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The Activist's Perspective; Intergroup Conflict in Homeless Advocacy

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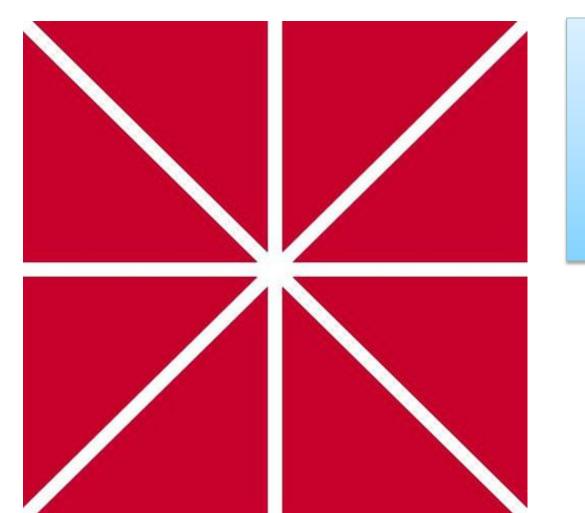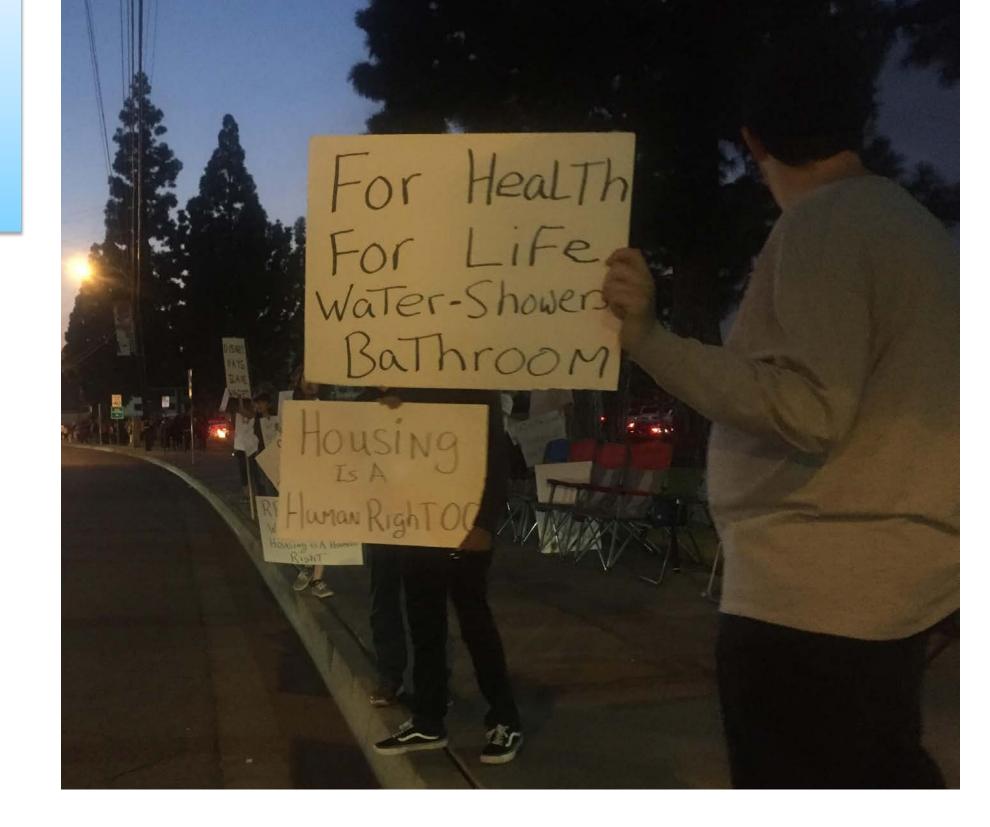# The Activist's Perspective; Intergroup Conflict in Homeless Advocacy

