

Synthesizing Homelessness Research: Trends, Lessons and Prospects

ISOBEL ANDERSON*

Housing Policy and Practice Unit, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

ABSTRACT

This article presents an overview of some of the key trends emerging from homelessness research to date, lessons to be learned, and some thoughts on the future prospects for homelessness research. Homelessness research draws on a number of academic disciplines, in an international context, and using a wide range of research methods. There is a significant theoretical and empirical research evidence base for understanding the nature and causes of homelessness, and a developing body of research on the impact of intervention strategies. Key challenges for the future include the development of truly multi-disciplinary research and truly international comparative research, as well as greater scientific rigour in both policy oriented and scholarly led research on homelessness.

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Key words: homelessness research; developments; multi-disciplinary approaches

INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to synthesize some of the ideas explored in this special issue and in the vast body of research literature on homelessness. It draws out some of the key trends and lessons in relation to three main areas: theoretical and multi-disciplinary approaches, making international comparisons, and developments in methods for homelessness research. The article concludes by commenting on the prospects for effective homelessness research in the future.

THE SEARCH FOR THEORY: MULTI-DISCIPLINARY OR JUST MULTIPLE DISCIPLINARY?

A key aim of this special issue has been to present divergent disciplinary perspectives on homelessness to an audience, which might not otherwise be reached. In an era where collaboration and multi-disciplinary working are strongly encouraged, it is to be hoped that

* Correspondence to: I. Anderson, Housing Policy and Practice Unit, University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA, UK. E-mail: isobel.anderson@stir.ac.uk

this is a positive step towards enhancing the prospects for collaboration. Although primarily a psychology journal, only two of the papers presented here come directly from this discipline. The others are more readily characterized as coming from sociology, social policy, and policy studies. The question arises as to how far these different perspectives are complimentary or conflicting? And whether the whole is greater than the sum of the parts?

The UK homelessness literature is often criticized as lacking in theoretical rigour, an issue raised within this special issue. Kemeny (1992) has argued that the theoretical underpinning of UK housing research has always been weak, with both sociology and social policy having developed in an empirical, rather than a theoretical tradition. However, a range of theoretical perspectives have, in fact, been applied to the issue of homelessness within the UK literature.

Watson (1986) developed an explicitly Marxist (and also feminist) approach to homelessness while Kennet (1992) has written about regulation theory and homelessness. Neale (1997a, 1997b) made a significant contribution to the consideration of a range of sociological perspectives in relation to homelessness. The notion of homelessness as a social construct provided a basis for further theorizing during the 1990s (Hutson & Liddiard, 1994; Jacobs, Kemeny, & Manzi, 1999). Harrison (1999) has theorized homelessness and race, while Doherty (2001) revives feminist theory and critiques of feminism in 'gendering' homelessness. Also, Kemeny and Lowe (1998) have attempted to provide a theoretical analysis of international comparative housing research. The late 1990s also saw the emergence of the discourse on social exclusion in Europe and the UK, with Pleace (1998), Kennet (1999) and Anderson (2000) all considering whether the concept of social exclusion could assist in theorizing homelessness.

While the above-mentioned contributions may be imperfect, they represent a substantial body of creative thought going into the theoretical explanation of homelessness in the UK literature. Importantly, however, theorizing in this sense should be differentiated from hypotheses-driven theorizing that is characteristic of the positivist tradition, and of psychology more generally—which has been largely absent from the UK literature.

Theory and policy

The perceived lack of analytical rigour in UK research may, at least partly, be attributed to the way in which much research is funded: that is, as policy relevant, but not necessarily theoretically informed, empirical studies. Two key shortcomings can be identified in relation to policy-oriented research. Firstly, the parameters of the research may be constrained by the policy focus of the government or the funding agency. Secondly, policy research may not fully exploit the potential for the associated data sets to contribute to theoretical and scholarly debates. Important empirical studies of homelessness have been commissioned by central government, and others, which have been more concerned to inform housing policy and practice in the short term, than to reflect upon the long-term implications of social change. Nevertheless, the body of evidence can potentially be reused and reconsidered in the light of conceptual and scholarly debates.

