PLACES HAVE MEANING: THREE STREETS, THREE HOURS AND THREE STORIES OF SURVIVAL IN ONE CITY[1]

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ABSTRACT

The socio-economic conditions in South Africa have forced new identities and new responsibilities on individuals who migrate to urban centres in the hope of finding a decent livelihood. Broken family structures, unemployment, poverty, divorce and teenage pregnancy are some of the circumstances that drove three interviewees to form relationships with certain spots on the streets of the city of Pietermaritzburg in order to eke out a living. This article looks at the conditions that brought three interviewees to the city and the streets, and transformed them to adopt new 'families' and identify with geographical location for survival. While keeping some ties with their biological relatives, the three interviewees are largely de-traditionalised and find meaning from the streets through innovative and sometimes banal means such as begging and commercial sex work.

Keywords: family, places, poverty, stories, survival

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INTRODUCTION

There is a paucity of research on the relationships of people to specific urban environments, except those sites that have been formally assigned to them or for which they pay rent to occupy. Through the use of interviews, this article will establish what specific locations in three different streets mean to a homeless child, a so-called street child, a casual job seeker and a commercial sex worker. The author has attempted to be as ethical as possible and has used fictitious names to protect the interviewees. The article will seek to show that ordinary places can have meaning and can form new identities as people become familiar to them and form survival relationships with them.

METHOD

The method employed was to identify a friendly and welcoming face and request an interview appointment. When secured, the potential interviewee and I would agree on the conditions of the interview, for example, the place of the interview and the fact that it would be recorded. I decided that only three major questions would be asked given the time allocated: the identity of the interviewee, the cause that brought him/her to the streets, and finally their relationship with the chosen street or spot.

I tried to be as transparent as possible so that the interviewees could give informed consent and not feel in any way obliged to participate in the research (Carton and Vis 2008: 47).

I drove around town in the hope of seeing a welcoming and unintimidating face that I could approach for an interview. For all three groups where potential interviewees would come from, a car that drives slowly works wonders. As was the case with the homeless person, when he saw me looking out of the window he stretched out his arm, indicating a request for something. I pointed to him to move back up the street where I planned to find a parking spot and wait for him. He came and we set an appointment. I gave him a R5.00 coin as a response to the request.

Having been to the jobseekers' street before and seeing them in action, I went to Greyling Street on 19 September in the afternoon to see if I could secure an appointment for an interview. When I drove past I saw five young men raising thier index finger – an indication of their availability for work. It is interesting to note that there are no women job seekers. As my interviewee told me, people employed from that street mainly do manual labour. When I turned back and parked on the opposite side of the road, they came running. The first one I spoke two listed the number of jobs he could perform . Others arrived and also enumerated their skills. I got out of the car for better communication. I made it clear that I did not want to hire anyone because I don't have a property. Finally the rest of the men left and allowed me to speak alone with the potential interviewee. He insisted that we conduct the interview

immediately. He did not mind going to my office when I realised that the recorder was not in the car. He accepted to the offer of R100 for his time.

According to Beatrice Okyere-Manu (2005), who wrote her Master's dissertation on commercial sex work, it is a challenge to find a commercial sex worker to interview:

> It is very difficult finding those who were willing to be interviewed. After trying fruitlessly for a long time to contact some from the newspapers, on the phone and along the street, and even from some homes for abused women and pregnancy crisis centre, I finally met one in a hair salon and a relationship was established. (Okyere-Manu 2006: 20–32)

I asked my colleagues at the Sinomlando Centre at the University of KwaZulu-Natal if they knew someone I could interview on the matter, but could not find help. Unlike the homeless person and a temporary job-seeker who work during the day in the open, sex workers hide from the public. As Okyere-Manu writes: 'It must be noted that sex work leads to stigmatization. This is the reason why most of them hide on dark street corners so that they are not seen by relatives and familiar faces, and this put them in danger' (Okyere-Manu 2006: 20–32). It means potential interviewees are always on the lookout of unwanted intruders in their workspace.

On the evening of 5 October 2011, I went out to try my luck after hesitating to call the numbers given in the local newspaper, *The Witness*. Since those listed in the paper do not operate from the streets, the purpose of my research would be defeated. I drove to Prince Alfred Street and called out to the first woman I saw. After interrogating my intentions and refusing to participate since she had not been working long enough on the streets to answer my questions, she invited her friend who wasted no time jumping into the car. Having clarified my intentions and reached agreement about pseudonyms and payment, we found a busy but less noisy street for a recorded interview.

