Pathways Approaches to Homelessness Research

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ABSTRACT

Research on homelessness has focused on either structural forces or individual actions or, where both are considered, has failed to find an effective way of analysing the two sets of factors together. This article looks at one way of doing this through the adoption of a ‘pathways’ framework. The article reviews existing pathways research on homelessness and argues that existing studies do not analyse the interaction of structural and action elements. A stronger theoretical framework is outlined and emphasis placed on the discourses which shape the nature of services for homeless people and the actions of both staff and homeless people themselves. Understanding of the interaction between these two groups is vital if the nature of homelessness is to be comprehended. A research method is needed which focuses on homelessness discourses and their restructuring and shaping through interaction in order that the aim of a holistic analysis can be achieved.

INTRODUCTION

Both research and policy discussions on homelessness in Britain have been focused on the dichotomy between individual and structural causal factors. The policy debate has been between what Jacobs, Kemeny, and Manzi (1999) term the ‘minimalist’ and ‘maximalist’ constructions of homelessness. The minimalistic construction is predicated on a conception of the causes of homelessness as being the individual pathology of homeless people. This construction is associated with a policy response which stresses the distinction between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ behaviour (for example as enshrined in the concept of ‘intentionality’ in British homelessness legislation) and which focuses on intervention at the level of the individual. This construction can be contrasted with a maximalist approach, which places emphasis on the structural causes of homelessness such as conditions in the employment and housing markets and public policies such as on social security. In this construction the major causes of homelessness can be found at the level of societal structures and it is the role of public policy to deal with these through, for
example, intervention in the labour market for young people or through the provision of housing accommodation.

A similar dichotomy is evident in research. In their review of research on homelessness among single people in Britain, Fitzpatrick, Kemp, and Klinker (2000) point to the common perception that the distinction between individual and structural explanations is generally perceived as ‘a useful starting point’ (p. 19). On the individual level there is a considerable body of research examining the characteristics of homeless people which is then often used to identify particular risk factors and trigger points. Fitzpatrick, Kemp, and Klinker (2000) identify 12 risk factors in addition to poverty and unemployment which seem to lead to an increased risk of homelessness. These risk factors include sexual or physical abuse in childhood, offending behaviour, lack of a social support network, and drug or alcohol abuse. Trigger factors are defined as specific events which can be the immediate cause of a period of homelessness. They include relationship breakdown, leaving the parental home after arguments, eviction from housing, and leaving institutional care. A common problem with this kind of research is identifying cause and effect. Fitzpatrick, Kemp, and Klinker (2000) point out that as well as being predictors of homelessness many of these factors may also result from or be exacerbated by homelessness.

In their review of the literature, Fitzpatrick, Kemp, and Klinker (2000) argue that most researchers generally tend towards structural accounts of homelessness. They state that the main factors contributing to homelessness include adverse housing and labour market trends, cuts in social security benefits, rising levels of poverty and family restructuring. Despite their use of the dichotomy between individual and structural explanations of homelessness in reviewing existing research, Fitzpatrick, Kemp, and Klinker (2000) quote Neale (1997) in arguing that this dichotomy is overly simplistic, and that no sharp distinction can be made between the two sets of factors. The implication is that both sets of factors are important in causing homelessness and that the interactions between them are complex. However, there is a distinct lack of a coherent framework in which to examine the nature of these interactions. This is perhaps not surprising given the importance and ubiquity of this dichotomy in social science. However, there has been increasing interest in the interaction between individual action and structural forces as shown for example in the work of Giddens (1984). It is the contention of this article that research on homelessness needs to work with frameworks derived from these approaches if it is to shed light on the complex of factors associated with homelessness and its prevention. The key aim of this article is to explore one possible framework using the concept of a ‘housing pathway’. The article reviews existing uses of the concept of a homelessness pathway and argues that further development of the approach is needed in order to integrate agency and structural aspects. A conceptual outline of the approach is put forward based on Clapham (2002). This approach is then applied to homelessness and it is argued that the previous approaches need to be supplemented with an assessment of policy discourses and of interactions between homeless individuals and service providers. The use of the approach in evaluating both the symbolic and action aspects of public policy towards homelessness is then outlined.

