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Having attained his Masters of Social Science from the National University of Singapore in 2008, Harry Tan has written on street busking in Singapore and street children in Bangkok. Rekindling his love for marginalized groups, his PhD research now focuses on homeless seniors, and how there is a 'language of extinction' in the Singaporean context.

A Conference Paper exploring the ‘official’ narratives of homeless seniors in Singapore
Title: Marginalized Seniors: The ‘truth’ about older homeless people in Singapore

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Abstract

In this paper, I shall explore the various ways of speaking about the homeless seniors in Singapore through statements made by the state and its state-controlled media. Uncovering these various possible ways helps reveal the ‘unwritten rules’ that are at work when one attempts to speak about the homeless in Singapore. Because of a lack of academic work done on issues of social justice that arise with the experience of ageing in Singapore, little else is known about this group of homeless seniors sleeping in public spaces besides the ‘official’ narratives provided by the state. Consequently, statements made by the state and its state-controlled media acts as a form of power-knowledge; a ‘regime of truth’ that subjects and governs these homeless seniors with the very knowledge these statements produce. Therefore, further research is needed and the sociologist has a role here. I conclude this paper by suggesting three issues concerning the growing phenomenon of homeless seniors in Singapore that demand further sociological research and attention.

Keywords: homeless; seniors; Singapore; state; state-controlled media; social justice

Introduction

The thought of homeless seniors in Singapore may seem far removed from its carefully cultivated image of a city state where everything appears to work and run efficiently. In fact, the city state's public housing policy was deemed such a success that the United Nations (UN) project for the homeless invited other nations to study the Singaporean model (*The Straits Times*, 1987). Such is the confidence in the Singapore's success story that it prompted the city state's Permanent Representative to the UN to declare that poverty has been eradicated in Singapore and that there are no homeless or starving people in Singapore (*The Earth Times*, 2001). However in recent years, this confidence is being tested with the growing emergence of homeless seniors sleeping in public spaces such as beaches, parks, underpasses and so on. For example, in 2010, the authorities from the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and the Sports (now restructured as Ministry of Social and Family Development) picked up 339 homeless individuals sleeping in public spaces in Singapore. This figure was up from 217 in 2009 (*The Sunday Times*, 2011).

For the state government, this growing phenomenon has led to some uncomfortable admissions that there are indeed homeless people in Singapore, and that the majority of these homeless individuals are senior persons who are mostly in their 50s or older (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2012). Even though the government has admitted to the phenomenon of homeless seniors sleeping in public spaces, there seems to be certain 'unwritten rules' when it comes to speaking about these homeless seniors. When Al Jazeera produced a video about the homeless in Singapore titled "Government policies forces some onto the street", it was taken to task by the government for misreporting and failing to ascertain the facts. Al Jazeera has since ceased to operate its channel in Singapore (ChannelNewsAsia, 2010a). Internet blogs and websites are also advised to check their facts carefully while writing about the situation of homeless seniors in Singapore.

In this paper, I shall explore the various possible ways of speaking about the homeless seniors in Singapore through statements made by the state and its state-controlled media. Uncovering these various possible ways helps reveal the ‘unwritten rules’ (a language for talking about a topic) that are at work when one attempts to speak about the homeless in Singapore currently. Because of a lack of academic work done on issues of social justice that arise with the experience of ageing in Singapore, little else is known about this group of homeless seniors sleeping in public spaces besides the ‘official’ narratives provided by the state. Consequently, statements made by the state and its state-controlled media acts as a form of power-knowledge; a ‘regime of truth’ that subjects and governs these homeless seniors with the very knowledge these statements produce (Foucault, 1972). Therefore, further research is needed and the sociologist has a role here. I conclude this paper by suggesting three issues concerning the growing phenomenon of homeless seniors in Singapore that require due attention.

