

Problematizing the 'homeless identity': considering people beyond their homelessness

In this paper, I argue that homelessness as a separate and distinct area of enquiry may have a tendency to place too great an emphasis on homelessness as a defining and all encompassing characteristic of 'homeless people'. That is, with other, possibly more salient factors, considered in the context of, or by reference to, an individual's homelessness. While this suggestion may seem extreme, this paper's central thesis is subtle, relating primarily to a matter of emphasis, namely moving the emphasis away from homelessness as a discrete and defining category.

This contention follows Pleace (1998, p.57), who believes homeless literature is not inherently bad or inherently good, but the mere fact that there is a homelessness literature in its own right demonstrates a fundamental methodological flaw – there is no unique social problem called homelessness. Initially, I justify my contention that some homeless literature has portrayed people as innately homeless with reference to a 'homeless identity'.

I then move to empirical data that locates homelessness in a broader context free from such simplification. The data, gathered in inner city Brisbane in 2007 and 2008, focuses on three emerging themes: the mundane and everyday aspects of homelessness, substance and alcohol misuse, and traumatic family experiences.

Arguably, there are few more compelling ways to suggest an individual's innate connection to something, or that an individual embodies something, than by ascribing them with a corresponding identity to the thing in question. While definitions of identity are contested, it is widely agreed upon among sociologists and social psychologists that an individual's identity consists of their experiences, worldviews, aspirations and things of fundamental importance to them (Brekhus 2003, p.23, Layder 2004, p.1, Oyserman 2004, p.5). Contributors to the homelessness literature have ascribed a 'homeless identity' to some 'homeless people'. There is, however, little explanation as to what exactly a 'homeless identity' is, or whether people labelled this way have self-identities as 'homeless people'.

A range of international scholars have considered the 'homeless identity' a central trait, exploring and even measuring whether the 'homeless' embrace or reject it (Farrington and Robinson 1999, Osborne 2002, Snow and Anderson 1993). Within Australia, a 'homeless identity' has received less empirical work, but has nonetheless been theorised as something people at the end of a 'homeless career' may develop (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1994, MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2003, Zufferey and Kerr 2004).

Regardless of the validity or otherwise of a 'homeless identity', it is my contention that thinking of people who are homeless in this way gives undue focus to their homelessness at the expense of other factors. If we uncritically construct people with a 'homeless identity', then we run the risk of considering their homelessness as a defining and all encompassing characteristic

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Brekhus (2003, p.216), focusing on homosexuality, has demonstrated that the more marked or stigmatised an identity attribute is, the more difficult it is for one who carries that attribute to present as if it is just one aspect of their life. As individuals, we all have a range of attributes, traits and experiences that constitute our identities. The more unique or distinctive the attribute relative to the general population, the more informative that attribute is taken to be in conveying our identities. Thus uncommon attributes like "homelessness" have high explanatory value. But if a "homeless identity" is to have explanatory purchase, we need to explore whether it is an exogenously or endogenously derived identity.

Understanding the life situations and self-identities of people who are homeless is important, as this understanding can inform policy and service provision. Below I discuss some identity perceptions and attributes of the research participants in this study, perceptions and attributes that if taken into consideration, could assist in beneficial outcomes for those concerned.

Furthermore, this understanding can counter misrepresentations, for instance, the 'homeless identity'. Misrepresentations or the way people are constructed matters on practical levels. Nancy Fraser has detailed the intertwined nature of 'economic injustices' and 'cultural injustices'. Fraser (1997, p.18-9) asserts that cultural injustices, for example, the way groups can be misrepresented, must be redressed in order for appropriate economic, or policy redistribution measures to follow. When groups are misrepresented, or indeed 'problems' framed in a particular way, the subsequent responses can be inappropriate and restrictive (Bachhi 1999, p.62). Labeling people seeking asylum as 'unauthorised' (DIMIA 2003) is an extreme example of this. With reference to homelessness, a 'homeless identity' can be seen as blaming the individual and emphasising problematic differences (Schiff 2003, p. 492).

Methodology

The methodology was chosen as a means to understand how people who were long-term homeless understood and constructed their identities. From November 2007 until May 2008, participant observations of people who were homeless, and whose homelessness occurred in public spaces in inner city Brisbane were conducted. These spaces included: a café which operates specifically for people who are homeless, an outside mall in Fortitude Valley, a five hundred meter tract of council land located on Brisbane River where approximately thirty to fifty people 'sleep rough', and at four designated locations inner-city suburbs where a coffee/food van distributes services to people who are homeless. The latter is a service where I volunteered while collecting data.