Although the title suggests three hours for three interviews, all three interviews took less than an hour. The reason may be the fact that the interviewees needed to go back to fend for themselves or the nature of the topic discussed was not of a nature where one wanted to sit for an hour.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is not hard to see that the method raised serious ethical considerations. Firstly, the amount paid to the interviewees may be far less than they deserved, considering that they were in a position of vulnerability. Through their interaction, the author will have an opportunity to discuss his findings with his peers, to publish it and may in the process receive academic and scholarly recognition, which sometimes translates into financial gain.

The benefits to the parties involved may therefore be disproportionate. One may even suggest that the interviewees were short-changed. They sought both financial

gratification and affirmation from interacting with me. The case of Themba, whose friends went about trying to call him for my ‘forgotten’ appointment, is a good example where his friends may have looked at him with some envy. This is possible when homeless communities are seen as the outcasts of society. To have someone insist that his story is valuable and that it will have people learning from it carried honour for Themba.

Just as it is unthinkable for a person to begin their career in commercial sex work, it is equally unthinkable that one can do the job until retirement at the age of 65. It was therefore proper and ethical to use a pseudonym also in the case of Nosipho Maseko, to protect her when she leaves the profession.

The matter of payment in exchange for an interview has been a bone of contention among oral history practitioners. Some support it and others do not. Further, there is a group that prefers payment in kind, in agreement with the interviewee. Finally, there is a group that prefers listing the interviewees as co-authors, as the story belongs to its narrators and therefore they deserve more or equal recognition in its publication.

The situation of my interviewees is a unique case. Even if one did not mind having his name disclosed, like Dlamini, the consequences of such disclosure may come back to haunt them or their descendants. I have undertaken to show them the work when it is published. They will identify with their stories but their identities will be concealed. Due to the nature of their way of making a living, the conditions may have been so harsh or so improved that it may not be possible to find them on their spaces on the streets, come publication time. Since the matter of ethics is not clear-cut, in such situations the interviewer or researcher would have been ethical enough if no harm came to interviewees and their kin.

THE THREE STORIES

Homeless child

Children are rendered homeless for various reasons. Some of them are too small to fend for themselves. While my abstract indicated that I would interview a child, I only managed to secure an interview appointment with an adult homeless young man of thirty years.

To conceal his real identity we shall call the interviewee, Themba. On Tuesday 18 September 2012, I went – as per our agreement – to meet Themba in the city of Pietermaritzburg. I went straight to two young men sniffing glue in the presence of a woman. They quickly moved into action looking for Themba after enquiring if I came from Ashdown, his township. Thirty minutes later a greater number of people began looking for him, Themba was nowhere to be found. Just when I began to interview one of his friends, the woman who had been sniffing glue earlier excitedly

delivered Themba to me. While they looked for him I had managed to procure sodas and pies to make the meeting memorable. Out of respect the group allowed me space to talk to Themba alone.

Themba has three siblings. Their mother died when he was still small. His father was injured at work and receives an inadequate pension to support them. He left school at Standard Seven and left home when he was 13 years old. With the little that he makes from the street, he supports his father. When he saw one of his friends living on the streets of the city, Themba joined him on an irregular basis. Later he began to spend longer periods of time on the street.

Personal meaning of the street

Three streets in particular hold much value to Themba's survival: Chief Albert Luthuli near Game, Langalibalele Street in front of Boxer Shop and Loop Street across from the Police Station. In the morning from 8am, Themba begins to ask for money and food from people passing by his spot. From around noon, he switches over and his spot before Boxer Shop in Langalibalele. When darkness covers the city and the people disappear, he goes to sleep on the pavement across from the police station.

Jobseeker

Sipho Dlamini chose to have his identity made public when offered the choice of using a pseudonym. I decided against using his real name. He was born in 1991 in Stilfontein in the North-West Province, which he refers to as Johannesburg, and came to live with his grandparents in Pietermaritzburg when his parents died when he was two years old. Two of his brothers were already living with the grandparents in Dambuza. He came with one brother and a sister to join the other siblings. He went to school in Dambuza until Grade Twelve. He could not go further because he obtained an F symbol in Matric (Grade 12) and his grandparents could no longer pay for his schooling.

Personal meaning of the street

When asked how long he has been making a living from the streets, Dlamini answered:

> I have been on Greyling Street for nearly five years. Since I was in Grade Eleven I joined my friend on Saturdays to do *umgadlo*. When I finished school I came regularly.

