

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on understanding homelessness. It criticizes approaches that ignore, distort or diminish the humanity of homeless people, or else, add little to our understanding of that humanity. In particular, it rejects what it calls “epidemiological” approaches, which deny the possibility of agency for homeless people, insofar as those approaches view the situation of those people largely as a “social fact”, to be explained in terms of causal variables or “risk factors” of different kinds. It evaluates the concept of homelessness pathways as a way of making sense of research findings on homelessness. It takes issue with realist approaches, insofar as these approaches purport to identify “underlying” mechanisms that “cause” homelessness, and discusses ethnographic approaches focused on “homeless culture”. Throughout, the paper emphasizes the need to understand homelessness as multidimensional and storied, and concludes with a plea for more research that looks at the whole life of a homeless person, rather than just at selected episodes of rooflessness.

KEY WORDS

Homelessness,

Pathway,

Realism,

Culturalism,

Multidimensionality

Introduction

Homelessness is multidimensional (Somerville 1992 – see also Watson and Austerberry 1986). Homelessness is not just a matter of lack of shelter or lack of abode, a lack of a roof over one’s head. It involves deprivation across a number of different dimensions – physiological (lack of bodily comfort or warmth), emotional (lack of love or joy), territorial (lack of privacy), ontological (lack of rootedness in the world, anomie) and spiritual (lack of hope, lack of purpose). It is important to recognize this multidimensional character, not least because homelessness cannot be remedied simply through the provision of bricks and mortar – all the other dimensions must be addressed,

such as creature comforts, satisfying relationships, space of one's own, ontological security and sense of worth. Otherwise, what we tend to find, as with women leaving homes where they have been abused, is that "housing is the problem – homelessness may well be a solution" (Tomas and Dittmar 1995, 494).

Homelessness is experienced by individuals (along any one of its dimensions) but it is also imagined, for example, by policy-makers, academics and the general public. Such imaginings (or ideological constructions) tend to take on a life of their own, for example, in terms of legislation (see, for instance, Somerville 1999).¹

In Husserl's terms, homelessness is an intentional object, albeit a complex one (see Harman 2008), but it is peculiar because it signifies an absence (namely, of home) rather than a presence. In this paper, I want to argue that it is experienced in terms of its multidimensionality and is also imaginatively constructed in terms of life histories by those who have experienced it. It would then follow from this that an account of such constructions could represent a new form of understanding of homelessness, potentially very different from that favoured by those who have never experienced homelessness.

This paper starts with an evaluation of two research projects that draw upon the life histories of homeless people. It then goes on to criticize what has been called the "new orthodoxy" that purports to explain homelessness in terms of a combination of so-called "structural" and "individual" factors. This is followed by a section that examines the literature on homelessness pathways, in terms of pathways into, through and out of homelessness. This section concludes that the concept of homelessness pathways is inherently fuzzy but potentially useful: evidence does suggest the existence of a certain number of patterns that occur in the life courses of some people, particularly in relation to paths out of homelessness. Next, the paper criticizes realist approaches to explaining homelessness, mainly on the grounds that they represent little more than a new interpretation of the "new orthodoxy". Close consideration of the work of McNaughton (2008), however, shows how original research that explicitly follows this approach struggles to remain within a realist paradigm. Finally, the paper looks at "cultural" approaches, and in particular, the work of Ravenhill (2008), arguing that these provide a richer account of homelessness, which is closer to the experience of homeless people themselves as well as of those who work with homeless people. The paper concludes with some suggestions for further research and policy change.

Homelessness as Part of Life

Tomas and Dittmar (1995) is one of the earliest examples of an approach that considers the life stories of homeless people. The authors state: "Our concern is to locate the origins and course of home, not only in the discrete and isolated events of a housing history, but also in the on-going story that is told about this history" (Tomas and Dittmar 1995, 498). The intention is, therefore, not only

to identify a chronology of events in the life of a particular individual but also to discover the story narrated by that individual about those events: “Meaning is only accessible in storied form” (Tomas and Dittmar 1995, 498). Within these stories, homelessness emerges as an event or, more commonly, an episode that is capable of conveying a variety of meanings (to the same individual in different circumstances, or to different individuals in similar circumstances or to different individuals in different circumstances).

Considering Tomas and Dittmar’s findings, it is interesting to see how far they support the idea of homelessness as multidimensional, particularly since the authors appear to have been unaware of the particular dimensions identified in Somerville (1992). It turns out that the homeless women in this study were most concerned with safety (the physiological dimension), which is clearly explained not only by reference to their life histories of being abused and assaulted, but also with their need for “four walls and a roof” (Tomas and Dittmar 1995, 504) (the physical dimension) and “a place of your own where you can be alone” (Tomas and Dittmar 1995, 504) (the territorial dimension – of privacy).²

Further, the homeless women appeared to lack ontological security:

There was no house, no set of streets, or even town, to which the women felt they could return and at least be recognised, even if they wanted to. The “situation” of home in these accounts was changeable and unstable. (Tomas and Dittmar 1995, 506) ... Home was abuse and relocation. Their “home” travelled with them and, like them, was now on the “outside” of any particular geographical location, or situation. (Tomas and Dittmar 1995, 508) There is also evidence from the women’s stories about lovelessness, joylessness and loneliness (the emotional dimension – Tomas and Dittmar 1995, 507; see also Robinson 2008a), which was associated, interestingly, with living in bed and breakfast accommodation. Their antipathy to such accommodation suggests that they regarded the emotional dimension of their homelessness as even more important than the physiological dimension. Finally, there is a suggestion of a spiritual dimension, in that the homeless women found it difficult to imagine living in a place of their own that would be safe, secure and affordable – in other words, they could not see how to attain such a way of life (Tomas and Dittmar 1995, 508). One could say that they lacked spirit or were “poor in spirit”, but this did not mean that they had lost hope entirely – there was evidence of a certain resilience in the face of extremely adverse conditions.

Even though Tomas and Dittmar made no use of the concept of multidimensionality in their research, therefore, the multidimensional character of homelessness is clearly revealed in their findings. Evidence of this multidimensionality can also be found in many other studies and will be considered throughout the paper – for example, Craig, Hodson, Woodward, and Richardson (1996), Lemos (2000), McNaughton (2008) and Ravenhill (2008). Unfortunately, however, I have not been able to find a single study that makes explicit use of the typology devised by Somerville (1992) or of any other multidimensional framework for understanding homelessness. Furthermore, there have been relatively few studies that focus on the life histories of homeless people, even though “a recovery of those stories [is] essential if studies of homelessness are not to continue to deny

homeless people an identity and agency beyond only their position as 'homeless'" (May 2000, 615). May (2000) provides a useful review of such studies and also a report on his own study. His review identified what seemed to be a common tendency for young homeless people, in particular, to follow a trajectory from leaving their (settled?) home through increasingly frequent and longer episodes of homelessness to sleeping rough. His study of single homeless men using night shelter and hostel accommodation, however, questioned the simplicity of this conclusion and aimed to provide a clearer account of the episodic character of homelessness. The study showed marked variations among his interviewees in how many episodes of homelessness they experienced, in the length of those episodes, and in how they experienced them.

On the basis of these findings, May identified three groups of homeless men: the long-term homeless (8), the episodically homeless (24) and the first-time homeless (11). The life stories of the long-term homeless showed no clear common pattern at all – no history of "drift" into homelessness and no clear movement through different types of accommodation – each of their life stories was unique.³

May did find, however, that the group shared two characteristics: "a history of long-term unemployment" and "all but one had serious and sometimes multiple vulnerabilities" such as heroin addiction and alcoholism (May 2000, 623).⁴

The episodically homeless were also all unemployed (in 76 out of a total of 77 homeless episodes), but nearly all of them lacked vulnerabilities that might be associated with homelessness. The life stories of the majority of them were dominated by the use of short-term private-rented accommodation, "interspersed by occasional and short-lived periods of homelessness" (May 2000, 625). Interestingly, "the most common reason offered for losing accommodation was simply the attempt to find improved living conditions" (May 2000, 626) – that is, to escape living conditions that they regarded as intolerable.⁵

The next most common reasons were directly related to lack of employment, e.g. losing a job, moving to try and find work elsewhere or rent arrears or relationship breakdown following job loss (May 2000, 629). This group was more likely to turn to friends and relatives in a crisis, and less likely to use hostels except following a period of sleeping rough, but hostel stays rarely led to more settled accommodation. May concluded that the main problem for this group was a lack of access to secure employment and secure accommodation.

The third group, the first-time homeless, was the most varied group of all. Most of them had serious vulnerabilities, e.g. drug addiction and mental health problems, but again, they were all currently unemployed. Loss of employment led to homelessness directly, or indirectly, when the extensive support from relatives ceased (May 2000, 634).

May (2000, 635) reached an important conclusion:

We have failed to recognise the full significance of unemployment in the homeless dynamic. Inexplicable in terms of individual vulnerabilities, the repeated experiences of homelessness that characterised these men's lives has been explained as the result of a position of multiple structural disadvantage relating to their experiences in relation to both the housing and labour markets and a legislative framework that denies more secure forms of housing to most poorer single people.⁶

One would expect that a focus on life stories would involve an examination of the whole person but in fact, May restricted his interviews to identifying what he calls "homelessness careers" or "accommodation biographies", as if it were possible to separate out the physical dimension from all the other dimensions of homelessness. To be fair, however, there is an important footnote to the paper, in which he recognizes, but only after conducting his main interviews, that homelessness does have a multidimensional character. The key message here, and running throughout his paper, relates to the importance of employment in the lives of adult males in particular, with the "work ethic" largely determining their ontological security and possibly also their spiritual well-being.

These two studies (May 2000; Tomas and Dittmar 1995) show, first, that homelessness is multidimensional; and second, the insights a life history approach can offer into homelessness. At the same time, they suggest the limitations both of studies that do not consider people's current circumstances in the light of their previous histories and of studies that focus only on the physical dimension of homelessness.

The "New Orthodoxy" of Homelessness Explanation.

