

Viewing Questions

After viewing the Man in the Dog Park film, your reading/viewing group or class may want to engage together in conversation. Here are some questions from the book author/film writer to spur your thinking in different topic areas. If you've read the chapter, questions that engage both the chapter reading and the film are provided at the end of the list.

Questions About the Man in the Dog Park Film

- (1) **Terminology.** In 2022, the federal government has come out with new “preferred language” that asks us to change language such as “homeless people” or “the homeless population” to “people or persons experiencing homelessness.” Why do you think they've done this? After watching the film, what do you think is the difference between calling someone a “homeless person” versus a “person experiencing homelessness?” In what ways can a subtle shift in language have an impact on those who use those words?
- (2) **The larger picture.** Revisit in your mind the scene where Jamie is walking through a beautiful neighborhood and admiring the gardens and the cars. Despite that he is a strong young man, he says “I only feel safe walking with someone like her” referring to a small middle-aged white woman. Unpack the scene. Describe any of the factors—social, economic, and personal—that you think are behind what happens in this scene. What do you imagine has contributed to Jamie's reactions in the scene? Think of all the things that might have gone into creating this real-life moment. When you go for a walk, what social, economic, or personal factors shape your experience?
- (3) **Stereotypes.** Ross narrates a scene where Javier, a day laborer who is experiencing homelessness, is walking down a city street. Ross says: “Javier's wages go to one place, and it's NOT rent.” Before you saw where his money went to in the film, what did you think? Did anyone guess that he was sending his wage money to his mother or family? Reflect on this.

What incident/s in the film most powerfully countered a view you have held or that is held by people you know? Which incident/s in the film confirmed your prior sense of a “homeless person”?

- (4) **Animation and real.** The film includes some complex choices about representation. A major choice made was to animate a very serious social issue and very intimate personal stories. What, for you, were the advantages or disadvantages of doing this? What does the use of animation make possible in this film for you as a viewer? Did you experience a downside to animation? Did it take away from your sense of intimacy or connection? What was your reaction to the places in the film where it went from real to animation or animation to real? Did it make a difference to you (if so, how?) that residents from a homeless shelter played the parts of the actual people represented in the encounters in the book?
- (5) **N.I.M.B.Y.** One of the main stumbling blocks to affordable housing in both liberal and conservative districts throughout the U.S. is public opposition, often presenting itself as NIMBY, “Not in My Backyard.” We may like the idea of more affordable housing, but... “NOT here, NOT near my house or in my neighborhood.” Do you think that a film or a book like this is capable of influencing people at all on this issue? From your perspective, under what circumstances might people become more

open to having affordable housing in their neighborhoods? In what ways might you engage in this dialogue?

- (6) **The Word Cloud.** Before watching the film, what words were in your own word cloud when you heard the phrase “homeless person”? How do you believe those words affected how you’ve interacted in the past with homeless individuals you’ve encountered?

After watching the film (and perhaps reading the chapter), what words do you think might be different or challenged about your word cloud now? In what ways do you think the word clouds we carry in our heads about others impact us? Is there a way that you could see yourself cultivating or testing new words?

Do you think that people experiencing homelessness and people in the general public have similar word clouds about “homeless people?” If not, what do you think would be different about the clouds? If you think they might be the same, why? Was there any indication in the film or the chapter that would make you think so.

- (7) **Master Identity.** As the book chapter explains, homelessness is something of a “master identity” that trumps everything else about a person. Part of the problem when you encounter a person experiencing homelessness is that all you know about them is that they are “homeless.” There is no personal information or history to add to the picture.

How did it affect you or your perception when you learned a tiny bit more about some of the central figures at the end of the film: yearbook, the letter to mom, or even a little more information about a talent or a parent? Did it affect your perception or did the “master identity” rule? What do you believe it would be possible for you to do to push beyond in the master identity when you encounter someone experiencing homelessness?

Is there anything about your own life that you consider a “master identity” (in that once someone knows you are this, it deeply affects how they relate to you)? What labels do you use to describe yourself? What labels do you think others use to describe you? What about you do the labels reveal and what do the labels hide or blur?

- (8) **Race and Gender.** The statistics presented in the postscript of the film indicated that 60% of individuals experiencing homelessness are people of color. 38% of domestic violence victims experience homelessness at some point in their lives (and we can add here that 15% of shelter residents are typically victims of domestic violence).

