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# Researching Homelessness in Europe: Theoretical Perspectives

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- › **Abstract\_** *This paper explores the theoretical developments in homelessness research and relates them to the European context. The paper asserts that European academics have relied too heavily on American research and evidence, and that there are dangers in using these ideas and data to interpret European homelessness. The increased emphasis on individual characteristics and actions in theoretical debates about homelessness is considered and the importance of new arguments that homeless people exercise controls over the nature of their homelessness is explored. Finally, the paper discusses how to take forward analysis of a social problem that has both individual and structural elements.*
- › **Keywords\_** *Old and new orthodoxy, theory and data, theory building on homelessness in the EU*

## Introduction: The New Orthodoxy

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Victorian investigations of extreme, unaccommodated poverty looked for individual moral lapses, active choices not to work honestly, to drink too much and to be criminal; or for individual tragedies, decent people finding themselves in desperate situations despite their very best efforts (Ribton-Turner, 1887; Freeman and Nelson, 2008; Higginbotham, 2008; O'Sullivan, 2016). Twentieth century scholars used statistics and ethnographic techniques to study homeless populations, defined as people using emergency accommodation and living rough. Data from this research repeatedly showed a very high prevalence of mental health problems, initially in combination with problematic drinking and, later on, with illegal drug use, within largely lone adult male populations (Scott, 1993). However, research into homeless families, who tended to be very poor but not seriously mentally ill; data that raised questions about how high the prevalence of support needs was among homeless individuals; and apparent spikes in homelessness linked to economic recession, downward shifts in affordable housing supply and cuts to welfare systems, caused some academics to redirect their attention to structural factors (Burt, 1991). Academic debates about homelessness can be characterised by arguments about whether structural factors, or individual pathology, provides the better explanation of why homelessness occurs (Gowan, 2010; Farrugia and Gerrard, 2015).

A 'new orthodoxy' arose in the 1990s and began to shape theoretical debates and the conduct of homelessness research (Caton, 1990; Pleace, 1998; 2000; Farrugia and Gerrard, 2015). This new orthodoxy contended that homelessness was not individual in nature, nor was it structural, but instead resulted from the *interaction* of structural and individual factors (O'Flaherty, 2004; Fitzpatrick, 2005). Structural factors, in the new orthodoxy, referred to the operation of housing and labour markets, cultural and political factors contributing to inequity – i.e., sexism, racism and other forms of stigmatisation; and to the operation of welfare, public health and social housing systems. Individual factors centred on needs, characteristics, experiences and, importantly, behaviour.

The new orthodoxy was posited on the idea that most homelessness research tended to suffer from one of two main theoretical flaws (Neale, 1997). The first theoretical flaw, which dated back to the first attempts at studying homeless people, was a near-total emphasis on observable individual traits (O'Sullivan, 2016). Homelessness was explained using analysis of specific people in specific places, which by and large meant people living rough or in emergency shelters, whose apparently very high support needs were used to 'explain' their homelessness, with little or no reference to contextual variables (Hopper, 1990; O'Sullivan, 2008). The second theoretical flaw in existing homelessness research – according to the new orthodoxy – was a second set of ideas that viewed homelessness as the polar

opposite, as almost entirely a consequence of capitalism, in a context of failures within, and cuts to, welfare systems. Homelessness was seen as being *inflicted* on powerless people by forces that were, literally, beyond their control, or as a function of individual pathology (Pleace, 2000).

Within the new orthodoxy, labour markets, housing markets, welfare systems, health and social housing systems, and individual needs, behaviour, characteristics and experiences all combined to cause homelessness (Caton, 1990; Pleace, 2000; O’Flaherty, 2004). When someone experienced the wrong combination of structural and personal factors, homelessness was created and sustained. Homelessness, was a negative assemblage of structural and individual disadvantages; homelessness was a *pattern* (Lee *et al.*, 2010).

In the new orthodoxy, three factors worked in combination. These were personal capacity, access to informal support and access to formal support.

The risk of homelessness increased if someone lacked personal capacity, which meant resilience, coping skills and access to financial resources. This meant labour market disadvantage, limiting illness, disability, low educational attainment, a disrupted childhood, mental illness, drug addiction, criminality – indeed, anything that limited someone’s innate capacity to self-care in a free market economy.

Limits to personal capacity could be countered by a partner, family or friends if they were able – and were prepared – to offer informal support. If someone could not put a roof over their own head, a family, a partner or a friend might do so. If there was no partner, friends or family, these supports were absent, as was the case if these potential sources of informal support had no resources to spare or were simply unwilling to help.

Formal support from health, welfare, social housing systems and homelessness services could, in turn, counteract limits to both personal capacity and to informal support. Barriers to health, care, support and housing services for homeless people, ranging from negative responses based on stereotypical images of homelessness through to local connection rules, could, however, block access to formal support (Baptista *et al.*, 2015). Formal support services might also simply be under-resourced, which might in itself generate homelessness. This raised the possibility that countries with well resourced, highly accessible welfare systems would have less homelessness, an argument for which there is some evidence (Stephens and Fitzpatrick, 2007; Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015).

