The Word on the Street: Homeless Men in Las Vegas

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"Image … is everything."

Native Las Vegan Andre Agassi, in an early-career advertisement for Canon cameras

Las Vegas is many things: some real, some imagined, some real-and-imagined. Often lost in popular imagery of the city is the observation that Las Vegas is actually a tale of two cities – both of which exist within the same geographic confines. As Erving Goffman might say, the city contains both the frontstage "LAS VEGAS!!!" that is presented to the credulous masses of 40 million tourists who visit each year, as well as the less visible backstage "las vegas" that serves as a figurative engine and storage facility for the lives and props that keep the staged events humming. Kurt Borchard's book *The Word on the Street: Homeless Men in Las Vegas* seeks to explore one oft-neglected aspect of this duality: a behind-the-scenes population of Las Vegans whose presence, at the very least, provides a bit of a backstage buzzkill that threatens to spill into the frontstage revelry.

Overall, studies of *communities with large-scale gambling* remain largely neglected – especially when compared with the rapidly evolving field encompassing the study of *individuals who gamble*. This neglect is unfortunate: in contrast to the field of

alcohol studies, the field of gambling studies enjoys the advantage of several Weberian "ideal type" laboratories from Monte Carlo to Las Vegas to Macao to Singapore. In a world where gambling's wildfire expansion mandates sober analyses of community impacts, opportunities to explore these locales should not be missed.

Borchard aims to do precisely this kind of gambling-community exploration, examining the ways in which a familiar social problem—homelessness—plays out in a city that for obvious reasons manages its "presentation of self" very carefully. In doing so, Borchard leans upon a number of frameworks that are familiar to those who follow the gambling literature. One recurring theme is (personal) responsibility – specifically, who is to blame for homelessness in Las Vegas? To what degree is the homeless' plight "their own fault," and to what degree might fault be properly associated with other external or community factors?

The various perspectives presented here remind us of the popularity of the blame pastime in academic and lay analyses of social problems. Revealingly, the players (actors?) tend to point fingers elsewhere: Las Vegas politicians "blame the victim" for their own homelessness, while homeless men blame the tourism industry for their invisibilization. Meanwhile, academics take the opposite tack by pointing a finger at their *own* discipline – which they purport are uniquely equipped to explain all phenomena. Hence, when engaging homelessness, psychologists tend to point to mental illness, economists cite employment and income figures, and political scientists blame decision-making by key political entities. In this book, Borchard, a sociologist by training, uses his field's tools to help provide a complementary framework. Ultimately, his contribution helps fulfill C. Wright Mills' "promise" – that the "sociological imagination" can counter the tendency to diagnose "individual" problems while forgetting to pay attention to broader societal forces that shape all of our universes (Mills, 1959).

In engaging the personal responsibility, structure-or-agency debates, Borchard cleverly notes that in this test tube, at least, the extant structures emphasize agency. For instance, the strongly religious orientation of Las Vegas' shelters implicitly supports the idea that homelessness can be traced to individual deficiencies—and hence requires the "saving" of the individual soul. It seems, however, that the ultimate answer to the either-or question (*structure or agency?*) is simply "yes"—or as Borchard puts it, the answer lies in both "bad decisions and bad circumstances" (p. xxvi).

Of course, these "responsibility debates" have much in common with those engaging the most common subject of the gambling literature: problem gamblers. A note of caution here: though Borchard spends obligatory time on addiction in general, readers seeking an in-depth exploration of the direct interplay between gambling addiction and homelessness will be left unsatisfied by this work, as his

primary focus is elsewhere. However, those seeking a subtler understanding of the inherent complexities of homelessness in a gambling-dominated economy will be sated with insightful observations such as one on the perceived bountifulness of food in buffet-drenched Las Vegas versus the actual scarcity of food accessible to homeless Las Vegans. A worker at an agency in Las Vegas that serves homeless people made this observation:

