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Towards a Relationally and Action-orientated Social Psychology of Homelessness

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Abstract

Homelessness is a pressing social and health concern that literally embodies broader inequities in society. This article provides an introduction to research in social psychology on homelessness and an emerging research agenda that situates the contributions of social psychologists within the broader social science effort. Attention is given to the consequences of homelessness, definitional issues, the relevance of a turn to place and interpersonal and intergroup relationships, and the importance of an action-orientated agenda for responding to the complexities of homelessness.

The extent of urban poverty and homelessness has intensified in recent years in response to financial crises and the increased concentration of wealth in the hands of the few (Hodgetts, Chamberlain, Tankel, & Groot, 2013; Pable, 2012). It is an indictment on affluent societies that an increasing number of people are residing on the streets, living in insecure housing situations and facing food, employment and a raft of other insecurities. The conservative political agenda in OECD countries for reducing taxes and state interventions has resulted in fewer resources being available for preventing or mitigating poverty and homelessness. Social and community psychologists are well placed to guide decision-makers regarding the causes and consequences of homelessness and to lobby for resources to support effective responses to this pressing health concern (Hodgetts et al., 2013).

Key concerns in psychological research include documenting the extent of poverty and homelessness, trends across countries, pathways into and out of homelessness, risk factors, substance misuse, service provisions, policy developments and negative social and health concerns (cf., Christian, Clapham, & Abrams, 2011; Heinze, Hernandez, Toro, & Blue, 2012; Perreault, Jaimes, Rabouln, White, & Milton, 2013). For example, reflecting work on HIV, tuberculosis, gambling and mental illness, Tompsett, Domoff, and Toro (2013) explore risks relating to substance misuse among young homeless people. Such work is showcased in special issues for the *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* (Christian, 2003), the *Journal of Health Psychology* (Flick, 2007) and the *Journal of Social Issues* (Toro, 2007). The body of quantitative knowledge in psychology highlights the health impacts of homelessness, particularly for people from economically and socially marginalized backgrounds (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2006), intensifying existing risks of illness associated with social positioning and poverty (Natalier & Johnson, 2012). When compared with domiciled citizens, homeless people are more likely to experience a raft of physical and mental health issues and unmet health needs, physical or sexual violence, a sense of insecurity and fear, and reduced social integration (Hodgetts, Radley, Chamberlain, & Hodgetts, 2007; Mayhew, 1861; Perreault et al., 2013). Research also supports the proposition that there is more to homeless people than is captured by a focus on risk factors and disease trends. Person-focused research has explored the everyday lives and material and psychosocial hardships

experienced by homeless people (Stolte & Hodgetts, 2013). Homeless people face stigma and abuse, and often lack adequate social supports. This can erode the relational, physical and emotional aspects of their health (Hodgetts et al., 2007).

This article draws upon insights into homelessness from both within and outside psychology to introduce readers to key issues surrounding the nature of homelessness, the importance of place and relationships for homeless people and the need for research to inform action at personal, institutional and societal levels. In advancing a research agenda for social psychology, we first consider conceptual and definitional issues central to establishing the nature, complexities and extent of homelessness. We then consider the turn to place, daily practices and relationships as a way of advancing this field of research. The article is completed with a section on how research into homelessness should not be reduced to a spectator sport. To avoid further individualizing homelessness, the involvement of social psychologists requires advocacy initiatives and political engagements.

Conceptualizing Homelessness

Various governmental entities, including the European Union and United Nations (2009), have put considerable effort into defining homelessness (Illsley, 2013). Such efforts take us some way to ascertain the extent of homelessness, develop practice guidelines and allocate resources accordingly. A continuum of housing situations, ranging from the absence of a dwelling to inadequate and insecure housing, provides the basis for many official definitions of homelessness today. For example, the United Nations (2009) uses a two-stage, place-based definition of homelessness: (i) primary homelessness is defined by a state of rooflessness and incorporates those living without a private abode and (ii) secondary homelessness refers to people lacking secure and regular domestic dwellings. Elsewhere, more expansive conceptual categories have been developed (Statistics New Zealand, 2009), and these include being "without shelter" (living on the streets and inhabiting improvised shelters, including shacks and cars); in "temporary accommodation" (hostels for homeless people, transitional supported housing, women's refuges and long-term residency in motor camps and boarding houses); "sharing accommodation" (temporary accommodation for people sharing someone else's private dwelling); and "uninhabitable housing" (people residing in dilapidated dwellings).

