



# “Spatially, we are Creatures of Habit” – Understanding Gendered Geographies of Homelessness Using Participatory Mapping

**SHELLEY COOK**

Community, Culture, & Global Studies  
(CCGS)  
UBC Okanagan  
shelley.cook@alumni.ubc.ca

**JON CORBETT**

Community, Culture, & Global Studies  
(CCGS)  
UBC Okanagan  
jon.corbett@UBC.ca

## ABSTRACT

Participatory mapping is a promising, yet underexplored method for understanding the spatiality of homelessness in urban environments. In this study researchers employed a group participatory mapping approach with separate groups of homeless women and men to assess the utility of participatory mapping as a method for understanding gendered geographies of homelessness. Findings underscore the value of participatory mapping as a tool for highlighting gender differences in spatiality for urban homeless, including experiences of risk and the underlying meanings and uses of urban space.

## 1. Introduction:

The application of participatory mapping in environmental and natural resource management, conservation, and risk reduction is well established (Brown, Montag, & Lyon, 2012; Karimi, & Brown, 2017). Increasingly participatory mapping is being used to engage and understand experiences of people within complex urban environments (Brown & Kytta, 2018; Brown, Sanders, & Reed, 2018). To date however, few applications and their associated studies have used participatory mapping and related approaches to examine issues of homelessness in urban contexts.

In the handful of studies on urban homelessness that have utilized participatory mapping approaches, it was used as a tool to examine the

relationship between issues of spatiality and variables important to wellbeing. For example, accessibility patterns and community integration (Chan, Gopal, & Helfrich, 2014; Chan, Helfrich, Hursh, Rogers, & Gopal, 2014), access to care and health (Ensign & Gittelsohn, 1998), and spatial dislocation and increased risk (McNeil, Cooper, Small, & Kerr, 2015). By promoting improved understanding of the meaning of space in the day-to-day lives of homeless people, a main benefit of these studies (and of using participatory mapping approaches with homeless people more generally) is as a means to generate practical recommendations that have a positive impact on homeless people's health and wellbeing (Townley, Pearson, Lehrwyn, Prophet, & Trauernicht, 2016).

There are two key points about the use of participatory mapping in these studies most relevant to how it is used in this research. The first is the pronounced shift away from participatory mapping as a natural resource/environment focused application to a more clinical or “pedagogical tool” used to assess and understand individual need (Literat, 2013). Most notable in this regard are the activity space studies that use participatory mapping as a way to measure community integration (Chan et. al., 2014; Townley et al., 2016). The second is the use of participatory mapping as a process for understanding and making explicit geographies of homelessness that illuminate the experience of the spatiality for homeless people.

In the research outlined in this article, group participatory mapping was used as a method for understanding the differential effects of homeless spatiality for women and men. In other words, it was used to explore the *gendered geographies of homelessness*. Our research took place in the City of Kelowna in British Columbia. Particular attention was paid to the experiences of visibly homeless women and their geographies of homelessness, a research area that needs further exploration (Cloke, May, & Johnsen, 2007; Klodawsky, 2006). To our knowledge, this is the only study of its kind to use participatory mapping to examine gendered geographies of homelessness.

## 2. Methods and Data:

A total of four group participatory mapping sessions were conducted with separate groups of homelessness women and men, two groups with women and two with men. Participants were recruited through the two main adult emergency shelters in Kelowna, one that exclusively serves women and the other primarily accessed by men. There were eight participants in each group mapping session, which were held at the corresponding shelters. Participants ranged in age from their early 20's to mid 60's.

Participants were provided a large blank sheet of construction paper (one to share) and an assortment of different coloured pens and markers. They were asked to 'sketch map' (Corbett, 2009) or draw the places in Kelowna they viewed as being 'receptive' or 'welcoming' of them and those they felt were not, and to clarify their rationale for the difference between the two. Extensive notes were taken during mapping sessions.

Our data was derived from the sketch maps completed in each session (four total), transcripts of session notes (typed up post meeting), the thematic analysis of transcripts of session notes [coded using NVivo and Tesch's (1990) coding process], and a list of receptive and non-receptive spaces broken out by sex/gender with the rationale for their assessment. As part of a broader Community-based Participatory Research Project, we

analyzed our findings from group participatory mapping sessions in consultation with our project Advisory Committee (composed of formerly homeless individuals) and other key homelessness stakeholders throughout data collection using reflexive member checking (Fisher, 2009; Tufford & Newman, 2010).

