handle, I felt helpless and clumsy. Especially when

collecting the data, I tended to think about the women even when I was not directly working with them. During later stages of the study, analysing and writing became more effortless and less constrained when I realised that, after all, I was not writing about the lives of these women in particular. My study does not create a world with real people and their experiences; rather, the study is something that I write on the basis of the women's stories. I could better immerse myself in the women's stories when I could sufficiently detach myself from them. My thinking and writing became more nuanced and unconstrained when I realised that I was using the women's stories for better understanding and making generally understandable the theme of my study, and that the main issue was not finding out whether I could agree with the women's stories at all points.

Questions directly arising from the researcher's theoretical thinking can become a barrier for the interviewee's own story, the story that she actually would like to tell. The best way of interviewing, therefore, is to make simple and clear questions about personal experiences. When interviewing, I have tried to make it possible to tell the stories in a relaxed and unconstrained manner. Other methods seem irrational because the whole study is based on the women's stories. Stanley and Wise (1993, 161) argue that research in general is based on interaction and a relation between the researcher and the people, books, archives etc. that are studied. Also my own experience suggests that the literature that has best benefited my study has had the best interaction with not only my data but also with me. These texts have given life to new stories in my mind, thus giving a direction to my study.

Listening to the stories

I believe that all women voluntarily participated in my study, so the participation was not directly distasteful to anyone. The interviews were rewarding, touching and occasionally highly amusing. I believe that many of the women experienced the interviews rather like I did. Some of them described the situation as a chance 'to vent one's feelings' and 'to speak out one's mind'. Some experienced the feeling of being of use and help as very important.

The fact is, though, that the women asked nothing from me; rather,

I needed them and their stories. In a way, the setting turned upside down: the women's attitude to me and my study became rather empathic. They agreed to tell about very personal, touching and even painful experiences so that I could complete my study. Some expressed their concern quite explicitly:

"... so that you could make it as interesting as possible."
"What will you become when you get this ready, a professor?"
"I told Timo (a social worker) that I can't tell about what's happened to me because Riitta seems to so timid and sensitive."

The women were good tale-tellers; it was easy to follow their stories. They told about their lives; I listened, asked questions and in my imagination I saw them in the lives that they told about. As a result of listening, literation and several readings, the interviews have become stories of the homeless women; stories where the narrator lives as the main protagonist and where there are several other persons in other roles. By concentrating on my role as a listener, I have tried to enter that narrated reality – to see in my mind the world and life that the narrator constructs in her tales. By monitoring my distance and closeness, I have tried to see in the narrated world also things other than what the narrator herself has seen or understood. I have regarded myself as a collaborator who has tried to facilitate the story-telling, though sometimes I may also have hindered it with poorly chosen phrasings and clumsy associations.

In the interviews, the women made interpretations of their lives, and I had a chance to check my interpretations with them. Some of the women, I interviewed two or three times; in these cases I was able to check my interpretations with the narrator herself. In the analysis itself, the women were no longer involved, rather, I have talked with them on the basis of the experiences their stories have transmitted, and in this way I have formulated my interpretations and thematic analyses.

The women's stories were highly different – all experiences were unique in spite of their thematic similarities. In many ways, my own life is different from the lives of the women in the study. It is not my task to assure that I nevertheless understood, that we had a lot in common, after all. The main criterion is whether the reader can enter the women's world on the basis of the story fragments and the inter-

pretations I have made about them; whether the stories touch the reader, and whether the reader grasps the general human significance of the stories that themselves concern specific situations and groups.

The literature I have used has considerably influenced what I have found and what I have paid attention to. At the same time, reading the data, thinking about the women's lives and general questions arising from these have guided my choice, analysis and understanding of literature. The researcher is in the position to prune; to make choices and emphases in the analysis of a single interview as well as of the whole data. The researcher's world view and manner of seeing things becomes a part of the data and influences the construct that she makes from the data for the reader. In analysing her data, the researcher re-creates the interviews, which on its part justifies calling reconstructed interviews stories. (Ehn 1992, 201-205.)

On the basis of the interviews it is useless to try to aim at an unambiguous and consistent subjective truth. In different situations, times and perspectives, the same thing can get different, even conflicting analyses. Also the researcher on her part constructs truths in the interviews. Also psychic defense mechanisms have an effect: overly distressing things are excluded from consciousness, or they are discussed in a roundabout manner, by using symbolic terms (Honkasalo 1988, 135-139). Even without noticing it, the researcher can influence the interview process and its emphases. Quite unconsciously, she can prevent the processing of certain aspects and events central to the lives of the interviewees. By clumsy and uninsightful associations she can distance the interviewee from important things that the interviewee has been shyly approaching. The researcher's questions can also arise from a wholly different reality, which may prevent them from even touching the interviewee's world (e.g. Granfelt 1992, 23-24; Aro 1996, 136-139).