How does this influence your sense of the problem of homelessness and what needs to be done?

- (9) **Labels and their Effects.** Gregg, the guy in the beginning of the film who stashed his backpack (and plays the piano) talked about how he didn’t want to “look homeless:”

“I was traveling through town, camping, and one day someone asked me if I was homeless... I never thought of it that way. When that question came, I thought ‘Wow.’ I guess that’s what I am now.”

“The words you think have real consequences for us.”

What did you notice (or do you imagine) was the cost of appearing homeless for each of the people you met? Reflecting on the main “characters” in the film, pick a few individuals to consider from the list below. How do you imagine each have been affected by the public perception of them in these scenes:

Gregg: hiding his backpack

Miriam: soaping her clothes

Jamie: walking in the neighborhood

Randy: panhandling on a city street

Ross and Cathy: first meeting in the dog park

Penelope: buying 1 coffee for 8 people at the coffee shop

After doing this, do you notice any common emotions that color the daily experiences of people without homes as they deal with the public?

- (10) **Criminalization of homelessness.** The after-material of the film shares certain facts, including that in “A growing number of city-wide laws in the U.S.—prohibiting loitering, loafing, panhandling, sleeping in public or in your car—are making homelessness a crime.” This certainly impacted the life of Randy (and many more folks if you read the chapter).

Are you aware of the laws in your area? Do you know what activities have been made illegal that affect people without homes? As a member of the public, who might feel protected as well by these laws, can you envision a policy about camping or parking or panhandling that you believe would be compassionate but also protective of the public good/safety?

- (11) **Invisibility and Super-visibility.** The free chapter “The Stigma of Being Homeless,” (<https://themaninthedogparkfilm.org/pdfs/The-Man-in-the-Dog-Park-Book-Chapter-3.pdf>) talks about how individuals without homes are often publicly perceived as either “invisible”—so that they feel unseen “like a piece of trash on the sidewalk”—or its opposite “super-visible”—a highlighted subject of public gaze and reaction. What evidence did you see of these two related but opposite public outlooks in the film, as they affected the people you met in the film?

- (12) **Our clouded perspectives.** After seeing the film, are there any of your own attitudes that you suspect might be “clouded?” How, within the boundaries of our safety, resources, and time, could you take a step to examine them? How do we help each other lift the “clouded perspective” we and others have of homelessness?

If you’ve read the chapter: (<https://themaninthedogparkfilm.org/pdfs/The-Man-in-the-Dog-Park-Book-Chapter-3.pdf>)

- (1) **Do I look homeless?** When a man walked up to Ross and handed him a \$5 bill, the man’s intentions were to do a kindness, and offer a gift. Why do you think it upset Ross so much? Is there a lesson here in how you might think about or approach a person experiencing homelessness? Does it matter what that person is doing or saying? Do you think there is a way of appropriately approaching someone who has not solicited anything from you?

(2) Perception management. In the film, invisible words lead people without homes to employ specific strategies to have some control over how they are seen by others (e.g., Gregg hides a backpack). Besides hiding their homelessness, what else did you notice individuals doing to manage or influence your perception of them? What specifically were they trying to project or downplay about themselves?

What for you was most surprising part of what you learned about how YOU are seen by people experiencing homelessness? Does that make you want to adjust how you seem or behave?

(3) Comparing Chapter and film. What incident or encounter from the film stood out in your mind? What incident or encounter recounted in the chapter stood out in your mind? Are they the same incident or different? Why do you think the particular incidents stood out in your mind? Is there a different impact in a visual scene with “characters” than in a narrated scene from a book?

(4) Give and Take. The story of the gifted painting (p 38-39) points out how giving and receiving affects our sense of relationships.

In your own life, who, in your perception, do you give to more than you receive from? Who gives to you more than you give to them? What relationships do you have in which, in your perception, the giving and receiving seems equal? In each case of giving and receiving, how do you think about the relationship? What does the equality or inequality of exchange mark about the relationship?

For someone experiencing homelessness, what chances do you imagine they have to “give” rather than to “receive?” Can you see any ways to engage with an individual experiencing homelessness in other ways than handing a dollar bill out a window to a person holding a sign?

If you've used other questions that worked well in discussion, please feel free to share the question with us, and we may add it to our list here.