Within the policy domain, a good deal of high quality empirical research has been conducted in the UK, providing a substantial evidence base on the nature of homelessness; the experience of homelessness; and the barriers to moving out of homelessness. To an extent, empiricism has its own value in informing both policy and theory. It is legitimate for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as governments, to commission and conduct

research to inform their activities, and we should not necessarily expect this research to be highly theoretical. However, we should expect it to be methodologically robust—an issue taken up in the final section. This is one area where the UK can potentially learn from the US, and where UK policy-oriented homelessness research can potentially learn from other fields of social research.

Moving forward

Different disciplinary perspectives bring different elements of understanding to our analysis of homelessness. Very broadly, it could be argued that sociology and social policy are fundamental to explaining why homelessness exists at a broad structural level, while psychology and consumer studies make a key contribution to understanding how people respond to circumstances of homelessness. While it is evident that research into homelessness is conducted from many theoretical perspectives, to-date there is relatively little (if any) published research, which is genuinely multi-disciplinary or cross-disciplinary in nature. Designing, conducting and analysing inter-disciplinary research may be one of the great intellectual and practical challenges for the future. While funding structures may be becoming more flexible, the extent to which it is actually feasible to conduct, say, psychological and sociological research on a fully collaborative basis remains to be tested.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

From a purely scientific point of view, there is no reason why homelessness research should not transcend geographical frontiers. The principles of psychology, sociology, economics, geography and consumer studies are all internationally applicable. However, empirical data is much less readily comparable across national boundaries. For example, in the UK social policy tradition, the detail of national welfare state policy will be fundamental to analysis, whereas in the US although the market-economy is considered to provide a backdrop for the issues, it has not been analysed in relation to homelessness to the extent that the welfare state has been in the UK.

The notion of welfare state regimes developed by Esping-Anderson (1990) has provided one of the most influential frameworks for international comparisons of welfare outcomes. Barlow and Duncan (1994) attempted to apply Esping-Anderson's welfare state regimes to housing systems. They characterized Liberal regimes as having limited government support for housing, and a stigmatized/residualized social or public sector (e.g. US). Within Corporatist regimes, housing subsidy was more likely to be overt and less 'ideologically tainted', but was not aimed at changing social stratification (e.g. Germany). The Social Democratic regimes were characterized as attempting to manage the market to increase standards and lower costs for all (e.g. Scandinavian countries). Barlow and Duncan also identified an additional category of Rudimentary regimes (southern Europe) with limited or no intervention in the housing sector and more likely to be characterized by self-help (Barlow & Duncan, 1994).

Anderson and Christian (this issue) also referred to paradigms of welfare, but to-date homelessness research has not been fully integrated into such a framework. Which countries or welfare state regimes have relatively more or less homelessness, and how do they respond to the issue? These sorts of questions require to be addressed at the international

level. To this end, Sosin (this issue) cites the overall prevalence of homelessness in the US at 14%, which is significantly higher than the UK estimate of 4% (Burrows, 1997). A much closer look at how those figures were derived would be needed prior to drawing any further conclusions as to the influence of differing welfare regimes.

Other factors also influence our ability to make rigorous international comparisons. Taking the US/UK focus of this journal, the sheer difference in scale in comparing the two countries must also be considered. The UK is arguably more equivalent to one State in the US and there may be important variations within countries, related to decentralized governance. There are substantial differences in the tenure structures and procedures for accessing housing which also complicate comparative analysis. Yet, at a very basic level, the need for secure, affordable, decent housing, complemented by support services where appropriate, is, arguably, universal.

O'Connell (this issue) provides the only contribution, which explicitly sets out to compare US and UK policy interventions. O'Connell's article presents a detailed review of policy and intervention strategies in the two countries, mainly focusing on the 1990s. Yet, international comparisons are complicated by the timing of political change in relation to policy implementation, research and evaluation. O'Connell's article does not directly tie policy change to political change in the same way as Anderson and Christian (this issue). By the end of the 1990s, Britain under New Labour had arguably moved to the left of the previous Conservative regime, while the US under the Republican Bush administration had moved to the right of the previous Democrat administration led by Clinton. A much more sophisticated political analysis would be needed to explore changing welfare regimes and their long-term influence over welfare and homelessness.