Systemic failure – focused specifically on homelessness services rather than welfare systems as a whole – had also been identified by researchers as a cause of homelessness. It had been apparent for decades that some members of the homeless population were recurrent and long-term users of homelessness services

(Macgregor-Wood, 1976; Dant and Deacon, 1989). However, the true nature of that population and how small it might actually be would not start to become clear until the ground-breaking longitudinal analysis of Culhane and his colleagues on service administrative data in the US (Culhane *et al.*, 1994). These studies indicated that 10 percent of Americans using emergency shelters were long-term homeless people with high support needs, with another 10 percent characterised by recurrent homelessness and relatively high support needs (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998). Some people were not being brought out of homelessness by existing services, something that was found in EU Member States as well as in the USA (Sahlin, 2005).

A triad of support systems kept homelessness at bay: personal capacity, informal support and formal support. If one set of supports failed, homelessness might be avoided; remove two and the risk of homelessness increased; once all three were gone, homelessness was, from a new orthodoxy perspective, practically inevitable.

Structural factors were apparently at the core of the new orthodoxy: economic systems actively generated inequity; barriers to welfare, health and housing services and inadequate homelessness services were all contributory factors. Yet the factors that predicted – indeed, determined – homelessness were *individual*. Individual capacity, if it were sufficient, meant the risk of homelessness could be effectively resisted, particularly if combined with sufficient informal support from friends, family and a partner. Vulnerability to homelessness due to structural factors began with individual characteristics; severe mental illness, drug addiction, criminality, sustained worklessness and limiting illnesses all undermined individual capacity and they might also undermine or remove access to informal supports (Dant and Deacon, 1989). The new orthodoxy was posited on the idea that structural factors ‘caused’ homelessness only when someone had limits to their personal capacity and insufficient access to informal support. One had to *need* formal support to prevent or exit homelessness before inadequacies within, or barriers to, that formal support started to matter as a cause of homelessness (Pleace, 2000; Lee *et al.*, 2010).

The new orthodoxy has influenced both research and practice. Academic research has explicitly linked homelessness service failures to a false construct of homelessness as the result of individual pathology, without sufficient acknowledgement of structural factors or a lack of informal support as causes of homelessness. Services have been criticised because they seek to ‘correct’ deviant behaviours, treat mental health problems and drug-addiction, and ‘staircase’ homeless people towards independent living through training and treatment (Pleace, 2008). Some American research found evidence of reprehensible practice and failure in staircase services (Stark, 1994; Lyon-Callo, 2000; Dordick, 2002), echoed in European analysis (Hutson and Liddiard, 1994; Sahlin, 2005; Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007). A more complex picture was suggested by other research, which reported

'staircase' models that were supportive, choice-orientated and relatively effective (Pleace, 2008; Rosenheck, 2010), rather than total institutions (Stark, 1994). However, the idea that homelessness services failed because they greatly over-emphasised individual behaviour and had fixed, preconceived ideas about who homeless people were, became pervasive (Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007).

Equally, service responses that failed to acknowledge individual characteristics, needs, experiences and behaviour have also been subject to academic criticism. The 'housing-only' response of British statutory services, which offered secure social housing to vulnerable homeless individuals without support services has been criticised by researchers and practitioners as being effectively over-focused on housing need (Dant and Deacon, 1989; Pleace, 1995; McNaughton-Nicolls, 2009).

New service interventions that emphasise shared humanity and a respect for the choices of homeless people have appeared, the leading one of which is, of course, Housing First. In a Housing First service, homeless people are not blamed for their situation; their housing need is recognised as related to structural factors and is met, but there is at least equal emphasis on meeting individual support needs within a framework characterised by service user choice, harm reduction and a recovery orientation. Housing First is, in many senses, almost akin to a manifestation of the new orthodoxy (Tsemberis, 1999; Hansen-Löfstrand and Juhila, 2012; Padgett *et al.*, 2016; Pleace, 2016). By contrast, a traditional, basic emergency shelter can be directly related to the ideas within the old orthodoxies that homeless people mean less, have less and are less than ordinary citizens, which is 'why' they are homeless (Lancione, 2016).

## **Subgroups and Agency**

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The problem with the new orthodoxy is an absence of precision. If homelessness is, indeed, the result of a negative assemblage of individual and structural factors, questions then arise as to how exactly this happens and what it looks like. Neale's criticism of arguments emphasising structural factors or individual factors is that homelessness is too diverse to support either set of assumptions. As she notes, this is an equally effective critique of the dangers of the imprecise melding of individual and structural factors within the new orthodoxy (Neale, 1997). Hopper also highlights the inherent vagueness of the new orthodoxy, arguing that both a single pattern and a set of patterns are hard to see within an essentially heterogeneous population (Hopper, 2003). Writing in 2000, the author similarly criticised the new orthodoxy for lacking a clear expository framework (Pleace, 2000).