There is an increasing acknowledgement that homelessness is not simply about the presence or absence of particular forms of shelter. Homelessness is also a complex psychosocial, political and economic issue that spans social, legal and physical domains (Statistics New Zealand, 2009). Each of the categories outlined in the official definitions invoked above also contains a range of complex relationships between homeless and housed groups, which demonstrate how homelessness is more than a housing issue (Illsley, 2013). As we will explore, homelessness is a fundamentally relational phenomena (Hodgetts et al., 2007).

Complexities surrounding efforts to define homelessness and issues of 'home', 'place' and 'belonging' are particularly apparent in emerging research on Indigenous homelessness (Groot, Hodgetts, Nikora, & Leggatt-Cook, 2011). Such scholarship constitutes a shift from defining and enumerating homelessness to efforts to try and understand homelessness from within very different cultural and psychological traditions (Groot et al., 2011) and to avoid the reification of Eurocentric worldviews (DeVerteuil, May, & Mahs, 2009), which create artificial epistemological distinctions between people, place and things (Latour, 2005). For example, the concept of "spiritual homelessness" reflects an effort to explain situations in which Indigenous people are displaced from ancestral lands, knowledge, rituals and kinship relationships. Memmott, Long, and Chambers (2003) note that throughout pre-colonial history and into the present, for Aboriginal peoples in Australia "home" is not necessarily

associated with a domestic dwelling. Home denotes affiliation with a cultural landscape, a repertoire of places and one's belonging within a tribal group. Here we see an understanding of the importance of physical and social locations in understanding homelessness for such Indigenous peoples (see next section on place and relationships). Work in this area problematizes the application of conventional Eurocentric notions of home and homelessness to Indigenous peoples (DeVerteuil et al., 2009) and supports calls for culturally informed and relationally orientated responses to homelessness (Groot et al., 2011). These relationships extend out beyond the interpersonal to the institutional and structural levels of society (Hodgetts et al., 2013).

Early social science research into homelessness reveals tensions between individualistic and structural explanations for understanding and addressing homelessness that constitute reoccurring features of efforts to address homelessness (Mayhew, 1861). The prevalence of these explanations has subsequently varied across time, cultures and contexts (Daly, 1997; Fitzpatrick, Bramley, & Johnsen, 2013). US-based research has tended to privilege individualistic explanations (e.g. personal choices, lifestyles and so-called personal deficiencies such as mental illness), which position the role of the individual as central in the occurrence of homelessness. Associated responses to homelessness come mainly in the form of intensive case management and social work interventions. Conversely, European research has tended to focus more on structural explanations (e.g. family poverty). Here, the causes of homelessness have been situated beyond the individual, and instead in macro-socioeconomic factors, including housing and labour markets and governmental policies. Responses are more often orientated around broad societal interventions alongside housing subsidies and the provision of affordable accommodation and welfare benefits.

Attention has returned to the complex interplay between individual and structural drivers of homelessness (Daly, 1997; Illsley, 2013; Laurenson & Collins, 2007; Natalier & Johnson, 2012). This shift reflects the realization that social structures (e.g. underemployment, lack of affordable housing, social stratification and deinstitutionalization) and personal lifeworlds (e.g. hardship, death of loved ones, abuse, mental illness, substance misuse and eviction from tenancies) are inseparable (Toohey, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004). Personal and structural influences can become mutually sustaining of homelessness (Jones, Shier, & Graham, 2012). An individual's homelessness is more often than not an outward symptom of 'antisocial' economic and societal relations, as well as familial traumas, mental illness and substance misuse (Hodgetts, Stolte, Nikora, & Groot, 2012; Hodgetts et al., 2011; Laurenson & Collins, 2007). The interwoven and multidirectional nature of personal, relational and societal dimensions of homelessness has led to a focus on homelessness pathways (Clapham, 2003; Fitzpatrick et al., 2013). Pathways research documents how homelessness often stems from structural and relational vulnerabilities to poverty that are exacerbated by a combination of adverse life events.

An often overlooked and key distinction in pathways to homelessness is the social class of origin of homeless people. Research conducted alongside social service providers (Hodgetts et al., 2012) indicates two broad class-based groupings of homeless people, which have been termed *droppers* (middle class) and *drifters* (underclass). The first, and by far the smaller of the two groups, includes people who come from middle-class, domiciled backgrounds, but who have 'dropped' into homelessness due to traumatic events, including the loss of significant loved ones, job loss, debt and health issues. Existing services are primarily orientated towards helping such people reintegrate into the domiciled lifeworlds to which they are accustomed. In contrast, drifters are people from lower class backgrounds who have never enjoyed a 'normal' (read middle class) domiciled life. Homelessness is yet another hardship in their lives, which have been characterized by deprivation, disruption and disjuncture. This means that

resolving the homelessness of drifters is a far more complex task and involves much more than simply 'rehousing' or the amelioration of these people's so-called 'personal problems'.