While it is feasible to compare policy frameworks across countries and draw broad conclusions about housing systems, empirical testing is much more difficult and has rarely been attempted at the international level. For example, a collection of papers examining international critical perspectives on homelessness (Huth & Wright, 1997), presented a series of national studies and only one (Daly, 1997) began to make comparisons across more than one country. Also, the European Union has been developing a series of housing statistics (e.g. Ministry of the Environment, Finland, 2001) but these comprise a series of national data sets, which are very difficult to compare. The European Observatory on Homelessness has been established through the European federation of homelessness NGOs and funded through the European Union's anti-poverty programmes. Again, correspondents from each country feed in national level analyses, which are then combined to produce a Europe-wide report (Edgar & Doherty, 2001; Edgar, Doherty, & Meert, 2002). In the absence of substantial funding for cross-national empirical research, this somewhat imperfect process, is possibly 'as good as it gets' to date in European comparative homelessness research. Developing more robust international comparative analysis remains a major challenge for researchers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF METHOD

Quantifying homelessness

O'Connell (this issue) makes the crucial point that despite the huge volume of research, quantification of homelessness remains elusive in both the US and the UK. Quantification itself is inextricably linked to definitions of homelessness, and frameworks for housing

provision, as much as to the technical approach to enumeration. The European Union also struggles to provide any reliable estimate of homelessness (Harvey, 1999).

Anderson and Tulloch (2000) discuss attempts to quantify homelessness in the UK and some of the methodological problems associated with trying to do so. They concluded that more attention should be paid to assessing the prevalence of homelessness, as well as estimating the incidence at any one time. For example, it is important to know whether homelessness is concentrated among a few people who experience it over the long term or permanently (low prevalence) as opposed to being a common, shared experience, but short lived (high prevalence). This would require to be estimated through quantitative surveys of representative samples of the whole population, either through panel studies or using retrospective questions (Tompsett et al., 2003). Such research could more accurately reflect the overall extent of homelessness than attempts to enumerate a mobile and changing population at one point in time.

Qualitative and quantitative methods in understanding homelessness

Quantitative methods dominate the US research on homelessness, although Hill (this issue) demonstrates the integration of qualitative techniques into the US literature (also see Hopper, 1998). In the UK, there is a serious lack of statistically robust quantitative studies in published homelessness research (Anderson & Tulloch, 2000). A large number of UK 'surveys' have not paid sufficient attention to issues of sample size and composition, and many studies are not sufficiently large to allow meaningful statistical analysis, nor are they representative of their target population to allow meaningful general conclusions to be drawn (cf. Kershaw, Singleton, & Meltzer, 2000).

Likewise, there are weaknesses in the US literature. Although studies have focused more on implementing rigorous methods, this is a more recent development, as historically US investigations have also been plagued with design and measurement problems. Furthermore, contemporary studies have sought to use robust designs, but have been criticized for not balancing this with the constraints and practicalities of working with homeless people. For example, using measures that are reliable, but also sensitive to social context (Susser, Conover, & Struening, 1989).

In contrast, the UK research has better developed analysis of the legal framework, and recognizes the importance of social context. Qualitative interviews with homeless people are routinely used in UK research, though there remains scope for increased rigour in sampling, and for wider use of detailed life histories to explore pathways in and out of homelessness over time, and to identify different risk groups (Anderson & Tulloch, 2000).

Comparisons. The techniques of comparing periods of homelessness with periods of 'being housed', and building comparison groups into research, are not well developed in UK homelessness studies (Anderson & Tulloch, 2000; Fitzpatrick, Kemp, & Klinker, 2000). This applies to comparing the experiences of those who do and do not become homeless, or to comparing the experience of different groups who do become homeless, and without such comparisons there is no systematic basis to assess the severity of the experience of homelessness. In contrast, the US literature has paid much more attention to comparative sampling. Because this body of literature is adequately reviewed elsewhere, it is not done so here (Sosin, this issue; Toro et al., 1999).

Developing longitudinal analysis. Both Anderson and Christian (this issue) and Clapham (this issue) have argued for the importance of a longitudinal analysis of

homelessness, embracing some notion of pathways through homelessness and housing pathways more generally for the UK. To-date, there have been no large-scale, longitudinal surveys of movement in and out of homelessness in Britain, although it is known that a high proportion of new social housing tenants have previously been homeless (Third & Yanetta, 2000). However, the US literature does report on a growing number of longitudinal investigations (Piliavin, Wright, Mare, & Westerfelt, 1996; Sosin, Piliavin, & Westerfelt, 1990; Stajanovic, Weitzman, Shinn, Labay, & Williams, 1999). Yet, due to the size of the US, such studies have been city-specific (e.g. Stajanovic et al., 1999) and not national in scope.