For critics, the new orthodoxy was not a testable hypothesis; it failed, even in broad terms, to explain *how* this causal interaction of personal and structural worked. The criticism was that the new orthodoxy amounted to a series of vague suggestions, not a coherent, testable, social scientific theory (Neale, 1997; Pleace, 2000; Williams and Cheal, 2001; Pleace and Quilgars, 2003; Somerville, 2013).

For Fitzpatrick, the way to move beyond these limits was to look at the detail, to zoom in on homelessness causation and explore whether distinct patterns were present. There might well not be one 'homelessness', triggered by a consistent negative assemblage of trigger variables, but there could be identifiable, predictable clusters of homelessness, taking differing forms. If 'internally homogeneous subgroups' existed, this allowed for the possibility that the individual factors would sometimes be more important than structural factors, or indeed vice versa, depending on which form of homelessness one was talking about (Fitzpatrick, 2005). According to these ideas, economic structures, housing structures, patriarchal and interpersonal structures and individual attributes do not manifest homelessness in one – ill-defined and unexplained – form, but as a series of distinct social problems (Williams and Cheal, 2001; Fitzpatrick, 2005). Subsequent work on 'multiple-exclusion' homelessness used statistical analysis to explore clusters of characteristics in a specific, long-term and recurrently homeless population, arguing that it did, indeed, have distinct, predictable characteristics (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2011).

While Fitzpatrick and others have sought to refine the new orthodoxy, other voices have questioned it on a fundamental level. These criticisms centre on the idea that structural factors were being over-emphasised and that agency was effectively being removed from homeless people (McNaughton-Nicolls, 2009).

From this perspective, the new orthodoxy disempowers homeless people, both as agents whose decisions might negatively influence their situation and as agents whose individual actions might enable them to find their own way out of homelessness. The assumptions of old orthodoxies – that homeless people were powerless in the face of structural forces or could not overcome their own limitations due to issues like mental health problems – were still present.

From this perspective, homelessness is navigation; it is a navigation that may be constrained in various ways, but homeless people nevertheless take decisions that influence their trajectories through homelessness. Understanding that individual choices influence homelessness along with individual characteristics, needs and experiences as well as structural factors, leads to the idea that people take specific *pathways* through homelessness (Snow *et al.*, 1994; May, 2000; Clapham, 2003; Fopp, 2009; McNaughton-Nicholls, 2009; Parsell and Parsell, 2012; Somerville, 2013). This line of criticism of the new orthodoxy is distinctive because the study of an individual homeless person is not simply a 'diagnosis' to explain their homeless-

ness (Lyon-Callo, 2000; O'Sullivan, 2008). There is recognition of the homeless person as an agent – a thinking person taking a particular 'pathway' through homelessness (Clapham, 2003) and not simply someone who is a victim of their own vulnerabilities in a harsh world – while also acknowledging that structural factors are present. This emphasis on actions and behaviour brings individual characteristics to the fore, making understanding homelessness a matter of understanding individual choices to a much greater extent than is suggested by the new orthodoxy (McNaughton-Nicolls, 2009; Parsell and Parsell, 2012).

## Theory and Evidence

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Relatively primitive individualist explanations of homelessness, which over time shifted towards ethnography, started to be challenged by academics arguing that structural factors were fundamental to understanding homelessness. In turn, these two underdeveloped ideas were replaced by the new orthodoxy, in which negative assemblages of structural and individual factors were seen as creating homelessness, which was, in turn, criticised for lacking precision (Neale, 1997; Clapham, 2003; Fitzpatrick, 2005). The study of subgroups, in which homelessness stopped being one social problem and became many, combined with a recognition of individual agency, has begun the process of working towards an analytical framework for European homelessness research (Pleace, 2005).

However, homelessness research, both in the European context but also more broadly, is still uncomfortably close to being a conceptually inconsistent mess. Research focused on structural factors, on individual pathology, using the new orthodoxy, using a choice-focused ethnographic 'pathways' analysis and using subgroup analysis is occurring, and being published, at the time of writing.

Quite a lot of the research emphasising structural factors, such as inadequate housing supply as a direct cause of homelessness in the UK (Greve, 1964; Glastonbury, 1971; Greve *et al.*, 1971; Drake, 1989) or highlighting rising inequality in the USA (McCarthy and Hagan, 1991; Burt, 1991), is older material. However, papers arguing that homelessness is essentially a construct of the neo-liberalist pursuit of inequity are still appearing (Phelan and Norris, 2008; Willse, 2010; Bullen, 2015). Ethnographic studies emphasising individual pathology are still published (Nooe and Patterson, 2010), as are papers that feel there is still a need, more than 25 years since the new orthodoxy first started to appear, to argue that homelessness has both individual and structural causes (Cronley, 2010; Lee *et al.*, 2010; Parsell and Marston, 2012; Piat *et al.*, 2014).



