

Theoretical approaches in recent academic studies into homelessness in the Netherlands

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Until the eighties, academic interest in the issue of homelessness was restricted in the Netherlands. Around 1990 researchers began to take an interest in the subject. Several small scale, and a few more extensive studies were conducted. For the larger part these focused on gathering data empirically and making recommendations for social workers and policymakers. The emphasis was on the practical applicability of results, not so much on the development of theories on homelessness. Quite often theoretical reflection is lacking. There were also some dissertations that did pay specific attention to the theoretical basis of homelessness. Since 1990 five such doctoral theses have been presented in the Netherlands. Four of these will be discussed on the following pages, focusing more particularly on the theoretical lines of approach that were chosen in these studies and their conceptual basis. These dissertations focus on the following respective by-aspects of homelessness: (1) the life-world of lodging house tenants; (2) homeless young people, attachment and social relations; (3) the construction of homeless identities and (4) the development of homelessness over time. The final paragraph contains some remarks on the theoretical approaches that were used.

1. Life-world of Lodging house tenants

In 1996 the dissertation *Finding the strength, The life-world of Lodging House Tenants*, by the sociologist Spierings appeared. The study explores the circumstances, lifestyles and experiences of lodging house tenants in Rotterdam. The study refers to a type of lodging that is similar to what is termed in other countries: Flophouses (New York), Single Room Occupancy hotels (New York), Rooming houses (Chicago) or Lodging houses (Birmingham).

The study is based on 33 life histories and detailed observations of the physical and social environment of the lodging house system. In addition the main actors in the everyday life-world of lodging house tenants are interviewed: the landlords and housing inspectors. Different techniques for data collection are used: a survey, open interviews, documents and observations during interventions by housing inspectors. The tenants are not regarded as separate from their surroundings. Instead they are studied in the context of a physical and social environment - a milieu that is capable of hampering or facilitating their ability to adjust and adapt. The study describes the daily life-world of lodging house tenants, who they are, how they live and with whom.

An important theoretical concept Spierings uses, is the concept of people's life-worlds. It is a sociological approach that attempts to gain insight into people's life-world, without being at all judgemental. The author bases himself on the theoretical frameworks of the sociologists Schutz and Habermas.

The concept of 'life-world' in knowledge sociology is derived from theories of Schutz (1974), in which empiricism is defined as people's daily experienced reality. People interpret and know the meaning of their experiences in daily reality. People try to analyse and understand the intentions of social actions on the basis of their basic stock of knowledge. This knowledge of personal experience consists of prejudice, judgement, convictions, expectations etcetera, and is intersubjective by nature. Based on everyday experience people tend to refine their knowledge in the course of time and if need

be they adjust it. Homelessness is a frightening meaning category for lodging house tenants. Their actions are aimed at preventing this very situation. In this study, point of departure is the empiricism of the daily life-world. It is based on an action perspective in which people create their own reality on the basis of daily interpretations of this reality.

In his analysis of society the sociologist Habermas (1981) departs from Shutz's concept of life-world, but he attempts to explain phenomena on a system level. Society should be conceptualised as a life-world and as a system. The concept life-world refers to the interpreted relationship between the objective (object), social (standard) and inner (experience) world. People are products of their own actions, but also of traditions, mutually solidary groups and of socialisation processes. Therefore, people's personal situations are not merely the result of their own actions, but also of social textures, methods of organisation of facilities. Rules and regulations are the cause that certain groups can not participate to the full in society, according to Habermas. Increasingly, rules and regulations become barriers that could result in social exclusion.

One of Spierings conclusions is that in order to help the vulnerable, one has to start with the possibilities and needs of these individuals and groups. The provision of social work and social services is apparently unable to help all vulnerable people and groups, as is shown in this study. People with complex problems are not being helped effectively. They appear to be falling out of the system. Many social provisions and facilities designed to ease the consequences of social exclusion of vulnerable groups have often become the actual cause of their exclusion from society.

2. Homeless young people, attachment and social relations

In 2001 the developmental sociologist Roorda published a thesis called *Attachment, social relations and homelessness*. The study aims to contribute to the explanation of homelessness originating from Bowlby's attachment theory (1969/1984). The central issue of the dissertation is: to what extent can the quality of attachment be considered to be a causal factor in the individual process leading to homelessness in adulthood? It is a case-controlled study. Relevant information has been gathered among adult and young homeless and non-homeless persons. The recruitment, selection and the collection of data of adult homeless and non-homeless persons were effected within this study, while information about homeless young persons and their reference group had been collected during previous research.

