



## **Foucauldian principles and issues of homelessness**

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### ***Abstract:***

*In this paper, I apply Foucauldian principles, in the same manner as Townley's (1993) work on Human Resources, to the novel field of Homelessness in the United Kingdom. I consider the housing provider-recipient relationship, together with methods employed to render the subject of homelessness discourse visible. I apply the Foucauldian concept of governmentality to this process of subjectivisation in the homelessness discourse.*

**Keywords:** Foucauldian, power/knowledge nexus, subject, homeless, governmentality

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### **Introduction**

Recent attempts at combining methods historically grounded in disparate paradigms initially seemed to threaten the power of the separate schools of thought, but are now seen as part of a continuum of approaches aimed at dealing with differing levels of human activity, that is, to form an 'intelligible whole'.

It has been argued that the range of systems approaches acknowledged by Creative Problem Solving: Total Systems Intervention (Flood and Jackson, 1991) and Multimethodology (Mingers and Gill, 1999) are by their nature structuralist; they therefore utilise assessment systems, albeit in different ways (functionalist, by means

of measurable inputs/actions/outcomes; interpretivist via self-assessed values; critical via active challenges to boundaries, which question the priority given to the self who sets the values expressed by those boundaries). In his work, Foucault has ‘shown how what counts as truth depends on, or is determined by, the conceptual systems in operation’. (Townley, 1993) Philp (1985, p.70) notes ‘When we classify objects we operate within a system of possibility – and this system both enables us to do certain things, and limits us to this system and these things’.

Within the range of organisations charged either formally (by legislation) or informally (as volunteers) with responding to the issues of homelessness, there is always some attempt made to measure, or codify, the level of need in a given area at a given time, and in identifying the gap between the measurement and provision, together with a number of ways of assessing individual need for the services provided by these organisations. In other words, tacitly acknowledging the gap in provision leads to various criteria designed to exclude those deemed outside the remit of a given organisation, in order to maximise their finite/limited resources. With this statement of perspective, we are clearly within the realms of efficiency and effectiveness – the preserve of management ‘scientists’, and within the purview of Foucauldian thinking.

### **On Power, Knowledge and the Subject**

These three themes run through much of Foucault’s work: power, knowledge and subjectivity; understanding of these is essential to analysis of homeless issues, in a similar way to that operated by Townley (1993) in her Foucauldian approach to Human Resource Management.

Foucault wished to understand more fully power relations, i.e. how power mechanisms affect every day lives. This is opposed to views of power as a commodity, which may be held or possessed, embodied in a person/institution/structure, or used for organisational or individual purposes.

*‘Power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, something one holds on to or allows to slip away.’ (Foucault, 1981, p.94)*

Instead, Foucault views it as a *relation*, made apparent when it is exercised, employed at all levels and in many dimensions. As a result, studying power involves considering how power operates – the procedures, practices and techniques that reveal its effect. It is also evidenced in the way persons or things are rendered visible politically, i.e. ‘power is exercised by virtue of things being known and people being seen’. (Foucault, 1980, p.154)

Foucault’s essay (1991c) on governmentality (a neologism of government and rationality, government being the intention to shape/guide/affect the conduct of some person, and rationality being the need to know same before it can be governed) reflects the view of power twinned with knowledge. This recognises that government is dependent upon particular ways of knowing, requiring vocabularies, ways to represent that to be governed, and on ways of ordering populations/mechanisms to supervise or administer individuals or groups. Rationality depends upon ‘specific knowledges and techniques of rendering something knowable and therefore governable). (Townley, Ibid.) Governmentality thus refers to the processes which render objects amenable to intervention/regulation via formulation in a particular conceptual way. It emphasises regulatory systems, processes, and methods of thinking about/perceiving a domain, especially where these are translated into scripts

claiming authentic depiction of same. These depictions may then be translated to other decision-making bodies.