Not all of the current work on homelessness acknowledges that the evidence base has undergone radical change in the last 25 years. Longitudinal analysis of large scale administrative datasets has shown there are patterns in American homelessness (Culhane *et al.*, 1994; Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Culhane *et al.*, 2013). There is a small population with poor mental and physical health, and with limited or no informal support, who are not getting access to the right services. These studies found that cross-sectional research had over-sampled a high-need minority who were the most likely to be sleeping rough or in services, while anyone experiencing homelessness for a shorter period tended to be missed (O'Sullivan, 2008). Longitudinal analysis found a much larger, transitionally homeless population who were poor and who tended not to have high support needs (Culhane *et al.*, 2013).

Evidence has since appeared indicating that clusters of high-need long-term homeless people exist elsewhere: in London (Jones and Pleace, 2010); Toronto (Aubry *et al.*, 2013); Dublin (O'Donoghue-Hynes, 2015); and, particularly, in Denmark (Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015). The scale of transitionally homeless populations appears to be very much smaller in some European contexts where welfare systems are extensive than in America, while high-need subgroups are still present (Benjaminsen, 2016). The same work also partially supported the arguments of those who said homelessness was broadly related to inequity due to evidence of a transitional, apparently low-need homeless population characterised primarily by poverty (Pleace, 1998; Farrugia and Gerrard, 2015).

Analysis has also showed that support needs and sets of behaviours associated with long-term homelessness do not always predate homelessness but can arise *during* homelessness. People who do not have high support needs, or indeed any support needs, when they first become homeless, develop support needs in association with experiencing sustained or recurrent homelessness. Peaks in homelessness also appear to be related to economic recessions, and American research has found that long-term and recurrently homeless people tend to be a similar age (Culhane *et al.*, 2013). This work suggests that the flow into long-term and recurrent homelessness may not be constant; it could peak during recessions, which, when coupled with data indicating that high support needs can arise during homelessness, raises an interesting possibility: if these data are right, they mean people without high support needs become homeless at higher rates during recessions and that some of this group find themselves unable to exit homelessness and experience marked deteriorations in mental and physical health in association with what becomes long-term and repeat homelessness.

Structural factors have become more evident through comparative analysis. Recent research from Denmark, contrasting results with the USA, indicates that the nature of homelessness can be distinct in countries with radically different welfare systems. Homelessness that is related simply to poverty appears to be very unusual in the Danish context, in marked contrast with the USA (Benjaminsen, 2016).

Criticism of the idea that severe mental illness was actually a demonstrable cause of homelessness – as people with severe mental illness greatly outnumber homeless people and mental illness can arise during homelessness – has been around for decades (Cohen and Thompson, 1992). Systemic failures in mental health treatment and welfare systems can be associated with homelessness, but current evidence indicates that poor mental health in itself is not a sufficient or necessary cause of homelessness (Montgomery *et al.*, 2013). Research has also highlighted how drug use – sometimes described as another ‘causal’ factor – can arise during homelessness or remain constant, beginning before homelessness, continuing during homelessness and persisting after homelessness (Kemp *et al.*, 2006; Johnson and Chamberlain, 2008; Pleace, 2008).

Domestic violence and abuse has also been found to be a far more frequent cause of women’s homelessness than is the case for male homelessness, but gender differences in homelessness causation appear to be only part of a larger picture. Women appear often to take distinct pathways through homelessness, which are not explained by differences in structural factors such as differences in welfare systems, but which are instead linked to agency. Families, disproportionately headed by lone women, appear often to respond to homelessness by relying on informal support, only resorting to services once support from friends or relatives becomes exhausted, according to American and British research (Shinn *et al.*, 1998, Pleace *et al.*, 2008). Women’s experience of homelessness when they were without or separated from children has been found to be similar, with reliance on personal and informal resources again leading to an experience of homelessness that often remains hidden, and with services again being used as a last, rather than a first, resort (Mayock and Sheridan, 2012; Mayock and Bretherton, 2016). Studies of youth homelessness have also shown how young people’s experience of homelessness can be shaped by how they respond to their situation. Again, they might use their own capacity and informal resources rather than going straight to services, at least when homelessness initially occurs (Fitzpatrick, 2000; Quilgars *et al.*, 2008).

So, simple poverty can cause homelessness, and the extent to which this occurs can be linked to structural differences, such as those between welfare systems. Individual support needs, individual actions and levels of informal support may cause homelessness, allow homelessness to be avoided or result in varying trajectories through homelessness. When homelessness is recurrent or sustained, it can

be associated with the emergence of a drug problem, mental illness or other support needs. There is no single route through homelessness, but apparent clusters exist, such as women experiencing homelessness trajectories that can be linked to their choices. Structural factors, individual agency, needs, characteristics and experiences have all been shown to have an influence on homelessness causation and the sustainment or recurrence of homelessness. This could be read as an argument that the simplicities of the new orthodoxy and the old orthodoxies look set to be replaced with a kind of 'complex subgroups' thesis (Pleace, 2005), but there are reasons to hesitate before going down this road.

