Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

TRUDY NORMAN

MA (University of Victoria, 1986)
BSc (University of Victoria, 1978)

“Differing Needs, Differing Agendas: Activism by People with Experience of Homelessness in the Capital Region of British Columbia”

Interdisciplinary Studies

Thursday, December 17, 2015
10:00AM
David Turpin Building
Room A132

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Bernadette Pauly, School of Nursing, University of Victoria (Co-Supervisor)
Dr. Margo Matwychuk, Department of Anthropology, UVic (Co-Supervisor)
Dr. William Carroll, Department of Sociology, UVic (Non-unit Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Nancy Halifax, School of Health Policy & Management, York University

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Ryan Budney, Department of Mathematics & Statistics, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

Governments have done little to address poverty and homelessness despite awareness of the increasing number of people affected by these issues. Neoliberalizing processes and resulting federal and provincial social policy changes since the 1980s have driven the decimation of Canada's welfare state and contributed to expanding inequalities that systematically privilege a wealthy few at the expense of the balance of Canadians, particularly those living in poverty. Collective resistances may be the best available and most powerful tool people in poverty, including those who experience homelessness, possess to challenge government policy directions and outcomes that marginalize their voices, needs, and wants.

The literature on collective action of people in poverty and who experience homelessness is sparse. Scholarship incorporating the voices of people who experience homelessness and participate in collective action is meager within this small body of literature. The role agency plays in individual behaviors and how such choices may be shaped by social conditions, is relatively unexamined. An activist ethnography, with structural violence as described by Paul Farmer as the critical frame, was used to explore the role various types of agency played in collective actions of people with experiences of homelessness or experience housing insecurity in the Capital Region of British Columbia.

Primary questions guiding the research were —How do people who experience homelessness collectively challenge processes, policies, and outcomes that contribute to homelessness? What are participants' experiences of these efforts? How may these efforts be understood within a structural violence framework? To answer these questions I chronicle and critically examine the challenges and successes of —The Committee, a group of housed and unhoused activists as one example of collective actors that ‘push back' against processes and practices that produce and reproduce homelessness.

Findings suggest that structurally violent processes generate embodied outcomes, lived experiences that constrain agency, often working to exclude people with experience of homelessness from collective resistances. Participation of people who are actively homeless or with experiences of homelessness in collective resistances requires attending to basic material needs and daily life issues in ways that allow meaningful participation in organizing work as a precursor to collective action. Allies can reproduce structures of violence and contribute to dismantling those same structures. Relationships between people with experience of homelessness and allies may work to mitigate unequal power relations, allowing some people with experiences of homelessness opportunities for participation in collective resistances not otherwise available to them. Implications for grassroots organizing and inclusion of people with experience of homelessness in collective resistances are included.