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# Media Portrayals of Wildfire Displacement and Homelessness with Maude Hines and Janet Cowal

**Narrator:** Welcome to PDXPLORES, a Portland State research podcast featuring scholarship, innovations, and discoveries pushing the boundaries of knowledge, practice, and what is possible for the benefit of our communities and the world.

**Maude Hines:** My name is Maude Hines. I'm a professor in the English Department, the Chair of Black Studies, and I head up the narrative strand in PSU's Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative.

**Janet Tom Cowal:** My name is Janet Tom Cowal. I'm a Senior Instructor Two in the Department of Applied Linguistics.

**Hines:** What really intrigued us about the 2020 fire season, I mean, certainly the 2020 fire season was a terrible thing, but it gave us the opportunity to think about what the word homeless meant. We started to look carefully at the language used in the media and to look at when writers were using words like “evacuee”, and when they were using the word “homeless” and what it meant, and we were very intrigued that no one who had lost their homes to the fires were called homeless, that that word has taken on so many other meanings that it can no longer be used to describe not having a home.

**Cowal:** And, we also found that people who were previously unhoused and were, in fact displaced, were never referred to as evacuees. So, that was creating a meaning about “being without a home” or “houselessness” or “homelessness” as not being related. Again, not being related to not having permanent shelter. I think that the public is somewhat aware of possible roles that humans and social structures have in the creation of disasters like climate change, flooding, and wildfires. The public doesn't seem to have the same kind of awareness or understanding of the relationships between social structure and houselessness. We don't yet have agreed upon ways to talk about houselessness. The previous study Maude and I did, on the meaning of houselessness, and our current study show that the terms such as “homeless” and “houseless” are rarely associated with social structural causes, but rather with individuals' identities.

**Hines:** While Janet and I are here talking about it today, I wanna be clear that this was a group effort. I especially want to acknowledge the work of the other lead authors, Emily Leickly and Idowo Ajibade.

**Cowal:** So, for this study, we took approaches from our various disciplines in order to interpret the media narratives. So, by analyzing narratives from these different disciplines, we were able to expose some of the underlying logic that impacts the way we treat people experiencing houselessness. And in this article, we hope to provide insight into opportunities for changing dominant narratives and for building an ethic of care, compassion, and empathy that ultimately will lead to social change.

**Hines:** The discursive practices that Janet and I were working on in which the word homeless has come to be an identity category “that's a homeless guy”, naturalizes that state as not temporary. So, we're starting to get into the temporal dimensions of being unhoused. That this is an identity category where you can't imagine the moment in which this happened, in which the person had some kind of disaster that created this state. The evacuees were in an unnatural situation. They didn't, they weren't supposed to be without a house, whereas the folks described as homeless, that word contained the idea that being homeless was a natural situation for them. And once that situation is naturalized discursively, one of the effects is to hide the kinds of legislative decisions, economic and equalities, disasters like the Vernonia flood, that created homelessness sometimes for folks who are still experiencing it. Those kinds of things are erased and the situation is deemed natural for that person, even though there's nothing natural about it.

**Cowal:** So, it matters how a society defines “natural” and “disaster” because those definitions have material consequences. It impacts what the society thinks caused the disaster in the first place, and the degree to which the society believes it has agency in what is occurring. So, who thinks something's a disaster in the first place? And whose disaster is it? And whose fault is it that it occurred? And who should be responsible for fixing things? And who can actually fix things if it's possible to fix things? So if you define “natural” as something people can't control, like the weather, and you define “natural disaster” as something that, something big that hurts innocent people, then you most likely will want to help people in whatever way possible. If you define “natural” in terms of “natural or logical consequences”, and if you assume people are houseless because they're drug addicts or because they're lazy, then you know, of course they're houseless because they're drug addicts. Then it's their own fault, and because it's their own fault, they should be responsible for fixing their own mess, and the society isn't obligated to take action. And

actually, is it even a disaster? Well, it depends who you ask. So, for evacuees, the wildfires were defined as a natural disaster that they did not cause. So, the fact that they were displaced and without shelter was not their fault. So, they were deserving of empathy, support, and assistance. For people who were previously unhoused who were also displaced and they had no shelter, natural disaster had a different definition, and there were different material consequences. So, the content of news stories is much more likely to be associating houselessness with crime, filth, and drugs rather than with economic or say human rights issues. And the actual words and phrases and metaphors used also make a difference. So, for example, if you use words or phrases like “sweeping up homeless camps”, right? You're creating an image that people experiencing houselessness are dirty and that their belongings are trash. If you use phrases like “displacing economic refugees”, we have a very different picture of the situation. The media create the dominant narrative, that is, the dominant narrative is the common understanding of any issue that the majority of society takes for granted and doesn't question. So, in the case of houselessness, the dominant narrative has been created by people who are housed and who are focusing on fear. So, this means that the public's understanding or the common sense/knowledge taken for granted/ understanding of houselessness is really from a fearful housed perspective, and perhaps the dominant narrative would be less negative if the perspectives of people who have lived experience with houselessness were more often included in media reports.