HOMELESSNESS PATHWAYS

The concept of a homelessness pathway has been used by Fitzpatrick (1999) in her study of homeless young people in Glasgow. She criticized the static nature of much research on
homelessness and sought to shed light on the dynamic nature of the experience of homelessness of many people. She also sought to provide a holistic framework by placing the housing pathways of young people in relation to other pathways such as the transition from education to employment. Another focus was the relationships between family members and the young person which could influence the process of leaving home and the help received when attempting to live independently. The research technique used was the biographical interview in which subjects were asked to recount their biography. This was coupled with an (only partially successful) attempt to trace the subjects a year later and to undertake follow up interviews to shed light on the changes in their position over time. From this research Fitzpatrick was able to criticize the prevailing view of a downward spiral of homelessness and to identify six particular types of homelessness pathway. These varied according to geographical location (whether in the city centre or in the local area studied), degree of entry to ‘official’ homelessness agency facilities (such as hostels), and the stability of the young person’s housing situation.

Another use of a pathways framework was undertaken by Anderson and Tulloch (2000). They defined a homelessness pathway as a description of ‘the route of an individual or household into homelessness, their experience of homelessness and their route out of homelessness into secure housing’ (Anderson & Tulloch, 2000, p. 11). From their review of the research evidence, Anderson and Tulloch identified 23 different general pathways divided according to the stage in the life course. Five were associated with young people, 11 with adults and seven with people in later life. The descriptions of these generalized pathways included the trigger factors and the experience of homelessness in terms of the physical location of the individual (for example, a hostel or sleeping rough). Some pathways included a route out of homelessness, but many did not. A limited account was taken of the interaction between homeless people and the policy mechanisms they encountered. Examples include outcomes from dealings with the mechanisms of statutory homelessness procedures and barriers to accessing housing because of a record of rent arrears.

Both research studies are valuable starting points in using the pathways framework. The strengths of Fitzpatrick’s work were the focus on the voices and perceptions of the young people themselves as they constructed their own situation and the dynamic and holistic nature of the framework used. Both studies use the concept of a pathway in homelessness research to overcome drawbacks of other approaches. For example, they emphasize the dynamic nature of homelessness, showing that homeless people move in and out of homelessness, in some cases a number of times. The diversity of the experiences of homelessness has also been stressed.

However the research could have been developed further to make the most of the pathways framework. The pathways approach was relatively untheorized and not related to a wider literature. This meant that the large amount of information collected in each case was described rather than analysed. In particular, Fitzpatrick describes the individual biographies and identifies the wider structural factors involved, but does not relate the two. The analysis followed the usual method of describing structural factors as constraints and treating them independently from the biographical factors. Therefore, little light was shed on the interactions between agency and structure. When confronted with the individual biographies and the pathways identified, the focus is on the behaviour of the individual and not on the structural factors which may have influenced this. Although it is clearly not the wish of the authors, the impact is to reinforce the minimalist conception of homelessness.

These drawbacks can be overcome through the incorporation of an analysis of the impact of discourses and their relationship to the reality constructed by homeless people.
To show the importance of this it is necessary to focus on the theoretical underpinning of
the pathways approach.

THE PATHWAYS APPROACH

The concept of a housing pathway has been developed as a framework of analysis. It is
essentially the application of a metaphor rather than being a theory (although theories may
be developed from it). In the same way it is not a research method, although it may sit well
with some particular research methods.

The most developed exposition of the pathways approach is given in Clapham (2002).
The fundamental building block of the approach is social constructionism which is based
on the tenet that social life is constructed by people through interaction. It is through inter-
action that individuals define themselves and the world they inhabit. The use of language
is vital because it allows interaction about individuals or objects which are not present and
enables the accumulation of experiences and meanings which can build up into zones of
meaning which serve as the stock of knowledge which people use in their everyday life
and can be passed on from one generation to the next. These systems of meaning or dis-
courses represent the nature of the world or reality and become taken for granted. It is
argued by Bauman (1992) that the current post-modern world is made up of many and
competing discourses in what he terms the ‘dissipation of objectivity’. The nature of social
order in society will depend on the ability of people to be able to sustain a particular ver-
sion of reality as being considered to be objective truth. This ability will depend on their
ability to exercise power.