## 3. Results

### **Differences in Geographies of Homelessness for Women and Men**

Consistent with the patterns of gendered geographies of homelessness for visibly homeless women identified by May, Cloke & Johnsen (2007), in our study women's geographies of homelessness were both similar and dissimilar to those of men. The participatory mapping process helped identify two principal geographic profiles for homeless women. Women either resisted typical male-centric representations of street homelessness by retreating into female spaces of care outside of the downtown (which acts as the epicenter of homelessness and street level activity in Kelowna), or they were more embracing of male representations of homelessness and their identity as a 'visibly marked' homeless person existing in public space. Irrespective of their specific geography of homelessness, the homeless women in this study were acutely aware that entering into male dominated spaces meant accepting the presence and influence of men in their day-to-day lives.

For the women in this study, a desire to maintain or reclaim their sexual independence often underlies their choice of where to locate themselves in the urban environment, including where they access shelter services. By avoiding male dominated homeless spaces, they are better able to maintain their freedom, sexual and otherwise. However, with the rise in violence and volatility on the street, women are under increased pressure to couple with men as a form of protection. Both female and male participants talked about the increase in 'coupling' among homeless street populations over the last several years in response to more pronounced culture of violence on the street. It is now an expectation

that women will ‘couple’ as a way to protect themselves when they are on the street. This trend is well noted in the homeless literature (Duff, Deering, Gibson, Tyndall, & Shannon, 2011; Rowe & Wolch, 1990). According to one male participant who was homeless on and off for decades, “If [women] are alone now like they were in the past, they are scared and carrying a knife.”

These coupling relationships are impermanent and specific to the street homeless context. One woman spoke about how she “felt unsafe” when she was on the street alone, but felt “safer and less a target for bad people” when with a boyfriend. Once she found private housing however, she ended her relationship with him because as she put it, “I didn’t need protection anymore.”

Even when seemingly similar in terms of basic geography, women’s experience of spatiality is fundamentally dissimilar to men’s because space represents different risks for women, risks they must navigate in the day-to-day survival. As noted by women in this study, the most significant risk that male dominated spaces represent, other than the immediate threat to women’s safety and sexual independence, is the risk to their continued sobriety/recovery.

### **Differences in how women and men understand and experience space**

Throughout the participatory mapping process, female participants talked about space more emotively than their male counterparts, both positively and negatively, and they tended to use more feelings-based language to describe locations. For example, “nice people are there”; “good memories and happy times”, “makes me feel at peace when I’m there”, and “I have warm feelings associated with that place”. ‘Shame’ surfaced as a central theme in women’s narratives about the socio-spatiality of homelessness, with spaces of care being identified as significant sources of judgment for women. As one woman put it, “I am being judged based on not looking like I need mental health services. Like, I am sorry I don’t look messed up enough for you.”

Although both women and men referenced a lack of dignity and feelings of dehumanization in relation to their experience of homelessness, women’s comments were more heavily focused on feelings of “shame”, “discrimination”, and “judgment” that for them, is more readily levied at women than men. Women noted feeling particularly resentful of judgment from service providers they had to access because they’re “mothers and have children to feed”, such as food banks, income assistance and Ministry of Children and Families offices. In reference to her experience at a local church run food bank one woman commented, “You feel like doing something wrong if don’t have money. They look at me like I am a bad person. It is so embarrassing.”

The difference in women and men’s experience of spatiality as visibly homeless people extends to how they conceptualize space cartographically. Men were generally more reluctant or hesitant to create and work with their own maps through sketch mapping. Men were also more focused on the precision and accuracy of locations on their maps, often asking me to confirm the exactness of their placement of different markers. Women were consistently more open to creating their own spatial renderings, and their maps were often highly creative and colourful, with the scale of buildings and other landmarks based more on the importance of these spaces in terms of their emotional weighting (both positive and negative feelings engendered) versus any actual scaling of size.