Historically, there have been three main types of popular explanation of homelessness (with the latter being typically understood in terms of visible street homelessness), which are nicely summarized by Gowan (2010) as "sin talk", "sick talk" and "system talk".⁷

Up until the 1960s, "sin talk" predominated, in that homeless people were seen largely as culpable for their own situation, due, for example, to their drinking, drug-taking and/or general recklessness and irresponsibility. From the 1960s to the 1980s, "system talk" became more pronounced, in which the plight of homeless people was attributed to so-called "structural factors" such as lack of jobs that paid a living wage and lack of decent, affordable, accessible housing. Finally, from the 1980s, more or less up to the present day, "sick talk" has become more in evidence, where homeless people are seen, for example, as having mental health problems, personality disorders, incapacities and "vulnerabilities" of various kinds.

In academia, beginning in the 1980s (Brandon et al. 1980), it has been said that a "new orthodoxy" (May 2000, 613; Pleace 2000) emerged, in which:

homelessness is explained with reference to the manner in which changing structural conditions impact most severely upon particular groups, either because of a simple position of structural disadvantage or (more usually) because of some further vulnerability that renders a person especially ill equipped to cope with those changes (May 2000, 613–614).

In other words, homelessness is to be explained in terms of a specific combination of structural factors (e.g. relating to the labour market or the housing system – May 2000) and individual vulnerabilities (see, e.g. the list of risk factors in Fitzpatrick, Kemp, and Klinker 2000, 28). “Structural” factors create the conditions within which homelessness occurs, and then, “individual” factors determine the likelihood of becoming homeless in those conditions (Fitzpatrick, Kemp, and Klinker 2000; Pleace 2000). Those experiencing these factors are said to be “at heightened risk” (Jones and Pleace 2010, 26) of homelessness: “The more someone exhibits individual risk factors and/or is exposed to structural risks, the greater the risk that they will become homeless” (Jones and Pleace 2010, 27). “Poverty” is seen as an almost universal risk factor, as “people who are not poor can usually avoid homelessness even if they experience personal crises” (Fitzpatrick, Kemp, and Klinker 2000, 28).

There are four main problems with the “new orthodoxy”. First, none of the factors, whether structural or individual, is clearly specified. Fitzpatrick, Kemp, and Klinker (2000, 24) recognize that: “there is actually a dearth of research that rigorously examines the relationship between social and economic processes and patterns of homelessness in Britain”, but arguably, the main problem is that the relationship itself is not well understood in the first place. Fitzpatrick (2005, 5) points out that poor parenting or marriage breakdown, for example, might plausibly contribute to homelessness but could be either “structural” or “individual” or both or neither. Second, homelessness itself is taken as a given “social fact” (Durkheim 1982); that is, a truth about social relations that can be measured or quantified independently out of our experiences of those relations, and a “housing fact” that is, understood one-dimensionally as a physical condition only. Third, the new orthodoxy operates with an inappropriate understanding of causation, which I elaborate on further below. Fourth, this orthodoxy is not actually new at all, because it has long been held that homelessness is “caused” by a failure of relationship between “individual” and “society”. Bahr (1973, 17), for example, wrote: “homelessness is a condition of detachment from society characterised by the absence or attenuation of the affiliative bonds that link settled persons to a network of interconnected social structures”. These “affiliative bonds” could be “individual” or “structural” – they are primarily relational – and this idea also hints at a multidimensional understanding of homelessness (e.g. emotional, ontological and spiritual).⁸

On the second of these three problems, the facticity (Sartre 1993) of homelessness seems to have grown stronger over the years,⁹ as governments have taken it upon themselves to monopolize the definition of homelessness, and have increasingly targeted for interventions into those populations whom they choose to label as “homeless” (or “socially excluded” or “multiply excluded” or suffering from “deep exclusion”, etc.). The main problem with all of this discourse is that it is disconnected from the reality of human experience: it discounts that experience or attempts to reduce it to a single dimension (lack of housing) and then produces statistical associations that do not seem to reflect any real social relations.¹⁰

In truth, as Harman (2008, 347) states, “Contact with reality begins when we cease to reduce a thing to its properties or to its effect on other things”.

The new orthodoxy is, I think, an instance of an epidemiological approach to research – that is, an approach that attempts to identify a relationship between a set of independent variables (including

“structural” and “individual” factors, typically known as “risk” factors) and a dependent variable (in this case, homelessness).¹¹

This approach can work, however, only if there is general agreement on the specification of these variables, and this is not the case with homelessness. It is not even clear whether it is possible in all cases to identify (without general agreement!) variables that are independent of homelessness. It is of course possible to generalize to a certain extent – for example, if you do not pay your rent, you are at risk of being evicted and, therefore, becoming homeless¹² – but this says nothing about the reasons why you did not pay your rent, which could equate to a wide variety of independent variables. Which of these independent variables are associated with your homelessness, and in what configuration they appear, will depend on your particular life history?

In order to understand homelessness, therefore, it is first necessary to take account of the biographies of homeless people. May (2000), for example, came to see that lack of employment was a key factor in the lives of homeless men by investigating their life histories, but the fact of unemployment in itself tells us little about how homelessness is “caused”: what is important is how that unemployment is perceived by the homeless men themselves and how exactly the experience of unemployment fits into their own life history. It may turn out that each individual experiences unemployment in a way that is unique to them, with the consequence that it relates to their homelessness in a way that is also unique. This does not, however, rule out the possibility that, as we learn more about the life stories of different homeless people, certain patterns or common themes may emerge. What kinds of patterns or themes these might be is discussed in the next section of this paper.

Homelessness Pathways

Since the 1980s, a number of scholars have expressed the view that homelessness is to be understood primarily as an event or sequence of events or an episode or episodes that occur(s) at a point in a pathway that someone follows through the housing system (e.g. “Homelessness can be seen as an episode or episodes in a person’s housing pathway” – Clapham 2003, 123). A homelessness pathway has been defined more specifically as “the route of an individual or household into homelessness, their experience of homelessness and their route out of homelessness into secure housing” (Anderson and Tulloch 2000, 11). A homelessness pathway is, therefore, part of a housing pathway (defined as “patterns of interaction (practices) concerning house and home, over time and space” – Clapham 2002, 6313), which is itself part of a pathway through life – the life story of an individual or household.¹⁴

For Anderson and Tulloch (2000), the purpose of a “pathways” approach is to see “whether discrete pathways through homelessness can be identified in relation to key characteristics such as gender, age, race, household type and life experience” (Anderson 2001, 1). Presumably, if such typical pathways can be identified, it becomes possible to focus the provision of homelessness services more effectively to meet the needs of the different groups involved.

Based on a review of the relevant literature, Anderson and Tulloch (2000) concluded that age group was the key characteristic affecting the different pathways through homelessness and gender was the second most important variable.¹⁵

They identified three types of pathway into homelessness differentiated by the age at which homelessness began: youth pathways (15–24 years), adult pathways (20–50 years) and later life pathways (50 + years). Each type of pathway was associated with a specific set of “risk factors”: youth pathways with being in local authority care, suffering violence and abuse, family dissolution and reconstitution, moving home frequently as a child and having problems at school and/or being excluded; adult pathways with changes in family size, relationship breakdown (with and without violence) and mortgage and rent arrears; and later life pathways with retirement or redundancy, loss of parents on whom one depended, widowhood, marital breakdown and mental illness (see Crane 1998, 1999).

Anderson and Tulloch (2000) described pathways through homelessness but their definition would appear to suggest the possibility of a distinction between pathways into homelessness pathways out of homelessness, and pathways of “continued homelessness” (Mayock, Corr, and O’Sullivan 2008). In practice, this distinction seems to arise mainly because of the different focus of different studies; for example, whether they are most concerned to find out how homeless people got to where they are, or how they can return to mainstream living, or how they manage to adapt to a life on the street or, more broadly, how homelessness features within the transition that some young people make from childhood to adulthood (see, e.g. Jones 1993, 1995). The identification of a particular typology of pathways may, therefore, to some extent, reflect the interests of the researchers involved. If we accept the multidimensionality of homelessness, however, it would seem to make sense to adopt the widest possible interpretation of a pathway as the life history of a particular individual, and for young people, this would involve the period of transition from child to adult, however this is understood. This does not rule out the possibility that different life histories will reveal a number of common themes.

Pathways into Homelessness

Unfortunately, whatever be the interests of the researchers, many of these pathways seem to be insufficiently specified. To take just one example from the above lists, namely, “being in local authority care”, the identification of this as a “risk factor” for youth homelessness does not tell us what it is about being in local authority care that might make a young person vulnerable to becoming homeless later on. Much will depend upon why they were taken into care as a child, how old they were at the time, how long they spent in care, what the quality of care was like, whether they continue to be in touch with either of their parents or close relatives, what support those parents or relatives can and do provide, how well they get on with them and so on. As a risk factor, it tells us very little that is meaningful, but only points to the need for further investigation (see Ravenhill 2008, 11616 – and similar comments could be made in relation to factors such as “structural poverty”, “relationship breakdown”, frequent moving, mental illness, incarceration, substance misuse, school non-attendance and so on). On the other hand, a risk factor such as mortgage arrears is inadequate in a different way: its significance is all too clear (if you do not keep up with your mortgage repayments, you will lose your home) but it tells us nothing about the

reasons for the arrears (e.g. loss of employment, illness, relationship breakdown – these reasons then themselves point towards the need for further investigation such as into reasons for inability to find another job, what sort of illness and so on).

All of this suggests that the pathways into homelessness approach, at least, looks like a new version of the risk factor or epidemiological approach. Homelessness continues to be understood as a one-dimensional dependent variable, but it is now seen to be age-variant or life-course variant (or gender-variant or location-variant). The literature is replete with statistics that have little value. Take, for example, Fitzpatrick, Kemp, and Klinker (2000) statement that lone parents in the European Union have 17 times greater risk of homelessness than couples. Since homelessness is strongly associated with a relationship breakdown pathway, which results in lone parenthood, this is hardly surprising.