Dlamini explained that initially *umgadlo* people, as he calls this kind of job-seeking method, used to be all over the city, covering every street that showed potential for

workers being picked up for piece jobs. Someone decided that they should all gather along Greyling Street so potential employers needed less time to search for a worker.

Dlamini's skills include gardening, painting, construction, loading and welding and putting up signs and posters. The time for employment ranges from one hour to three weeks, depending on the nature of work to be done. Some people have been lucky and secured full-time employment. For their services, Dlamini said that they charged R120 per day (8am–4pm) with R20.00 used for the day's transportation back home and a meal.

His present situation is that he is an orphan and has one brother who works for two or three days selling bananas on behalf of Indian merchants. His sister is a volunteer for the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC). Having a girlfriend, he has to go out and make ends meet. With the money he makes he buys food and clothes. He said: 'As a person who is hungry I cannot say there is no life in Greyling Street.'

When asked about his relationship to Greyling Street, Dlamini responded: 'That place helped me a lot because if I didn't go to that place I would not be able ….'

The place ensures his survival, according to Dlamini, in the sense that the jobseekers support one another. Someone who was employed the previous day does not insist on running after potential employers until others have had a chance as well. Having been around Greyling, Dlamini belongs to a group of veterans who occupy the lower part of the block between Chief Albert Luthuli and Boshoff streets. The newcomers' group occupies the upper part of Greyling from Albert Luthuli to Peter Kerchoff Street. A newcomer can cross over to the veterans' side only when he can prove that he can teach skills to others.

Dlamini loves being at the corner of Greyling Street and Chief Albert Luthuli because he sees that place as a source of livelihood for him. He also sometimes puts on his bib to marshal cars into parking spaces before the Postnet and Debonairs Pizza shops to earn a few Rand when the recognises that a marshal is absent or late for work.

Commercial sex worker

Although Okyere-Manu has interviewed 12 sex workers at length, she did not care to enquire about the identity of the street or the relationship the sex workers had with the spot from which they operated.

Nosipho Maseko came to Pietermaritzburg from Matatiele in 2000 to look after an old man in Willowfontein just outside the city, who promised to help pay her school fees. She is 24 years of age. She never knew her father but her mother died in December 2002. Maseko could still be seen as fortunate because she has a grandmother, three aunties and an uncle back in Matatiele, although sometimes having those relatives is not necessarily very helpful, as they are not actively involved

in doing their duty. For their value in culture, memory and trauma, Mathenjwa argued that elders must do their job of guiding children from the very beginning.

> The grounding idea suggests that elders are said to be elders because they know what is right and what is wrong. They can clearly define what is good and bad. They are capable of identifying what is good for an individual child, a person, a home, a ward and the nation at large. A decision is said to be sound when made after its possible repercussions have been weighed. It is perhaps for this reason that elders are regarded as resourceful generators, preservers, purveyors and distributors of knowledge (Mathenjwa 2013:1).

Maseko started working on the streets in 2008. When she became pregnant by an unemployed boyfriend, she had to go back home to Matatiele. Since there was nobody to help her raise her child, she had to find ways to do it herself. When she enquired, an older friend in Willowfontein told her how she was making ends meet:

> I visited her in the city and she showed me how she made her money. I saw that indeed it is a way I can also raise my child by means of this money. She never drove me into this job. I decided myself because I saw that whenever she came back home at 12 midnight she carried money (N. Maseko).

Maseko began her work on East Street but moved to a spot in Prince Alfred Street next to the Department of Transport buildings to avoid thugs. Prince Alfred Street has a number of security guards who protect the sex workers from *tsotsis*. She makes about R350 per night, especially around the 25th of the month. On a good night she makes R500.

Personal meaning of the street

When asked about the safety of the spot and the turf wars, Maseko responded that Prince Alfred Street is divided: The lower part of the street below Chief Albert Luthuli Street is reserved for veterans (*Osisi abadala*) who chase young women away because they were not there when they fought for the use of that part of the street. The top part of Chief Albert Luthuli is used largely by newcomers who work in different groups. Nosipho explained that they stand in groups of friends and acquaintances. Among the newcomers there are no turf wars, she emphasised.

The only danger on the chosen street is from the police who sometimes appear and either pepper-spray the sex workers or arrest them for a short while. Nosipho has been arrested five times.