There is not one single pathway into homelessness, and pathways back into domiciled society can vary considerably (Anderson & Tulloch, 2000). As a result, interventions focused solely on rehousing prove ineffective when homeless people (predominantly drifters) return to street life because simply having a domiciled dwelling fails to address the broader drivers of their homelessness (Daly, 1997; Hodgetts et al., 2012). For many, homelessness can be attributed to a combination of inadequate income, social isolation, loneliness and a lack of community integration (Crane & Warnes, 2005). Appropriate integration into domiciled life, rather than merely re-housing, necessitates support systems, jobs and the cultivation of positive social networks within which homeless people can be integrated (Hodgetts et al., 2012). Relationally and context focused responses are crucial for addressing homelessness.

The Turn to Place, Daily Practices and Relationships

Place is of particular importance in understanding homelessness. After all, homeless people constitute a group defined by their anomalous dwelling in 'uninhabitable' and unhealthy urban places. Homeless people are often defined with reference to their lack of access to private domestic spaces. Additionally, homeless people's very sense of self as embodied beings is socially and interpersonally inflected in contextually specific ways through expressions, gesture, clothing, interactions and location (Hodgetts, Stolte, Radley, Chamberlain, & Groot, 2010). As proposed by actor–network theory (Latour, 2005), people are fundamentally emplaced beings, entangled in interactions with other people and particular places. Homeless people are always located somewhere, and this locatedness is central to understanding the social practices through which they inhabit their lifeworlds and respond to adversity. Further insights into homelessness are being garnered through explorations of how people occupy particular places as embodied beings through engagements with other homeless people and a range of social and material practices that give meaning to their situations. These networked local practices involving people, things and places shape experiences of homelessness and the structural relationships that cause homelessness.

In response to the realization that particular urban spaces and associated practices and relationships can both hurt and heal people, scholars have drawn on the concepts of *landscapes of despair* and *spaces for care* (Stolte & Hodgetts, 2013). The latter refers to places such as hospitals, spas, gardens and resourced urban dwellings that have healing effects, whereas landscapes of despair encompass unhealthy places, particularly in cities experiencing urban decline, overcrowding, conflict, social injustice, austerity and welfare retrenchment. Streets, doorways and motorway over-bridges comprise an urban landscape of despair never intended for human domestication. These concepts allow us to engage with the complex ways in which places are networked and operate as sites where personal and collective, local and extra-local processes intersect and shape homeless lifeworlds (Stolte & Hodgetts, 2013). Many domiciled people's daily lives involve the conduct of routine health maintenance practices in the privacy of their own homes. Simple acts such as washing, brushing teeth, getting adequate rest and sleep, gaining respite from public life, storing and taking medicines and eating fresh food are considered vital for daily health maintenance. Yet, these emplaced and mundane practices pose considerable practical challenges for, and require additional effort of, those who dwell in public. Homeless people must make do in makeshift public dwellings and expend considerable effort in order to engage in basic health maintenance practices. By engaging in private domestic practices in public, they work to domesticate the streets in an effort to preserve their health (Stolte & Hodgetts, 2013). Their efforts to

partially transform non-therapeutic public *landscapes of despair* into more therapeutic *spaces for care* are tentative and subject to disruption from domiciled authorities.

Homeless bodies are often deemed to be out of place when they are engaging in private practices in public spaces (Mitchell, 2003). Civic responses to the occupancy and domestication of public space by homeless bodies include the introduction of visual surveillance systems that make housed citizens feel safer whilst displacing 'winos and beggars', and the hiring of security guards to remove homeless people from shopping districts and public libraries (Laurenson & Collins, 2007). In these settings, the claims of homeless people to belong and their rights to participate are increasingly questioned publicly, and consequently they face barriers to social participation and support (Laurenson & Collins, 2007; Mitchell, 2003). Homeless people are often denied legitimate identities as people who belong, and instead are labelled 'vagrants', 'beggars', and 'bums'. Practices that exclude homeless people from public places ultimately contribute to increased material hardship, distrust, disrespect, stigma and illness (Hodgetts et al., 2007).