Foucault does not see knowledge as detached or independent – it is essential to the illumination of sources of power. The procedures for the formulation and accumulation of power are not neutral instruments for the presentation of the ‘real’. (Steffy and Grimes, 1992) Scientific discourse and the institutions that produce it are part of the taken-for-granted assumptions that should be questioned. (Knights, 1992) A procedure of knowledge (such as those for investigation/research) can act equally well as a technique of power. Knowledge is the operation of discipline, delineating an analytical space and constituting an arena of knowledge thereby providing a basis for action and intervention, i.e. the operation of power.

This dual power/knowledge nexus implies:

- i) A challenge to positivism’s portrayal of power and knowledge as independent (by showing how mechanisms of disciplinary power are also instruments of formulation/ accumulation of knowledge). Thus knowledge does not lead to power, nor is power enhanced by acquiring knowledge; they are coterminous: the one does not exist without the other.
- ii) Power is integral or productive in that it creates objects. It is the desire to know, and is not negative but creative.

*‘We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of*

*truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.’ (Foucault, 1977, p.194)*

- iii) The human subject is produced historically, through elements of power-knowledge. The individual is seen as a product of social techniques of power. (This highlights the importance of identity and identity securing strategies in the reproduction of power relations. (Knights and Willmott, 1985) The focus of analysis centres on the ‘knowability’ of the individual, i.e. how the individual is rendered knowable, is constructed or reproduced. Identity is contingent, provisional, achieved, always in process – an approach which is rare in management studies (e.g. Calás and Smircich, 1990; Roberts, 1984, 1991; Townley, 1993).

### **The Implications of Foucault’s Work for Issues of Homelessness.**

Just as Townley (Ibid.) reverts to the basic building block of the employment relationship to illustrate the relevance of Foucault’s work for Human Resource Management (HRM), so must we revert to the housing provider-recipient relationship to see the relevance for issues of homelessness in the United Kingdom. Analysis of the causes of and solutions to youth homelessness has come under intense scrutiny in the last two decades, from governmental and social science sources, as well as from voluntary sector research, and with it has grown the idea of multi-agency action to resolve the issue. Unfortunately, enactment of multi-agency resolutions has been much more elusive – and there is a variety of analyses for the causes of this, too.

Townley (Op. Cit.) quotes Williamson’s (1995) work on *transactions*, centring on the ‘mediating mechanisms available to the parties to transactions to ensure agreement,

given the operation of human factors such as specifically bounded rationality, uncertainty and idiosyncratic knowledge' ... for Williamson, the central problematic was one of efficiency. However, just as one could criticise the depicting of the employment relationship as a transaction between free and equal parties, so one can challenge the parity of parties in the housing provider-recipient relationship, particularly when some of those in the recipient element of the relationship fall outside the legislated definition of priority need and are therefore, in Foucauldian terms, not rendered visible.

Likewise, if an underlying presupposition of the dominant approach (to HRM) is that information to determine transaction costs is discovered, then this must be equally so for the housing provider-recipient transaction, and the criteria for efficiency in the supply-demand relationship involved is also whether there is sufficient knowledge. With housing research, from whatever source, there is an acknowledgement of the difficulties in defining both the term 'homelessness' itself, and in counting the individuals who fall into the various categories chosen. The implication is that knowledge is objective, giving 'unmediated access to the world, reflective of an external facticity' (Townley, *Ibid.*) – and therefore is neutral, operating to uncover a naturally existing order. In other words, it relies on the positivist distinction between power and knowledge.

Taking a Foucauldian perspective can offer an alternative analysis of both the employment exchange (which is not our focus here) and the housing provision exchange. If we turn away from the self-evident categories of the institutions (council housing departments, private landlords, housing associations, voluntary

providers) and individuals (agents, principles), the focus shifts from considerations of what (houses/homes, hostels, bed and breakfast establishments, ‘invisible’ homelessness, rough sleeping) and why (efficiency, deserving/vulnerable cases) to how the knowledge-power duality is enacted in the housing provider-recipient relationship. Similarly, following Morgan’s (1980) consideration of focusing on the action of organising, then the focus of this paper’s analysis centres on how this particular relational activity is organised.

Townley (Op. Cit.) contends that the provision of knowledge, and simultaneously power, is central to organising. The gap between housing provision and need is the ‘analytical space that needs to be rendered governable’. This analytical, conceptual space has geographical and temporal dimensions (which vary according to which thread of discourse is dominant at that point in place and time), and a subject – the homeless person. These three dimensions must be rendered known and articulated so that they may be managed.

