Northumbria Research Link

Homelessness and Modern Urban Loneliness

Abstract

This theory-grounded chapter adopts the thesis that when the 'unwilling' homeless reject shelter, the apparent paradox of staying in the cold uncovers a desire to **confront loneliness**. In order to discuss this assumption, the chapter critically reviews both sociological and philosophical literature under the framework of structuration theory. The chapter concludes offering an alternative reading of homelessness as an ontological crisis characterised by **loneliness**, thus problematizing constructions of homelessness as individual failure.

The philosophical condition of homelessness in high modernity: the 'self' and the 'Other'

With increasing unemployment and poverty, homelessness remains present in modern urban landscapes. Despite better services, more available accommodation and increasing research, there are still homeless people who prefer to live on the streets. The research on homelessness in Britain over the last thirty years denotes an increasing interest in identifying socio-economic risk factors and the growing expertise in prevention. However, the fact that five per cent of the homeless population in UK chooses to sleep on the street (Randall and Brown 1996) points at the fact that the way homelessness is lived should not be missing from the literature. As Sterling and Fitzpatrick (2001) have noted, a crucial aspect of homeless people's lives such as loneliness remains a gap in research.

It has been noted that homeless people can feel at home on the street and prefer to stay unsheltered (Rivlin and Moore 2001). This chapter explores the rationale behind the fallacious paradox of the homeless willing to stay un-housed. First, we need to question if 'being housed' is tantamount to 'feeling at home'. When the homeless define home they express it in terms of social centre, ownership of relationships, emotional security, and a sense of equality with peers that allows for their 'self' identity to be expressed. Such understanding of home resembles more an emotional than a physical place (Nunan and Johns 1996, Wardhaugh 2000). Home as a self-orienting relationship to the world entails that being homeless is being without the social centre articulated by a sense of home (Robinson 2011). Therefore, by feeling homeless we are bound to feel a sense of loneliness. This brings our attention to the various conceptualisations of homelessness. The most immediate reading of homelessness understands it as lacking housing; however, a philosophical (and pertinent to the matter at hand) interpretation of the term speaks of lacking a sense of belonging, and with it a sound sense of identity, together with a sense of estrangement and **loneliness**. We feel estranged from a bond that, even if not fulfilled, it persists in some way. Only who has been, or has the possibility of being, at home can feel homeless. Although from Greek philosophy onwards homelessness has been a common theme, its significance and meaning has varied. Highly influenced by the ancient Greek tradition, Heideggerian philosophy understood the motif of homelessness as the manifestation of the oblivion of being (Mugerauer 2008): the human sense of estrangement is born from the conflict between experience and mind. Alternative philosophical readings of homelessness in high modernity question Heidegger's preclusion of the Semitic tradition and the subsequent rupture between ontology and ethics. For Lévinas (1979), the human sense of homelessness and estrangement is rooted on the relationship between the 'self' and the 'Other' which is a sign of our inability to avoid ethical responsibilities. Correspondingly, 'otherness' has become the main framing under which the debate on homelessness takes place. Although varied, the homeless population tends to be represented as generally responsible for their condition and non-productivity (Takahashi 1996). Popular media narratives describe the homeless as victims, individuals suffering bad luck and ruined by their own bad decisions (Hodgetts et al. 2006). These images of the

homeless result in a discursive separation between those representing homelessness and those experiencing it who are constructed as 'Other'. But, most importantly, both the experience of homelessness and the way we represent it constitute our understanding or conceptualisation of homelessness. Differences in the construction of homelessness shape its various aspects, such as our response to encountering homeless people on the streets, but also their own constructions of being homeless. Encounters with homelessness are familiar scenes in urban life. They are actively constructed both ways; the way we choose to respond to the encounter (ignoring, speaking, smiling or giving money) usually develops over time supported by social understandings and framed by wider discourses surrounding homelessness. A characteristic of these encounters in public space is the recognition of stigma as embedded in the otherness of the homeless (Gerrard and Farrugia 2015). Even when the view of homelessness triggers feelings of concern and sympathy, its physical presence acts as a reminder of the inequality of society, or the dysfunction of social welfare systems that fail to support the 'Other'. Subsequently, the homeless individual is deemed to feel out of place or displaced. Previous research has given voice to homeless people that have articulated feelings of stigmatisation (Farrugia 2011) and shame of being identified as homeless. These accounts highlight the emotional consequences of othering homeless identities: it creates an understanding of the 'self' as dysfunctional and displaced, and subsequently the homeless 'Other' is expelled from society both objectively and subjectively. Thus, 'otherness' becomes an interior process playing an important role in the development of the 'self' and social identity and a potential obstacle for the ontological security to be consolidated. Western ontology has reduced the other to the same by means of universal categories ruled by identity (aimed at understanding being), and led to the current emphasis on a self-enclosed subjectivity in high modernity (O'Donoghue 2011). It has been noted that as the process of individualisation is one of the key features of social life in Western high modernity, the principles of individual self-fulfilment and achievement seem to rule ontological security and self-identity (Beck 1992). Current attempts to neutralize individualisation and stress otherness and difference -such as Deleuze's defence of empiricism over transcendental philosophy (1953) and Derrida's call upon the ethical relationship to the Other as implicit in experience itself (1967)- seek a departure from traditional Western ontology on the grounds that any distinction between the 'self' that belongs to a defined rational sameness and the 'Other' who does not stigmatizes the latter on the basis of an autocratic distinction. As the 'Other' is ontologically expelled of the promised land of belonging (Somerville 1992), interaction between sameness and otherness is forbidden and loneliness is inflicted upon the ostracized 'Other'.