Relationships shaping homelessness span the intimate sphere and the structural dynamics of groups and institutions in society (cf. Latour, 2005). Homelessness often stems from relationship breakdowns, poor interpersonal communication, the death of a loved one, the lack of meaningful interpersonal relationships and inequities between groups in society that lead to poverty, wealth concentration, austerity measures and practices of social and spatial exclusion (Heinze et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2012; Natalier & Johnson, 2012). A focus on such diverse relationships allows us to span the local and the extra-local influences on incidences of homelessness. Additionally, "When we begin to consider the nature of relationships and their influence on homelessness we move discussions beyond a focus on risk factors" (Jones et al., 2012, p. 113). We can reconsider rehousing responses because, despite the hardships of street life, many drifters feel more at home on the streets. Their social connections reside there, and they often return to the streets after being rehoused because they lack social networks in the domiciled world (Hodgetts et al. 2011). Christian et al. (2011) illustrate the importance of building local relationships between homeless people, service staff and 'authorities' in resolving homelessness.

Domiciled constructions and distancing practices have crucial material implications for the lives of homeless people (Mitchell & Heynen, 2009). The way homeless people are defined and distanced by housed others influences social policy and official responses, efforts at inclusion or exclusion, and personal pathology or social reform, or perhaps some combination of these (Tompsett, Toro, Guzicki, Manrique, & Zatakia, 2006). Psychologists have begun to explore processes such as social distancing between homeless and domiciled groups across particular settings (Hodgetts et al., 2012). There is a long history of research into the ways in which individual preferences, based on a person's membership to specific social in-groups, influences social relations with people from other out-groups. These judgements are often measured along a continuum with *nearness*, intimacy or familiarity at one end, and *farness*, difference and unfamiliarity at the other end. Social distance is the strength of the lack of intimacy and distance that people feel towards others from groups different from their own. The concept derives from Simmel's (1908/1921) work on 'the stranger'; an ideal type of individual or group that is distanced socially from others, who is only partially a member of society, and who often transgresses social conventions. Reflecting the dynamics of distancing, Simmel proposed that the stranger can be in close physical proximity and socially distance or physically distant and socially near. As the stranger, homeless people embody the dynamics of social distance, with their presence often invoking a lack of involvement as well as a measure of indifference, even when such people are in close physical proximity to 'us'. Distancing homeless people as strangers allows for policies and practices of discrimination

(Hodgetts et al., 2012). The ultimate product of social distancing is the positioning of homeless people as existing outside the scope of justice, which can result in anti-homelessness laws and initiatives that displace them from public life (Mitchell & Heynen, 2009).

Reflecting the importance of intergroup relations and place, homeless people are regularly subjected to public deliberations and featured in the representational spaces provided by media reports (Laurenson & Collins, 2007; Tompsett et al., 2006). Mediated public deliberations provide a symbolic backdrop for personal and institutional considerations of the place of homeless people in our midst. Public discussions also contribute to social climates that advance punitive measures to displace vagrants, or alternatively foster efforts to ensure tolerance and social inclusion (Hodgetts et al., 2007). Research suggests that media coverage and public opinion regarding homelessness promotes both proximity and dispersion in that it is mixed in terms of sympathetic and stigmatizing depictions of homeless people (Tompsett et al., 2006). In general, public deliberations carry a polarizing tendency where homeless people are often constructed as strange and unlike us, or as people just like us who have suffered misfortune (Kingfisher, 2007). More sympathetic and less distant accounts arise when the degree of hardship and suffering endured by homeless people is acknowledged (Hodgetts et al., 2007, 2011). Less sympathetic accounts arise when emphasis is placed on difference and the unease some domiciled citizens feel about sharing public spaces with homeless people (Mitchell & Heynen, 2009). Drawing on Foucault's work on 'dividing practices', Schneider and Remillard (2013) also explore how even what appear on the surface to be proximity and sympathetic domiciled responses to homeless people can also reproduce the stigmatizing of homeless people as malfunctioning strangers who cannot care for themselves and who need to be regulated for their own good. As a result, homelessness is reproduced as a personal illness, rather than a systemic ailment that signals societal failings.

There is much at stake in bridging the distance between domiciled and homeless citizens. Mitchell and Heynen (2009) note that in order to survive, homeless people rely on *ad hoc* coalitions and practices that extend to sympathetic domiciled people. If we are to ensure the inclusion of homeless people as citizens, we must develop ways to manage social distancing processes and to rehumanize the homeless as citizens like us, rather than as disruptive strangers who are to be pushed out of the way. Further insights in this regard come from Lawson and Elwood's (2013) use of the psychological concept of 'zones of encounter' to consider how middle class exposure to the complexities of homelessness can potentially reduce social distance. Such zones of encounter hold the key to challenging dominant individualist assumptions within domiciled society that poverty is a self-contained problem that resides solely in personal lifestyles and choices made by defective persons.

