

BRITISH HOMELESSNESS: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Over the years many theories about homelessness have developed in the UK. The theories have both contributed to the understanding of homelessness and fuelled the homeless industry's push for more research. The research methods used and the outcomes of that research depend, to some degree, on the theoretical framework used. This paper argues that no single theoretical framework seems to fully explain British homelessness; its' causes, solutions, culture, its cyclical nature, etc. This paper proposes that realistically, to gain a holistic view of British homelessness an amalgam of parts of theories is needed. This means that a more complex triangulation of research methods is needed if homelessness as a whole is to be understood. The ideological theory used is also important because it shapes and informs the definitions of homelessness used and determines the research methods and types of conclusions found.

The paper is based on research presented in the October, England CUHP. It was conducted for the London School of Economics Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion. The research looked at people's routes into through and out of homelessness, using first hand accounts from people living or who have lived through homelessness. It is based on 48 life-story interviews, 52 formal and informal in depth interviews, with homeless and ex-homeless people and over 1020 hours of observation (on the streets, in hostels and drop-in centres). To counterbalance this information 24 interviews were carried out with people who had never been roofless but had experienced several triggers of rooflessness.

This paper will show the main theories of British homelessness, indicating the most popular theories in use. The paper then moves on to discuss two newer theories, which are currently under used when looking at homelessness; Structuration and Risk society.

Main theories used in the UK

Table 1 shows the main theories used in existing British literature to understand homelessness. The column 'aspect of homelessness researched' demonstrates how I used the theories to research homelessness. I think this table demonstrates how different theories can be used to understand the different aspects of homelessness and homelessness as a whole. I want to argue that by using a variety of theories I was able to achieve a comprehensive view of homelessness from a variety of different perspectives. The aim was to answer the question: If we know all the causes of British homelessness and have found solutions, that have been implemented, then why does it still persist? With this in mind I wanted to look anew at homelessness, look at it in a way that had not been done before.

Table 1

THEORETICAL METHODS USED

Theory		Aspect of homelessness Researched	
Functionalism		What is Home - definitions and the function of home within society.	
		Understanding the existence of homelessness as a phenomenon within society and how society reacts to that phenomenon	
		Maintenance of social order & social systems through shared norms & values	
		Homelessness as dysfunctional behaviour	
Structuralism		How legislation & the welfare state work to alleviate homelessness The definitions they use.	
		How governments work to alleviate homelessness	
		Organisations working with the homeless, how they work, their purpose, who they work with.	
Deviance	Functionalist	How individuals become excluded from society & form subgroups with their own norms & values	
	Structuralist	The role of subcultures, their hierarchies	
Symbolic Interactionism		Homeless culture and the impact of homelessness on the individuals' self-perceptions.	
		The way the individual acts, reacts and interacts within the homeless culture and mainstream society.	
		The way people become re-integrated in mainstream society.	
	Social Psychology	The way the norms & values of homeless culture are absorbed & transmitted. How people learn to be homeless.	
	Labelling Theory		The way people perceive themselves within mainstream society. How this contributes to social exclusion & inclusion
			The way people re-invent themselves as homeless person
			The way society, public and voluntary sector organisations ascribe the label homeless. The impact of this.
	Normalisation		People's ability to regulate themselves & conform to whatever the social norm is around them (homeless culture, drug culture or mainstream society)
		Resettlement process - trying to make people conform to a way of behaving and being.	
		The medicalisation of homelessness - people need treating, making better	
Constructivism		The stereo-types used to describe homeless people in annual reports and promotional literature.	
		Evolution of social policies for homelessness	
		Evolution of public perceptions of the homeless	
		An examination of the homeless industry	
		Evolution of homeless legislation	
Agency		How the individual acts & reacts within society & the structures of that society	
Structuration		Looking at the interaction between people, society & structures. Including the way people interpret the law, the help they are offered & their position within society	
		The interpretation of social exclusion & inclusion in terms of both mainstream society & the homeless culture.	
		How people use the resettlement process and succeed or fail	
Risk		A look at predictors of homelessness & who is in a position to spot those likely to become homeless	
		The obstacles & hurdles faced in resettlement, & what acts as buffers to prevent repeat episodes of homelessness	
		The strategies used by homeless people to avoid homelessness and/or resettle after homelessness	

To do this it was necessary to break free from traditional ways of researching homelessness. This meant trying out different methods, or at least unusual combinations of methods and looking at homelessness from different theoretical stances. This meant enhancing the strong points of existing theories and complimenting them with underused theories.