The foundation of social constructionism can be built on by adding Giddens’ concept of
structuration. He argues that social structures do not have an independent existence, but
are produced and reproduced by human agency at both the individual and institutional
levels where they serve both to constrain and enable action (Giddens, 1984). Action is
consciously intentional but has the unintended effect of reproducing structures. Social
practices thus have both an agency and a structural dimension.

Clapham (2002) defines a housing pathway as ‘patterns of interaction (practices) con-
cerning house and home, over time and space’ (p. 63). The pathway of a household is the
continually changing set of relationships and interactions which it experiences over time
in its consumption of housing. This includes changes in social relations as well as changes
in the physical housing situation.

It is assumed that households undertake what Giddens calls ‘life planning’ in a search
for identity and self-fulfilment. Housing is a key element in this. King (1996) argues
that housing should be seen as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. ‘It [housing]
is a means of fulfilment that allows other human activities to take place’ (King, 1996,
p. 22). Housing can also be an important source of identity. Taylor (1998) makes the
distinction between categorical and ontological identity. Categorical identity is concerned
with the labels, which are ascribed to us by ourselves and society. An example would be
the category of homeowner or homeless person which bring with them a set of discourses
which ascribe their relation to the wider society. This is in addition to categories of
social class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, age and so on. Ontological identity
is how these are forged by individuals into a coherent sense of self-identity. Categorical
identity is a key concept because of its mediating position between society and the
individual.
It is assumed that the housing pathway of a household is related to other pathways such as employment, family maturation and so on. Meaning attached to one’s housing situation may be part of a personal identity which includes type of employment, choice of clothing, type of car owned and so on. Therefore, housing pathways must be considered alongside other elements of life and lifestyle.

**HOUSING PATHWAYS AND HOMELESSNESS**

Homelessness can be seen as an episode or episodes in a person’s housing pathway. The pathways framework can shed light on the factors that lead to homelessness, influence the nature of the experience, and enable some people to move out of it. The output of research using the pathways framework has been in the form of biographies which have been used to construct ideal type pathways. This useful start needs to be supplemented in two major directions to draw most benefit from the framework. These are the incorporation of structural elements to the biography and the analysis of public policy interventions. Each of these will now be considered in turn.

The construction of personal biographies of homeless people, which document their experiences in housing and related areas of life is a very valuable and illuminating tool. At its best it can provide insight into the ‘perceptive world’ of the individual which influences the construction of their identity and their behaviour. What has been lacking so far is an analysis of the relationship between these perceptive worlds and the discourses which influence and shape them. Each homeless person does not construct their life in a vacuum, but is influenced by the way they are treated by their family and others they come into contact with, as well as their projection in the media, and their treatment by professionals and public services they interact with. Of course homeless people themselves reinforce or challenge these discourses through their individual words and actions as well as collectively through organizations lobbying on their behalf.

A number of related discourses may be relevant here. For example, the discourse of ‘the family’ will frame expected norms of behaviour between young people and their parents. Where these are breached there may be conflict, which may lead to homelessness. It is important to stress that in this as in other areas there may be a number of discourses vying for influence. These may be generally held or may be associated with particular social groups. For example, there may be a different discourse of family held by different generations, which may frame conflict between parents and their children. These discourses are associated with categorical identities. Examples are ‘parent’, ‘teenager’, or ‘drug abuser’. There may be conflicts over the boundaries of these categories such as what constitutes drug abuse in general and in any individual case. Parents may categorize their child as a drug abuser, but the child may dispute this categorization if they feel they are taking recreational drugs in a way sanctioned by their peer group. Discourses may be constructed which differ in for example, the expected rules of behaviour for a member of a category, the appropriate response of non-members towards members and the status members should receive. The taking of recreational drugs may confer high status within the ‘teenager’ discourse held by some young people, but confer low status from the discourse held by parents.

The importance of these discourses in interpreting biographical data is vital to understanding the nature of homelessness. A dispute between parents and their children may seem like an individual phenomenon when seen as part of the individual biography, but
may be mirroring similar general conflicts between discourses. In this case, the explanation of homelessness cannot be seen as only a result of individual pathology, but also as indicative of wider conflicts in society. This has implications for the acceptance of the ‘minimalist’ or ‘maximalist’ discourses of homelessness and the different explanations of causality and related policy discourses and mechanisms which frame the policy responses to homelessness.