During April and May of 2008, twenty people who were long-term homeless, defined as more than two years of homelessness, and who had previously been observed, were interviewed. In total, two hundred hours of fieldwork was recorded.

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Sixteen of those interviewed were 'sleeping rough'¹ at the time of interview, with two respondents residing in boarding houses, and the remaining two sleeping on a friend's couch. The four interview respondents not 'sleeping rough', had done so at some point prior to the interview. During fieldwork, a range of other people experiencing homelessness were also spoken with, these people did not participate in formal interviews, but some of their contributions were significant and they are also referred to as research participants. Approximately one third of the overall sample self-identified as Indigenous, which reflects the disproportionate number of Indigenous people estimated to 'sleep rough' in inner-city Brisbane (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2004 p.63). The male to female ratio was approximately seven to one.

From research participants characteristics noted above, it is clear that in no way do they approximate a representative sample of the estimated one hundred thousand people who experience homelessness in Australia on any given night (Chamberlain and Johnson 2001, p.10). In fact, their experiences of 'sleeping rough', many of whom have been for more than two years, suggest that they constitute a minority of people who ever experience homelessness.

The method of participant observation evolved throughout the six months of fieldwork. Initially, my role was as detached observer, or "observer-as-participant" (Gold 1958, p.221). Throughout the final three months, I assumed a more interactive role, known as "participant-as-observer" (Gold 1958, p.220). All informal conversations I had with participants were recorded as data, as well as participant's conversations I overheard, both among themselves and with other users of public spaces. The qualitative approach to data collection was employed to (1) observe the interactions and group memberships that are important to a social identity (Tajfel 1981, p.255), (2) to eavesdrop and witness participants life as it occurs separate to my interventions, or 'perspectives in action' (Snow and Anderson 1993, p.22), and (3) to enable participants to actively construct and articulate their identities, while expressing what was and was not important for them.

Locating myself in spaces that people experiencing homelessness used, and spending considerable time interacting with them alone and in groups, followed the logic that the longer a researcher spends with those researched, the more they will learn about who they are (Wolcott 2005, p.75). The actual spaces I gathered data were familiar and comfortable to respondents, it was their territory and they were among people they felt comfortable with – this too helped me gain an understanding of the breadth, depth and diversity of research participant's identities (Scott 1985, p.287).

Everyday aspects of homelessness

A central premise to this study is that research endeavouring to understand and explain homelessness, especially if predicated on notions of a 'homeless identity', may place too great an emphasis on homelessness. I suggest that this is at the cost of understanding things we all share in common with people who are homeless. Or if

¹ Sleeping rough is a term commonly used in the literature, and was the term favoured by some research participants to describe sleeping outdoors; it closely approximates Chamberlain and MacKenzie's (2003, p.6) primary homelessness.

Brekhus (2003) is right about our use of stigmatised attributes, this precludes us from considering non-marked or non-stigmatised attributes as important to whom a person is. Indeed, it may be said of human research more generally that researchers pay more attention to deviance or what is thought different from everyday life. This is not, of course, to question such research; as researchers and consumers of research, it is perhaps this difference that stimulates our interest and contributes to a greater understanding of humanity. Different or 'deviant' attributes, however, must be considered with other attributes, and not necessarily taken to explain the whole.

For my purposes, disseminating the 'normal' and everyday aspects of people experiencing homelessness was interesting, in that this normalness is in tension with the representations of the 'homeless' as the 'other'. These mundane representations moreover, serve to place those studied in a broader, more socially acceptable light. While spending a large part of six months observing people carrying out mundane aspects of their life often proved boring, these observations indicated that in many respects, participants did and said things that would not be considered out of the ordinary. For ease of clarity and explanation, I will briefly outline the everyday discussion in two parts: things respondents were observed to have done, and things they said.

It could be assumed that people who are homeless, especially when they are outside the labour market and 'sleeping rough', as they predominately were in this study, do radically different things from those of us who are domiciled and in employment. Numerous research has indeed successfully demonstrated that people who are homeless do things, or engage in adaptive strategies that in Australian society would be considered outside the norm (MacKnee and Mervyn 2002, p.295-6, Snow and Anderson 1993, p.57), including begging and going through rubbish. I do not question this, but add three points. First, participants to this study often did things that were very much related to the misuse of illicit substances. I discuss this below in the context of private over public space, but at this point it is worth considering that where an action takes place can determine its appropriateness. For instance, a loud verbal argument between a couple rummaging through a backpack looking for a phone in the middle of a busy mall, is taken to say more about them than the unknown arguments couples engage in behind closed doors.