The State

To appreciate the manner in which the state contributes to the various possible ways of speaking about the group of homeless seniors sleeping in public spaces, we need to examine the statements made by its legislators, political leaders and government officials. From the state’s legal perspective, senior persons who sleep in public spaces are labelled as “destitute”, defined as either “any person found begging in a public place...” or “any idle person found in a public place,... who has no visible means of subsistence or place of residence and is unable to give a satisfactory account of himself” (Destitute Persons Act, 2013). For the state, this act of sleeping in public spaces is deemed an offence, punishable under the Destitute Persons Act, Chapter 78 (2013). If caught, the Act also requires such persons to be institutionalized into state funded welfare homes¹ to be cared for and rehabilitated. The label “destitute” is thus one possible way of speaking about homeless

seniors who are sleeping in public spaces in Singapore. In choosing to label homeless seniors as “destitute”, the state also imposes several secondary labels on these homeless seniors, presumably that of being a ‘deviant’, a ‘beggar’ and an ‘idle’ person. Because the Destitute Persons Act has been enacted when Singapore gained its independence in 1965² (International Labor Conference, 1990), this label “destitute” is also the earliest available way to speak of ‘homeless’ seniors in Singapore.

The public statements made by political leaders and government officials have also resulted in another ‘official’ way of speaking about the group of homeless seniors sleeping in public spaces. Having defined ‘homeless’ seniors or more broadly ‘homeless’ people as “destitute”, the political leaders and government officials began to speak about “destitute” persons (as defined by the state’s laws) as a ‘non-existent’ group in Singapore. For example in 1967, the first Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew (2013:10) made the following claim on destitution and his vision for public spaces in Singapore: “Nobody here dies of starvation. Nobody is allowed to beg in streets. When we find someone begging, we put him into a home and feed him. ...we will make this one of the cleanest and most beautiful cities in Asia with trees, flowers and shrubs in all the public places.” Some twenty years later in 1989, he (Lee, 2013:136) reiterates: “You go down to New York, Broadway. You will see beggars, people on the streets. ...Where are the beggars in Singapore? Show me. ...Anyone without a home left to die in the streets and have to be collected as dead corpses?” Repeating the same message in his address to launch ComCare (a social assistance initiative for low-income individuals and families) in 2005, the current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (cited in Mendes, 2007) claimed that “low income Singaporeans are much better off than low income groups in any other country in Asia. We do not have destitute persons sleeping on the streets.” Government officials have similarly taken the political leaders’ stance by adopting this ‘language of extinction’ in their public comments. For instance, Professor Kishore

Madhubani, Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, writes in *The Earth Times* (2001): "There are no homeless, destitute or starving people in Singapore. Poverty has been eradicated..." More recently in 2010, Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan (ChannelNewsAsia, 2010b), then Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports says: "If you were a poor person, anywhere on this planet, Singapore is the one place where you will have a roof over your head, where you will have food on the table." Taken together, these set of statements result in – what I term for the time being – a 'language of extinction' that makes invisible the very groups they attempt to speak for. Because of a relatively long history of sustained reinforcement by the state (by its political leaders and government officials), speaking about homeless seniors as a 'non-existent' group is one of the most prevalent ways that has been internalized by most people in Singapore.³

The State-Controlled Media

Statements made in the local news media are also useful in exploring the various ways the homeless seniors are spoken about in Singapore. Due to the word limitation of this paper, I shall focus only on key statements made in *The Straits Times*; the most widely read national flagship newspaper in Singapore.⁴ While the topic of homelessness or indeed homeless seniors in Singapore do not generally get reported in the local news media, two significant news articles have been published recently.⁵ In 2007, *The Sunday Times*, the Sunday edition of *The Straits Times* published an article titled "Sleepers in the city". The focus was on "sleepers" who are found to be sleeping in various public spaces in the city-state. However, the article pointed out that many of these "sleepers" are in fact not homeless and are sleeping in public spaces for pragmatic reasons such as saving on taxi midnight charges or proximity to their workplaces. For example, one 35-year-old "sleeper" who shares a three-room flat with his brother (*The Sunday Times*, 2007) was quoted saying: "Every morning, I clean my face, brush my teeth and two seconds later I am at work." Of the numerous interviews

conducted with these “sleepers”, only one featured a homeless 71-year-old senior saying: “I do not want to live in an old folk’s home. There is no freedom there. Here I can drink coffee with my friends whenever I want.”