Homelessness and modern urban loneliness: problematizing constructions of homelessness

The 'othering' of the homeless is the result of the politics of rejection and stigmatisation shaped by dominant negative constructions of homelessness. While attempting to describe, understand or even eradicate homelessness, academics, the media, government bodies and policymakers have contributed to constructing particular framings of homelessness. When in 1977 the Housing (Homeless Person) Act introduced the first law namely addressing homelessness in Britain, it excluded single people from those considered in priority need (the

statutorily homeless), thus indicating an underlying construction of homelessness built on the individual's failing as the root of the problem. The Rough Sleepers Initiative (RSI) followed in 1990, stimulating the help and provision from the voluntary sector. Although successful, the RSI could not stop the surge of new homeless people needing to sleep on the street. The Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) was set up by the British Government in 1997 in order to decrease rough sleeping to a third by 2002. It claimed that the homeless were socially excluded, and aimed to offer both shelter and support, particularly for the 'unwilling' homeless that rejected help. Still, some local authority departments and voluntary organizations offered shelter only, keeping the crisis management approach that was common before the 1990s (Ravenhill 2008). While homeless policy evolved from crisis management to more accommodating responses, public space legislation did not transform accordingly. The current preventive approach to homeless policy runs parallel to containment legislation and public space ordinances that respond to public unease with the street lifestyle of the remnant 'unwilling' homeless. Despite attempts in recent decades to limit homeless people's use of public space, encounters with the homeless are part of daily city life. Within this framing, street clearance campaigns can be legitimised as tackling the problem of homelessness, as acting in the best interest of the homeless, but it has been noted that an increasing provision of shelters is not necessarily incompatible with the containment and control policies implicit in the punitive frame (DeVerteuil et al. 2009). Alternative readings that speak of an attempt to offer an improved and more attractive image of the city (Mitchell 1997) suggest that current discussions of homelessness that put an emphasis on public urban space ordinances fail to address the sense of loneliness experienced by homeless individuals in modern urban landscapes. Public space law in the United Kingdom has been echoing initiatives developed in the United States, such as Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), Public Drinking Exclusion Zones and Town Centre Partnerships (Coleman 2004). Legislation against begging, rough sleeping, urinating or drinking in public space is aimed at moving the homeless from view (Mitchell 1997) while engaged in commonplace behaviours often necessary for daily survival (Johnsen and Fitzpatrick 2010). Officers deploy these orders as a means to accomplish other goals directed towards the inconvenience or risks of homelessness. These exclusionary strategies are followed to the expense of the homeless' wellbeing (Walby and Lippert 2012). However, recent studies on spatial exclusion have shown that policing of homelessness is *'spatially contingent'* (Forrest 2014, p.1912). While an increasing number of commonplace and survival behaviours considered by criminal law support the spatial exclusion of the homeless from prime space, policing in marginal space is aligned with more paternalist impulses of poverty governance aimed at addressing individual pathologies (Forrest 2014). Similarly, social support services tend to be located outside of prime urban spaces (Wasserman and Clair 2011); furthermore, it has been argued that the social services approach visible in many high support shelters respond to the idea that the homeless people themselves are the problem to address and correct, instead of poverty, unemployment or low-income housing shortages (Williams 1996), thus contributing to representations of the homeless as failed individuals. Subsequently, attempts to move the homeless attach notions of dysfunction and (both actual and moral) filth to homelessness. Over the last thirty years, much of the literature on the topic has framed homelessness in punitive terms, describing measures that criminalize the survival strategies of the homeless,