The interviews can contain a considerable amount of mutual interactions even when the researcher verbally tells next to nothing about herself. Also nonverbal communication and emotions arising in the situations are interaction. Even unintentionally, people constantly communicate – merely by existing one speaks (Moilanen 1986, 37). The interviewee's main task is to create conditions for concentrating on reflective narration. This enables identification of connections between different things as well as the spontaneous progress of the interview.

I have tried to be fully present in and concentrated on the interviews, to listen attentively and to express my interest. I have not regarded it as important to express my own views or to tell about my own life. Though the women did not ask too many questions from me, the situations seemed interactive. After all, there are other ways than merely asking to get to know another person, e.g. making observations, the atmosphere, and the jointly constructed story.

Ethical questions and methodological traps

The homes of people living in institutions or dormitories are in public space. Therefore it is important to keep in mind that a dormitory room is meant for privacy as much as a room in a privately-owned house. Though dormitory doors do not contain locks, the researcher should respect the symbolic lock: a permission has to be obtained for opening that door. One should not force the interviewee to tell anything; one should not be too inquisitive, rather one should respect the interviewee's will. The researcher should recognise the interviewee's way of telling and choice of the stories that they prefer, and try to accommodate the research interests to these aspects.

Instead, it is ethically legitimate to carry out research that requires contacting people and personal interaction: the experience of home-lessness can be told only by those who have experienced this fate. Women belonging to small marginal groups enrich women studies with their stories, which also have sociopolitical relevance. Marginalised women are still too invisible in Finnish women studies as well as in poverty studies.

Ethical questions are emotional, and there are no mechanical solu-tions to them (Aro 1996, 57). Antti Karisto (1994, 230), in his article on the thinking of Zygmunt Bauman, analyses insecurity and ambi-valence as central conditions in life. One has to tolerate and cope with them, and this can strengthen one's ethical sensitivity. If the researcher does not assume the role of the 'good person', she may be in a position to carry out more honest research.

Ethical questions have to be solved in every single case of interaction (Bauman 1993, 78-81; also Karisto 1996, 255). What may be ethically motivated with one interviewee may be unethical with another. To some

people one can unhesitatingly pose highly personal questions, while others must be approached with due care and patience. Though I believe that being too curious and 'pushy' is particularly distasteful and unethical, there is also another trap involved: an overly sensitive and prudent researcher may not be able to help the interviewees in telling their stories; she may not be sufficiently inspiring or encouraging. In the worst case the interviewee becomes like this researcher: she expresses herself in a roundabout and 'correct' manner in order not to shock the sensitive researcher!

When talking about interviews, I use the term 'story' because I see them as attempts to reconstruct experienced life in collaboration with me. In these stories the homeless women construe their identity – they construct a description of their identity. They are the main protagonists in their stories whose identity gradually builds up in the course of their descriptions of different events, assessments of their life situations, their own interpretations and ways of narrating. The women who participated in my study mainly reminisced about their lives: they told about their lives eloquently, personally and without embellishment. Using their emotions, thinking and language, they created their own stories, sometimes shockingly sincerely:

Riitta: "You speak so honestly."
Raija: "Why polish it up."

Though sad things are in the foreground in this study, I hope that I have also been able to write about the life force that manifests itself in the women's stories. The stories in my data are not chronologically ordered biographies, complete up to the present. Still, I regard my study as a biographical study, broadly speaking: after all, what this study is about is lives and narrators. A life story is not necessarily a story that starts from childhood and progresses to adulthood. The women's stories are fragmentary, so are their lives. In the research report I have amply used my data, both as thematic fragments and as relatively long parts of stories. In this way I have tried to justify and concretise my interpretations. Secondly, with this way of writing I try to facilitate the interaction between the women and the reader. Thirdly, the purpose of the stories is to bring the experiences, thinking and words of marginalised women into contact with social work studies as well as

feminist studies.

I have analysed the data by constructing interpretations from the women's stories; interpretations whose goal is to emphasise the thematically important points. Because my approach is hermeneutic, the significance of the collection of the data is considerable. The stories are based on real people with their experiences, feelings and attitudes. My research object is the life stories of and by homeless women.