Next and related, while research participants spent considerable time doing 'out of the ordinary things' such as: lining up for food vans, speaking with outreach workers or researchers, attending dosing clinics, meeting with Centrelink and similar statutory authorities, and walking considerable distance at regulated times to maintain personal hygiene, when thought about with the benefit of insights from those who were homeless, these actions were not particularly divergent from the norm. That is, their actions were first and foremost very structured and predetermined – they were structured and largely predetermined because this was required to sustain their day-to-day lives. Attempts to organise time slots for potential participants to participate in paid interviews illustrated just how many commitments they had, and their intention to keep them. But it was perhaps their worldviews and aspirations that most portrayed them as unremarkable.

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The conversations, remarks and stories of research participants suggest another level of the mundane and everyday. This data was elicited directly from participants responses, but primarily from the many conversations I overheard them engage in.

They spoke among themselves about: rugby league, about how the death penalty should be reinstated for a paedophile recently in the news, and about how Christmas was too commercialised. When asked to explain who they were – their identities (a hard question for anyone I imagine), they spoke about helping other's less well off, peacefulness unless provoked, and ensuring everyone has a fair go. These types of remarks are not only mundane, but are strikingly similar to the purported 'Australian values' (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2007, p.4). Further to this, not one individual said that they enjoyed being homeless, or more precisely, that when reflected upon with the benefit of alternative choices, thought they would like to stay homeless.

The salience of the findings above come from just how ordinary they are; on the face of it, they appear inconsistent with people thought about as the 'other', whose identity deviates from the norm. These ordinary conversations, aspirations, and the keeping of appointments and day-to-day commitments that essentially ensured their livelihood, while constituting the largest sections of their day, are only part of the story. Illicit substance and alcohol misuse was a common activity for most participants; significant family traumas prior to homelessness was something common to all research participants I spoke with. I discuss these in the sections that follow, but in addition to my central argument that these factors understood in a broad context are more pertinent to participants lives than their homelessness, I will make one remark about these issues in the context of space and a 'homeless identity'.

Space, homelessness and difference

During six months of study, I observed, as I imagine other users of public spaces where homelessness occurs have done, people who were homeless use and experience the significant affects of illicit substances and alcohol; I observed people who were homeless engaging in bizarre behaviours – supposedly attributed to mental illnesses– and I observed people who were homeless engage in verbal and physical violence. These behaviours are 'out of place' in public malls, parks and footpaths. I am asking whether it is these 'out of place' behaviours (Cresswell 1996, p.37) that partially support notions of 'homeless' as 'other', with an identity in conflict with the norm.

Perhaps a contrasting perspective to understand these behaviours would focus on what constitutes public over private spaces, and indeed the limited access to 'private spaces' people who are homeless may have. What I am suggesting is the alcohol and substance misuse, violence, especially domestic violence, and mental illnesses are not characteristics of a deviant minority of 'homeless people', but statistically speaking, are relatively common among Australians (see ABS social trends 4102.0) and occur with all too great a frequency in Australian homes. People who are homeless, however, are often unable to retreat to private spaces (homes), where these behaviours go unnoticed to the majority, notably the sociologist's gaze. In contrast to those with homes who have opportunities to conceal 'undesirable' behaviours, people without homes often have little option but to display them.

Substance and alcohol misuse

People participating in this study related alcohol and substance misuse closely, almost inseparably, to a range of other social problems important to them. To facilitate clarity, alcohol and substance misuse will be discussed independent to other social problems, but recognising the relationship between them is significant and complex. Further, this paper makes no attempt to elevate these issues in a causal relationship with homelessness, but rather discusses their importance to bolster the argument that research participants perceived life experiences and activities other than homelessness as more defining to their identities.

Much research before mine has highlighted the high rates of mental illness and substance misuse among homeless populations, both International (Randall and Brown 2002) and Australian (Hodder et al. 1998). More recently, researchers have demonstrated how an exclusive focus on these co-occurrences can make a pathology of the homeless and portray them in a negative light (Kyle 2005, p.124). The 'National Coalition for the Homeless' in the USA (NCH 2002), for example, suggests that documenting problems the homeless disproportionately present with, simply serves as a screen so that people do not recognise that in many instances it is government's and in particular, their failure to provide sufficient affordable housing that is the true cause of homelessness.