Clapham (2003), however, argues that these flaws arise not from the adoption of a pathways approach in itself, but from the “relatively untheorised” character of its application. He criticizes Fitzpatrick, in particular, for not relating her individual biographies to “the wider structural factors involved” (Clapham 2003, 121) (this could be contrasted, e.g. with May 2000, discussed above, who related his individual biographies to structural unemployment). Clapham (2003, 122) also hints at the importance of dimensions of home and homelessness other than the physical – for example, ontological, territorial and spiritual – that are absent from Fitzpatrick’s (1999) framework. He argues that, in analysing homeless people’s life stories, more attention needs to be paid to the discourses that influence and shape those stories, for example, concerning family roles and substance misuse (where discourses of parents and children can come into conflict), and public policy discourses; for example, expectations concerning employment and training and what counts as appropriate housing and welfare provision.

Actually, as already suggested, the main problem with studies, such as Fitzpatrick (1999) and Anderson and Tulloch (2000), seems to lie not so much with their undertheorizing of pathways through homelessness (although this is certainly an important concern) as with their conceptualization of homelessness itself. If they were really interested in understanding the dynamics of homelessness, as they claim to be (see, e.g. Anderson and Christian 2003), they would first have looked for time-dependent variables, such as duration and frequency of homelessness episodes, and then, investigated the significance of the variations they found (not just noting, as Anderson and Christian 2003, 114, do, that for most homeless people the experience of homelessness is relatively short, while for a small proportion, it lasts for years). Anderson and Christian (2003) do not even mention the work of May (2000), whose typology of pathways is based entirely on such considerations. If a pathway’s approach to homelessness is distinguished mainly by its focus on the episodic character of homelessness, it seems reasonable to expect that time would be the key analytical category, and this is what May found. It is also the case, however, that May’s typology (of long-term homelessness, episodic homelessness and first-time homelessness) has more to do with pathways of continued homelessness rather than with pathways into and out of homelessness, with unemployment acting as a key factor that seemingly “ensnares” people in a homeless condition.

A rather different approach to homelessness pathways is taken in a study by Martijn and Sharpe (2006). Noting the high frequency of trauma experience among homeless people, they hypothesize

that “the experience of trauma will be a significant contributory factor in the pathway to homelessness for a large proportion of young people” (Martijn and Sharpe 2006, 2). They define trauma in clinical terms as what is measured by Criterion A of the post-traumatic stress disorder diagnostic criteria in DSM-IV (a standard questionnaire used in clinical trials), namely:

The person has been exposed to a traumatic event in which both of the following were present: (1) the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, (2) the person’s response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror. (American Psychiatric Association 2000)¹⁷

Other factors whose presence they looked for were psychological disorders, drug and alcohol problems, family problems and involvement in crime. If any of these factors occurred prior to the first episode of homelessness, it was deemed to be a possible contributor to homelessness. The data relating to all such possible contributors were then investigated to see if they could be grouped into a meaningful set of pathways leading to homelessness. By these means, five different pathways were identified, involving different combinations of four precipitant factors for homelessness, with the four factors being all those originally selected except for crime, as there was only one case in which crime occurred prior to homelessness (Martijn and Sharpe 2006, 4).

This is an interesting study because it goes about as far as it is possible to go in terms of in-depth interviewing (approximately three hours each) and precision of definition of what they call “dimensions” in the “timeline” (Martijn and Sharpe 2006, 3) of the interviewees’ life stories. Having said that the study has the feel of a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that the researchers assessed for their five precipitant factors and found plenty of evidence for all of them – except involvement in crime (and this last one is odd because we know from many other studies that committing crime commonly predates first-time homelessness). It seems that other factors could have been selected, such as poor school attendance, which could also be precipitant factors. What the study does not tell us is what the actual pathways were, in terms of the precise sequence of events. The researchers seem to think it sufficient to identify a correlation between a specific combination of factors and a first onset of homelessness without actually tracing how the former might have led to the latter.

This is, therefore, just another, if more sophisticated, example of the risk factor approach criticized earlier. The authors claim to have identified pathways into homelessness but these pathways seem to have only a beginning and an end – we do not know what happens in between, except insofar as this is recorded in the histories of individual “cases” (one is reported for each of the five pathways). The study highlights the importance of early trauma for later psychological problems, including drug and alcohol disorders, but this is already well known and does not tell us how this leads to homelessness (though again, we know something about this from other studies, e.g. drug use leading to conflict with parents). Lying behind the authors’ arguments is an assumption that:

If one can identify complex subsidiary pathways, one may be able to isolate the precipitant factor or cluster of factors that have led to homelessness. This would help explain how and why youth first become homeless. In most cases it is more accurate to identify a pathway, rather than one single factor, that has direct influence on the adolescent becoming homeless. (Martijn and Sharpe 2006, 9) The only problem with this is that a pathway is not the same as a cluster of factors, and what we are presented with here is clusters of factors, not pathways. Knowing the clusters of factors that relate

to the occurrence of homelessness does not tell us how those factors figure in a pathway that leads to homelessness.

Whilst on the topic of trauma, it may be worth mentioning the systematic review of homelessness and complex trauma by Maguire, Johnson, Vostanis, Keats, and Remington (2009).¹⁸

The authors use the term “chronic homelessness”, which they do not define, but appears to mean “entrenched or repeat homelessness” (Maguire, Johnson, Vostanis, Keats, and Remington 2009, 4); that is, either long-term homelessness or multiple episodes of homelessness, thus conflating two of May’s (2000) categories. It is estimated that up to 70% of homeless people have personality disorders, which are often produced by traumatic childhood and adolescent experiences (compare a range of 58–100% in studies conducted across Western Europe – Philippot, Lecocq, Sempoux, Nachtergaeel, and Galand 2007). The review found “strong and consistent evidence supporting an association between homelessness and complex trauma” and “a complex relationship between traumatic experience, mental health issues, behavioural factors and homeless status” (Maguire, Johnson, Vostanis, Keats, and Remington 2009, 5).

Such reviews do not appear to contribute anything of value other than reminding us of our ignorance. The authors simply do not say what the association between homelessness and complex trauma might be. In their own terms, they neither present “aetiology” of homelessness, nor could they do so because they do not define homelessness itself. They are deliberately atheoretical and completely ignore pathway’s approaches and, indeed, all other approaches that do not conceive the research question in terms of statistical associations between independent and dependent variables.

Consider, however, how one might establish a relationship between complex trauma and homelessness. All that has to be done is to select a random sample from the general population and compare it with a random sample from the population of homeless people (whoever they might be). Using the agreed diagnostic questionnaire, one could then find the proportions of each sample who have experienced sustained exposure to traumatic events. Of course, one would find that the proportion of the homeless sample presenting with traumatic experience is much higher than in the general sample. So, one would then be able to conclude that the relationship between complex trauma and homelessness is statistically significant. I suggest, however, that this would tell us little or nothing of value because we would be none the wiser about how one actually leads to the other. And yet, this is how much, if not most, of homelessness research is framed. This is what I mean by facticity.¹⁹

Pathways Out of Homelessness

For understanding homelessness outcomes, Clapham (2003, 126) emphasizes that it is necessary to take a long perspective. There may be a number of “key points” or “junctions” where the situation changes, and a new direction is followed. These turning points make pathways through and out of homelessness complex and sometimes difficult to follow. All studies, however, seem to suggest that the longer someone remains homeless, the more difficult it is for them to exit homelessness, and the more likely they are to access forms of institutional accommodation such as hostels.

May’s (2000) typology of pathways of continued homelessness has already been mentioned, but this does not seem to have been replicated in subsequent studies. Anderson and Tulloch (2000) cite a

range of studies showing how young men and women follow different pathways out of homelessness; for example, young women are less likely than men to sleep rough, and more likely to be accepted as statutorily homeless because of being accompanied by children (see also Fitzpatrick, Kemp, and Klinker 2000, 27), and to leave home because of domestic violence and so on (see also Wong and Piliavin 1997 – a longitudinal study showing that women, at least with children, were likely to exit homelessness more quickly than men). In general, pathways out of homelessness seemed to be directly into independent accommodation, with or without the help of housing agencies, or through “resettlement” by homelessness agencies directly into permanent supported housing or indirectly via temporary supported housing.

Anderson and Tulloch (2000) make the point that longitudinal studies can be beneficial for improving our understanding of pathways out of homelessness. Homeless people can be interviewed at the time they become homeless and then reinterviewed at later dates to gauge the changes that might have occurred. Such studies have been carried out in the USA, but it is not clear what pathways they have identified. Piliavin, Sosin, Westerfelt, and Matsueda (1993) established that individual deficits were not as significant as previously thought in either determining entry into homelessness, length of time spent homeless, or success in exiting homelessness, while Piliavin, Entner-Wright, Mare, and Westerfelt (1996), following Sosin, Piliavin, and Westerfelt (1990), distinguished between “dependent” and “independent” exits from homelessness (see below). Wong, Culhane, and Kuhn (1997, 459) study of 28,000 users of family shelters in New York appears to have shown merely that “subsidized housing is linked with a substantially lower rate of readmission to the Family Shelter System”.

In general, the longitudinal studies in the USA show a wide prevalence of episodic homelessness but the majority of those becoming homeless exit it relatively quickly, and return to it only when they fail to sustain affordable accommodation. In contrast, in the UK, Craig, Hodson, Woodward, and Richardson (1996) followed up their sample of homeless young people in London after a year and found that only just over a third of the ones they could find had achieved stable housing (defined as independent or shared accommodation, long-stay hostel or returned to parental home). Similarly, follow-up research by Stockley, Canter, and Bishopp (1993, 17) on homeless young people in Surrey, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight suggested that stable housing could take a long time to secure (perhaps, 18 months or more – Dane 1998), and probably, only after “a period of accommodation instability making use of more marginal types of accommodation”.