such as begging, panhandling, scavenging or rough sleeping. This framing corresponds to the rise of punitive measures (Takahashi 1996) which -from exclusion and containment to forceful removal into shelters- construct modern urban spaces as a world where the homeless is rejected and has no place to be. Although survival needs may be just satisfied through tactical trajectories that interlink homeless services, soup kitchens, street contacts, public places or hidden retreats, the transience of these trajectories reinforces feelings of loneliness and sustains anxieties about the need to belong (May 2000). Just as the physiological and safety needs are relatively satisfied on the street, the need to belong will come to the fore (Maslow 1954). The homeless is then doomed to suffer **modern urban loneliness** and forced to negotiate non-belonging to mainstream society through alternative constructions of home (Rowe and Wolch 1990) within the context of homelessness.

The need to belong: homelessness re-constructed as ontological crisis

As 'otherness' dominates most constructions of homelessness, this chapter highlights the emotional consequences of othering homeless identities, signified by the sense of estrangement and loneliness. As feeling engaged with mainstream society has been identified as a relevant factor in order to preserve ontological security (Giddens 1991), those excluded from mainstream housed society and moving into homelessness can experience a significant culture shock and are likely to feel ontologically insecure. As the homeless 'Other' is expelled from society both objectively and subjectively, an understanding of the 'self' as dysfunctional and displaced is created. This shock, that seems bigger for those who became suddenly homeless or were in denial about their risk of becoming homeless (Ravenhill 2008), comes mostly from the sudden awareness of a seemingly hostile society perceiving them as homeless, as 'Other'. Then, through the process of becoming homeless, the individual's self-identity is dismantled; the evidence of personal history is lost (shared stories, photographs, identification…); and often, being known by a street nickname (as opposed to one's name) contributes to the process of depersonalization. This destabilization of the 'self' and social identity constitutes an ontological crisis that makes the homeless individual seek alternative stabilizing factors. Although those who leave behind traumatic experiences (such as domestic violence or child abuse) may experience this crisis as a relief and opportunity, in general terms, the struggle for a new identity is characterized by a deep feeling of loneliness and estrangement from mainstream housed society. It has been argued that the loss of a social identity is not a process of mutual withdrawal between individual and society (Sainsbury 1986); instead, social exclusion can be externally applied to the individual through the process of marginalization and stigmatization implicit in 'otherness'. The homeless reflexively negotiate with dominant constructions of homelessness as external labels of their identity (McNaughton 2008), being highly aware of the stigma attached. Once the ontological crisis is experienced, the individual needs to know that the self and social identities can remain stable. The homeless culture offers those individuals on the street the ontological security that mainstream society is not able or willing to give. It helps its members survive on the street, not just physically (individuals may share information or food, for instance) but also emotionally, offering the possibility to bond with other individuals in a similar situation.

Once excluded from the wider society, being included in the homeless culture means fitting in a group where one can feel respected, can develop close friendships, and can redevelop an identity after the old one is undone. Individuals do not become members of the homeless culture just by sleeping rough; they have to accept it and want to be included within it before they can belong to the culture (Ravenhill 2008), adopting the behavioural patterns related to the new social network. New friendships developed in this network can be nurturing and calm the deep sense of loneliness experienced when becoming homeless. When shelter is made available, leaving the street means rejecting the emotional support of a network where one belongs in an attempt to enter the society from which one was excluded. Uncertainties about finding in mainstream society the intense bond and care received within the subculture can trigger feelings of anxiety and fear of loneliness when leaving it. Evidence from research participants in Britain suggests that fear to what they may encounter in support shelters and temporary accommodation or fear to lose control over their own lives can make the homeless decide to stay on the street (May et al. 2007). Thus, the homeless culture traps people into homelessness for considerable periods of time, as separation from these friendships becomes harder with time (Ravenhill 2000). Each individual's need to preserve a sense of ontological security and identity is tied to the ability to conceptualise who they are, to build a narrative of their identity. Despite life changes, ontological security and identity can be safeguarded through a cohesive narrative that makes sense of life events (Ricoeur 1992). This narrative will underpin individual agency, and will therefore affect the individual's capacity for choice. Empirical research has shown that those people rejecting the homeless culture or in denial of their own homeless state were more likely to leave the street sooner (Ravenhill 2008). Since subcultures develop from marginalization within the main culture or society, this means that those individuals refusing to see themselves as 'Other' can see homelessness as a brief upturn and seek or accept help. In contrast, acknowledging one's otherness (and stigma) means recognising the loss of the old social identity and the rejection from mainstream housed society. It is this recognition that triggers the sense of estrangement from main society and deep loneliness. Absorbing a new identity through which a sense of 'self' can be re-built is part of the process required to belong to the street culture and ultimately defy loneliness. Most literature based on one to one interviews with homeless people tends to portray them as lone individuals, and therefore, only recently homeless people have been understood as social beings (Tunstall 2008) whose decisions can be driven by the desire to confront loneliness.