### **Reflections on the Use of Participatory Mapping**

Being present with homeless people while they create maps detailing intimate aspects of their lives is an evocative, immediately personal, yet natural way for researchers to work with homeless people to help express their relationship to different spaces in the urban environment. As the researcher, there was an ease and a naturalness to the process of mapping with homeless participants that belied the intimacy and sensitivity of the issues and topics

being discussed. As it was used here, the group-based approach to participatory mapping was an effective process for illuminating the nexus of the space-gender-homelessness interaction.

There are two key related benefits of participatory mapping indicated through these findings. The first is as a means to generate context-sensitive and gender-specific service recommendations, and the second is as a way to understand spatiality and the experiences of risk for homeless women in the urban environment.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, group participatory mapping provided an effective approach to make visible the differences in geographies of homelessness for women and men, and in turn, gain insight into the meanings, uses, and risks related to urban space based on gender. Researchers across disciplines with an interest in understanding gendered experiences of the spatiality of homelessness should be optimistic about its potential in homelessness research, which has only begun to be explored.

#### References

- Brown, G. & Kytta, M. (2018). Key issues and priorities in participatory mapping: Toward integration or increased specialization? *Applied Geography*, 95, pp. 1-8.
- Brown, G., Sanders, S., & Reed, P. (2018). Using public participatory mapping to inform general land use planning and zoning. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 177, pp. 64-74.
- Brown, G., Montag, J. M., & Lyon, K. (2012). Public Participation GIS: A Method for Identifying Ecosystem Services. *Society & Natural Resources*, 25(7), 633-651.
- Chan, D., Gopal, S., & Helfrich, C. (2014). Accessibility patterns and community integration among previously homeless adults: A Geographic Information Systems (GIS) approach. *Social Science & Medicine*, 120, pp. 142-152.
- Chan, D., Helfrich, C., Hursh, N., Rogers, S., & Gopal, S. (2014). Measuring community integration using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and participatory mapping for people who were once homeless. *Health & Place*, 27, p. 92-101.
- Cloke, P., May, J. & Johnsen, S. (2008). Performativity and affect in the homeless city. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 26, pp. 241-263.
- Corbett, J. (2009). Good practices in participatory mapping: A review prepared for the international fund for agricultural development (IFAD). Available at: <https://www.ifad.org/documents/10180/d1383979-4976-4c8e-ba5d-53419e37cbcc>, Accessed date: June 4, 2018.
- Duff, P., Deering, K., Gibson, K., Tyndall, M., & Shannon, K. (2011). Homelessness among a cohort of women in street-based sex work: the need for safer environmental intervention. *BMC Public Health*, 11(643), pp. 1-7.
- Ensign, J. & Gittelsohn, J. (1998). Health and access to care: perspectives of homeless youth in Baltimore City, U.S.A. *Social Science Medicine*, 47(12), pp. 2087-2099.
- Fischer, C. (2009). Bracketing in qualitative research: conceptual and practical matters. *Psychotherapy Research*, 19(4-5), p. 583-590.
- Karimi, A., & Brown, G. (2017). Assessing multiple approaches for modelling land-use conflict potential from participatory mapping data. *Land Use Policy*, 67, 253-267.
- Klodawsky, F. (2006). Landscapes on the margins: gender and homelessness in Canada. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 13(4), pp. 365-381.
- Literat, I. (2013). Participatory mapping with urban youth: the visual elicitation of socio-spatial research data. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 38(2), p. 198-216.
- McNeil, R., Cooper, H., Small, W., & Kerr, T. (2015). Area restrictions, risk, harm, and

- health care access among people who use drugs in Vancouver, Canada: A spatially oriented qualitative study. *Health & Place*, 35, pp. 70-78.
- Rowe, S. & Wolch, J. (1990). Social networks in time and space: Homeless women in skid row, Los Angeles. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 80(2), p. 184-204.
- Tesch, R. (1990). *Qualitative Research: Analysis Types and Software Tools*. New York: Falmer.
- Townley, G., Pearson, L., Lehrwyn, J.M., Prophet, N., Trauernicht, M. (2016). Utilizing participatory mapping and GIS to examine the activity spaces of homeless youth. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 3/4, pp. 404-414.
- Tufford, L. & Newman, P. (2010). Bracketing in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work*, 11(1), pp. 80–96.