Martijn and Sharpe (2006) reinterviewed young people in each of their five pathways and identified five trajectories they followed since becoming homeless. Those who had already developed psychological or drug or alcohol problems (meaning the vast majority of them) all developed further problems after becoming homeless; particularly, involvement in crime. The rest remained stable (these had experienced trauma or family problems). This confirms that, at least initially, young people tend to follow a downward trajectory on becoming homeless, unless they are already relatively free from psychological and drug and alcohol problems. This finding fits well with May’s (2000) distinction between long-term and episodic homelessness, insofar as the former group all had serious vulnerabilities, which entrenched them in homelessness, whereas the latter did not (perhaps, because they were more resilient), and were, therefore, able to move out of homelessness (though they might fall back into homelessness at a later date). As Martijn and Sharpe (2006, 10) point out, it also has important implications for the evaluation of homelessness services, in that the

emphasis needs to be on preventing problems from getting worse rather than assuming, for example, that the solution lies simply in providing housing or employment.²⁰

Perhaps, the most in-depth longitudinal studies to date of pathways through and out of homelessness have been by Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan (2008) and McNaughton (2008) (but see also Crane, Warnes, and Coward 2011). Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan (2008) were able to identify three types of pathway taken by young homeless people (aged 12–22 years, resident in Dublin), which they called independent exits from homelessness, dependent exits from homelessness and continued homelessness. Most independent exits from homelessness involved a return to the parental home (only one other case is cited, involving a move into private rented accommodation), although this did not rule out the possibility of housing instability in the future. Dependent exits involved moves into transitional/supported housing or care settings (residential or foster care) with assistance from statutory or voluntary services. Members of this group were more likely to return to homelessness than those making independent exits. "Continued homelessness" involved rapid movement between multiple living situations, mostly including episodes of rough sleeping and stays in unstable accommodation (e.g. hostels and prison), with prolonged periods of rooflessness in some cases. This could, therefore, mean entrenched or repeated homelessness, as mentioned above.

What most characterizes this pathway is what the authors call "chronic housing instability" (Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan 2008, 13), which is related to three factors: substance misuse and drug dependence, incarceration and temporary exits from homelessness. On the basis of these pathways, the authors were able to identify facilitators and barriers to exiting homelessness. Facilitators included appropriate housing, family and practical support, new social relationships including with a key worker, drug treatment and education/training. Barriers to exiting homelessness included, apart from the lack of these facilitators, entering adult hostels from the age of 18, lack of job opportunities, mental health problems and problems arising from the experience of homelessness itself; that is, adaptation to life on the streets (Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan 2008, 15, 147).

Interestingly, Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan (2008) did not identify long-term and episodic homelessness as distinct pathways, although some people experienced longer episodes of homelessness than others and some became homeless more frequently than others. The more one considers the detail of Mayock et al's findings, however, the more difficult it is to understand the basis of their pathways typology. For example, the pathway from leaving the parental home to returning to it seems distinct in itself. Studies of so-called "runaway youths" (Thompson, Safyer, and Pollio 2001) have established that they leave home due to arguments and conflict at home [due to "problem behaviour", "wrong crowd", etc – Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan 2008, 67–68]; have experiences of emotional or physical abuse; seek to escape from parental problems (i.e. alcohol or drug dependency, mental health issues) or have chronic school-related difficulties. (Malloch and Burgess 2011, 62; see also references cited in Fitzpatrick, Kemp, and Klinker 2000, 34–35)

We know that: a high proportion of young people from stepfamily backgrounds and the care system run away; runaways are at serious risk of harm, although this risk may be less than if they stayed at home (Malloch and Burgess 2011, 69); and that approximately half of sentenced prisoners ran away from home as a child (Prison Reform Trust, 2005, 16).²¹

Those who return home are more likely to have avoided committing crime, remained in touch with their families, and had fewer problems with school, the criminal justice system or drug use (Thompson, Safyer, and Pollio 2001, cited in Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan 2008, 67). Where problem behaviour, such as drug use, was a factor in their becoming homeless, their return home was conditional on desistance from that behaviour (Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan 2008, 68–69). Similarly, where parental problems such as alcoholism were related to their leaving home, their parent's quitting drinking was instrumental in facilitating their return home (Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan 2008, 72). Following the return home, there almost always occurred a "settling in" period, in which both the young person and their parents adjusted to the situation. This adjustment, however, was greater for the young person because of their need to find new social networks to replace those they had experienced on the streets (which were often drug-related) (Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan 2008, 73) or in hostels (Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan 2008, 77). Returning home is not always appropriate, for example, in the case of an abusive parent (Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan 2008, 78). The respondent who moved into a private tenancy was clearly in an extremely fragile housing situation: a heroin user, feeling suicidal, involved in criminal activity, lacking education or training, living in poor conditions, behind with his rent, a child in foster care, at odds with his landlord (Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan 2008, 79–82) – this looks like a different pathway, and a multidimensional interpretation of homelessness would not count him as having exited homelessness at all.²²

This discussion highlights, I think, the general fuzziness of the pathways concept. In the case of youth homelessness, for example, it is not tied to any particular theory about the transition from childhood to adulthood. It depends on being able to identify common themes in the life stories of different individuals, but it is possible that different researchers will identify quite different themes.²³

Nevertheless, I would venture to suggest that most scholars would agree that there is a certain pattern in the stories mentioned in the last paragraph about young people running away from home and returning to that home later on. Such patterns can be repeated and then new pathways (which may or may not involve homelessness) can be followed as the young person becomes an adult.

When one considers the young people in Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan (2008) dependent exit pathway, they do not seem to be very different from those just described in the independent exit pathway. What distinguishes them as a group is their unwillingness to return to the parental home, "due primarily to the presence and persistence of problems that had driven them out in the first place" (Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan 2008, 112). Related to this, they "had limited or no support from their families in exiting homelessness, leaving them dependent on social workers, residential care staff and their key workers for day-to-day help and support" (Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan 2008, 112). The degree and quality of support they received was variable, and many struggled to adjust to their new supported living situations, but they had all moved away from life on the streets and their street or drug-using friends, and most of them now participated in education or training and many aspired to fully independent living and getting a job.

This pathway, therefore, does look different from that of returning to the parental home, and suggests that mainstream institutions can, to a certain extent, substitute for family in exiting from homelessness. However, the discussion does not fully consider that living in supported/transitional housing or a care setting cannot be equated with independent living and, as such, may not represent

a permanent exit from homelessness. Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan (2008, 156) recognize this later on, suggesting that service-intensive interventions such as transitional housing may actually be a form of "therapeutic incarceration" (Gerstel, Bogard, McConnell, and Schwartz 1996), and quoting approvingly from Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin (2007, 87) in relation to hostel-type accommodation: "Learning how to dwell in an institution does not facilitate independent living; conversely, it might entail opposite results: institutionalisation, secondary adaptation and stigmatisation".²⁴

Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan's (2008) third pathway (continued homelessness) is the most complex. On the other hand, the young people in this pathway differ from those in the other two pathways only "in terms of the number of accommodation types they accessed and in the frequency of their movement between living places" (Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan 2008, 120). Many also reported temporary exits from homelessness into the family home, a sibling's home or the private rented sector, which all proved unsustainable. Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan (2008) describe a cycle of use of short-term hostels and immersion in the homeless culture. They also identify the importance of substance misuse and drug dependence in a highly localized homeless culture, a cycle of movement through homelessness and incarceration, and why temporary exits were not sustained. If there is a common theme here at all, it is one of disengagement with mainstream culture and acculturation to homeless culture – this will be discussed further below. It then, only remains to provide an account of a pathway out of such entrenched homelessness.

Studies that emphasize the cultural dimension of pathways through homelessness, that is, the processes by which people enter into, adapt to and leave a "homeless culture", are examined in a later section of this paper. To conclude this section, it may be said that the concept of homelessness pathways has potential, if used cautiously and with an eye to theory development. Most of the relevant research has focused on young homeless people, and it is likely that pathways for other age groups are substantially different. Most of the research has also focused on homelessness in a one-dimensional sense, but has often found it necessary to consider other dimensions as well. The most useful research seems to be that which has adopted a biographical or life history interview approach, particularly if combined with a longitudinal framework.

The literature describes pathways into homelessness and pathways through and possibly out of homelessness. The analysis of pathways into homelessness has numerous weaknesses and the nature of the pathways remains little understood. In contrast, the analysis of pathways out of homelessness identifies some relatively clear common themes, for example, return to parental home, and long-term trajectories through transitional housing into independent living or into entrenched homelessness or into chaotic mobility. In a number of respects, however, it is incomplete, for example, concerning whether a given exit is permanent or only temporary, or on how a permanent exit is made from entrenched homelessness. Beyond all of this is an overarching grand theme or leitmotif about fall and redemption, paradise lost and regained, which cannot easily be captured in terms of the pathway's idea.²⁵

Realist Approaches to Homelessness

Fitzpatrick (2005) takes the view that the problems in explaining homelessness up to now derive from inadequate conceptualization of its causation. She criticizes what she calls "positivist" explanations, which interpret causation in terms of high levels of correlation between certain factors and homelessness. She further argues that a "risk factor" approach is unsatisfactory because it does

not explain why these factors might increase the risk of homelessness. She follows a pathways approach, in that she asserts that what is important in understanding and explaining homelessness is the “recurring pattern of life events and circumstances implicated in ‘pathways’ into homelessness” (Fitzpatrick 2005, 6), a pattern that varies from one person to another. She holds that these patterns can be explained in terms of realist social theory. In this section of the paper, however, I argue that realism, as expounded by Fitzpatrick, adds nothing to our understanding of how people enter, exit or remain in homelessness (for more general critiques of critical realism, see Gunn 1989, 109–11; Käpylä and Mikkola 2010; Somerville 2012).

Central to Fitzpatrick’s realist explanation of homelessness is the claim that: “Homelessness ... is not a cultural phenomenon, but rather a signifier of objective material and social conditions” (Fitzpatrick 2005, 12). Here “structure” is contrasted with “culture”, “objective” with “subjective” and “material” or “real” with “ideal”. The “causes” of homelessness are then identified mainly as “structures” of different kinds (economic, housing and patriarchal/interpersonal) plus “individual attributes” (basically, factors that reduce personal resilience). She goes on briefly to explore how these different factors might be related in different contexts (compare Ravenhill’s 2008, concept of an accumulation of triggers, considered below). She cites, in particular, the example of a link between poverty, domestic violence and homelessness.