This chapter views the seemingly irrational choice of staying on the street through a philosophical lens. This philosophical reading portrays homelessness as a human condition of estrangement signified by a deep sense of loneliness. As becoming homeless triggers an ontological crisis on the individual through the 'othering' imposed by mainstream housed society, the homeless actively seek to re-construct their 'self' and social identities in an attempt to counterbalance the ontological crisis they experience. Rejecting shelter can then be understood as an attempt to maintain ontological security, by means of keeping a social group where one now belongs. Moving to temporary accommodation or shelter breaks the predictable social pattern, forces the individual to socially adapt again, and triggers the fear of

loneliness. It is arguable that temporary accommodation does not allow a sense of belonging to develop, and the homeless individual to settle. In this context, going back to transient constructions of belonging within the context of homelessness may seem a more realistic prospect than the possibility of *'home as residence'* (May 2000, p.755) from which the homeless 'Other' is alienated. As alternative geographies of belonging within tolerant environments have been identified to play a critical role in the survival of trauma and loneliness experienced within homelessness (Sterk-Elifson and Elifson 1992), the decision of remaining unhoused can be seen as a way of securing some sense of belonging and defying loneliness.

Conclusion: remaining on the street to defy loneliness

This chapter explores the apparent paradox behind the homeless staying un-housed when accommodation is made available. When the homeless define home in terms of social centre, ownership of relationships, emotional security or sense of equality with peers, they are not defining home in terms of shelter. As shelter is not tantamount to home, homelessness is not purely the lack of housing. A philosophical lens allows a deeper understanding of the condition of homelessness. When we are homeless we feel estranged from a bond that, even if not fulfilled, it persists in some way. Only who has been, or has the possibility of being, at home can feel homeless. When we feel homeless we lack a sense of belonging and with it a sound sense of identity. But also, it is the realisation of one's condition of homelessness that inflicts a profound sense of loneliness. Loneliness is a crucial aspect of homeless people's lives that has to be considered to understand their capacity for choice. Loneliness is inflicted upon the homeless individual as the emotional consequence of the politics of rejection and stigmatisation shaped by dominant representations of homelessness. These negative representations construct the homeless as 'Other', and subsequently 'otherness' becomes the main framing under which the debate on homelessness takes place. This includes the construct of modern urban spaces as a world where the homeless is rejected and has no place to be. Punitive measures such as containment legislation or public space ordinances condemn the homeless to suffer modern urban loneliness when ontologically expelled from the land of belonging. The ontological exile is both objective and subjective, as it creates an understanding of the 'self' as dysfunctional and displaced once the sudden awareness of a seemingly hostile society perceiving them as 'Other' takes place. The homeless negotiate rejection from mainstream housed society by turning to the homeless culture for support. The new friendships developed on the street network can nurture and calm the deep sense of loneliness experienced when becoming homeless. This means that when accommodation is made available, leaving the street means rejecting the emotional support of the homeless network and facing uncertainties about being accepted in mainstream society, triggering fears of loneliness. This chapter concludes that the paradoxical decision of remaining unhoused can be understood as a way of securing some sense of belonging within the homeless culture and defying loneliness.

References

Beck, U., 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity.* London: Sage.

Coleman, R., 2004. Images from a neoliberal city: the state, surveillance and social control. *Criminology* 12, pp. 21-42.

Deleuze, G., 1953. *Empiricism and Subjectivity. An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Naure.* Translated by C.V. Boundas, 1991. New York: Columbia University Press.

Derrida, J., 1967. *Writing and Difference.* Translated by A. Bass, 2001. London: Routledge.

DeVerteuil, G., May, J., and Von Mahs, J., 2009. Complexity not collapse: recasting the geographies of homelessness in a 'punitive' age. *Progress in Human Geography* 33(5), pp. 646-666.

Farrugia, D., 2011. The symbolic burden of homelessness. Towards a theory of youth homelessness as embodied subjectivity. *Journal of Sociology* 47(1), pp. 71-87.

Forrest, S., 2014. From 'Rabble Management' to 'Recovery Management': Policing Homelessness in Marginal Urban Space. *Urban Studies* 51(9), pp. 1909-1925.