The most popular theories used in British homelessness research were derived from the ideological stance of British society at the time. Historically, British ideology had been that homelessness was caused by a personal failing or weakness of the homeless individual (Slack 1990; Thompson 1990; Rose 1988). This had a direct impact on public policy (Archard 1979). Systems for dealing with homelessness at that time were punitive and demeaning (e.g. the work houses Crowther 1981). With the introduction of the welfare state between 1945 and 1948 through a series of statutes (Glennister 1995) a shift in ideology took place, shifting the focus towards the structures of society as a contributor to homelessness. This eventually led to the first legislation to directly combat homelessness – the 1977 Housing (and Homeless Persons) Act. However, this legislation failed to include single people. Arguably it was still the ideology of society that by thrift and hard work a single person could avoid homelessness (e.g. Glennister 1995). Any single person not able to avoid homelessness, was therefore, by default not thrifty and hard working, they must be feckless and lazy (which were perceived to be personal weaknesses and failings). Thus British homelessness research became pre-occupied with the dichotomies of Agency versus Structure. Deviance also became a strong part of British literature as homeless people were seen to be deviating from the social norm and therefore did not work their way out of poverty or homelessness and did not fit the structures set up to prevent homelessness (e.g. the labour market, national insurance against unemployment and sickness).

Between 1970 and 1990 the emphasis was still on causes of homelessness. By this time projects and researchers began to observe increasing numbers of repeat episodes of homelessness. Investigations suggested that this was a combination of Structure and Agency factors that were leading to both homelessness and people repeatedly becoming homeless. In the 1980s and 1990s further legislation was introduced, which placed homelessness firmly within the housing domain. Homelessness was relegated to a subsection of the housing acts. Throughout the 1990's the government led a sustained period of research into homelessness via the Rough Sleeper's Initiatives. This mixture of research led action and checks transformed the way homelessness was dealt with through voluntary sector organisations, but did little to change government policy and attitudes.

The theory used to interpret the phenomenon of homelessness influences definitions of homelessness. Thus agency theorists tend to look at causes of homelessness in terms of events that happen to individuals (e.g. child abuse, domestic violence, divorce). Structuralist theorists (and organisations like Shelter) see the shortage of suitable affordable housing as the main cause of homelessness. Deviance theorists see that it is the dysfunction of the individual, their family or the organisations designed to help them that causes homelessness. Thus it is not surprising that until very recently, legislation focuses on resolving structural issues for the homeless, voluntary sector organisations until the turn of this century were primarily pre-occupied with crisis management of homelessness and resettlement. Resettlement mainly involved how to get a homeless person into accommodation. This then

highlighted a new phenomenon where individuals bobbed in and out of accommodation and homelessness – the ‘revolving door syndrome’. Again it was perceived that a mixture of structures and agency were to blame for this.

Throughout this time, the emphasis in research was on the causes of homelessness or repeated episodes of homelessness. It wasn’t until the late 1990s that researchers shifted from their preoccupation with causes of homelessness and were able to consider the possibility of triggers rather than causes (Randall and Brown 1999). Triggers that are inextricably linked and entwined that when acting together especially if in quick succession can trigger roofless episodes (Ravenhill 2003). There is no one single cause, no one single structural factor or personality flaw. In fact, it is not even the triggers themselves that result in homelessness or rooflessness. It is the interaction between triggers, life events, the political or legislative climate of the day, the individual’s reaction and interaction with their circumstances and time that together contribute to homelessness.

It was from this point that I wanted to move research into another dimension. Little research had been done using the last two theories in Table 1; Structuration and Risk Society. These two formed the dominant theories used in my research (Ravenhill 2003).