### **The Limits of Current Theory**

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A key limitation in current theory is the extent and validity of observation. American research has delivered solid critical analysis of the limits in only looking at homeless people in specific contexts and at specific times (O'Sullivan, 2008; 2016). Yet, while the longitudinal research using administrative data conducted by Culhane and others in the US has been nothing short of ground-breaking, these are data based on service contacts; they are not the whole homeless population. Recent American work, involving Culhane, has begun to explore the possible extent of homeless populations beyond those who make contact with services, raising questions about the original thesis on the nature of American homelessness (Metraux *et al.*, 2016).

The literature produced in the US is gigantic, but alongside a mix of robust, careful quantitative analysis and carefully conducted and contextualised ethnography, there are a lot of programme and service evaluations. A lot of US research is centred on exploring how to reduce homelessness by testing different models, not exploring the nature of homelessness itself. Canadian and Australian research has also added to scholarly discussion on the nature of homelessness (Parsell and Parsell, 2012; Piat *et al.*, 2014), although, as in the US, quite a lot of the research being conducted is centred on programme and service model evaluation.

Good quality American, Australian and Canadian research adds to our understanding. However, this material is ultimately not about Europe, and that, in itself, is an important caveat. There is a need for caution in relying on externally generated evidence and ideas to guide European research, because it is already clear that patterns in homelessness that exist in countries outside Europe do not necessarily exist in the same way within Europe (Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015).

There has been progress in developing an evidence base in Europe. France, Spain and Italy have all undertaken significant, if only periodic, attempts to count their homeless populations. Data on homelessness have also improved in countries like Poland and Portugal (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014). In the United Kingdom, home-

lessness research is extensive, although predominately funded by governments and the charitable sector, both of which are pursuing specific agendas and, again, heavily focused on service evaluation (Pleace and Quilgars, 2003). Denmark and Ireland have integrated data systems that, while not providing every answer, enhance statistical data on homelessness.

Nevertheless, European data on homelessness are skewed. There are geographical gaps. There are gaps in evidence on various forms of homelessness. The evidence base still tends towards studies of visible homelessness – i.e., populations largely comprised of lone men living rough and in homelessness services (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014). People living without their own space, without privacy and without security of tenure in Europe are, at best, partially mapped and partially understood. European data on hidden or concealed homelessness, which includes youth, family and women's homelessness, are quite limited.

Gaps in data mean gaps in understanding. Not knowing about a population makes it difficult to theorize about that population and creates the risk – as was the case in the US – of building theories about homelessness that simply fall apart as soon as data improve (O'Sullivan, 2008).

Issues around observation exist alongside problems with definition in the European context. Definitional challenges for researchers and policy-makers exist at two levels. The first is when homelessness is reduced to an ill-evidenced, over-simplified construct. For example, assuming that 'all homeless people are mentally ill' means that research, strategy and services are, at best, only covering one group and are, at worst, wasting resources and causing distress as they attempt to understand and respond to homelessness solely in terms of 'mental health' (Pleace, 2005). Equally, simply viewing homelessness as a function of housing market failure, corrected by increasing affordable housing supply, is also a flawed response, as assuming homeless people have no support needs is no better than assuming they are defined solely in terms of support needs. At the second level is the question of what is meant by homelessness itself, questioning why someone on the street or in an emergency shelter is 'homeless', while someone squatting in a building unfit for habitation or living in a shanty town is not. Concealed homeless households, without the privacy, safety or security of tenure that would be in place if they had their own front door, are 'homeless' in one European country but are only 'badly housed' in another (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014).

The work of FEANTSA and the European Observatory on Homelessness in the MPHASIS project and developing the ETHOS typology has promoted the idea of a shared European definition of homelessness. Some progress has been made towards a universal standard for enumeration (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014). Yet,

beyond people living rough and, usually, in emergency accommodation, definitions of homelessness can still be inconsistent and contested, both within Europe and elsewhere (Amore *et al.*, 2011).

Definition has major implications for theory. As the definition of homelessness broadens, structural factors may become more prominent, because more and more poor people enter the equation. It is the recurrently and long-term homeless populations that, on current evidence, have consistently high support needs, whereas other homeless people, such as families or those experiencing short term homelessness, do not (Burt, 1991; Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Pleace *et al.*, 2008).

Counting, say, concealed or hidden households as homeless, alongside people living rough, extends homelessness, even in contexts in which welfare and social housing systems are extensive and well-resourced (Benjaminsen, 2016). Homeless families do not look like people who have been living rough for any amount of time (Pleace *et al.*, 2008). A precariously housed group, or indeed groups, that transition in and out of homelessness for short periods, if they are counted as homeless, will be different again and may in turn contain more subgroups (Culhane *et al.*, 1994; Meert and Bourgeois, 2005). The further one moves away from regarding homelessness as only meaning long-term and recurrently homeless people, the more complex the picture, potentially, becomes. As the definition of the homeless population expands, new characteristics, new sets of behaviours and new structural factors will be added to the mix, and one theory may, in consequence, need to give way to another (Pleace, 2005).