I agree that focusing on problematic attributes of the homeless can have a pathological effect, an effect which casts a shadow over the difficulties in gaining a social housing tenancy (ACOSS 2002, p.2) and a decline in housing affordability (Disney 2004). But for people who were homeless in this study, understanding substance and alcohol misuse was important to understanding their life experiences, both past and present. Similarly, they explicitly explained their often long and disabling relationship with alcohol and illicit substances as inextricably related to who they saw themselves as a person, what they perceived as primarily wrong with their lives, and what they wanted most to change.

Conducting observations in spaces where people who were homeless frequented, enabled me to witness them affected by alcohol and substances. I overheard many conversations about illicit substances, particularly people trying to 'get on'. During my conversations and interviews with people who were homeless, they spoke at length about the alcohol and substances they used, and all too frequently misused. Furthermore, I observed many participants interact and consume alcohol and illicit substances in what appeared to be relatively identifiable groups. Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1994, p.8-9) have suggested that groupings or a shared sense of a collective identity is important to the 'homeless identity'.

Firsthand remarks from research participants confirmed that they and others they interacted with formed a number of loosely fitting groups based on alcohol and illicit substances. While it was clear that these observed and referred to groups consisted of predominately people who were homeless, homelessness was by no means their defining or organising trait². First, some group members were not homeless, and

² I also observed and was informed of groups based on Aboriginality. Memmott et al. (2003) have detailed some thought provoking insights on spiritual homelessness and Aboriginality, themes that are close to this study.

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research participants who were homeless often did not know the housing or homeless status of other group members. Hence, homelessness or housing status was insignificant for research participant's understanding of the group. In contrast, the interaction of space and activity was particularly important for the formation and maintenance of groups.

Previous studies have demonstrated how the forging of groups is emotionally and practically beneficial for people who are homeless (Grigsby et al 1990, p.143, Wolch and Dear 1993, p. 239-40); while Snow and Mulcahy (2001, p.158) have shown how 'the homeless' use marginal spaces that are uncontested, allowing them to enjoy some freedom.

Both previous findings were pertinent to people observed in inner city Brisbane, but mainly in a way to facilitate alcohol and substance misuse. Group members consciously and deliberately sought out spaces where they knew police or members of the wider public would not impinge upon their use. Participants actually spoke about police directly inferring that if they use, or consume alcohol in designated spaces, for example spaces where people who are not homeless rarely frequent, police intervention would be less likely. Whereas if they consumed alcohol or brought illicit substances into other places, for example the Fortitude Valley Mall, they would be searched and checked for outstanding warrants – all of which I routinely observed.

These groupings based largely on substance and alcohol use/misuse did not simply take place randomly in uncontested spaces. Groups were formed, and thus spaces used based on whether it was alcohol, or the type of substance being used. Research participants spoke about Zannex, Subutex, heroin and drinking groups, which they would cite when pointing out who they were, and importantly, who they were not (Joffe 2007, p.211).

The groupings that I observed and had explained to me, the time people spent interacting with each other, and the basis for those interactions, seemed to be primarily understood in terms of substance and alcohol misuse. Not only did research participants spend considerable time in groups, groups of which the housing or homelessness status of other members were often unknown to them, but they spoke about aligning themselves with, or against, groups not based on homelessness, but on what members of the group engage in as a group. Instead of homelessness being the defining or organising aspect, it was alcohol and illicit substances. In short, participants did not see themselves as a 'homeless group'.

This rationale for group formation was likewise reflected in research participant's comments about alcohol and substance misuse on an individual level. They overwhelmingly explained their substance and alcohol misuse as not simply important to their daily routines, but important to how they saw themselves on a personal level. Where as homelessness, while important to their life in terms of things lacking, was spoken about as symptomatic or subsidiary to alcohol and substances.

Aboriginal people were included in this study and their contributions inform the overall work. Word restrictions coupled with a limited understanding preclude any serious and specific consideration of Aboriginality, homelessness and identity in this paper.

Similarly, in terms of defining self and things of most importance, homelessness assumed a secondary role to traumatic family experiences.

Traumatic family experiences

Unlike alcohol and substance misuse, which not every participant mentioned, each mentioned traumatic family experiences. Recent Australian research (Byrne 2005) documents the prevalence of serious family trauma experienced in childhood prior to adult homelessness, as well as the realisation that family or marital separation often immediately precedes homelessness (MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2003, p.38). Traumatic life events more generally, are also more likely to occur during homelessness (Buhrich, Hodder and Teesson 2000, p.965). These experiences were common both during and prior to homelessness. Importantly for this paper, research participants referred to their traumatic family experiences prior to homelessness as the most important in terms of how they saw the world, who they were, and to explain their current life situation.