> The hotels actually run those buffets far more efficiently than what it looks like. There's not as much wasted as what you could easily think…. The other part of that is when they have it… [t]he recipient needs to … pick it up on the spot, and sometimes we don't have the resources to do that. We may not have a truck, we may not have a driver, we don't certainly have a refrigerated truck… The other challenge we have is, can this be consumed right away? [An additional problem is that] if you know you've got x amount of meals you need to prepare every day, [and] if the donation doesn't come in, what do you do? … Then how do you determine if you've got four hundred men in the program that you've got enough food for fifty or a hundred, which fifty or a hundred gets it? … So it's not as simple as saying, "All leftover food from the buffets ought to go to a shelter,' end of conversation. (pp. 63-64)

Borchard's narrative crackles at moments like these, when key players are allowed to speak in their own words.[1] It sputters a bit when its attention drifts from this focus, as it does when the book starts off with a content analysis chapter focusing upon the (necessarily?) sterilized local media accounts of homelessness. In a book whose strengths lie in its unflinching self-reports, this media content analysis feels a bit forced and out of place.

When it immediately returns (in chapter 2) to an in-depth account of one homeless man's life, however, momentum is restored and the reader is taken for a ride. Here, Borchard follows "Jerry" around for an entire day, and paints a harrowing portrait of homeless life. This is perhaps the greatest strength of ethnographic research, a methodology that has evolved far from its anthropological roots, but nevertheless still works best when explaining alien worlds to the uninitiated.

Our time with Jerry includes many revealing and moving scenes. We observe veterans' hospitals, conventional hospitals, a fruitless chase from one homeless shelter to another to find appropriate services, "friends" on the street who steadfastly refuse Jerry's pleas for help, an ambulance ride, an emergency room, a bus station, a transitional living facility, judges, police officers, and finally, a Knights of Columbus hall, where a scene that is not for the weak-stomached unfolds. The scene is worth excerpting here, as it reveals how qualitative data tell stories that

quantitative data cannot. During their day together, Jerry and the author Kurt approach a bus

> … owned by the Knights, which has the word *Hope* on the front. We got as far as the bus and Jerry needed to stop. He grabbed hold of a handle near the bus door and said, "Hold on.' I waited a few feet away.
>
> At first, I thought he had a bad case of gas. Then I noticed he was looking down at his feet… "I shit myself again," he said angrily.' "I'm sorry, Kurt."
>
> 'Oh hey, don't apologize,' I said, feeling queasy. My mind had gone completely blank from this unexpected turn, but I somehow managed to assure him that I wasn't sickened or upset by what happened. "You had an accident,' I said.
>
> He cursed as he continued to try to clean himself. I noticed he was shaking…
>
> Suddenly he looked me in the eye. "Are you sure this is what you want to do?' he said, referring to my research. Doesn't this depress you?' (pp. 50-51)

At the end of this roller coaster ride of a day, Borchard concludes with a movingly honest and introspective passage in which he wonders whether Jerry will want to shake his hand (he does, and Borchard accepts). As a co-author of a few quantitative government-sponsored reports on homelessness in the Las Vegas community, I was struck by the realization that quantitative data (such as seemingly ubiquitous "homeless counts") never quite speak to audiences in the way that Borchard's qualitative data do. Though many familiar caveats apply (whither representativeness and generalizability?), surely there exists a place in the literature for qualitative accounts such as these (and those such as [Snow and Anderson's 1993](#) classic that serve as a foundation for Borchard's work).

In the next chapter, "Causes and Consequences," the author resists the temptation to assign blame for homelessness to any singular or simplistic cause. Though policymakers might long for more definitive "solutions," Borchard's work puts him in a more ambivalent analytical place:

> I sometimes found it hard to tell if a particular problem like addiction or mental illness preceded a man's homelessness, was perhaps a manageable problem that then grew worse after he became homeless, or if it only became a problem after he became homeless" (p. 54).

After spending many hours listening to homeless men explain their lives, the

author concludes that homelessness is "almost never reducible to a single cause-and-effect relationship" (p. 58). In this setting, a parallel with traditional gambling research areas emerges; after all, problem gambling researchers frequently grapple with the diverse and multifaceted causes and consequences of gambling behaviors (see, e.g., Blaszczynski, 2005).