From the point of view of the local council housing providers – and to a growing extent the housing associations – all three dimensions are constrained by legal definitions, supplemented by government ‘initiatives’; however, in the voluntary sector, and among the client group themselves, there is a somewhat different, broader discourse, sweeping in issues not covered by the legal definitions. The key ‘unknowns’ for housing departments can be seen to be (i) the number of persons liable to present as ‘homeless’ and in ‘priority need’ (as legally defined), and with a local connection, and (ii) the number of suitable properties void at the appropriate

time. That is, they need knowledge of two dimensions – the nature of the ‘client’, and the nature of the accommodation.

Within the voluntary sector and the ‘client’ base, these ‘unknowns’ are less clear cut – there is discourse on the nature of homelessness itself, on what constitutes priority categories, on what constitutes accommodation (or lack of it), and on the level of support required (in both monetary and social terms). The dimensions here could be seen as (i) the nature of homelessness, (ii) how to categorise ‘priority need’ in the face of finite resources, (iii) the nature of shelter, and (iv) the nature of on-going support.

It should be noted that more recent governmental discourse has begun to focus on similar issues to that of the voluntary sector/client group, but because they have chosen to constitute (render knowable) homelessness in a particular way, the remaining three dimensions are still less broad in scope than in the voluntary sector/client base discourse.

### **On the division of a population**

The work of housing providers in allocating housing is about the coordination of large numbers of people wishing to be housed with available housing, together with the ability to differentiate between these people, i.e. the rational and efficient deployment of a population. This requires the development of techniques to manage these people, and the development of a relevant vocabulary, i.e. a means of knowing, and a way of representing/ordering people, or in other words, use of the disciplines to change ‘confused, useless or dangerous multitudes into ordered multiplicities’.

(Foucault, 1977a, p.148) He was, of course, referring to the birth of prisons here, but the principle of ordering/ranking is equally applicable to the work of the housing agencies.

*‘One must eliminate the effects of imprecise distributions, the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation ... [the discipline’s] aim was to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, ... to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits. It was a procedure, therefore, aimed at knowing, mastering and using.’ (Foucault, 1977a, p.143)*

The distribution of individuals in space, or the location and fixing of them conceptually, whilst identified by Foucault as the realm of the disciplines, is very clearly also the realm of housing agencies. This distribution may be enacted using a series of techniques, and Foucault (1977a) identified three primary methods of effecting this: enclosure, partitioning, and ranking. That is, the creation of a closed space, a one-to-one relationship between individual and place, and the hierarchical ordering of said individuals. In other words, the process at work in knowing both population and individual. Discipline is therefore about organising classification techniques and their tabulation, and about introducing individuals into said tabulation.

The spatial/geographical separation of a place (enclosure) is seen in Foucault’s work on the asylum (1967), the hospital (1973), and the prison (1977a). From the earliest attempts to deal with homelessness (the workhouse) to the large hostels (now defunct) and current emergency shelters, there is a clear practice within housing provision of shutting in the incumbents. The boundary between mainstream housing and homeless

provision is 'policed' by the disciplines, a discourse which categorises individuals as 'deserving' (in priority need) and 'undeserving'. (A similar boundary discourse can be found in feminist writings, with the division between the public and private spheres.) People are classified via a strict set of criteria before they can even be included on the 'housing register', and thereafter their position relative to others on that list is defined by a 'points' system, with points being allocated for items such as pregnancy, number of children, disability, and so forth. This latter practice constitutes a partitioning of the population. It involves both spatial and analytical division but also a political ordering of people, since this practice is encoded in housing law.

Townley (Ibid.) states that there are two methods of comparing: taxinomia and mathesis (i.e. ordering via a taxonomy, or through measurement). These define a relation, showing both equality and difference, and imply a continuum between things. They allow both the ordering of a multiple and of an individual. They are systems of recording, classifying, and measuring, which is the operation of Foucault's governmentality.