ANALYSIS

Depending on one’s circumstances, physical spaces can have various meanings. For some a single incident can connect them to a place. In the Bible there are stories of such incidents. The story of Abraham, about to sacrifice his son Isaac, had significant

meaning and was named Jehova Jaira (the Lord Provides) (Genesis 22:14). In the story of Jacob wrestling with an angel in a place he later named Peniel, he saw God face to face and his life was spared (Genesis 32: 25–30).

Of the three interviewees, only the group of homeless people does not leave the CBD. The city is their home day and night. With the rate of unemployment on the rise and my interviewees having no education and training for skilled labour or a profession, it is no surprise that they eke out a living on the streets.

The place chosen must provide maximum benefit without demanding maximum effort from the person who chose it. For instance, in their circumstances, people making a living from the streets need the basics of food and security. The places they choose are important to them for as long as they can get food or money to buy food. As soon as the chosen places no longer help them to obtain food or chances to get money for food, they are abandoned. Similarly, if the chosen places cannot provide security, they are abandoned. This is both human intelligence and animal instinct. For similar reasons, people and animals move from place to place for survival.

There are certain social benefits that one enjoys by eking out a living on the streets, as we have seen with the homeless person, Themba, and Bongani Dlamini, the piece-job seeker. They have found friends with whom they socialise and fraternise in the midst of a situation of anomaly. In the case of Themba, the first group I met identified itself as his friends and quickly went in different directions to look for him, so he could keep our appointment. Even how they related to one another showed that, despite their unenviable conditions, homeless communities depend on each member's support and friendship. They are friends who look out for one another and share their resources. While waiting for Themba, I saw a young man retrieving a wrapped pie out of a dustbin and passing it on to another who decided against going to Boxer Store to have it microwaved. Although they do not have places they call home, the homeless community consists of friends. It is not ideal, but it works for each of them.

In the case of Dlamini, things are different. Unlike Themba, who is older than him, Dlamini chose the conventional but still hard way of surviving. He has chosen to live at home with his siblings and contribute to the welfare of the household. His survival is connected to the dignity of work. He finds dignity and respect from his kin by doing honest work. He sells his labour to those who need it and with the little he earns, he provides for his household. In a study of 27 young men who were already fathers at a young age, it was found that almost overwhelmingly they spoke about the need to be employed and to earn money as the measure of a good father (Swartz and Bhana 2009: 48). Like all men who were socialised to be providers, even Dlamini saw that as his role.

With some of the money he makes, Dlamini buys himself decent clothes. In most townships of South Africa, both young men and women are given respect because of how they are dressed. The more one wears clothes with the latest labels,

the more respect one gets, even if the money to buy the clothes was gained through criminal activity.

The people who choose to make a living from their chosen places will always attract attention to themselves. One can only admire the courage that people working on the street need, to face the judgmental gazes of passers-by. It takes tons of courage and sometimes drugs for them to keep doing what they do, especially the homeless beggars and the sex workers.

Resilience

Besides lessons of survival in the midst of a hostile Pietermaritzburg CBD, there are other lessons one can learn from the interviewees. One such lesson is resilience. The judgemental gazes of passers-by have the potential to drive a person to seek to numb their feelings with drugs. Insinuations that you are a nuisance are tantamount to stigmatisation. It is no wonder that almost all homeless street dwellers are said to be using some sort of drug to cope. The stigma or that present but invisible mark can prove hard to deal with in the quest to be seen as a normal person trying to survive.

The situation of the three interviewees can be likened to that of people living with HIV. In his recent study with Molly Longwe and Ntokozo Zitha on stigma and support groups, Philippe Denis found that HIV/AIDS support groups are valuable to members because '[t]hey play a crucial role in the lives of their members by providing them with emotional support and by encouraging them to seek treatment and adhere to it' (Denis 2013: 5–6). Although informally and loosely organised, the people making a living from the streets have similarities with the formal support groups of people living with HIV/AIDS. For instance, a large percentage of people in support groups have experienced rejection from their own kin and some sections of society (Denis 2013: 6). Both groups mostly depend on people outside their circles, as they have no formal and regular income.

The long and short of the similarities is what the three interviewees said about the guidance, the reception and support they found among people who make a living on the particular streets, as one interviewee who was rejected by her community experienced: 'Her strength came from the support group she had joined in 2006 at the local clinic. There she did not only find emotional support but work opportunities' (Denis 2013: 11).