Roorda states that attachment plays an important part in the origins of homelessness. Homelessness is considered to be a condition of community and social isolation with increasing alienation from society. In the past a large number of studies on homelessness have concluded that the childhood of many homeless people is characterised by unfavourable family circumstances, accompanied by a high degree of instability, rejection and lack of love. In this study a research model has been developed, based on Bowlby's theory concerning attachment. The key thesis of the theory is based on the hypothesis that the need to become attached to a protective individual is one of the primary needs of the child. The biological function of behaviour is organized within the attachment system and originates from a protective survival need of the child. A person's feelings and expectations with regard to the availability and accessibility of others and the feeling that one is worthy of care and able to receive love, becomes established and recorded in the internal working model of attachment. These mental models are the guidelines and reference points for future social transactions with the environment, and in particular for the progress, expectations and the interpretations of their own and other people's ways of dealing with relations. An attached child will be better able to approach the world with confidence and, when faced with potentially alarming situations, is likely to tackle them effectively, or to seek help in doing so, according to Bowlby. The theoretical construction of the internal working model of attachment is a key concept when studying attachment in the relation to personal development.

In the attachment theory the possible results of affective and emotional neglect in childhood are seen as highly significant for the later social-emotional development of the individual. There is a connection between the relational experiences in (early) childhood and adolescence and the nature and quality of later interpersonal relationships. An unbalanced development with regard to attachment is

considered to be a risk factor that can lead to an increased vulnerability of the individual during stressful and/or negative environmental circumstances and events.

The general conclusion of Roorda's study, based on the theoretical notion and the results of the statistical examination of homeless and non-homeless adults, is that attachment factors can definitely be identified as determinants for the development of homelessness.

3. The development of homelessness over time

In 2002 Van Doorn's *Time on the streets* was published. This study examines the processes that underlie the episodic nature of homelessness. The problem definition focuses on its origination, continuation and termination. The study is longitudinally structured and was conducted in Utrecht. It focuses mainly on the street population: those who actually live on the street. The main source of data gathering consists of the monitoring of two cohorts of respondents. The first concerned 64 persons who at the outset of this study were practically all homeless. They were monitored during 1993 and 2000. The second concerned a cohort of 20 former homeless persons that were monitored between 1997 and 2000. The method used was that of qualitative data gathering. It is a sociological study mainly, in which use was also made of insight from psychology and anthropology.

The conceptual framework of this study was based on two perspectives. The first perspective concerned the development in the lives of homeless people and the biographical elements in it. The second perspective was directed at the relationship between homelessness and its institutional environment. Subject of research was the way in which government measures and institutional interventions in the lives of homeless people come together and accumulate.

This study makes use of the career perspective. Reference is made to, amongst others, Becker (1963) and Luckenbill and Best (1981). These authors, as did some other adepts of the Chicago School, presented in greater detail concepts of 'deviant careers'. These concepts still seem useful, although some critical remarks are made.

In addition, this study makes use of the theories of Goffman frequently. In *Asylums* (1986) Goffman describes the nature of total situations and their residents. This refers to institutions such as psychiatric hospitals and prisons, that provide a total care package to their inmates. Residents are offered a place to live and to sleep, as well as meals. Staff members generally manage the residents' income. Daytime and leisure time occupation usually takes place within the walls of the institution and the residents' social network is restricted to staff members and fellow residents. It is characteristic to such institutions that residents gradually lose their independence: they hospitalise. Goffman's body of thought was applied in the longitudinal study to provide insight into certain processes of homelessness, that are similar to hospitalisation effects. Another application of Goffman's theories (1959; 1963) concerns the allocation of social roles and stigmas. Goffman describes amongst other things the discrepancy that occurs in the way in which people that have experienced a considerable descent on the social ladder see themselves and the way in which the environment 'labels' them. Whereas meanwhile the environment attributes a lower social status to them, the image they have of themselves is usually still based on their former social identity and roles. In other words: their interior and exterior perspectives clash. This results in identity and role conflicts and often in loyalty conflicts as well. In addition, Goffman describes how the loss of former social roles and status in society can create 'a sense of personal failure' in people. In the longitudinal study many of the mental mechanisms Goffman describes were also found among the homeless.

The findings regarding the two perspectives that combined constitute the conceptual framework of the follow up study, can be summarised as follows. The first perspective was aimed at developments in life. The main conclusion in this respect is that great importance should be attached to the influence of culture and socialisation processes. The loss of a house and the decline towards the streets set a process in motion of integration into street culture. This contributes considerably to the continuation of homelessness and opposes a return to regular society. The second perspective was aimed at the highly problematic relationship between homeless people and the institutional environment. In the explanation of this the concept of culture once more occupies an important position. Institutional culture is at odds with street culture. The perceptions of reality that agencies have conflict with the perceptions of reality held by the homeless. Many homeless people have a

dualistic approach towards (care) agencies. For agencies present solutions to their problems but at the same time they are a part of them. They contribute to both their social inclusion and exclusion.

4. The construction of homeless identities

In 2003 the dissertation *Wonen in een verhaal* (Living inside a story) by Hoogenboezem was published. This author's roots are in general social science: a new discipline that combines approaches from sociology, psychology and anthropology. The study focuses on the life stories of over 40 homeless men and women, from various cities. Nineteen of these life stories are at the centre of the book.