In 2011, another news article titled “Choosing to sleep in the streets” (published also in the Sunday edition of *The Straits Times*) addressed the issue of the ‘homeless’ seniors specifically. The writers suggested that for most elderly people or “elderly vagrants” (as termed by the writers), sleeping in public spaces is a choice they made after falling out with their rental flat roommates.⁶ Robert Chua, center manager of a Senior Activity Center explains that “old people are stubborn and they are fixed in their ways, so it’s easy for them to disagree and quarrel” (*The Sunday Times*, 2011). Other reasons for sleeping in public spaces include personal preference, filling up their rental flats with too much junk that there is no room to sleep and being thrown out by their families. As an example of why these “elderly vagrants” were thrown out by their families, the writers (*The Sunday Times*, 2011) quoted a 78-year-old senior: “What to do, I have nowhere to sleep – my son says I’m dirty and smelly and threw me out.”

These statements in the state-controlled local news media (*The Sunday Times*, 2007; 2011) present us with two ways of speaking about ‘homeless’ seniors in Singapore: 1) homeless seniors as “sleepers”; and 2) homeless seniors as “elderly vagrants”. These terms “sleepers” and “elderly vagrants” draw us into making various contrasting assumptions about ‘homeless’ seniors in Singapore. For example, the term “sleepers” tends to remove the element of homelessness from the act of sleeping in public spaces in Singapore since it is reported that the majority of these “sleepers” are technically not homeless. By contrast, the term “elderly vagrants” reinforces the state’s legal definition of homeless seniors as “destitute” considering that the word “vagrant” also refers to “an idle person without visible means of support or permanent home” (Dictionary.com). Despite these seemingly contrasting

ways of speaking about homeless seniors, both news articles in the state-controlled media incline the readers to a similar conclusion. That is, these seniors sleep in public spaces either as a matter of ‘choice’ or as a consequence of ‘personal action/inaction’ rather than a social issue or lack of support by the state.

‘Unwritten Rules’ and Further Research

In exploring the statements made by the state and its state-controlled media on homeless seniors, we arrive at the various ‘unwritten rules’ that are at work when one attempts to speak about this group of people. In Singapore, a homeless senior can be spoken of as a “destitute” or an “elderly vagrant”. Subsequently, this “destitute” senior or “elderly vagrant” assumes also the various related labels of a ‘deviant’, ‘beggar’ or ‘idle’ person with no visible means of subsistence. One could also speak of homeless seniors as a ‘non-existent’ group in Singapore. In this respect, the effectiveness of the Destitute Persons Act depends on ensuring that there are no homeless seniors sleeping in public spaces and that those found are admitted into state-funded welfare homes. Yet, a problem remains for the state. How does it account for the existence of homeless seniors in Singapore? The answer can be found in the state-controlled media. Accordingly, some seniors who are sleeping in public spaces are in fact “sleepers” who are technically not homeless and only do so for pragmatic reasons such as proximity to their work places and so on. Regardless of these different possible ways of speaking about homeless seniors, they incline us to draw the conclusion that the growing phenomenon of homeless seniors sleeping in public spaces is the result of ‘personal choice’ or a consequence of ‘personal action/inaction’ rather than due to poverty, unemployment or a lack of state support.

Because of a lack of research, little else is known about this group of homeless seniors besides the ‘official’ narratives offered by the state and its state-controlled media. These

statements result in a form of power-knowledge that subjects and governs these homeless seniors in a 'regime of truth'. For example, the homeless senior as "destitute" makes it easy to institutionalize these individuals into a state-funded welfare home. Once institutionalized, homeless seniors are officially subjected to the "care, control and rehabilitation" of the state and governed through its state-funded welfare homes (Destitute Persons Act, 2013). Citing the Advisory Council on the Aged, Bentelspacher (1994) writes on the impact of these state-funded welfare homes or "aged homes" (his term) for the seniors in Singapore: "Aged homes are viewed as undesirable living situations. The elderly residents are, for the most part, cut-off from family and community and feel unloved and discarded by their families and society." To conclude, I propose three issues concerning the current situation of homeless seniors in Singapore that demand greater sociological research and attention. The first issue concerns the absence of the voices of homeless seniors in the 'official' narratives offered by the state and its state-controlled media. In this cacophony of 'official' opinions and 'expert' knowledge, homeless seniors become a group that is marginalized and silenced by the dominant 'official' discourse about 'homelessness' in Singapore. Research is needed to give voice to these homeless seniors sleeping in public spaces by producing a comprehensive and meaningful account of their lives and lived experiences.