Structuration theory focuses on the individual's role within a larger structure, highlighting the duality of and interaction between structure and agency. Neither social structures nor individual independent actors can operate without the other existing (Giddens 1984). This is because whereas structures can make social action possible, social action or social interaction actually creates those structures (Neale 1997). For Giddens, rather than society controlling individuals, it merely places limits or boundaries on the choices available to people. Thus even groups that are known to have limited choices (e.g. the socially excluded or homeless) still have the power and ability to resist, they do not have to behave in fixed patterns and ways.

There are a number of common biographical, behavioural and structural characteristics among homeless people, which have been identified as causes or triggers of their homelessness. Most single homeless people have experienced multiple triggers and have complex and multiple needs, especially long-term rough sleepers. For example,

One 14 year olds mother died, her father wasn't coping and sent her to boarding school. The young girl wasn't coping and her behaviour changes she became aggressive and rude and alienated her teachers. She then started to drink heavily and dating older men until she was expelled at the age of 15. She moved in with her 40 year old boyfriend. As she is nearly 16 her father lets her go. When nearly 17 she has had enough of the way her boyfriend is treating her and realises that what she is experiencing is Domestic violence. She contacts an auntie who removes her from the boyfriend's home and gets her into a hostel that will rehabilitate and help her.

It is this complex nexus of triggers and responses, the interplay between and chain reactions caused by the biographical, behavioural and structural characteristics that becomes part of the object of scrutiny for Structuration theorists. This is the gap in homeless research identified by structurationists. A gap caused by the inadvertent

focus on fixed patterns and fixed trajectories into homelessness (Rosengard 2002; Anderson and Tulloch 2000; Fitzpatrick 2000) or the preoccupation with personal failings and homeless careers (Randall and Brown 1993; 1996; Chamberlain 2001; May 2000; Pavialin et al 1993). There was little research into what happens to people who nearly became homeless but managed to avoid it (e.g. Ravenhill 2003), no comprehensive research into British homeless culture (Ravenhill 2003) and little done on people's coping strategies and their own attempts to avoid rooflessness (Ravenhill 2003). At the commencement of the research there had been very little research looking at prevention (Dickens and Woodfield 2004; Quilgars et al 2004) or family roles (Smith et al 1998). Structurationists would argue that researchers need to look at both those who did become homeless and those who avoided homelessness, to get a balanced view of how agency (individual actions) and structure have worked together to produce the outcome (homeless or not homeless).

For structurationists, homelessness cannot be reduced to arguments that the homeless are entirely responsible for their own problems or victims of circumstances beyond their control, nor can it be reduced to either a housing problem or a welfare problem caused by either structural or individual factors (e.g. Neale 1997). For structurationists, simple binary oppositions are insufficient when researching the complex nature of society and human actions, reactions and interactions.

The nature of structuration theory means that simple categories of homelessness cannot be formed. All individual, structural, familial and societal factors are interconnected and inter-related. The refusal to allow binary oppositions and mono-theories to explain homelessness allows for contradictions and dichotomies to exist. Thus, for example, it makes it possible for solutions to homelessness to be simultaneously causes of homelessness. For example, hostels are designed to accommodate and, in some cases, resolve homelessness through resettlement. However, the conditions of hostels, strict rules and regional blanket bans on individuals accessing provision, can and does cause rooflessness.

Built onto the theory of structuration is the notion of risk and risk society (Beck 1992); a theory that looks at the interplay between structures and individual actions.

Risk Society theory extends way beyond predictors or risks of becoming homeless. Beck (1992) proposes the theory that risk is multifaceted and impacts all levels of society from state to individual, each being inextricably linked and inter-dependent on each other. Here there is a sharp shift towards individualism, with the individual responsible for anticipating and negotiating risks and therefore to blame if they fail to do so. To be able to participate fully and survive in a risk society, individuals need to develop a new set of life-skills. They need to be able to anticipate and endure dangers, and "deal with them biographically and politically" (Beck 1992). Individuals need to be aware of both politics and market forces on a global, national and local level. They need to be able to recognise, anticipate and cater for their own needs through work and self-provision of welfare protection (i.e. insurance). All this needs to be done despite the fact that risks are unstable, unpredictable commodities, and the once relied on welfare institutions in society have been destabilised by the nation state drawing back from the safety net of welfare provision (Beck 1992; Croft 2001).