The classification schemes used within housing agencies to allow an individual a place on the waiting list are a method of locating individuals in reference to the whole, and therefore operate to reduce individual singularities. This operates even within the newer 'housing shop' form of access to housing, wherein applicants bid on available housing, rather than simply being allocated, as was formerly the case. The points system, a method of ranking or scaling, produces gradations of need, and is

therefore a disciplinary mathesis to determine who is seen in relation to whom, i.e. a hierarchical seriation of a population.

For Foucault the question would then be how, why and with effects, the boundaries became imposed, maintained or breached rather than whether they are effective/accurate, or a reflection of reality: the application of such gradations is not only a disciplinary process, but also a *normalising* one – the one end of the scale having positive outcomes, the other negative (i.e. denial of housing access).

*'The distribution according to ranks or grades has a double role; it marks the gaps, hierarchizes qualities, skills and aptitudes but it also punishes and rewards.'* (Foucault, 1977a, p.181)

Ranking thus enables individuals to be known through being differentiated from one another, (Townley, Op. Cit.) - it measures/hierarchizes according to value, ability, level and nature of individuals.

*'Disciplines characterize, classify, specialize; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchizes individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate.'* (Foucault, 1997a, p.223)

## **On articulating the provider-recipient contract**

In the previous section, the use of disciplinary practices to distribute individuals in space was discussed; however, the division and articulation of the housing provider-recipient relationship temporally and physically is also of interest, and may be considered in a similar way to that employed by Foucault with regard to labour.

Although less constrained than the ‘scientific’ management of labour, access to housing is also delimited by temporal requirements that need to be adhered to if the recipient is to be accommodated, or indeed to remain in accommodation. One instance of this is the requirement to confirm on an annual basis that an individual wishes to remain on the waiting list. This may combine with strictures placed on the individual by other agencies, such as Social Security. The waiting list itself is not static, since over time more individuals may join who have a higher ranking in ‘points’, or in ‘priority need’. Furthermore, councils may insist on an obligatory waiting period before an application is actively considered. These practices are articulations of temporal division within the housing applicant list.

Physical actions are also constrained within the accommodation process. In many emergency shelters, those actively engaged in drug/alcohol abuse are disbarred despite their urgent need for shelter. Indeed, all housing contracts are governed by lists of ‘rules’ as to how one can behave once one gains access to them – even private owners have to follow regulations regarding what they may do with their property. In private rented accommodation, one may be constrained as to putting up pictures, or maintenance of the garden, and council tenants are required to keep the inside of their dwelling in good order and to report any major repairs needed. In general, the less permanent the form of accommodation, the greater the physical constraints on what actions one may take within that physical space. Whilst these processes in themselves do not constitute what Foucault referred to as ‘the capitalization of time’, it can be argued that the provision of secure accommodation is, in this day and age, a necessary precursor to a place in the labour process, and is therefore an initial step in that capitalisation. If the capitalisation of time is ‘the detail of activity through time

related to cost' (Townley, Ibid.), then the interaction through time of both the homeless and the housed (the recipients) with the housing agencies, with the inherent costs of these over time, including the cost of 'voids' (empty dwellings that still require maintenance), is clearly an exemplar.

### **On creating the homeless subject**

Homeless individuals must first be rendered visible – there are systems in place to check the veracity of their claim for housing. Just as in Foucault's study of power/knowledge (1980, p.125) 'power had to be able to gain access to the bodies of individuals, their acts, attitudes and modes of every day behaviour', so do we find in the field of housing provision – especially that of voluntary provision, where conforming to specified norms is a prerequisite of access.

Likewise, making aspects of homeless individuals more visible affects the constitution of the individual – codification of the individual and hence codification of activities produces knowledge each of the other, outlining the parameters of individuality.

*'The successful control of an object ... requires a degree of understanding of its forces, its reactions, its strengths and weaknesses. The more it is known the more controllable it becomes.'* (Garland, 1987, p.853)

How, then, is the individual rendered an object of knowledge? In Foucault's frame of reference, this may be either be by being subjects of scientific study, or by using 'technologies of the self' to see themselves and to be seen in a particular way.