The consequence for research on homelessness is that the identification and elucidation of appropriate discourses is a vital part of the research task. It is then necessary to relate them to the ‘perceptive world’ of key actors in a personal biography in order to relate the personal and the structural.

The second area in which recent pathways research can be developed is in the treatment of public policy. King (1996) argues that public policy can be seen at two levels. The first level is that of action where policy can influence behaviour by creating (or changing or destroying) mechanisms which allow (or prevent) households from acting in particular ways. The second level is that of discourse. Policy mechanisms are usually framed by and sometimes meant to influence discourses. For example, employment and training policy towards young people is associated with a discourse which includes a view of the appropriate role of young people, their behaviour and their obligations. At present it is assumed that all young people over 16 should be in work or in full time education and that any help given to them is conditional on certain norms of behaviour such as attending training every day, not being under the influence of drink or drugs or behaving in a ‘proper’ manner towards trainers and other trainees. Usually, policy interventions have more or less explicit assumptions about the causes and nature of the problem they are meant to deal with. These assumptions may derive from professional or political definitions of ‘the problem’ and may serve to challenge or reinforce dominant discourses. Policy interventions will differ in the mix of discourse and action elements. For example, some will be primarily aimed at the level of discourse by providing mechanisms, which are mainly symbolic in their reinforcement of particular discourses rather than being meant to be directly used through action.

Many homeless people in the pathways identified by Fitzpatrick (1999) came into contact with public or voluntary agencies designed to ‘deal with’ them. Agencies differed in their definitions of ‘the problem’ and the appropriate way to deal with it. For example, some such as the police had an explicit emphasis on social control with appropriate behaviour being defined through the legal system. Others were more focused on homeless people themselves and attempted to help them in the way that homeless people themselves thought appropriate by adopting their definition of ‘the problem’.

Homeless people may be offered different kinds of services including accommodation and support. Each package has a particular discourse associated with it which may influence the way that homeless people react to it. Fitzpatrick (1999) probed the meaning which homeless people associated with the idea of ‘home’. For many, traditional forms of accommodation for homeless people such as hostels or shared living arrangements did not come within the bounds of their definition. Hutson (1999) argues that many forms of accommodation and support for homeless people are based on professional definitions of ‘need’ which conform with the interests of the professionals in claiming special expertise rather than with the needs as defined by the homeless people themselves. Some homeless people viewed hostels as frightening and hostile places where they felt threatened. Fitzpatrick (1999) identifies many people who would not avail themselves of services in the centre of the city because they felt unsafe venturing outside what they defined
as their own area. An interesting phenomenon is emerging in Britain where some homeless people are choosing to sleep rough on the streets rather than accept the accommodation and support which is available for them. For them the streets provide more elements of ‘home’ than the hostel accommodation they are offered.

The key point is that discourses influence the shape of the interventions designed to ‘deal with’ the problem of homelessness and that consuming the services can mean accepting the implicit discourse. In consequence homeless people may judge the services on the basis of the meaning it has for them and their willingness to ascribe to or accept the discourse. Therefore, a key element of research on homelessness should be the elucidation of these discourses and the reaction to them by homeless people.

Homeless people will be confronted with the discourse as they interact with service providers and professionals in seeking to consume the services. These interactions are important in restructuring or destructuring social practices (see Clapham, 2002). In analysing different forms of interactions Haugaard (1992) argues that structures are only reproduced where a shared perception of a rule is affirmed. In other words, if one actor starts the interaction in a way which follows structural practices, the second party to the interaction can either respond in the same way, which means that the structure is reproduced, or can intentionally refuse to follow the structural practices (what Haugaard calls destructuration) or cannot know how to respond in an appropriate way (non-restructuration). These interactions have a structural element based on the dominant discourse which frames the ‘rules of the game’ within which interaction takes place. They also have an agency element in the way that specific interactions may have the potential to reinforce or challenge these norms. If a large number of interactions destructure in a particular way, this may lead to change in the ‘rules of the game’. The outcome of the interaction may well hinge on the power which the parties can bring to bear. Here power is seen as existing and being manifest in the relationships between different actors (Clegg, 1989) and consists of the resources available to the parties and their ability to utilize them effectively. In the situation of a service provider and a homeless person it is likely that the homeless person will have little potential to destructure where there is an urgent need for access. The ability to walk away from the interaction is probably the only resource the homeless person has. This may be effective where an agency has to meet utilization targets in order to justify public funding. Destructuring can also be pursued through collective endeavour by pressure groups working on behalf of homeless people to challenge the dominant discourse through media and political channels. This can reinforce the actions of individual homeless people in their interactions with service providers and give them information to facilitate destructuring.