Atty McLellan, Dr. Lisa Leitz

Research Question

How did homeless activists characterize the situation surrounding the riverbed; including their own involvement, as well as Orange County's interactions with the homeless?
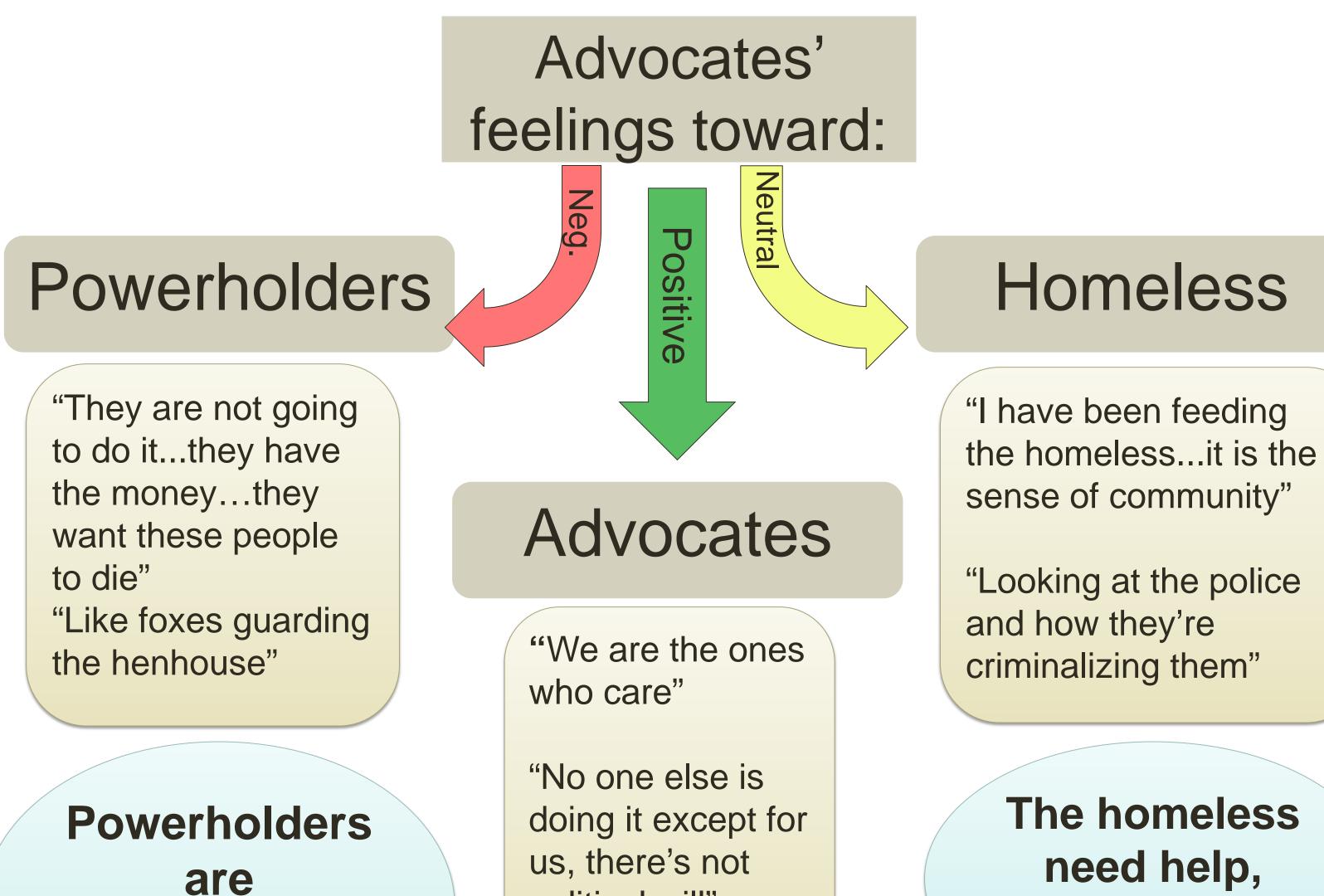
Context

In early February, 2017, Orange County Public Works began maintenance along the Santa Ana Riverbed, which required the permanent removal of the hundreds of homeless residents who were living in the area. These evictions, as many homeless advocates referred to them, sparked a new wave of activism for the homeless in Orange County. Advocates' increased urgency to find a resolution to O.C. homelessness has led to heightened friction between activists and powerholders

Methodology

Overall, 35 meetings were watched or attended with 11 of those meetings being strictly for advocates. I conducted ethnographic research at these meetings, taking note of the language that the advocates used. These ethnographic notes were then qualitatively analyzed using grounded theory, where I created codes via open coding, highlighting repeated phrases and words, which were connected into larger and larger concepts (axial coding into selective coding).

Advocates' feelings toward:

Neg. / Positive / Neutral

Powerholders

"They are not going to do it...they have the money...they want these people to die"
"Like foxes guarding the henhouse"

Powerholders are untrustworthy and neglectful

Advocates

"We are the ones who care"
"No one else is doing it except for us, there's not political will"

Advocates are caring and know the solution

Homeless

"I have been feeding the homeless...it is the sense of community"
"Looking at the police and how they're criminalizing them"

The homeless need help, they are victims

Intergroup Conflict & Perceptions

- "… A major characteristic of intergroup conflict is the effort made by both superordinate and subordinate group members to eliminate this condition of social insecurity…stereotyped attitudes with respect to social organizations [are] organized around basic premises of group action", (Laviolette and Silvert 1951)
- "An in group/out group bias develops and grows more pronounced as conflict increases...the perceptual biases that are revealed when groups involved in conflict attempt to evaluate each other include stereotypes...over time these perceptions become increasingly inaccurate, and tend to fuel further conflict" (Labianca, Brass, and Gray 1998).
- "…moral superiority may justify some negative discrimination against outgroups..." (Brewer 2001)
- "This is the point at which preservation of the ingroup justifies direct aggression against the outgroup and underlies conflicts over political control…but when intense distrust has already developed common group identities are likely to be seen as threats (or opportunity) for domination and absorption" (Brewer 2001)

Observations

- The majority of the time, advocates talked about powerholders in negative terms, regarding powerholder actions as **harmful** to the homeless
- Whenever powerholders were connected to positive ideas or outcomes, it was connected to advocates **forcing** the powerholders to do good
- When mentioning themselves, advocates were mostly related to positive values
- The homeless community was depicted with little agency; advocates depicted that either powerholders **acted upon** them, or advocates acted on **behalf of** them
- The O.C. residents was seen as a potential resource that could go **against**, or be **persuaded** by the advocates

Conclusions

The language used by the advocates aligns with intergroup conflict theory in that the language demonstrates a level of negative stereotyping that advocates have towards powerholders. This discrimination leads advocates to see themselves on higher ethical ground than their perceived opposition, powerholders (Brewer 2001). These perceptions can become more entrenched the longer the conflict persists, making it more difficult, perhaps impossible for groups to come to an eventual resolution (Labianca, Brass, and Gray 1998). Studies about resolving intergroup conflict have recommended reducing negative interactions amongst groups as a way to prevent the conflict from worsening (Labianca, Brass, and Gray 1998). While there are many different factors involving the solution to homelessness, our study suggests that perhaps improving the perceptions and working relationship between advocates and powerholders would be a good first step at least towards solving homelessness in Orange County.

Continuing Research

This research is only part of a larger, more extensive project that is observing powerholders' perceptions, county resources, as well as more a more in depth look into advocate perceptions.