(Foucault, 1983) Foucault acknowledges two practices/technologies to achieve the latter: examination, and confession.

Examination is a method of observing, and is a disciplinary process with several distinct operations: measuring in quantitative terms, and hierarchizing in terms of value, the abilities, level and nature of individuals. It renders individual differences/capacities both visible and invisible, and hence more calculable and manageable. 'It is the process whereby individuals become compartmentalized, measured and reported, for the purpose of administrative decision-making' (Townley, Ibid.). It could be argued that much extant work on youth homelessness comes into this category, particularly that carried out by local authorities to enable themselves to develop housing strategies to meet their legal obligations. This examination has two effects: individualization and individuation. The former refers to the process of making the individual more identifiable, as against other individuals (differentiation), the latter to attempts to identify components of individuality. 'The over all effect is to create the individual as an analysable, describable subject'. (Burrell, 1988, p.202)

The difficulty with this is, in management terms, that: 'The individual knows ... more than anyone about his own capabilities, needs, strengths and weaknesses, and goals .... No available methods can provide the superior with the knowledge he needs to make such decisions ... yield at best an imperfect picture.' (McGregor, 1972, p.136)

Accessing self-knowledge in Foucault's terms is done by means of the 'confession'. (Foucault, 1981, 1985, 1986, 1988a, 1988b) Foucault acknowledges this principle as working in a range of fields – e.g. education, medicine, work. In applications for

work, this can take the form of blank spaces in which one outlines one's strengths and weaknesses, or shows how one overcame difficulties. In the youth homelessness research literature, it often takes the form of 'authentic voices', i.e. direct quotes from homeless people about their experiences. These confessional procedures operate by making the individual break with discretion/forgetfulness, and they also are processes that confirm identity, constituting themselves as individuals. Such self-constitution is clearly evidenced when homeless people seek out each other's company and band together for protection against a hostile 'other'. In some cases, the 'experienced' street person (i.e. has been sleeping rough for some time) will show the newer incumbent how to survive, provided they do not see the newcomer as a threat, and in this way act as a 'mentor'. The hostile 'other' can also be understood as an attempt to force the homeless individual to conform to perceived societal norms – but the injunction to 'get a job', which can be backed up with physical violence, does not necessarily have much real meaning for an individual who is desperately trying to make it through to the next meal, so perhaps these 'norms' need adjustment. Be that as it may, it is still an example of efforts to enforce conformity.

All these things are procedures that constitute the individual, with or without individual engagement/participation, inculcating required habits/rules/behaviour/norms.

*'The status of the individual, i.e. his/her right to be different and hence everything that makes him/her truly individual is lost in these processes.'*  
*(Townley, Op. Cit.)*

So whether it is mathesis by examination, or taxonomy via confession, the delineation of the individual to enhance manageability tends to erode that individuality. The consequences of that erosion in housing terms, can be seen in those homeless individuals who do not meet criteria for assistance, and in a wider sense in society's treatment of travelling people (whether New Agers, Irish Travellers, or Romanies).

### **Implications for homeless research**

Given the Foucauldian stance taken, research will need to be refocused, both in the contemporary arena, and with regard to historical data. Using the focus of power/knowledge duality, the locus shifts from probing the veracity or falsehood of the homelessness discourse to the way in which the duality functions. It is therefore a question of the way in which knowledge is produced, and the effects generated thereby. The author has, to date, been unable to locate exact examples of Foucauldian approaches to homelessness issues, although there have been a few attempts to apply these approaches in the Systems arena (Valero-Silva, 1994, 1995; Flood, 1991). However, research might well be directed at the politics of how homelessness came to be defined, and the temporal institutionalisation of these definitions.

Approaches to homeless research (of which youth homelessness is a sub-set) have traditionally sought to define and enumerate the homeless population, and have thus sought to render their behaviour predictable and calculable. Government involvement had increased the drive to fully articulate the problem. In 2003, local councils in England and Wales were obliged to carry out needs research into youth homelessness to formulate housing strategy for 2004 onwards. The voluntary

organisations were also involved in similar research to enable them to plan future resource commitments (my own unpublished research undertaken with Lincolnshire Education and Accommodation Project (2002) and FAST (2003) being examples of this). Throughout the discipline, discourses of measurement/ classification/ recording/calculation are legitimised and disseminated via professional journals, publications, professional associations, and in meetings. Those investigations not 'focused' on quantification (how many) focus their research on reasons for the phenomenon (why). Foucauldian thought shifts toward the 'how' of power/knowledge functioning in place of these issues.