First of all, Fitzpatrick’s conceptualization of homelessness is one-dimensional, in that, by excluding the interpretation of homelessness as a “cultural phenomenon”, it excludes most of the non-physical dimensions of homelessness. Granted, homelessness is “real”, in the sense of being a material condition that emerges within a range of distinct and complex pathways. It exists whether or not it is experienced as such and whether or not people agree on what actually counts as homelessness. Nevertheless, it also exists in the dimensions already characterized in this paper. It is difficult to see how a realist would be able to identify a “homeless culture”, but that does not prevent the reality of homelessness from being cultural as well as material.

Second, by reinterpreting “risk factors” as “causes”, it seems that Fitzpatrick is simply translating the “new orthodoxy” into a new language, without making any substantive changes to the sense of it. The “causes” of homelessness are the same, namely, a combination of “structural” and “individual” factors. Some new factors are identified, e.g. “patriarchal and interpersonal structures” (Fitzpatrick 2005, 13), but these are no better specified than before. She notes, for example, that poverty seems to be universally implicated in the causation of homelessness, not just directly through inability to afford housing but indirectly “through an array of necessary (‘internal’) and contingent (‘external’) relationships”, with the feedback loops involved being interpreted as increasing the “weight of the weighted possibility” of homelessness among certain poor people (Fitzpatrick 2005, 14). However, given the lack of specification of these feedback loops or of the weights of the different causal mechanisms involved (apart from poverty, perhaps), this analysis does not seem to say much more than that poverty is the primary risk factor for homelessness, while other factors are secondary.

Just to emphasize this point, although reference is made to “causal mechanisms”, whose operation might result in homelessness, no account is given of what these mechanisms might be or of how they might work. No connection is made between the identification of patterns of life events and the operation of these causal mechanisms. Indeed, no actual pattern of life events is even mentioned. One could take, for example, the pattern discussed above concerning young people leaving and

returning to their parental home and ask what a realist analysis might add to our understanding of that pattern. It could be that young people from poorer families are more likely to follow this pattern, because they are likely to have fewer resources to find a home of their own. If so, realists could then point to the importance of economic structures here, but this would not explain anything about the pattern itself. A realist approach simply does not engage with the “reality” of the homelessness pathway.²⁶

Finally, the realist concept of causation or causality is problematic. It seems not to be understood by realists that life stories exhibit a narrative structure that is categorically different from the social and spatial structures that realists have in mind. The pathways that homeless people relate in their narratives do not seem to be of the same kind as the pathways that realists seek to identify. Narratives need to be understood as a form of knowledge, structured by plots, themes and characters, which is different in nature from the “rigour” or “robustness” sought by the “new orthodoxy”. Narratives are, indeed, “cultural”, and, therefore, homelessness narratives can be described as a “cultural phenomenon”. This does not make the homelessness described in these narratives any less real – on the contrary, the reality of the homelessness experience is often heightened in homeless people’s life stories.²⁷

McNaughton (2008) represents the only major study of homelessness that professes to follow a realist approach. Based on a longitudinal study of the experiences of 28 people over the course of a year, she developed a new theory of homelessness, using key concepts of capital, edgework, trauma and integrative and divestment passages. She explained her respondents’ homelessness largely in terms of their lack of resources or capital (social, economic and human) and the edgework they engaged in or experienced in response to this lack, with this edgework then tending to deplete the few resources they had.

The concept of edgework, which refers to risky behaviours or experiences, such as drug use or abusive relationships, adds something to our understanding. It may seem unreasonable for people who are already low in resources to follow courses of action that deplete those resources further, but such actions may make sense as a form of “thin rationality” (Somerville and Bengtsson 2002). As McNaughton (2008, 72) puts it: “people engage in edgework as a means to individually find some self-actualisation or control in the context of an increasingly disenchanting, liberal individualised modern society; or to escape the isolation or disaffection they feel by being marginalised and ‘poor’ within the structural conditions of inequality and poverty that exists”.²⁸

For McNaughton, however, people do not simply choose whether or not to engage in risky behaviours. Lack of capital resources, plus experience of trauma, not only shapes the choices that are available to certain individuals but also to some extent makes those individuals who they are, how they feel about themselves and how they relate to others. For some of these individuals, depression, for example, would be an understandable and indeed, reasonable response to what they might perceive as the hopelessness of their situation. On this basis, McNaughton develops a new theory of human agency, in terms of biographical narrative structures:

Agency does not refer to actual actions or outcomes, but to the internal processes, independent of but embedded in structures, that individuals subjectively experience ... agency does not refer to the actual “doing”, but the internal narratives that people have of their lives that affects how they act, and are embedded in the course their life has and will take ... Exercising “agency” relates to each

individual's ability to construct a narrative (and narratable) identity – a conceptualisation of who they are, over time. (McNaughton 2008, 46–7)

Here, agency is understood clearly, not in terms of conscious action, but in terms of individuals' own life histories. It follows that homelessness has to be explained in terms of how it figures within the plot of each individual's life story. This already seems a long way from Fitzpatrick's (2005) concepts of structure and causation.

McNaughton found two directions of pathways through homelessness. The first she called "spirals of divestment passages" (McNaughton 2008, 91), where some edgework (e.g. use of heroin) enabled individuals to control the trauma they had experienced while, at the same time, it increased the risk of further trauma, as a result of which the status and resources of individuals followed a downward path, ending in overdoses, fatal accidents or attempted suicide. Most of the homeless people in her research followed such a path after they became homeless, e.g. losing their jobs, drinking heavily, increased drug use, health problems, being assaulted, etc. "Crisis points" led inexorably to "breaking points", as a result of which they moved into a rehab, were admitted to hospital or died (this is similar to the downward trajectory identified by Martijn and Sharpe 2006, discussed above).

The second (and opposite) direction she called "integrative passages" (McNaughton 2008, 95), whereby individuals moved towards a (culturally sanctioned) settled way of life. She emphasized that achieving this was a long process, involving many changes such as reducing alcohol or drug use, making contact with family members and accessing training courses, and gaining their own housing was just a part of this (McNaughton 2008, 95–6).

None of McNaughton's respondents actually attained a stable state during the year that she was in contact with them. Instead, for many of them:

Their social status was caught, flip-flopping in the space on the edge of society ... [They] appeared to make integrative transitions out of homelessness by obtaining their own tenancies. However their transitions were actually characterised by a flip-flopping of integrative and divestment passages, interacting with, and triggering each other. (McNaughton 2008, 99)

Divestment occurred because of the effect of edgeworking, as explained above, while integration took the form of, for example, starting rehab or moving into a hostel from the streets. Each integrative transition, however, brought with it new risks, which required resources or further edgework if they were to be negotiated successfully. If the resources were lacking (e.g. to cope with life in a hostel) or the edgework was too risky (e.g. using heroin within the hostel), then divestment passages would follow (namely, exit from the hostel). In this way, McNaughton provides an explanation for the erratic pathways of episodic homelessness noted by May (2000), Anderson and Tulloch (2000) and Maguire, Johnson, Vostanis, Keats, and Remington (2009), and for Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan's (2008) chaotic pathway of continued homelessness. This also helps to explain why resettlement (a pathway out of homelessness) can be such a long process, particularly since, so McNaughton argues, services for homeless people are often complicit in these cycles of integration and divestment (see, e.g. Lorna's story in McNaughton 2008, 134).²⁹

For McNaughton, then, individuals are understood primarily in terms of narrative pathways interacting with and within complex social systems.³⁰

Homelessness is explained, not as a social fact that is independent of people's experience of homelessness, but precisely as an event or episode in the lived experience of individuals, which is then interpreted by those individuals in different ways, and related to the environment in which they find themselves. As Luhmann (1995) argued, social systems are self-referential, in that they achieve, through the communication of meanings, relations with themselves and a differentiation of these relations from relations with their environment. A complex system is neither totally ordered nor totally chaotic, but based on iterative cycles in which the output from one cycle becomes the input to the next. In the case of McNaughton's research, the flip-flopping between divestment passages and integrative passages is a typical example of such an iterative cycle.

Within complex systems, transitions commonly occur from more stable to more complex behaviour and back again, and this is reflected in the pathways followed by homeless people, with the stable states (or "attractors" in the language of complexity theory) being "normal life" and "death". Such transitions are also marked by patterns of bifurcation (Dean 1997), such as those observed by McNaughton (2008) in terms of the cleavage between those who are "trapped" within the homelessness system and those who are not.

Complexity theory is, therefore, able to explain many of McNaughton's findings – indeed, edgework itself could be understood as working at the edge of chaos. Complexity theory can also throw light on how "structural" factors can generate complex behaviour – for example, Byrne (1997) shows how an increase in male worklessness from 10 to 30% in Teesside from 1971 to 1991 led to a range of edgework that looks similar to that described by McNaughton.³¹

McNaughton touches on aspects of what might be called the "culture" of homelessness – the importance of social networks, edgework as a social not just an individual activity (McNaughton 2008, 149), the homeless as a group of "outsiders" created by the welfare state (McNaughton 2008, 151), who develop "close emotional ties" over time (McNaughton 2008, 153), how such groupings and ties exacerbate rather than alleviate the problems experienced by their members (McNaughton 2008, 152), and so on.³²

As a realist, however, she sees homelessness as primarily a "structural" rather than a "cultural" phenomenon. This is unfortunate because, as noted above, her concept of agency suggests a new way of understanding the relationship between "structure" and "culture". An agent is understood as one who can narrate their life course; that is, who can structure their life course in terms of a story. So "structure" here means the narrative structure of an individual life course.

Individual life stories, however, are not the whole story. Different individuals will tell different stories about their lives, and in these stories, they will relate to their environments in different ways, and the stories of these different individuals may or may not intersect at particular points, and the observations of third parties, such as researchers, may generate different stories again. What McNaughton calls "structure", then, is something that is to be understood within and through the stories of all these different individuals. The "structure" is not outside of all these stories but is an integral part of each story (e.g. as a set of themes or as a backdrop to the narrative). If such stories can be regarded as part of "culture", then "culture" and "structure" become indistinguishable.