Life stories are viewed as constructions in which narrators form their identity. The narrative concept of identity emphasises that constructing an identity results from reconciling both public and private aspects of life. Taking both into account, it presents identity as a major theoretical social scientific concept. The study analyses the interaction between individual and structural levels by addressing research questions like: What narrative forms and co-themes do homeless narrators use in constructing their identity and what is the nature of these identities? How do homeless narrators relate to their past, present and future in their life stories, and how does this influence their ability to cope in late modern society? To what extent are homeless men and women able and willing to remain themselves within their everyday institutional context?

Based on interview analysis, the author distinguishes five different narrative forms. First there are stories characterised by ups and downs. Narrators who use this form express positive and negative episodes in their life stories. A second group of homeless narrators tends to integrate their life stories around a constant theme emphasising a specific identity throughout their life course. The third group underlines a break or rupture, and their stories contain an event or series of events giving rise to an identity discontinuity. Their old way of interpreting life no longer applies. They seek new ways to give meaning to their lives. Fourth, there are narrators who shape their life story as a tragedy, and in so doing they express the feeling that things are falling apart and that change for the better is unlikely. The fifth narrative form refers to homeless people that are unable to achieve some structure in their life story. They narrate a chain of isolated anecdotes that are hardly connected to each other.

The study also presents a second typology, based on the ways in which the homeless orient themselves on the institutional context. It is shown in this typology that the homeless from the fifth narrative of the first typology –the ones that are hardly capable of providing some structure in their life story- also connect to institutions the least.

Hoogenboezem bases her analysis of the way in which the interviewed relate the present, the past and the future in their life stories, on the theoretical framework of Giddens' 'late modernity' (1984). Giddens' point of departure is that people are action capable and expert actors. They have knowledge of their own actions. They are capable of directing their behaviour reflexively and of controlling it and of providing information on the objective and motives of their behaviour. The capacity to put knowledge into words explicitly Giddens terms the discursive awareness of actors. Social science research –Giddens states- should focus on this. The key to insight into the social order lies within the changing relations between the production and reproduction of social life by the people that are a part of it: in their narrative expressions, in their life stories. In his social analysis Giddens states that life in late modernity requires a constant orientation on the future, in which the reconstruction of the past is accompanied by the anticipation of the probable course of the future. By telling others about themselves people intervene in their future existence. The way in which storytellers position themselves influences their scope of action. In late modern society, in which the exposition of autonomy is dominant, freedom of choice and make ability walk hand in hand with the risks of modernity. Society requires of people that they are capable of assessing these risks correctly, of exploring the future and of developing a strategic life planning.

Hoogenboezem concludes that problematic identity constructions may hamper homeless narrators in their participation in late modern society, and in particularly in their relation to institutions.

Conclusion

As stated before, academic interest in the theme of homelessness was rather restricted in the Netherlands until the eighties of the last century. Although research into this subject is still relatively scarce and development of theories is still in its infancy, it would nevertheless appear that of late there has been a development that indicates an increased academic interest in this theme and a firmer theoretical basis for it.

The scarce academic studies on homelessness that were published prior to 1990, were conducted by social psychologists in particular and mainly based on an individual-psychological approach to homelessness. In the Dutch research tradition, this approach could be considered a dominant paradigm for a long period of time. As a consequence, structural explanations of the phenomenon continued to be overlooked in general, and there was little attempt to link micro and macro level aspects. A shift in the research tradition appears to develop nowadays. This is an assumption only because on the basis of but a few dissertations that appeared in a relatively short period of time, clear conclusions can hardly be drawn. In any case, the recent academic studies described earlier provide a greater variety of research approaches that were used and of the underlying theoretical concepts. The authors attempt to describe both micro- and macro perspectives and to disentangle the interaction between them. Hoogenboezem for example attempts –by means of the conceptual frameworks of Giddens- to link the life stories and identities of the homeless to the requirements modern society sets to citizens. And Spierings too attempts –by means of the conceptual framework of Habermas- to present more clearly the influence of the system world on the life-world of the lodging house tenants.

Furthermore, in the described studies attention was being paid –more than used to be the case- to the methodological set up of the studies and the accounting for the research design. Although the described dissertations all made use of the qualitative method, there seems to develop a greater diversity in methodological approaches. For example, in the developmental psychological study of Roorda (in which by the way the emphasis is on the micro level of individual attachment, and less attention is paid to macro factors such as social developments) a contribution was made to the methodological enhancement of the tradition of research into homeless people, by testing hypotheses on the basis of Bowlby's theories, and by selecting a research design in which use is made of a control group. And in methodological respect too, the study in which homeless people are being monitored during several years provides more starting points for gaining a clear view of the dynamic processes of homelessness. This is supplementary to the 'point in time' studies that are available at present.

The theoretical concepts used in the studies described earlier, provide insight into an increasing number of by-aspects of homelessness and render more visible the interrelation between several factors leading up to homelessness. However, they still leave a number of questions unanswered. For example, the intriguing question why homelessness hits men in particular and women to a far lesser extent only. Apparently there are gender specific elements that are co-determinant for the risk of becoming or continuing to be homeless. Neither the theoretical frameworks from developmental psychology nor the more sociologically oriented frameworks in which micro and macro perspectives are linked, have as yet come up with a conclusive explanation for this.

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