Analysing homelessness as subgroups or as sets of pathways provides one way to try to tackle this issue, as it breaks homelessness up into more manageable conceptual chunks. However, taxonomies always have some element of compromise; there are 'boundary' cases that could go into one category or another, and decisions about the criteria used to identify each subgroup and whether it represents a robust basis for analysis are rarely straightforward (Bowker and Leigh-Star, 2000). Building a taxonomy becomes more and more complex the broader the definition of a social problem is and the more extensive the data are. Building clear and consistent pathways or subgroups is likely to be difficult in a data-rich environment with a wide definition of homelessness. Recent work from the US has shown how adding new data can disrupt taxonomies that were assumed to be relatively robust (Metraux *et al.*, 2016).

Taking something like lone adult homelessness, it can be seen how one presumed pathway – from psychiatric ward to homelessness service – was fractured as data improved. The idea that drug and alcohol use, combined with mental health problems, prompted most lone adult homelessness also fell apart once it was seen that these issues could arise *following* homelessness and that many homeless

people did not have these characteristics. Once gender was examined, it was clear that individual agency – women avoiding homelessness services, modifying their own trajectories through homelessness – also has an impact. Comparative research on welfare regimes shows the importance of context.

The potential problem with subgroups is that, as more data are added and as definitions widen, existing assumptions and existing patterns may disappear, supposedly ‘shared’ characteristics being replaced by more complex and nuanced relationships. Enough complexity in data may cause a breakdown in existing taxonomies, which as Neale (1997) suggests, can collapse in the face of enough intricacy. The point is that, if instead of, say, ten subgroups that provide a conceptual framework for ten distinct homelessness populations, there are a thousand, at what level of ‘membership’ does a homeless subgroup cease to be of theoretical or practical use? Equally, if there are many similarities in homeless populations, classification becomes a problem because there is not enough diversity.

## **Europe and the Conceptual Life Raft**

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Limitations in data have led to a tendency among European academics to use American, Australian and Canadian data and theory as a kind of conceptual life raft. European theoretical work on homelessness does exist but, inevitably, this work draws on American ideas because that is where most of the research and, consequently, much of the thinking about homelessness is done. The new orthodoxy was being written about in the US 26 years ago (Caton, 1990), while the importance of understanding behavioural factors, of pathways through homelessness, was being discussed 22 years ago (Snow *et al.*, 1994). European academic thought on homelessness is not plagiarism, but it would be disingenuous to suggest that European homelessness research is not heavily influenced by American work. While European data have improved, it is still the case that the only data on specific aspects of homelessness, on (what may be) specific subgroups of homeless people, or sometimes the only research that is socially scientifically robust, is American, Australian or Canadian (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010).

In Denmark, data-merging has already allowed American ideas about homelessness to be tested, with some very important differences in the nature of homelessness becoming evident (Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015). In Ireland, the Pathway Accommodation and Support System (PASS), introduced in 2013, also allows for this kind of analysis. Better data allows testing of American ideas, which may show their limits in the European context and spur the development of new theories. Building a European theoretical debate about the nature of homelessness, adding to global academic discourse on homelessness, means undertaking more research

in some contexts while redirecting efforts in others, particularly with respect to shifting the focus of research away from men who are living rough or in emergency accommodation.

There are reasons why the European evidence base is not more extensive. Quite a lot of homelessness research is funded by charities or governments and is focused on evaluation, or seeking to highlight specific issues. Perhaps more importantly, social scientific attention and the resources available to social scientists are confronted with a great many social problems. In the context of massive, structural shifts in labour markets producing mass youth unemployment across Europe; managing a population that is now living very long lives; or managing the consequences of mass migration, homelessness can appear to be a relatively minor issue, despite the unique the level of distress it causes.

Redirection of current research efforts, which while not necessarily large in scale or as robust as would be ideal, might help lessen Europe's collective reliance on internationally provided conceptual life rafts. Looking again at homelessness causation, testing the viability of current theory, and exploring – albeit sometimes in smaller-scale work – the lived experience, perceptions and experience of homeless people is one way forward. There are dangers in swimming to these life rafts because of an absence of data: first, American, Australian and Canadian ideas might not be relatable to European contexts; and second, there is a risk of projecting externally developed taxonomies and theories about the nature of homelessness onto European homeless people without sufficient critical analysis.

There is something to learn from those Americans who have conducted ethnographic research that has enriched and contextualised an understanding of homelessness, which is often built around statistical data. Working towards a mixed, multidisciplinary evidence base in Europe, including through ethnographic research, will help develop theoretical thinking, reduce the risk of incorrectly 'projecting' American patterns of homelessness onto a European context, and ensure homeless people and their views and experience are represented (see, for example, Lancione, 2016).