Pathways into the Homeless Culture

Cultural approaches to homelessness date back to ethnographic studies of Skid Row in the USA, and are concerned mainly with pathways into homelessness. For example, Wallace (1968, 97):

Recruitment into the skid row way of life may be divided into four phases with component community and social psychological characteristics. The incipient phase involves the dislocation from the basic social network of society accompanied by a sense of rootlessness. Exposure to skid row subculture follows, accompanied by isolation and desocialization. The third phase – regular participation in skid row institutions – witnesses the beginnings of submergence into skid row subculture. The final phase in the natural history of the skid rower is marked by his integration into the skid row community, and by his acculturation.

Here appear the key concepts of mainstream culture and homeless subculture, the conceptualization of homelessness as multidimensional (rootlessness, isolation, desocialisation) and the identification of a clear pathway or trajectory from “the basic network of society” to skid row. Later, ethnographic researchers, such as Snow and Anderson (1993, 277), found that descent into skid row was only one of a number of possible pathways that a “dislocated” individual could follow:

... there seem to be five possible career trajectories for the homeless. Some have only brief careers on the streets. Others sink into a pattern of episodic homelessness. A third career entails permanent embeddedness in a liminal plateau typically in an institutional niche outside conventional society. A fourth career leads to chronic, unrelieved homelessness. And a final possibility involves permanent, or at least relatively long-term, extrication from street life and return to conventional society after years, or perhaps even a decade or more, of homelessness.

Ethnographers tend to explain the phenomena they investigate in terms of the relationships among the people involved. Ravenhill (2008), for example, defines homelessness in terms of a set of relationships.³³

Based on interviews with 150 homeless people over the course of 10 years, she emphasizes the social networks in which they participate and the “cultures” they create together. This is more than just a matter of “friendship networks”, as suggested, for example, by Fitzpatrick, Kemp and Klinker 2000, 35 – it is more like what Cloke, May, and Johnsen (2010, 184) call “culturally significant local ‘scenes’ of homelessness”. Ravenhill talks about a “culture of homelessness” or “homeless culture”³⁴ or “homeless community”, which involves not only the individual edgework described by McNaughton but also the emotional and social support that homeless people find on the streets. Relationships among homeless people may be supportive and threatening, risky and reassuring, uplifting and depressing and oppressive and liberating bringing both joy and misery and hope and despair. There may well be flip-flopping from one condition to the other but both conditions exist within the same relationship.

Ravenhill also talks about a “homeless industry” (this term appears to originate from the USA – see Snow and Anderson 1993), which “includes statutory and voluntary sector organisations, campaigners, churches and charities, plus academics, intellectuals, research organizations, authors and even university or college training courses” (Ravenhill 2008, 14). This industry is a part of the homeless culture, through its provision of hostels, day centres and homeless persons’ units, including even the police and hospitals, helping to make that culture more stable and unified: “It firmly links the subculture to mainstream society” (Ravenhill 2008, 176).³⁵

However, it tends to cater for needs that are easier to meet, it requires individuals to follow rules that those in mainstream society do not have to follow (e.g. no smoking, no alcohol, no sex, no pets and no nights off) and it does not address the conditions that give rise to homelessness (see also McNaughton Nicholl, 2010, 32, 34).

The homeless industry is outside as well as inside the homeless culture, reinforcing that culture while at the same time being dedicated to its destruction. It lifts people up only, in some cases, to put them down – or, to put it the other way round, it puts some people down only in order to lift them up. It causes homelessness, but it also helps people to exit from homelessness. It is riven with its own internal contradictions. It creates new divisions and reinforces existing divisions within the homeless culture, but it also provides new sources of unity and solidarity within that culture.

Ravenhill’s understanding of the causation of homelessness is rather different from that of realism. Although she agrees that “homelessness results from a complex interaction among several factors” (Philippot, Lecocq, Sempoux, Nachtergaele, and Galand 2007, 494), she emphasizes that: “The importance lies not with the predictors of homelessness, but the accumulation of triggers over time” (Ravenhill 2008, 101), a process that is set within the life course of a particular individual (see Ravenhill 2008, 101–114 for a detailed account). Each “trigger” is to be understood only in the context in which it occurs, as part of the life course of a particular individual. Triggers may be pulled over a relatively short period (e.g. a succession of traumatic events), which cumulatively “destabilize the individual, rupturing their protection against rooflessness and leaving them unable to cope when a housing crisis occurs” (Ravenhill 2008, 132). This crisis may not materialize for many years but: “The crucial time appeared to be during the natural recovery period after trauma, when most people tend to withdraw to recoup and recover. If other triggers occurred at this stage, then vulnerability to PTSD, mental health problems, addiction and rooflessness dramatically increased” (Ravenhill 2008, 132). Those looking for early warnings of a fall into homelessness (in order for homelessness to be prevented), however, are likely to be disappointed, despite Ravenhill’s occasional comments to the contrary, because the events that she talks about do not seem to be at all predictable.

Like ethnographers before her, Ravenhill sees the process of becoming homeless in “cultural” rather than “structural” terms; first, as a process of learning how to be homeless, for example, through repeated experiences of coping with sleeping rough, and then, as a process of accommodation to the “homeless culture” (for further discussion, see Ravenhill 2008, 156–160 – e.g. experiencing “culture shock”, disengaging from mainstream society and learning to “fit in” – see, e.g. Mayock, Corr, and O’Sullivan 2008, 124–127; Wallace 1965). Here, the “homeless culture” includes introduction to the use of heroin, petty crime, prostitution and other risky behaviours (Mayock, Corr, and O’Sullivan 2008, 122–123). Overall, the story told by Ravenhill is one of early experience of homelessness associated with poverty on leaving home (irrespective of class of origin), making

further episodes of homelessness more likely, in a cumulative process of divestment of resources and acculturation to homeless ways of life.

Ravenhill (2008, 155) describes the process of accommodation to the homeless culture as follows:

[I]n many ways the process of becoming roofless mirrors Goffman's (1961) description of the process of institutionalization. There is the initial inertia, the stripping of self-identity as clothes wear out, hygiene and personal care becomes impossible to maintain and the corporate identity is absorbed. This depersonalization includes the loss of their name (street people are often known by nicknames and aliases), personal demonstrable history (photographs, keepsakes, forms of ID) and the loss of "me" (the stories, memories attached to photographs and keepsakes). There is a language and demeanour that needs to be adopted for survival. Homelessness then becomes one of Goffman's (1970) games, the rules of which need to be learned and accepted, before the actors within that game can play. The idea of learning to play the game is a form of institutionalization that is reinforced by mainstream society through labelling. (Goffman 1961, 1968) Ravenhill (2008, 161) stresses that the close-knit character of the homeless culture makes it very difficult to leave:

Once an individual has acclimatized to rooflessness and survived the first few days and weeks, it becomes increasingly difficult to help them move back into mainstream society. This is, in part, because of the intensity and strength of the networks and friendships formed early on. Separation from such intense friendships can be painful and may become increasingly difficult the longer a person remains within the homeless culture. These cohesive friendships and informal support networks are at the heart of the culture's continued existence.

For further detail on the inverse hierarchies that exist in the homeless culture, resulting in differential capacities to exit homelessness, see Ravenhill (2008, 165–169).

Pathways Out of the Homeless Culture

Given the power of the homeless culture and the multidimensional character of homelessness, exiting from homelessness is bound to be extremely difficult. Ravenhill is implicitly critical of simplistic approaches to resettlement such as "housing first" or "employment first" or "treatment first" (or presumably anything first unless it addresses all the dimensions of homelessness affecting each individual at one and the same time).³⁶

She describes four "catalysts" that began the exit process in her research: "First, they felt that they had reached the bottom and the only way from that point was up" (Ravenhill 2008, 185). In McNaughton's terms, this corresponds to a "breaking point", but interestingly McNaughton notes that this can end in despair and/or death rather than resettlement – or, in her terms, further divestment rather than integration (see also McNaughton Nicholls 2010, 30–31). It is not clear, therefore, why someone who has been homeless for a long time should wake up one morning and suddenly decide that they want to change their lives. Since this seems to be an absolutely crucial decision, more research would appear to be necessary if we are to understand how such decisions come to be taken.

A second catalyst in the resettlement process mentioned by Ravenhill (2008, 186) is sudden shock or trauma, which could be an assault, rape, disabling accident, near-death experience or the death of a close street-friend. It could be that such an incident is what induces them to feel they have reached

the bottom (the first catalyst) or at least to conclude that life on the streets is too dangerous for them or involves too much suffering for them to bear. These first two catalysts, pushing people out of homelessness, may well be related, and again, it is not clear why such trauma should have this effect rather than pushing them into depression, resignation and despair.

The other two catalysts are factors pulling people out of homelessness. One of these is the recognition that someone outside the homeless culture cared about them: "Typically it was staff at homeless facilities or outreach workers who showed care. The sudden realization that they existed and mattered to people outside the homeless culture increased self-esteem, created hope and motivation to begin resettlement" (Ravenhill 2008, 186). Families were particularly important too: "Those rehoused and in contact with their families appeared to find it easier to resettle and reintegrate into housed society" (Ravenhill 2008, 193; see also Robinson 2008b, 90).³⁷

This suggests that it may be the showing of care at the breaking point that makes the difference between descent into perdition and ascent into a settled way of life (see Cloke, May, and Johnsen 2010, on "the ethic of kindness" – the unconditional loving care given by a homelessness service provider to a homeless person is key to successful rehabilitation³⁸). The fourth catalyst is then the availability of support and guidance from a range of people and organizations outside the homeless culture, mainly within the homeless industry. This is different from care because: "The person who showed care was not always the person who could help" (Ravenhill 2008, 186; italics mine). Strictly speaking, this support and guidance is not so much a catalyst in starting the resettlement process but more of a necessary condition for the resettlement to succeed.