The shift towards individualism and personal provision of welfare protection has increased the reliance on the individual's capacity to understand the risk and take

countering risks in order to survive. Those people least able to understand, anticipate and/or prepare for the risks are those most vulnerable to debt, cycles of deprivation, social exclusion and homelessness. The cause and effect of many welfare problems (including homelessness) then becomes blurred as it is continually viewed in terms of individual action, biography and the wider market forces and influences from the nation state and international arena. Croft (2001) proposes that risk should be viewed as a process over time, to account for its reciprocal nature. She identifies three stages, all of which are important when thinking in terms of preventing homelessness.

Contingency: a 'pool' of latent risks that have the potential to have an impact, but remain uncertain. For example, many triggers of homelessness are latent, they may never be activated but they remain risks that could result in homelessness. These risks may be recognisable as possible future events and thus planned strategies can be formed to act as insurance to prevent them being activated (e.g. family mediation, debt counselling, savings).

Crystallisation: an event causes the crystallisation of potential risk into something substantive, this event may be on an individual or collective basis, chosen or imposed. For example, recession causes an individual's redundancy and a shortage of alternative employment opportunities. This diminishes their savings and the home is repossessed, they and/or their family become homeless. Individuals rarely act in isolation, so crystallisation may have a domino affect (e.g. the stress of debt and repossession causes the partner to leave taking the children). On a collective basis, crystallisation may be caused by much broader events, for example, the impact of benefit level changes (Social Security Acts 1987 and 1989) to young people meant that a whole group of people vulnerable to homelessness became homeless.

Consequences: may be short/long-term, gain/loss, but must be viewed diachronically, i.e. overtime. One consequence may be the implementation of strategic responses from individuals, groups, outside agencies (e.g. charities) or at state level. If several risk events arise simultaneously the effect is 'palimpsest' i.e. they negate each other's impact), this therefore may make the situation better or worse and may affect the strategies put in place. When applied to homelessness, this is important when considering prevention. Strategies can be put in place to counteract the known risks or triggers of homelessness, but events may subsequently take place that were not anticipated and thus dilute or negate the impact of such policies. Policies are often interdependent on the existence of other supporting policies and all are vulnerable to structural factors, for example, housing availability, employment levels, welfare protection.

In addition to the diachronic process of risk at a structural level, is the individual's reaction to their changing circumstances. There are very real dangers, the individual's capacity to assess and plan for risk can be undermined by knee-jerk reactions such as shock, disbelief or a lack of knowledge (Croft 2001). This can have a negative impact and may result in homelessness; for example:

"I never thought I would become homeless. I always managed to find work and accommodation together, I rented from the place I worked". Chris, male aged 30; housed 5 months

“Looking back, I never put my name down on the council waiting list, I don’t know why. I don’t know what I thought would happen, I think I thought something would just come out of the air really”. Mark, male aged 28; housed 4 years

This incapacity to act, to pre-empt and plan for any and every eventuality is a risk in itself. It may also contribute to other risk events which when combined with the original one make a far more damaging impact. For example:

“My father died. I found him one morning on the floor. Contacted the doctor and ambulance but the hospital pronounced him dead on arrival. Soon after my mother died. The shock. The tenancy for the flat was in my mothers’ name. The landlord, when he found out, raised the rent; he trebled it. I couldn’t afford to keep living there. I tried to fight the case, but I’d just lost my parents and couldn’t sort everything out. I moved straight onto the streets”. Frank, male aged 53; Bed & Breakfast accommodation, long-term homeless

In conclusion, no single theory adequately encapsulates the whole of the problem of homelessness. Different theories offer great insight into specific facets. For example, symbolic interactionism explains a lot about the homeless culture and the impact of homelessness on the individuals’ self-perceptions. Constructivism explains the evolution of social policies and public perceptions of the homeless. It provides a basis from which to examine the homeless industry. While structuration and risk society theory offer some insight into the importance of prevention, process and time and the reasons why some people, but not others, become homeless.

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