The second issue relates to the voluntary welfare organizations (VWOs)⁷ that are working with homeless seniors. At present, VWOs can be categorized into two groups in Singapore: 1) those that received funding from the state government; and 2) those that are fully independent and do not receive any funding from the state government. Teo, Mehta, Thang and Chan (2006) argue that rallying VWOs into the state government's influence (through funding) gives more power to the state and helps legitimize its decisions. In this respect, further research is needed to understand if perceptions on the issue of homeless seniors or indeed homelessness in Singapore differ for the two groups of VWOs. Also, how

do these VWOs address a problem that does not ‘officially’ exist since speaking about homeless seniors as a ‘non-existent’ group is one of the most prevalent ways that has been internalized by most people in Singapore?

Finally, the third issue relates to the need for further research to gain/provide a comprehensive understanding of these homeless seniors sleeping in public spaces. Current definitions that are provided by the state and its state-controlled media provide at best stereotypical caricatures of these seniors and their lives. These terms “destitute”, “elderly vagrant”, “sleeper” and even the very term “homeless” itself may define aspects of some of these seniors sleeping in public spaces. However, they are also largely responsible for the stigma (Phelan et al., 1997) that homeless people face on a daily basis.⁸ Rethinking and challenging the established stereotypes of homelessness in Singapore is not easy within the Singaporean context but necessary if we are to begin making this ‘invisible’ social justice issue ‘visible’ and worthy of attention.

(Word Count: 2976)

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Notes

¹ There are ten homes that are currently gazetted as welfare homes by the state for the care, reception and rehabilitation of destitute persons. These state-funded welfare homes operate under strict rules. For example, any person found behaving in a disorderly manner or who attempts to escape from lawful custody of the welfare homes is guilty of an offence and is liable to a monetary fine or imprisonment. For more details, refer to the Destitute Persons Act (2013).

² Since 1965, the Destitute Persons Act (2013) has undergone several revisions, most notably in 1970, 1985, 1989, 1990, 2001 and 2013. Despite these amendments, the key tenants of the Act such as the definitions of a destitute and the penal sanctions that require a destitute to reside in a state-funded welfare home remain unchanged.

³ This is an observation that I have made in the course of my volunteering work with a voluntary welfare organization (VWO) when talking to new volunteers or the general public. When told that we deliver food to these homeless seniors, many of the new volunteers and the general public respond with a similar question: “Are there really homeless people in Singapore?”

⁴ *The Straits Times* has a readership of 1.25 million people in 2012, which accounts for 31% of the 4.04 million people in Singapore (Singapore Press Holdings, 2013).

⁵ Since its publication in 1845, there were consistent reports in *The Straits Times* about homelessness in Singapore until 1965, the year the Destitute Persons Act was enacted. From 1965 to mid-2000s, these reports were rare, if any at all. However from the mid-2000s, news reports on ‘homeless’ people have started to re-appear occasionally.

⁶ This group of “elderly vagrants” (*The Sunday Times*, 2011) who have fallen out with their rental flat roommates are usually ‘single’ since the Housing Development Board (HDB) in

Singapore requires single seniors to apply for the rental flat in pairs to make the best use of space and to encourage these singles to take care of each other.

⁷ In Singapore, a Voluntary Welfare Organization (VWO) is defined as a non-profit organization that provides welfare services and/or services that benefit the community at large (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2014).

⁸ In the course of my volunteering work with VWOs, I have witnessed many incidents where homeless seniors have been stigmatized due to established stereotypes labelled upon a “destitute”. For example, it is not uncommon for new volunteers to wipe their hands with alcohol wipes after shaking hands with some of these homeless seniors. The common remark is as follows: “You do not know what diseases they may have, so better stay safe than sorry.”