The nature of the services provided to homeless people is determined by the interaction between staff and prospective users. Staff are given a framework for this interaction through the policy and procedures of their organization which will be based on and be part of the discourse which underpins the provision and provides its justification and rationale. The interaction with prospective and actual users is where this discourse is put into practice and may confront the discourse of homeless people which may be different. A process of negotiation may then take place which will determine access to the services, but may also have the effect of restructuring or destructuring (i.e. changing) either discourse. The face-to-face interaction between provider and user is where important structural processes are played out and possibly changed. Therefore, a key element of research on homelessness should be the analysis of these interactions. This calls for a research method which can capture this through, for example, participant observation when the interactions are taking place.
EVALUATING PUBLIC POLICY

Much research on homelessness has been aimed at the evaluation of services designed to provide accommodation and support for homeless people. The pathways framework offers a way of approaching this. It was argued earlier that public policy has both discourse and action dimensions. The discourse dimension has been discussed at length earlier. This section will focus on the action dimension.

The pathways approach draws attention to changes in a person’s housing circumstances whether in physical location or in meaning. For homeless people these changes may be many and rapid. For example, Fitzpatrick (1999) shows how some homeless young people spent considerable periods of time moving between staying at home, with friends, rough sleeping or in hostels. The aim of many policy interventions is to make changes to a pathway to enable homeless people to achieve particular outcomes. These may be expressed in terms of outcomes which are not classified as homelessness such as the move from rough sleeping into a hostel or maybe into permanent accommodation. Alternatively the outcomes may be expressed in terms of their acceptability to the homeless person themselves such as that they are satisfied or feel at home in the accommodation. The pathways framework offers a way of conceptualizing the movement of a person through their housing situation and so is a good tool for understanding action outcomes.

In particular the pathways approach leads to an emphasis on the dynamic nature of pathways, in other words, their changing nature over time. In the evaluation of policy interventions a key issue is the time frame involved. Many evaluations look at the immediate outcomes of policy such as success in moving people off the streets and into hostels or from there into permanent accommodation. However these outcomes are only another stage in the housing pathway and may be of short duration. Hostel dwellers may drift back onto the streets if the underlying issues causing their homelessness are not dealt with. Some people when given permanent accommodation find it difficult to cope on low incomes when they may lack the skills and knowledge to live on their own and the personal networks, which would counter isolation and loneliness. The pathways approach draws attention to both the holistic nature of people’s problems and the importance of taking a long perspective on outcomes.

In any pathway there are key points where the housing situation changes. Employing the pathways analogy one can think of these as junctions where there is a change of direction. Becoming homeless is clearly an important junction. The use of the framework can aid the understanding of why these junctions occur and can, therefore, aid understanding of how to prevent them happening. It may be that intervention at certain points in the pathway is more effective than at other points. The dynamic and holistic nature of the approach gives a framework for analysing these issues.

CONCLUSION

Much research on homelessness has followed and reinforced the traditional dichotomy in the social sciences between structural and personal approaches. This has been mirrored by political discourses of minimalist or maximalist definitions of homelessness and its causes. The article outlines an approach to research based on the concept of a housing pathway, which enables structural and personal factors to be considered together. The concept of a homelessness pathway has been used in previous research, but this article has
sought to show that this has been underconceptualized and has failed to bridge the structure-agency divide. Nevertheless existing research has shown some of the strengths of the approach through its dynamic and holistic nature and its foregrounding of the voices of homeless people themselves. A clearer specification of the theoretical underpinning of the pathways approach enables existing work to be extended, largely by linking the agency and structural dimensions through analysis of discourses and their use in the interaction between service providers and homeless people. It also gives a way of evaluating public policy interventions both in terms of their action and discourse elements.

There has been a considerable amount of research on homelessness in Britain, but much of it has been partial, in the sense that it has concentrated on either structural factors or alternatively on giving emphasis to the voices of homeless people. Further research is needed which pursues a more holistic approach and attempts to bring together these elements. The pathways framework offers such an approach.

REFERENCES