Even when young people on the street use drugs such as glue to try and cope with their lack of family and parental love, and to face the demands of their situation, one can still recognise their resilience. The situation of being detached from parents and siblings (where they are alive) has the potential to traumatise any young person. Instead of considering suicide and getting involved in major crimes that may lead to a life in prison, the interviewees found courage and a reason for living, and rose out of their disempowering situations. They practically make money and have food

every day of their lives, either received from their companions or by earning it through selling or begging.

Dignity denied and supplied

It is often the case that commercial sex workers tried other means to make a living, but failed for many reasons. It is undeniable that a career in life as a sex worker is tough. That is similar to the piece-job seeker whose dependents are waiting for food and other supplies. Their condition of not being able to provide denies them dignity in the eyes of their dependents. In the same way, when they stand on the streets begging for work, they are in a condition that denies them dignity.

Standing on the streets is the lesser of two evils for these people. In that dilemma, the three streets under study provide dignity of sorts. While the streets look like mere geographical spaces and addresses, they carry vital meanings for some people.

Migrant labour, unemployment and teenage pregnancies bring about poverty that largely affect women and children in the rural areas. These very children and new mothers find ways to the city to explore prospects of making a living to either support themselves or their relatives. But poverty causes more than just hunger and homelessness. It also breaks the social fabric that holds families and relatives together. In writing about the social, economic and moral dimensions of fatherhood, Mkhize foregrounds migration, unemployment, poverty, divorce and family partition as contributing to the decline in responsible fatherhood and, by implication, the increased number of homeless children (Mkhize 2006: 183–184).

African families used to live together in a bigger family circle that included uncles and aunts and extended cousins (referred to as brothers and sisters). The stories told by the three interviewees show that while related to the particular sites in the CBD, they still have blood relatives to care for, but they are themselves not cared for. Despite that, one can point to the breakdown of even the extended family system that makes young people vulnerable (Lesejane 2006: 173). Referring to the changed roles of African men, Lesejane, in his chapter ‘Fatherhood from an African cultural perspective’, laments the diminished role of *botho/Ubuntu*, which ‘is characterised by caring and compassion for others, especially the most vulnerable; connectedness to and ongoing fellowship with the ancestors; and commitment to the common good’ (Lesejane 2006: 174).

Since poverty, urban migration, unemployment and homelessness caused the interviewees to change their traditional ways of living, it is not surprising that they are detached from ancestral relationships which are usually established through rituals. Where rituals are needed for invoking wealth or health, one can only perform them in the presence of nuclear or extended family members (Mkhize 2006: 187). Where one is alone and has ritually unclean strangers as one’s family on the streets, there is no chance of a credible ritual being performed. The efficacy of a ritual depends

on the blessings granted by an elder (Mathenjwa 2013: 3). It is important to note that those practising ancestor veneration do it for as long as it brings about benefits of a temporal on eternal nature. Similarly, when one has not been looked upon with favour by the ancestors and is living on the streets, such ancestors begin to lose credibility as a source of wealth and health. Lesejane sees children on the streets as social outcasts (Lesejane 2006: 179) and it is likely that homeless people do not see themselves differently either. They have been physically and emotionally uprooted and may not have anybody to claim them when they die.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to show how socio-economic conditions that include family degradation, urban migration, unemployment, teenage pregnancy, changing fatherhood forms, divorce and poverty drive young people to develop a survivalist relationship with specific open street sites within the Pietermaritzburg city centre. The relationship with the street or corner provides multiple benefits, such as protection from harm, opportunity to make money from begging (as in the case of Themba) and from commercial sex work (as in the case of Nosipho Dlamini), and a chance to be picked up for *umgadlo* (as in the case of Dlamini).

The three interviewees have developed new identities, as the streets force them to be adopted into new 'families' whose vulnerability teaches them survival tactics and gives them control of their spaces. The interviewees and their 'brothers' or 'sisters' from the streets were not nurtured to make a living from the streets. They take up roles they were never prepared for or socialised to take, but circumstances demand of them to have life stories which are different from those of their ancestors. Poverty and broken traditional family systems drove them to be innovative and make individual meaning of their collective misfortune. They have a new way far removed from the Zulu traditional way because, as Mathenjwa nostalgically wrote about the good old ways: 'Unfortunately, today, most people have become selfish and most tend to focus on their individual wellbeing without making any attempt to care for the less fortunate' (Mathenjwa 2013: 9).

NOTE

1. The paper was first read at the Oral History Association of South Africa 9thannual national conference in Thaba Nchu, Free State Province in 2012.

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