Large scale statistical data are vitally important; analysis of major administrative data sets, as achieved in Denmark (Benjaminsen, 2016), could revolutionize understanding of European homelessness. Yet, American experience teaches us to test the limits of administrative data and reflect on the lived experience of homelessness as well. The work of those who have emphasised individual agency in understanding European homelessness – for example from evidence about choice and differentiated experiences between genders (Mayock and Bretherton, 2016) – also highlights this need.

## Assumptive Research and Cultural Gravity

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Early studies of homelessness took place in civilisations that, broadly, regarded themselves as natural systems, in which every individual had a place, usually at the bottom of a strict hierarchy. Taxonomies, including some spectacular categorisations of ‘professional beggars’, ‘lunatics’ and ‘habitual drunkards’, were constructed to try to understand this population (Ribton-Turner, 1887; Gray, 1931).

Welfare systems were in place for populations we would now call homeless, using a mixture of containment and support (Roberts, 1963; Higginbotham, 2008; O’Sullivan, 2016). These systems were not welfare states, but the idea that poverty was, at least in part, structural in origin and that society had obligations towards the poor extended beyond the Marxists, even if the idea that some of the poor were ‘undeserving’ proved very hard to shake off (Vorspan, 1977; Veit-Wilson, 1991).

In the context of highly developed welfare systems that were built on assumptions that the poor and vulnerable needed to be cared for by the state – in Western Europe at least – a shift in homelessness research occurred. Research began to appear that conceptualised homelessness in terms of inadequate access to support, to housing, as a systems failure rather than as the result of individual action (Macgregor-Wood, 1976). In making the argument that homeless people were not being properly cared for, that their rights to housing or support were not being recognised, these ideas created a new kind of individual pathology centred on a need for support. The presumption that asylum closures had put people with mental health problems onto the street and ‘caused’ the increase in American homelessness was the meridian of this kind of thinking (Scott, 1993).

Arguments that homelessness resulted mainly from labour market (Stewart, 1975) and housing market failure (Glastonbury, 1971; Greve, 1964; Greve *et al.*, 1971; Drake *et al.*, 1981) were relatively unusual and relatively short-lived. In the UK, more or less entirely economic arguments about the nature of homelessness were sometimes made (Drake, 1989). However, explanations of homelessness that emphasised the role of structural factors but also noted the role of individual characteristics were more common (Anderson, 1993).

Within the new orthodoxy itself, the role of individual characteristics in homelessness causation is fundamental. With the advent of arguments in favour of subgroup and pathways analysis, alongside the study of individual agency, the focus on the individual in homelessness has, if anything, increased.

Reading some of this literature, it can seem that things have moved on; the ‘sin-talk’ of homelessness as a moral offence, the ‘sick-talk’ of homelessness as a pathology and the ‘system-talk’ of homelessness as systemic injustice have been replaced



(Gowan, 2010). Yet, mainstream responses to homelessness are another matter; as both American (Gowan, 2010) and European researchers have pointed out, individual pathology remains prominent in policy circles (Phillips, 2000; Pleace, 2000).

Images of homelessness as a problem experienced by specific types of individuals whose actions led to their homelessness were firmly within the cultural mainstream far into the twentieth century (Phillips, 2000) and remain present in Europe and throughout the Western world (Fopp, 2009; Devereux, 2015). Research in the meantime has, in some cases, remained focused simply on individual pathology or, while acknowledging structural factors, used a pathways or subgroup thesis (in which patterns are defined with reference to individual characteristics and behaviour) as a conceptual framework.

There are two risks here. These can be described as ‘assumptive research’ and a ‘cultural gravity’ risk, which could lead some European homelessness research in the wrong direction.

Assumptive research occurs when researchers regard homelessness as a clearly defined and understood social problem – i.e., that it is people sleeping rough who are largely male and whose homelessness is linked to support needs and behavioural factors. Such research adds nothing to the understanding of homelessness because it assumes homelessness is *understood*, which means that questions about the nature of homelessness do not need to be resolved, beyond determining, for example, how many rough sleepers in a particular city are taking heroin. People living without their own space, without privacy and without security of tenure in Europe are not considered by such research, because homelessness means a predominantly male population sleeping rough or in emergency shelters and nothing else.

One of the biggest challenges faced by European homelessness researchers is ensuring that there is a theoretical debate. Homelessness research is being conducted that assumes homelessness is a relatively simple, relatively small-scale social problem with clearly understood causes. There are longstanding concerns that the political right has sought to narrow the definition of what homelessness is, emphasising only visible homelessness that can be easily linked to individual pathology and drawing attention away from wider structural problems with affordable housing supply and inequity (Anderson, 1993). Beyond this, there is the view of homelessness as individual pathology that dates from before the nineteenth century – a mass cultural understanding of homelessness encompassing only a self-inflicted state found among people in emergency shelters and on the street (Carlen, 1996; Phillips, 2000; Gowan, 2010). Assumptive research must be challenged because it is based on a clearly false construct of what homelessness is and lacks any social scientific foundation.