What Ravenhill's research shows here, I think, is that the key to starting the resettlement process for some people within the homeless culture is an interaction of a particular kind that occurs at a breaking point in the life of the homeless person, and this interaction involves contact with someone outside the homeless culture who offers them an unconditional caring relationship. If this caring person is someone within the homeless industry, they are then in a position to secure support and guidance for the homeless person and thus, advance the resettlement process. Resettlement still takes a long time, however, involving (in McNaughton's terms) complex flip-flopping from integrative to divestment passages, related primarily to the changing character of the caring relationships concerned, the quality of support and guidance being made available and the individual's capacity and opportunities to disaffiliate from the homeless culture and re-engage with mainstream culture (Zlotnick, Tam, and Robertson 2003).

On the question of how resettlement programmes should be organized, Ravenhill (2008, 212) reports:

The most successful resettlement programmes appeared to be those beginning with light, broad rules that were then added to as and when individuals could cope with the next phase of resettlement. For most, rules needed to exist to create a sense of security. Rules that were too slack were counterproductive, leaving people feeling unsafe both physically and ontologically. Equally rules that were too rigid made it impossible for the individual to achieve, feel valued and learn how to decipher right from wrong behaviour for themselves.

Basically, having learned how to be a homeless person, the individual had to (re)learn how to function in housed society: “Fitting in, belonging to any society requires that we learn the rules and know how to play the game to be able to fully participate. If we are serious about reintegrating the roofless into housed society, we need, at the very least, to teach them how to play the game and give them the skills and the means with which to participate” (Ravenhill 2008, 212).

These conclusions are very much supported by the work of Cloke, May, and Johnsen (2010). They show how voluntary soup runs, and many day centres and hostels, provide continuity of care and “service without strings” to homeless people (Cloke, May, and Johnsen 2010, 157) and describe one example of a hostel that works with clear rules that are valued by the residents, a friendly environment and considerable autonomy for, and spontaneous acts of kindness by, the staff (Cloke, May, and Johnsen 2010, 174–179). Unfortunately, however, other voluntary organizations lack sufficient competence³⁹ or resources, particularly in terms of access to affordable housing. Cloke, May, and Johnsen’s research is also distinctive in emphasizing the geographical unevenness of homeless cultures, from one city to another and from one locality to another – “the feel of a place for a homeless person” (Cloke, May, and Johnsen 2010, 209).

This paper has drawn mainly upon research in the UK, USA, Ireland and Australia; so, it is pertinent to say something about the special character of the USA here. The sheer cruelty and vindictiveness of the US system, indeed, is sometimes difficult for Europeans to fathom. In San Francisco alone, thousands of people, mostly African-American, continue to live without being able to get work or state support of any kind, so end up homeless.⁴⁰

They are usually already criminalized and often continue to resort to crime in order to survive. As homeless, they are ill-treated by the police and city authorities, who destroy their makeshift shelters and attempt to drive them off the streets. They are frequently arrested and imprisoned, even for trivial offences, incurring huge costs for the criminal justice system. The homeless industry simply provides insufficient material resources to lift these people out of homelessness, even in the richest state (California) in the richest country in the world (this is well documented in Gowan 2010, chap 6). Consequently, as Gowan (2010, 134) says: “The primary therapeutic exit from homelessness remained what it had been for decades: disability payments for the minority who could prove that their physical health had been permanently ruined by street life”. The majority of homeless people in the USA, therefore, have to fend for themselves as best they can, and much of Gowan’s book documents how they manage to do this. When they get angry about it, they are recommended to go for anger management courses (Gowan 2010, 135). Apart from those who became severely disabled, those who successfully exited homelessness in Gowan’s research were helped to do so by family and friends (Gowan 2010, 212).

It is largely the US experience that gives rise to Neil Smith’s (1996, 2002) revanchist thesis, whereby the elimination of the poor (including homeless people) from urban areas is seen as part of a radical neoliberalizing project to make the city “safe” and attractive for gentrifiers and for commercial activities – mainly, shopping and tourism (see Gowan 2010, chap 7, especially 271–272; and for a similar account in relation to Los Angeles, see Davis 1990).⁴¹

In the USA, homeless people have effectively been cleared from the streets⁴²

and coerced into shelters, where they have been further coerced into medicalized rehabilitation programmes that rarely address their real and diverse needs (for work, respect, loving kindness and even back surgery – Gowan 2010, 216–217) and provide inadequate support for them to access routes into settled housing. The latest twist is to justify this lack of support in terms of neoliberal notions of self-management (meaning: “it’s up to you now, you’re in charge”). This is of course impossible to square with the continuing coercive approaches of clearance and shelterizing (or exclusion and containment), as homeless people themselves know only too well (Gowan 2010, 222, 270).

In contrast, in other countries, including the UK, Cloke, May, and Johnsen (2010, 9) argue that revanchism is rather less in evidence. They recognize that there has been a certain amount of policy transfer from USA to UK, in terms of technologies and techniques designed to “manage” a problematic “street culture” – for example:

variations of zero-tolerance policing, making begging a “recordable offence”, the “designing out” of certain street activities, the introduction of “diverted giving schemes”, and the introduction of Designated Public Places Orders (to restrict the consumption of alcohol in public places) and of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders. Yet crucially, even if central and local government approaches to homelessness have undoubtedly become more targeted around issues of enforcement, containment and control in Britain in recent years ... these measures have been accompanied by programmes that are much less easily characterized as revanchist. (Cloke, May, and Johnsen 2010, 9)

Overall, then, the value of “cultural” approaches to understanding homelessness is that they provide a more substantive explanation of the pathways that people follow through homelessness. Each person’s journey is unique but common themes appear in the processes of their moves out of mainstream culture into the homeless culture, the relationships that they develop within that culture (involving the homeless industry as well as the various subcultures of the street, drugs, etc.) and the processes by which they move away from the homeless culture and back into mainstream culture (involving a lengthy and flip-flopping period of resettlement). The explanation itself takes the form of a story, and stories are a form of knowledge (Garcia-Lorenzo, Nolas, and de Zeeuw 2008 17).

Conclusion

Being at home in the world (or “home”, for short) is a multidimensional phenomenon, comprising a complex assemblage of relationships of a number of different kinds. Perhaps, the most important of these relationships are those involving unconditional care and commitment, based on kinship and/or kindness. Homelessness can then be understood in similar multidimensional terms as the absence of these relationships.

Homeless people, like everyone else, are primarily social beings, with specific histories, living in specific environments and relating to those environments and to other (homeless and non-homeless) people, and also to themselves, in different ways. The lessons to be learned from homelessness research are: first, we must pay more attention to people’s life stories; second, we must set these life stories in the context of the life stories of those with whom they come into

contact, including the life story of those who listen to these life stories;⁴³ third, we must reflect on the meaning of these life stories in the construction and maintenance of different cultures, seeing cultures as interactively and discursively constructed across a number of dimensions; and fourth, we must analyse the relationships between different cultures, thus building up an overall picture of how homelessness is produced.

The review of homelessness literature in this paper suggests that there is a degree of understanding of some of the different pathways that people follow into homelessness and of the common themes involved: childhood trauma, lack of loving care, substance misuse, “wrong crowd”, institutionalization (e.g. prisons) and so on. At least, some of these themes, however, require further investigation, and the relationships among the themes are also not well understood. Some researchers have been too quick to assume that they know what these themes mean and that it is a straightforward matter to establish how they correlate with homelessness. In reality, the relationship between each theme and an episode or episodes of homelessness is typically complex, and can only be understood in the context of people’s life histories. Homelessness itself has a multidimensional character, but this is not recognized explicitly enough in some of the literature on homelessness pathways. As a result, the full significance of the themes related to homelessness is not grasped.

Another point is that the research indicates a need for much longer time periods to be studied (10 years or more) in order to make sense of people’s experience of pathways through homelessness. It is difficult to see how this can be practically accomplished other than through conducting biographical interviews with adults and older people.

Finally, although pathways out of homelessness appear to be more clearly patterned than pathways into homelessness, they are less well understood. This seems to be because the homeless culture and the homelessness industry, and the relationship between them, has not been studied in sufficient depth, though the situation is better than it was. Further research is required on a number of points, such as the role of family and key workers for homeless people of different ages, genders, ethnicities, etc. and how these roles fit with wider service provision for homeless people (housing, treatment, education and training, and so on). Political change also has to occur, however, so that homeless people are regarded and treated as equals – the current approach (at least in the UK) of “tough love” or conditional welfare is oppressive, and will not work, anyway, so needs to be reviewed.

Notes.

1. Typically, this occurs through social construction, a largely political process of identifying and measuring a “social problem”, followed by the framing of policy designed to solve, or otherwise address and manage, that problem (see, e.g. Jacobs, Kemeny, and Manzi 1999).

2. Another example of the importance of the territorial dimension of homelessness comes from the attempts of homeless people to control their own space, e.g. by creating an obstacle on the street, creating a safe place to sleep, defining a visible identity such as Cardboard City and creating a meaningful living space that can be called “home” (Cloke, May, and Johnsen 2010; Ravenhill 2008, 177).