Other parallels with the broader research literature on gambling are less obvious: it turns out that both gambling problems and homeless problems can trace their stigmas to a Protestant Ethic focus upon hard work and gradual accumulation of part of goods through daily toil. As a result, one reason why both problem gamblers and homeless men feel overwhelmed by pangs of guilt is that powerful societal institutions (such as religion) have been *telling* them they should feel this way – and for hundreds of years. This complicates religious institutions' frequent attempts to "blame" problem gambling on casinos – especially when many of the most painful "problems" that problem gamblers encounter have to do with stigmatization and shame (Bernhard, 2007). As so often happens in strong social scientific research, careful sleuthing reveals that culprits abound, and can even be found in the most unexpected and ironic of places.

In Chapter 4, Borchard heads for the south end of the famous Las Vegas Strip, a rapidly developing area that now threatens to stretch into the Southern California border towns. Here he introduces us to a group of squatters in an old, abandoned hotel that has since been razed. After making a half-hearted attempt to typologize these squatters, Borchard is quick to note that these sorts of typologies run counter to the spirit of his qualitative inquiry. He then returns to his qualitative reports, and the energy returns as well.

In these explorations, we meet individuals who "show more embarrassment at their homelessness than resentment against wider social conditions that may have helped precipitate it." On occasion, however, subtler frameworks emerge, such as the moment when "Matthew," a squatter quite familiar with "American Dream" mythology, connects macro-economic (and even global) shifts with "individual" problems:

> [People come here because] it's pretty much warm all year round and very mild winters and the lure of finding a good job and kind of fulfilling the American dream… and a lot of the situations in—especially back East, a lot of plants closing and jobs going oversees to China and Japan and Taiwan and Mexico—a lot of people find themselves out of work, and they pack up the station wagon or whatever and come out here for jobs. (p. 138)

In Matthew's words, we can hear a vibrant sociological imagination. Furthermore, passages such as these reveal that literary theorists need not dominate the

academic discourse on mythology; social scientists also need to devote careful and critical thought to the ways in which myths affect human lives. In doing so, as always, we need to remember that myths are not necessarily "true" or "untrue" so much as they are tales that are handed down over time—and hence have a powerful grip on both our decisions and our circumstances.

As is always the case when telling stories in and about Las Vegas, mythology pervades these narratives. Frequently, frontstage Las Vegas myths collide with backstage life: as Borchard puts it, "I have found that homeless men generally like Las Vegas … because of its warm climate and its liberal laws that promote hedonism—in other words, for the same reasons many tourists and residents like it" (p. xxiii). Later, he notes that another significant "pull factor" for in-migrating residents (including those who end up homeless) is the myth of a job market that is expanding as rapidly as the community waistline that is the Las Vegas Strip. Awaiting those buying wholesale into the mythologies of easy job opportunities, however, are the sobering data on (for lack of a better term) "acceptance rates." As the local hotel-casinos readily (and even eagerly) broadcast, supply frequently outpaces demand: New hotel-casino projects routinely brag about the strikingly large number of applicants for new jobs. Other tales—such as the (accurate) one that many employees in the local service industry need to have a Sheriff's Card, which usually prohibits those with criminal backgrounds from working—are less often told, but no less potent. Though the quantitative data on employment rates in Las Vegas paint a picture that other communities envy, Borchard's qualitative data/stories reveal a more nuanced picture that includes the lives of those who do not find work in Las Vegas.

In the last sections of the book, Borchard very insightfully infuses the goings-on with classic sociological perspectives. He unflinchingly examines violent crime that targets the homeless, and connects these observations with similar arguments made famous in William Julius Wilson's 1987 classic *The Truly Disadvantaged* (about crime victims "left behind" after upwardly mobile populations flee the inner city). He then proceeds to link Wilson's more conventional quantitative analyses with Elijah Anderson's (1999) ethnographic accounts of how extremely poor people often understandably adopt aggressive postures to deal with the constant threat of crime in their world. This sort of skillful quantitative-qualitative linkage in sociology (or in any other field, for that matter) is truly rare, and it provides a fascinating and illuminating final framework for those who have followed Borchard's work to the end.

Notes

[i.]A notable and unfortunate omission: the tourism industry is never given a chance to speak directly to these issues. Critical as we might be of their perspectives, a

monograph that relies upon in-depth interviews should have made an effort to include these voices as well.

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