Many of the women who participated in my study asked, when the study will be completed, and they were interested in reading it. I have become personally acquainted with all the participants of the study, and on the basis of their stories they have become increasingly familiar to me in the course of the analysis. During the writing process, especially when formulating my interpretations, I have wondered, what these women would think of my text. Does my thinking correspond at all to their own interpretations of their lives? However, I have constructed the interpretations alone, without consulting the women for their opinions about my interpretations. A text can be interpreted in numerous ways, and my goal is not to give an ultimate or 'the only true' interpretation of the women's stories. In my opinion, I have formulated a psychosocially emphasised view on women's homelessness.

Some of the women have open-mindedly talked about topics that at least in my opinion are highly sensitive, e.g. about their tendency to violence or their use of alcohol during pregnancy. To my best, I try to follow the author Märta Tikkanen's definition of ethically adequate writing: "You can write about anything if you write it well". To me, writing well means respecting the narrator and her life and attempting to present the essence of her story.

The construction of the research object has taken place as an interaction between the data and the concepts. The study has become a Story built up of thematic stories. I do not study speech and text by itself; nor am I directly concerned with life itself. Rather, I study stories about women's lives from the perspective of homelessness. The stories convey an interpretation of experienced life, its narrator, and what kind of life the narrator would have wanted. They also implicitly tell about the researcher, the research process and especially about interaction.

About difficult things it is important to use words that do not cast a veil over the inconvenient reality. 'Suitable', neutral words can hide the

striving and suffering that many people have to undergo. A neutralising, made-up language indicates the pretense that "everything is fairly well, after all". (Wendell 1996, 77-81.) Bad phenomena marked by suffering and misery stain one concept after another – and emerge as lived and experienced suffering.

With her choice of concepts, the researcher construes her object in a certain way. With belittling, tendentious concepts one can reinforce biased stereotypes and make the position of marginalised people even more difficult. It may be the case that the people studied neither can not will identify themselves with the chosen concepts, which can tell much more about the researcher than about the people studied.

I call the women who participated in my study homeless women. I regard homelessness as a phenomenon with three dimensions: housing conditions, interrelations and the internal world. At least one of these dimensions were actual for the women during the interviews. Homelessness is a situational, not essential, property, on the basis of which a person can be classified into one or another category of out-of-the-ordinary people. What this actual category is depends on the perspective of the study. Formulating the research problem means formulating identities for the people studied.

During the research process, I have encountered three traps. One of them is becoming captive of the data: becoming enthralled by the stories, becoming fascinated by the story-tellers, idealising them. Becoming entangled in the stories makes it impossible to read the story critically, to generalise and to find the essential. At one stage, my strong efforts to avoid branding homeless women resulted in text that rendered the women as thoroughly 'good' people. I did not want to see or understand the distasteful and mundane aspects of their stories. This impoverished the women's stories and made it impossible to render the women as real, individual personalities in the research text.

Another trap is explaining the data entirely on the basis of texts by other researchers. It is tempting to fully explain, know and understand, as is the role of an expert on all aspects of life (Jaatinen 1996, 242-246). Immersing in and reconsidering the data, as well as questioning spontaneous interpretations, turned out to be rather difficult to carry out. It was much more comfortable to rely on other researchers' published texts than to expose oneself by presenting interpretations based on one's own data and thinking.

The third trap is an emotional one. The stories of homeless women sometimes feel close to my own life, so the question arises, about who or whose reality I actually write. This emotional trap and getting out of it showed to me how tendentiously I read the women's stories at a certain stage. I then believed that I discovered and wanted to discover in those stories things that later seemed quite unrelated to the lives of the homeless women. Along with empathy, critical self-reflection and preserving a sufficient distance turned out to be extremely important.

An important result of the research process has been understanding how difficult it is to construct a picture of homelessness where social politics, human relations and the internal reality do not become disconnected dimensions, but jointly contribute to a broken and restored, fragile and homely picture.

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SOCIAL WORK "THROUGH THE LENS"

Foreword

This article is based on my doctoral dissertation, written in Finnish, entitled *Kohtaamisia byrokraattisilla näyttämöillä* (1995, "encounters on bureaucratic stages"), and various unpublished diaries from the field, transcribed and untranscribed recordings, my lectures on the uses of photography in the social science, perceptions of the current economic recession and its consequences etc. However, I try to focus, as the title would suggest, on what photographs and videos have taught me about the social sciences, in that it is both the community to which dissertations on social work are addressed in Finland, as well as the medium in which social work is studied or taught. However, these tools and there uses also provided me with a new insight into my field of study, social work and employment counselling. But these tools and their use also gave me a new insight to my field of study, social work and employment counselling. My description of bureaucratic spaces and artefacts, or interaction in social welfare offices and employment offices, is conveyed through text, photographs and drawings. I have tried to combine text and image in various ways; for example, I have converted the videotapes into sequential cartoon strips, sometimes also using text inserted in balloons. The photographs used in my study are mostly