3. In the terminology used in a later section of this paper, May did not find any clear pathways trodden by the long-term homeless.
4. May is at pains to emphasize that this did not necessarily mean that they needed or wanted some form of supported housing or permanent accommodation. He cites the case of "Rob", who saw repeated episodes of rough sleeping as a "solution" to a broader set of problems relating to unemployment, providing him with an opportunity to exercise his construction skills in building shelters and renovating squats (May 2000, 624).
5. Given the problems experienced with sustaining private tenancies, May (2000, 635) cautions against an over-reliance on this sector to solve the housing needs of single homeless people. Recent research by Crane, Warnes, and Coward (2011) indicates that these problems of insecurity, poor conditions and poor management in the private rented sector persist up to the present day.
6. This conclusion is echoed widely in the literature. For example: "The other risk factor [apart from poverty] now common to the overwhelming majority of homeless people is unemployment" (Fitzpatrick, Kemp, & Klinker 2000, 28).
7. This follows Seal's (2005) identification of three types of homeless condition: "bad" (deviant), "mad" (ill) and "sad" (victims). Homelessness is said to result from the homeless person's own actions or bad behaviour, their health problems (mental or physical) or the failures of market and state provision. Similarly, Rosenthal (2000) identified "slackers", "lackers" and "unwilling victims". This typology was found both in official circles and among homeless people themselves. The three types of label are then reflected in three official approaches to solving homelessness: responsabilization or "normalisation" (Ravenhill 2008, 207) (emphasizing behaviour modification), medicalization (emphasizing treatment) and the "battle for the mind" (Ravenhill 2008, 207), where the individual is enabled to cope with their own past and with future events, connecting them with the reality of mainstream society, and giving them a sense of hope and purpose in dealing with that society – perhaps, not so much (or not only) a battle for the mind but more a struggle for a life worth living.
8. Consider also Becker's (1963, 25) concept of a deviant career, where homelessness can be interpreted as a form of deviance, following a path that takes a homeless person away from "conventional ways of life".
9. Chamberlayne (2004, 347), for example, refers to an "emotional retreat" in homelessness research and service provision.
10. For further useful critique, see Robinson 2008a
11. The classic epidemiological example is that of smoking (the independent variable) and cancer (the dependent variable).
12. There are countless equally banal examples in the literature.
13. "Homelessness, mobility and spatiality shifts over time, often charting complicated pathways into and out of different accommodation, different 'resting places'" (Cloke, Milbourne, and Widdowfield 2003, 32).

14. As Clapham (2003, 126) says: “The pathways approach draws attention to both the holistic nature of people’s problems and the importance of taking a long perspective on outcomes’.
15. The work of Fitzpatrick (1999) suggests that location is another important variable, at least for young people in urban areas. The study identified pathways relating to three types of location: a home neighbourhood, a city homeless network and a city centre. Cloke, May, and Johnsen (2010, 62) describe the homeless city, in some detail, as “constituted by a complex assemblage of places to sleep, eat, earn and hang out”, where the “journeys and pauses of homeless people ... are punctuated by different kinds of performativities”, which are “in turn bound up in complex ways with the architecture of the city itself”.
16. Ravenhill (2008, 139) comments further: “Institutionalization must be viewed in terms of the life-course rather than an episode in time and its immediate aftermath. Thus it is important to view why people entered the institution, their experiences in the institution and the long-term impact of that institution as one long process within the context of their lives. Institutions appeared to delay rooflessness as well as trigger it” (see in particular Table 6.2 on 140–141).
17. Note that even this clinical definition is fuzzy, as it involves an element of circularity (trauma defined by reference to a traumatic event). Does a traumatic event involve, for example, violence of some kind?
18. “Complex trauma” is the term used to refer to “sustained exposure to traumatic events” (Maguire, Johnson, Vostanis, Keats, and Remington 2009, 3).
19. Maybe this happens because in epidemiology, in order to prevent infectious disease, for example, it is not essential to know exactly how the germ damages the body but only how to avoid coming into contact with that germ. Preventing homelessness, however, is completely different. If we accept, for the sake of argument, that complex trauma in childhood produces psychological disorders, which increase the risk of becoming homeless later in life, we still need to know something about the relationship between the disorders that someone is suffering and their housing (and other) circumstances in order to be able to help them (continue to) live a settled life. This is not to rule out the possibility, however, that there exist some points of comparison between preventing infection and preventing homelessness – for example, by avoiding the influence of those who make infection or homelessness more likely.
20. “The implication of this research is that those services whose clients remain stable, even if function is less than optimal, are in fact producing relative improvements in the outcome for young homeless people” (Martijn and Sharpe 2006, 10). Maybe there is a case for “rehab and therapy first”, rather than the currently popular “housing first” and “employment first”. “Resettlement” needs to be understood in its widest possible sense.
21. Ravenhill (2008, 121–122) found that a significant proportion of children being thrown out of their homes came from middle-class families. This does not necessarily mean, however, that those children had more resources available to them than other children.
22. His private tenancy, for example, does not look as if it will last much longer.

23. Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys, and Averill (2010, 29) argue that the concept of pathways has advantages over alternatives such as trajectories and careers: “Where the notion of homeless trajectories seems too over-determined, the starting point too predictive of the direction taken, and while the points in the process identified by homeless careers might enable intervention, the pathways metaphor both suggests structure (a well-trodden track), and also implies choice (a negotiated journey)”. From their research, however, it is not clear what exactly are the “common routes” that young people take into, through and out of homelessness.

24. This finding is, however, contradicted by at least some (more recent) research on hostels (see Somerville, Brown, Scullion, and Morris 2011).

25. Ravenhill (2008, 182–183) warns against over-simplified and one-dimensional interpretations of pathways. Citing the example of Fitzpatrick (2000), she complains that “the focus remained on routes into housing, not the complete resettlement process: physical, emotional and psychological reintegration into housed society ... There was [also] a tendency to oversimplify exit routes. The pathways used relatively short time-spans as a measure of successful reintegration ([for example] six months). This is despite existing evidence to suggest that this stage of resettlement takes far longer (in excess of 18 months; Dane 1998)”.

26. Alternatively, one could argue that young people from poorer families are actually less likely to return to their parental home, as this would mean returning to a life of poverty. Flatau, James, Watson, Wood, and Hendershott (2007), for example, found that young people were more likely to leave home if their parents were unemployed, and also, once they had left, less likely to return home. So, “poverty” seems to explain why young people leave home and why they do not leave home, why they return and why they do not return. It explains everything, and consequently explains nothing. Ultimately, Fitzpatrick’s attempt to explain homelessness in terms of poverty fails because it takes no real account of agency. Poverty plays a part in homelessness, certainly, but its relationship to homelessness is complex.

27. These stories are “true” in Gadamer’s (2006) sense, in that they enhance being (of the storyteller, of the listener, of everyone and everything).

28. These motivations seem to correspond to what Somerville (1992) called the spiritual and emotional dimensions, respectively, of homelessness. McNaughton is, therefore, attempting to explain homelessness on the assumption that the life of each individual is multidimensional.

29. Not only in the management of hostels but in the provision of settled accommodation, agencies sometimes made it more, rather than less, difficult for homeless people to exit permanently from homelessness, usually by not taking sufficient account of their wider needs, particularly relating to making new friends (of the right kind!) and restoring ties with their families (McNaughton 2008, 123–128, 155–160).

30. Complexity theory can be classified as a realist theory (Byrne 1998).

31. Later on, McNaughton Nicholls (2009) attempted to explain edgework in terms of contextualized rational action, which is compatible with complexity theory but lacks a theory of context. More recently, she has drawn upon Nussbaum’s capabilities approach (McNaughton Nicholls 2010), which also lacks a theory of context but enables her to identify a number of interesting “complex

intersections”, for example, between homelessness and drug-taking, between mental illness, destitution and despair, between rehousing and resettlement and between the enabling and constraining functions of housing.

32. These issues are all discussed in the next section.

33. I have selected Ravenhill’s research as being the most deeply analysed and self-conscious study of homelessness from a culturalist perspective. There have, however, been other ethnographies of homelessness by British researchers, a classic example being Hall (2003).

34. For Ravenhill (2008, 145–146), homeless culture is a subculture, defined as “the system of beliefs, values and norms adopted by a significant minority in any given society or culture, in this case, the roofless, homeless or precariously housed in Britain ... Subcultures (including the homeless culture) have discernable identifiers, for example language, dress, demeanour and behaviour. These give an identity to both the group and individuals within it ... Subcultures enable members to become ‘mainstream’ within their group. A key feature of the culture is its paradoxical capacity to absorb loners, who remain isolated yet part of the homeless culture ... In general homeless culture is characterized by dense social networks and reciprocity, with people experiencing anxiety and depression when they leave or are denied access”. This subculture itself has subcultures, such as street drinkers, drug addicts, daycentre/hostel groupies, specialist daycentre groupies (with mental health problems), precariously housed street users (squatters, flophouse dwellers, etc), intermittent participants (loners and drifters), homeless advocates and activists (who used to be homeless) and the “homeless at heart” (Ravenhill 2008, 147–155). In their research, Cloke, May, and Johnsen (2010, 84, 134) found evidence, even within hostels, of distinct subcultures of “pissheads”, “junkies” and “straightheads”.

35. Similarly, Cloke, May, and Johnsen (2010, 184) describe local scenes of homelessness as resulting from “particular interconnections between service provision and service consumption”.

36. “Providing people with a tenancy is not resettlement, but rehousing. The transition from rooflessness to integration into housed society is far more than a route into adequate accommodation and support to keep that accommodation. There are a series of physical, emotional and psychological changes that need to take place. These form the rehabilitation process” (Ravenhill 2008, 203).

37. Many homeless people, however, are alienated from their families, so caring intermediaries are required in order to re-establish contact. Other sources of support included probation officers and religious organizations.

38. For more on the ethic of care, see Barnes (2012).

39. This is perhaps where “professionalism” comes in – Cloke, May, and Johnsen (2010, 246) recognise that what they call the “voluntary attitude” is necessary, but not sufficient.

40. Gowan (2010) reports that only about 13% of homeless people in the USA worked regularly, and much of this was “radically temporary” (147), while no more than 20% were likely to be receiving General Assistance (like income support in UK) at any one time (305).

41. In this respect, the USA is perhaps more like Brazil, India, China or South Africa than most European countries.

42. Through routine police harassment and, on the part of local government, a combination of “architecture to repel invaders, surveillance cameras to watch them, subsidiary police to roust and remove them, sprinklers to drench them, and stadium lighting to prevent them from sleep” (Gowan 2010, 237). In general: “We spray our fellow men and women with freezing water, slash their tents, destroy their shanties, and tow their cars, all in the name of a compassionate crusade to save them from their inner demons” (Gowan 2010, 272).

43. The researcher as listener is inevitably part of the story itself. This point is well illustrated in the case of Ravenhill, whose pregnancy during her fieldwork prompted major responses from some of her interlocutors, especially a sense of grief from having lost contact with their own children.

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