Family dysfunction, as both a child or parent, and internal family abuse as a child, were dominant themes underpinning most traumatic experiences. Some respondents were explicit about linking these experiences and their consequence to personal identity. They, for instance, highlighted their parent status (both fathers and mothers), but explained how traumas before homelessness such as accusations of child abuse, domestic violence, and family separation had undermined their ability to perform parental identities. Further to this, their homelessness, with the associated social stigma and impediments to provide a safe environment for children, reinforced feelings that their parental identities were challenged.

The realities of homelessness and family separation clearly subverted participant's capacity to perform the parental roles they idealised. But in addition to this, the unhappiness and despair they described by not being physically present as a parent, which they often explained in terms of homelessness, seemed to strengthen their resolve to highlight their parental identities over-and-above a problematic and one dimensional notion of a 'homeless person'. While this recognition of an individual's identity separate and unrelated to their homelessness appears absent from the homeless literature, this recognition is hardly groundbreaking. Taylor (2000, p.81) has demonstrated how people with disabilities emphasise and actively assert how family relationships define their identities rather than disability.

More frequently participants implicitly referred to family related trauma influencing identities. The statistically unrepresentative sample of this study reflected other Australian research that has found a disproportionate number of people who were homeless had also been in State care (Mendes and Moslehuddin 2004). Research participants in this study would often elaborate upon their experiences of State care, to infer how it had defined them. These references included initial childhood feelings of abandonment, feelings that had undermined any emotional feelings of 'home' since childhood. Other participants spoke about abuse and betrayal that lead to State care as related to their angry and pessimistic worldview. Another cohort linked life-altering trauma endured to explaining their desire, although often unachieved, to help people or to ensure success in parenting.

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Each respondent who made reference to family related trauma and identity did so in a diversity of respects. Common among these diverse experiences, was a mutual perception that the experience had proved profoundly influential in how they saw the world, and how they wanted me to understand them. Individuals in this study were unequivocal in that they were not a 'homeless person' with an identity that could be understood in terms of their homelessness. They rejected the notion of being a 'homeless other', describing themselves instead with reference to families or (negative) family experiences.

I recognise that an exclusive focus on traumatic experiences prior to homelessness, or alcohol and substance misuse during homelessness may have a number of unintentional affects. These could include the potential to ignore structural considerations; exonerating Governments of their responsibility to ensure access to affordable housing; making a pathology of people who are homeless; or portraying them as responsible for their homelessness. For participants in this study, however, understanding these factors illustrated how they shaped their lives and were important to their identities.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have reported on empirical data that is in tension with the notion that people who are long-term homeless see their homelessness as central to their lives, or important in how they see the world or themselves. Participants to this study did not speak about their homelessness as a defining characteristic or trait, either to define themselves in a collective or individual sense.

These perceptions did not, moreover appear to be strategies to idealise their lives and deny their problems, to themselves or to me. On the contrary, participants frequently spoke about themselves in negative and socially unacceptable ways; for instance referring to themselves as 'drug users', as people with failed lives, as abandoned and abused children, and as bad parents. Each respondent acknowledged their homelessness, but consistently rationalised it as symptomatic of a range of other far more important issues.

Moreover, these issues were always present prior to homelessness, although no one spoke about them causing their homelessness. Further illuminating, people in this study spoke about periods when they sustained tenancies, but the same issues were important for them regardless of their housing/homeless status. How they saw themselves – their personal identities, were relatively consistent regardless of whether they were homeless or not.

Emerging data from this study, while suggesting homelessness was not the most important defining or social factor, should not, of course, be taken to mean that housing is unimportant. Contemporary research demonstrates that people are more able to address social and psychological problems when housed compared to when homeless (Padgett, Gulcur and Tsemberis 2006). Securing affordable, safe housing was important to people in this study, for both practical reasons, and for the hope of receiving the respect and dignity they associated with not being homeless.

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Finally, this paper has argued that representations in the literature of the 'homeless' with a distinct 'homeless identity' portray them as the 'other' – an 'other' they have little say in defining and perhaps even less commitment to (Bauman 2004, p.38). Participants to this study clearly spoke of a lack of commitment to a 'homeless other'.

What purpose then does 'othering' the homeless serve?

Does homelessness literature referring to a 'homeless identity' serve to reify this 'other'? Categorising and identifying people into researchable entities may simplify the identifiers job, but identities are not inconsequential to people's lives, they do matter for those identified (Gecas and Burke (1995), p.43).

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