**Hines:** We examine news items from local news sources with the largest audiences. So we wanted one set of data from a print newscast, a print newspaper, one set from a radio station, and one set from a television station and looked at how large the audience was in each of those. We chose the ones with the biggest audience, so the Oregonian newspaper, OPB, or Oregon Public Broadcasting for radio and Fox 12 TV for television to see how housing status was portrayed in the kind of language that was used to describe folks in each of those pieces.

**Cowal:** So, as I described earlier, the dominant narrative creates the viewpoint that the majority of people take for granted as common sense or common knowledge, and it isn't noticeable or questioned. Therefore, we say it's unmarked. Each of the themes in our paper shows how the unmarked narrative about houselessness is *a* narrative or one perspective. This common sense perspective resulted in differential treatment of people who were displaced by the wildfires, but it was *a* perspective, not necessarily truth. So, the first theme “nomenclature” deals with the words that the media uses to talk about people and situations. So, for example, just by consistently using two different labels to refer to people who were displaced by the wildfires, two different groups were

created. So, “evacuees” referred to previously housed people, and they were directed to evacuation sites or evacuation shelters. Previously unhoused people who were also displaced were never mentioned in media reports as being evacuees. And they were labeled as “people experiencing homelessness” or “people experiencing houselessness”, and they were directed to homeless shelters. Reported speech refers to how the media privileges different groups of people in their narratives through the choices they make and who is quoted and how they are described. We found that the media reports of the wildfires frequently had interviews and personal stories about evacuees, and they would list people's full names and their occupations, and they would have direct quotes. So, actually their words, the evacuees, actual words are printed. And so, this kind of practice makes evacuees visible. It raises their voice, it legitimizes their experience of having not a home, but it legitimizes it. And by contrast though, there were zero wildfire reports in our data set of interviews with previously unhoused people and how the wildfires affected them. And so, this lack of representation basically erases their experience and then it excludes previously unhoused people as people who have a legitimate reason to be without shelter. Agency is related to that. It refers to the idea about who has the ability to take action. Whose fault is it that something happened? Whose fault is it if somebody doesn't have permanent shelter? And who should be responsible for ensuring that somebody has stable housing? We found that in the case of previously unhoused people, or when they're talking about houselessness, the dominant media narratives focus on perceived individual agency, so, mental illness or alcohol or drug addiction as opposed to structural conditions like the economic crisis or affordable housing. Again, that contributes to this negative perception that people have of people experiencing houselessness. So, in our data set, we found 34 local news articles that associated feelings of community and solidarity with evacuees. There were zero articles that associated feelings of community and solidarity with previously unhoused people. And then finally, this idea about silence, which also relates to the other themes, and that is the media sympathy and positivity towards evacuees can be really contrasted with their silence on the experience of people who were previously unhoused, you know, during the wildfires.

Why does that matter? It matters because whose stories get told tells the society whose stories matter. And so, by completely leaving out any stories of people who were previously unhoused in this whole narrative about what's going on with this big disaster, it sends a message that, okay, so these people, we don't even think about them. It makes that dominant narrative even more dehumanizing for people who are experiencing houselessness.

**Hines:** First of all, language is not neutral. The language we use to describe things and the language we use to describe people affects the ways that we think about them. There have been some efforts recently to use person-first language.

In other words, “people experiencing houselessness” rather than “the homeless” in order to focus on the fact that we're talking about people. However, what we found with the word “homeless”, that any language that we use can start to accrue meanings and we forget the original meanings of the words. More important, I think, is creating the kind of community and solidarity that Janet was just talking about, avoiding language and depictions that other. The names that we use are not as important as the overall context of how we depict things. The words, yes, but the words in their context is what matters most.

**Cowal:** I believe most people want to do the right thing, and I hope that studies like this will help people become aware of their assumptions and misconceptions that they might have about houselessness. And I think that if people understood that there are other perspectives on this problem, then that opens up other possibilities for solutions that people hadn't even considered. And I hope that policy makers and other people in power will make more informed decisions and better policy as a result of our research.

**Hines:** My name is Maude Hines, and my passion as a researcher is helping us understand stories and why they matter.

**Cowal:** My name is Janet Tom Cowal. My passion is activist applied linguistics, which means as an applied linguist, I partner with communities to amplify marginalized voices in issues such as water justice, houselessness, and access to legal information.