Researching Homelessness Should Not Be a Spectator Sport

It is important to extend the focus of theory, research and practice beyond a narrow focus on assessing the risks of homelessness (Jones et al., 2012) or efforts at re-housing to consider both *how* and *why* people enter, survive and exit homelessness. As with contemporary work in social psychology on urban poverty, work at local interpersonal, community and service is crucial, but not sufficient for resolving homelessness because homelessness is also a socio-economic issue that is currently exacerbated by wealth concentration and increased social inequalities (Hodgetts et al., 2013). The interwoven nature of personal, relational, regulatory and structural dimensions of homelessness requires further conceptualization that informs multi-pronged initiatives in direct action.

Scholars have raised the importance of fostering homemaking and relationship building and experiences of belonging among homeless people both on the streets and beyond (Groot & Hodgetts, 2012; Perreault et al., 2013). Homeless people can be resilient and make homes for

themselves on the street that are more homely than when they were housed. Such emplaced and relational processes are reflected in the efforts of service providers to create judgement-free environments in which people can engage safely in homemaking (Trussell & Mair, 2010). For example, Perreault et al. (2013) explored how services can build relationships for homeless people with mental health professionals that then give continuity to efforts to engage with homeless people outside of the local landscape of despair in rural leisure spaces. Their research reveals the importance of these latter spaces for homeless people to gain respite, reflect upon their lives, build new social supports and consider other options in life. Again, such interventions require the creation of judgement-free spaces for care within which homeless people are not threatened by eviction or overly punitive rules that disrupt their homemaking practices (Trussell & Mair, 2010). They reflect how, rather than simply "rehousing", there is also a need for more holistic support systems that include social participation and/or employment and the cultivation of social networks.

The reintegration of homeless people into domiciled society is less effective when conducted as a stand-alone objective. There is a need to consider what homeless people are being integrated into. Simply reintegrating homeless people into low quality and exploitative housing markets, into low-paid, casualized jobs, and into divisive or alienated communities is unlikely to bring the desired benefits for homeless people in the longer term. Consequently, addressing homelessness requires us to address wider societal defects stemming from the entrenchment of neoliberalism and the increased socio-economic inequalities in society today.

Too often psychologists observe, document and report events in the world, but are more reluctant to get directly involved. In the field of homelessness, this detached approach can come across as an exploitative form of poverty tourism or *victimography*. Scholars have argued for the increased use of participative action research, rather than studies that simply document the problems of 'the homeless' (Moxley & Washington, 2012). We need to embrace the long history in psychology of working in partnership with communities to challenge inequitable social structures and to affect change (Hodgetts et al., 2013). Research on homelessness needs to be informed by traditions within the human sciences that foreground the obligations of scholars to share knowledge with the wider citizenry and to contribute to the development of more equitable societies through public intellectualism, liberation psychology, participative action research and scholar-activism. Central here are the reciprocal relationships between researchers, participants, partner agencies and broader stakeholder groups in society who have the power to make a difference (Hodgetts et al., 2013). Psychologists are well placed to inform responses to homelessness, to foster the rehumanizing of homelesss people and to lobby decision makers to affect positive change.

Short Biographies

Darrin Hodgetts is a professor of Societal Psychology at the University of Waikato. Prior to this appointment, Darrin held posts in a Community Health at the Memorial University in Canada and in Psychology, Media and Communications at London School of Economics and Political Science. His research and numerous publications span urban poverty, health inequalities, everyday life, and the media.

Dr Ottilie Stolte is a senior lecturer in the School of Psychology at the University of Waikato. Ottilie completed his PhD in 2006 on training schemes for disadvantaged

unemployed people. Since then, she has taught social and community psychology and has pursued research and writing on homelessness, inequalities, poverty, place, and material culture.

Shiloh Groot is a lecturer at the University of Auckland having completed her PhD in 2010 on homelessness in New Zealand. Dr Groot research interests are in indigenous worldviews and communities, resilience, sex work, poverty, and homelessness. Currently, Dr Groot is the co-chair for the New Zealand Coalition to End Homelessness (NZCEH) where she provides advice on the expansion of research strategies that will inform the development of national policy and service provision.

Note

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