Homelessness

There has been a long debate about the definition of homelessness in Western countries (Polakow & Guillean 118). This is more than a mere academic issue, as the lack of agreement over definition makes it difficult to enumerate the homeless population and to urge governments to meet the needs of homeless people.

It is usually accepted that those who sleep in public places or squat in derelict buildings are homeless, but the following questions are often raised. How should we classify people who have no accommodation of their own, but who are staying temporarily with other households? Are they homeless? How about a person living in a conventional house who is experiencing domestic violence? Is he or she homeless? Are people in institutions `homeless' if they have nowhere to go when they leave? In the literature, these questions have been answered in different ways, depending on the broader perspectives of the authors concerned (Hopper, 144).

There is also a point of view that it is impossible to define homelessness. For example, Field (1988 cited in Glasser & Bridgman 205) noted: "The questions - What is homelessness? Who are the homeless? - are I think simply unanswerable". Another ten years on Burke (1998 cited in Glasser & Bridgman 207) echoed the point again: "Homelessness continues to escape precise definition, because of its complexity and increasing diversification."

The literal definition equates homelessness with `rooflessness', implying that homeless people are literally `under the stars', or illegally occupying deserted premises. This is how many journalists and newspaper editors represent the homeless population (Hambrick, Ralph & Rog 353). It has been translated into community `knowledge' through two dominant typifications of homeless people in the mass media. First, the image of the elderly, dishevelled man living rough, possibly with a mental health or alcohol problem - the

dominant characterisation of the homeless population in the 1970s and early 1980s. Second, there is the image of `street kids', usually portrayed as sleeping in public places or squatting in derelict buildings. This was the dominant media typification of homeless teenagers for much of the 1990s (Hambrick, Ralph & Rog 355).

By contrast, the subjectivist definition of homelessness has its origins in a long tradition of social and political thought which argues that sociological concepts should be grounded in the perceptions of actors. In the 1980s, Sophie Watson (cited in Kerr 27) pointed out that homelessness is a socially constructed concept and that what constitutes adequate housing can vary from one period to another. She also noted that different groups within the community may have different needs, and that people will not necessarily have the same expectations about what constitutes a home (ibid.).

Watson was particularly concerned about the situation of homeless women. She pointed out that a woman may be living in a house with her husband, but receive no emotional support from him, or be subject to his physical violence. In one sense, she has a `home' when this is defined purely in terms of physical structures; but in another, she is `homeless', because the dwelling to which she returns is not `home' in an emotional sense; nor is it safe. At the core of this argument is the contention that definitions of homelessness must always take into account the perceptions of those being studied. This idea has been influential (cited in Kerr 29).

In Australia, the National Youth Coalition for Housing (NYCH 1985 cited in Polakow & Guillean 100) defined homelessness as the absence of secure, adequate and satisfactory shelter as perceived by the young person and for homelessness to exist, at least one of the following conditions should be operative: (a) an absence of shelter; (b) the threat of loss of shelter; (c) very high mobility between places of abode; (d) existing accommodation considered inadequate by the resident for such reasons as overcrowding, the

physical state of the residence, lack of security of occupancy, or lack of emotional support and stability in the place of residence; (e) unreasonable restrictions in terms of alternative forms of accommodation.

The cultural definition contends that homelessness should be measured in relation to minimum community housing standards. It contends that homelessness is a socially constructed, cultural concept that only makes sense in a given society at a particular point in time. In this regard, homelessness may be understood as both an absolute concept and a relative concept (Hopper 102).

When homelessness is understood as an absolute concept, it refers to situations where people are literally homeless. They may be living on the streets, sleeping in parks or other public places, squatting in derelict buildings, and so on (Hopper 104).

When homelessness is understood as a relative concept, it takes into account that people are expected to have particular types of accommodation in order to live according to the conventions and cultural expectations of a particular community (Hopper 107).

On this view, homelessness is a concept like poverty. When poverty is conceptualised as an absolute concept, it refers to situations where people have insufficient resources to maintain even the barest level of subsistence (Glasser & Bridgman 54). When poverty is taken as a relative concept, it refers to the number of people who have insufficient income to maintain the minimal standard of living that is customary in their society. These days poverty is usually understood as a relative concept in Western countries (Polakow & Guillean 70).

Homelessness should also be thought about as a relative concept in the most contemporary countries. The fundamental weakness of the literal definition is that it posits homelessness as an absolute concept, thus equating homelessness with rootlessness. This misses the point that most people who lose their accommodation either stay temporarily with other households; go to boarding houses on a short-term basis; stay in various types of

government-funded emergency accommodation; or move from place to place (secondary homelessness, on the cultural definition) (Hopper 22).

Homelessness is like poverty in another sense. These days poverty is understood as an objective concept. It does not depend on people's perceptions. There has been a debate about how the poverty line should be established, but the critical point is that poverty is treated as an objective category. It is not officially measured by asking people whether they think they are poor (Hambrick, Ralph & Rog 354).

Homelessness should also be measured objectively, by quantifying the number of households whose accommodation does not reach the minimum housing standard. The minimum housing standard is embedded in the housing conventions all around us. The standard is equivalent to a small, rented flat, with a living room, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom and an element of security of tenure (Polakow & Guillean 49).

The fundamental weakness of the subjectivist argument is that it wants to assess whether people are `housed' or `homeless' on the basis of their perceptions. The SAAP definitions attempts to classify people in houses or flats as `homeless', on the grounds that they are unhappy with their accommodation. The minimalist version of subjectivism attempts to classify people in the tertiary homeless population as `housed', on the grounds that they think of their single rooms as `home' (Glasser & Bridgman 52). As we have seen, some people living in boarding houses do think of their single rooms as `home', but others do not. It is intuitively absurd to claim that people living in the same boarding house accommodation can be either `housed' or `homeless', depending on their point of view.

On our argument, people living in boarding houses are part of the homeless population in an objective sense, because their accommodation does not reach the minimum community standard. The subjectivist definition fails to recognise that homelessness is a

concept like poverty. Poverty is measured objectively. Homelessness should be measured in the same way.

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