Much of the research discusses the issue of culture (particularly key to Systems approaches), but this is not undertaken to the depth of analysis that Foucauldian approaches would require – the search with Foucauldian thought would be for systems of patterning within agencies dealing with homeless issues, and within the homeless population itself. There would also be a search for dominant patterns in different countries – much in the way Berghman (1995) has tracked patterns of social exclusion across Europe – but with an accent on methods for the partitioning of populations, the maintenance of strategies to maintain enclosure, the articulation of physical and temporal elements, and the ways in which the individual is rendered visible.

One might also consider the Foucauldian analysis as an heuristic device, introducing a different viewpoint and providing a framework that reorients research questions, together with a basis for a systematic comparative and historical analysis. The construction of a genealogy is called for, i.e. 'a form of history which can account for

the constitution of knowledges, discourses and domains of objects' (Foucault, 1980, p.117). There is a need for an historical analysis of the rules by which the homelessness discourse was formed, thus illuminating those things about homelessness which seem 'natural' or 'objective' in the here and now, and especially any 'unquestioned rationales' (Townley, Ibid.). This discursive analysis would demand the examination of the situation that initiated the discourses of homelessness, the consequences arising therefrom, its practical field of development, those accorded the right to speak, the legitimating institutional sites for the discourse, the position in which it sites its subjects, the things it sees as valid, and those who have access to that discourse (Foucault, 1972, 1991a, 1991b). This does not mean that it can be derived from economic criteria, nor from institutional developments, which might rather be seen as having implications for the conditions under which the discourse emerged and for its functioning, but not the discourse itself. There are also other fields that impact upon the homelessness discourse, such as educational, health, and legal discourses, and there has been some considerable work done on the relationship of homelessness to these issues, though not to the author's knowledge a Foucauldian comparison of the relevant discourses themselves.

## **Summary**

In conclusion, then, the basis for analysis of homelessness has been identified as the nature of the provider-recipient exchange. Since this relationship is not fully determined, the question then arises as to how society organises relational, exchange activity. Foucault's power/knowledge duality was used as a concept to indicate how homelessness practice works to impose order on that which is inherently undecidable. Trying to clarify this exchange demands 'effective instruments for the formulation

and accumulation of knowledge – methods of observation, techniques of registration, procedures for investigation and research, apparatuses of control’ (Foucault, 1980, p.102). The building blocks of knowledge in homelessness discourse operate via rules of classification, ordering and distribution; definitions of actions; the fixing of ‘points’/scales; and procedural rules, all of which give rise to a separate homelessness discourse, and a languaging pertaining to same. Mechanisms of registration, assessment, and classification serve to show how such a body of knowledge enable the objectification of those on whom it is applied, as well as locating these people as an object of knowledge. Schemes which classify ‘the homeless’, rather than simplifying/clarifying the experiences and needs of the homeless, serve inexorably as a regulatory mechanism to enforce current societal norms.

Approaching homelessness from a Foucauldian perspective reveals an alternative approach to perceiving and ordering material. Instead of looking at functional terms of mathesis and taxonomy, the emphasis shifts to how homelessness practice works to generate knowledge and power. It is these practices which place individuals in geographical and conceptual space, and which order/articulate the operating homeless process. Those processes which give rise to individualisation and individuation also give rise to an analysable and describable homeless subject. This allows homelessness research to be seen as the ‘will to knowledge’, i.e. a system of knowledge and a modality of power, and is a sufficiently detailed approach to address the ‘micropolitics of power’. By providing examples of ‘knowing’ the homeless (or sub-sets of same) as a population, its effect can percolate down to the individual, enabling highly individualised action which can be related to an intelligible whole.

By so doing, it thus provides a basis for reorienting current, historical, and comparative analyses of homelessness.

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