Gerrard, J. and Farrugia, D., 2015. The 'lamentable sight' of homelessness and the society of the spectacle. *Urban Studies* 52(12), pp. 2219-2233.

Giddens, A., 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hodgetts, D., Hodgetts, A. and Radley, A., 2006. Life in the shadow of the media: Imaging street homelessness in London. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9(4), pp. 497-516.

Johnsen, S. and Fitzpatrick, S., 2010. Revanchist sanitisation or coercive care? The use of enforcement to combat begging, street drinking and rough sleeping in England. *Urban Studies*, 47(8), pp. 1703-1723.

Lemos, G., 2000. *Homelessness and loneliness: the want of conviviality.* London: Crisis, p. 31.

Lévinas, E., 1979. The Contemporary Criticism of the Idea of Value and the Prospects of Humanism. In: E.A. Maziarz, ed., 1979. *Value and Values in Evolution.* New York: Gordon and Breach, pp.179-187.

Maslow, A.H., 1979 [1954]. *Motivation and Personality.* London: Harper & Row

May, J., 2000. Of Nomads and Vagrants: Single Homeless and Narratives of Home as Place. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18(6), pp. 737-59.

May, J., Johnsen, S. and Cloke, P., 2007. Alternative cartographies of homelessness: rendering visible British women's experiences of 'visible' homelessness. *Gender, Place and Culture* 14, pp. 121-140.

McNaughton, C., 2008. *Transitions Through Homelessness. Lives on the Edge.* Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mitchell, D., 1997. The annihilation of space by law: the roots and implications of anti-homeless laws in the United States. *Antipode* 29, pp.303-336.

Mugerauer, R., 2008. *Heidegger and Homecoming. The Leitmotif in the Later Writings.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Nunan, C. and Llewellyn J., 1996. *Raising the Roof on Women's Homelessness: A Framework for Policy Development.* Canberra: Women's Emergency Services Network.

O'Donoghue, B., 2011. *A Poetics of Homecoming: Heidegger, Homelessness and the Homecoming Venture.* Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Randall, G. and Brown, S., 1996. *From Street to Home: An Evaluation of Phase 2 of the Rough Sleepers Initiative.* London: HMSO

Ravenhill, M., 2000. *Homelessness and Vulnerable Young People: A Social Audit of Key Change Charity's Supported Accommodation.* London: London School of Economics

Ravenhill, M., 2008. *The Culture of Homelessness.* Aldershot: Ashgate

Ricoeur, P., 1992. *Oneself as Another.* London: University of Chicago Press

Rivlin, L.G. and Moore, J. 2001. Home-Making: Supports and Barriers to the Process of Home. *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless* 10(4), pp.323-336.

Robinson, C., 2011. *Beside one's self. Homelessness felt and lived.* New York: Syracuse University Press.

Rowe, S. and Wolch, J., 1990. Social Networks in Time and Space: Homeless Women in Skid Row, Los Angeles. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 80(2), pp. 184-204.

Sainsbury, S., 1986. *Deaf Worlds: A Study of Integration, Segregation and Disability.* London: Hutchinson.

Somerville, P., 1992. Homelessness and the Meaning of Home: Rooflessness or Rootlessness? *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 16(4), pp. 529-539.

Sterk-Elifson, C. and Elifson, K. W., 1992. Someone to Count On: Homeless Male Drug Users and Their Friendship Relations. *Urban Anthropology* 21(3), pp. 235-51.

Sterling, R. and Fitzpatrick, S., 2001. *Review of single homelessness research. Research summaries and bibliography update 1990-2000.* London: CRASH.

Takahashi, L., 1996. A decade of understanding homelessness in the USA: from characterization to representation. *Progress in Human Geography* 20, pp. 291-331.

Tunstall, R., 2008. Preface. In: M. Ravenhill, 2008. *The Culture of Homelessness.* Aldershot: Ashgate. pp.xvii-xx

Walby, K. and Lippert, R., 2012. Spatial regulation, dispersal, and the aesthetics of the city: conservation officer policing of homeless people in Ottawa, Canada, *Antipode,* 44(3), pp. 1015-1033.

Wardhaugh, J., 2000. *Sub City: Young People, Homelessness and Crime.* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Wasserman, J. and Clair, J., 2011. Housing patterns of homeless people: The ecology of the street in the era of urban renewal. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 40(1), pp. 71-101.

Williams, J.C., 1996. Geography of the homeless shelter: staff surveillance and resident resistance. *Urban Anthropology* 25, pp. 75-113.