Large-scale panel surveys are an important tool for longitudinal social research, allowing investigators to track changing circumstances with the possibility of identifying trigger events and consequences (Walker & Leisering, 1998). Panel surveys are a relatively recent development in British social science. For example, the first wave of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), was only conducted in 1991 (Jarvis & Jenkins, 1998). It is possible that some homeless people could be selected for the BHPS if they are living with friends or relatives. However, they might well be the individuals most likely to be lost from subsequent waves. Moreover, those homeless people living in emergency hostels/night shelters, and sleeping rough will be excluded from large-scale national studies, which only draw their sample from the formal housing sector. Consequently, specialist surveys of homeless people are likely to remain necessary.

There have been a number of smaller scale studies, which have attempted to track the circumstances of homeless people over time. Studies by O'Callaghan et al. (1996) and Pawson, Third, and Tate (2001) tracked applicants through the UK statutory homelessness procedures. Vincent, Deacon, and Walker (1995) tracked the progress of homeless men over a year, following the closure of a large hostel and Fitzpatrick (1999) compared the housing circumstances of young homeless people in Glasgow 1 year apart. As previously discussed, quantitative studies of pathways through homelessness based on larger samples, and controlling for different variables, are more widely applied in the US (e.g. Stajanovic et al., 1999). However, a number of studies in both the UK and US have documented the pitfalls and possibilities in conducting longitudinal research with homeless individuals (Crane, 1998, 1999; Fitzpatrick, 1999; Sosin, Piliavin, & Westerfelt, 1990).

Policy evaluation

Returning to a theme developed earlier, Pleace and Quilgars (this issue) send a strong challenge to governments and researchers regarding the effectiveness of many UK policy evaluation studies. Anderson and Tulloch (2000) were also critical of the quality of much UK policy research, particularly in terms of the rigour of methods used. This can be contrasted with Gulcur, Stefancie, Shinn, Tsemberis, & Fischer (this issue), in which the researchers present findings from an evaluative study with a number of important strengths to the empirical work. Gulcur et al. were able to make direct comparisons between two alternative programmes, over a substantive, 2-year evaluation period. Few UK studies achieve this (Anderson & Tulloch, 2000; Fitzpatrick et al., 2000). Consequently, it has proven difficult to draw firm conclusions as to the effectiveness of different approaches.

A common weaknesses in both British and American policy evaluation research relates to the lack of planning for evaluation (Chen & Rossi, 1989). Implementation almost always leads evaluation, and mechanisms for evaluation are often constrained by the pre-determined data collection mechanisms set in place by agencies. Furthermore, the

timing of evaluations is often too early (and too short) to determine the full impact of a policy initiative. Subsequent evaluations are rarely carried out and policy and practice may be changing in the meantime (Anderson & Tulloch, 2000). The possibilities for more robust evaluative studies have been demonstrated by Harvey (1999) who compares models for resettlement in Germany, Austria and Sweden. Detailed monitoring over a period of years meant it was possible to draw meaningful conclusions on relative cost effectiveness and long-term success of resettlement.

CONCLUSION: PROSPECTS FOR HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH

The question arises as to how far we really can synthesize homelessness research. The huge volume of literature within one country or discipline is rapidly becoming unmanageable, let alone trying to synthesize more universally. Further, there is no particular reason why there should be consistent views across, or within countries and academic disciplines. There may be dominant views prevailing at different times or in different places or among different sub-groups of analysts and lay people. But there will always be debate and diversity in approach and interpretation.

The large volume of research literature to-date has undoubtedly provided a substantive analysis of homelessness from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Key challenges for the future lie in further development of truly multi-disciplinary research, international comparative research, better quantification and longitudinal analysis. To achieve all of this will require very substantial resources. Equally, substantial resources are required for policy and practice interventions to reduce the scale of homelessness, which still blights the modern world. But a robust understanding of the impact of intervention does require both rigorous evaluation and creative theoretically informed research. Neither scholars, nor Governments and other funding agencies should shrink from these challenges.

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