The 'cultural gravity' issue centres on context and on measurement. Homelessness research that makes allowance for structural factors, also taking into account individual characteristics and behaviour, goes against a cultural norm that sees homelessness in terms of individual pathology. Data tend to be collected at the individual level: what has happened to someone, their characteristics, their earlier experiences, their choices and so forth. Their experience of using systems, their experience with landlords, their interaction with the world in which they are homeless, can be asked about but it is rarely observed directly. The systemic or structural can be harder to see, particularly in a European context where large-scale, robust longitudinal research on the nature of homelessness is unusual. Conducting research in a context in which individual pathology is expected to be the causal factor, in which data can only be collected at the individual level, usually using cross-sectional methods or in a single interview, may make structural factors inherently harder to see (Farrugia and Gerrard, 2015).

## Exploring Structural Causation

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During the decade for which this journal has existed, our understanding of homelessness has moved beyond individual pathology, structuralism and beyond the new orthodoxy. There are challenges around definition and data quality, and in trying to avoid reaching across the Atlantic for reassurance and guidance. Ensuring the individual and their agency is represented and ensuring that representation is accurate is vital. Part of that challenge, alongside ensuring homeless people have their own voice and do not have ideas projected onto them, is to look at how the context in which homelessness occurs influences the people who experience it.

So, is there, then, a case for a reassertion of exploring structural factors in homelessness causation, countering all this nasty historically and culturally generated individual pathology? Equally, is there not a case for reasserting the role of structural factors to reduce the risk that researchers using pathways and subgroup conceptual frameworks get carried away and focus too much on the individual and not enough on structural factors?

On the surface, the risks of this idea are the same as they have always been – i.e., too much emphasis on structural variables risks potential distortion through not paying sufficient attention to the role of individual agency or individual characteristics. However, as argued above, there are clear risks in over-emphasising individual agency and characteristics in trying to understand homelessness. These risks centre on how far a subgroup or pathways approach can go. If presented with too much complexity, as Neale pointed out twenty years ago (Neale, 1997), or if presented with too much *similarity*, taxonomic approaches to homelessness may

fall over. Focusing too much on the individual can risk downplaying structural factors, but perhaps equally significantly, taxonomies might not work very well, creating temptations to avoid some data (everyone is poor) or defining only specific groups as 'homeless' (recurrently and long-term homeless people are differentiated by high rates of severe mental illness) to make a taxonomy work.

We are clearly not yet in the position, in terms of data richness or moving towards a wider definition of European homelessness, where an existential risk to pathways or subgroup based analysis exists. It may be the case that homelessness is less complex in nature than current research suggests it may be, despite growing evidence of multiple variables at multiple levels having roles in the nature of the experience.

Almost 20 years ago, this author argued that homelessness was not a discrete social problem, but was instead an extreme of poverty being misread as 'unique'. Specific interventions and support services were needed, as homeless people had particular needs, characteristics and experiences, but homelessness was, ultimately, a product of poverty, which meant effective policy had to tackle deeply engrained inequality (Pleace, 1998). Revisiting that argument now, there are flaws: there was no consideration of individual agency; homelessness was effectively – as in the new orthodoxy – equated with total *disempowerment*, which was clearly wrong, while individual characteristics were downplayed. However, looking at that paper again, the challenge it posed – that homelessness needs to be contextualised to be fully understood – does not seem to have been fully answered (see also Farrugia and Gerrard, 2015).

Much of the development of social science, including what development there has been in the academic study of homelessness, took place in what looks increasingly like an historically exceptional period. In the last 30 years, the tendency towards massive accumulation of wealth and political power among small elites, which characterises most of human history, has reasserted itself. London, along with other European capitals and major cities, has become 'Pikettyville', in which a tiny transnational urban elite is shaping the nature of the city itself, creating enclaves of 'Alpha territory' (Burrows *et al.*, 2016). This massive concentration of wealth has taken place alongside the constriction of full time, well-paid, secure work, sustained reductions in welfare spending and marked decreases in affordable housing supply.

Homelessness does appear to be linked to individual characteristics, to behaviour, to choices; it is not simply a matter of economics or housing supply. The people who experience homelessness have at least some control over what happens to them. Yet, can the 'Alpha territories' exist without it meaning something for poverty and, alongside poverty, for homelessness? As wealth and power become ever more concentrated and inequity increases within Europe, does that have an impact on

the nature, extent and experience of homelessness? There are other questions, too, around ethnic, cultural and gender inequalities, which are structural, and which may also influence the nature and experience of homelessness (Pleace, 2011; Mayock and Bretherton, 2016). These are not questions we can explore properly if we focus too heavily on attempts to create taxonomies of homelessness as our main method of understanding this most acute of social problems, or as a set of interconnected social problems.

Our challenge as researchers and as social scientists is to fully acknowledge, respect and understand the human beings at the heart of homelessness *and* to understand as much as possible about the environment in which homelessness occurs. This requires a new neutrality, an openness, leaving behind preconceptions and ideas and theories about what we think homelessness is, who we think homeless people are and how we situate homelessness within the wider social and economic context.

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