Knowledge about Homelessness: The Problematics of Understanding

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_The reporter at an Irish riot said: ‘If you think you know what’s going on you don’t understand what’s happening.’_

Whether the concern is parkies or teenage couch-surfers, dispossessed Aboriginals or those fleeing domestic violence, what do we know about homelessness? Theorisations of homelessness are one source of information, if not knowledge. This mini-library has much to offer, but it is too late in the game to be naïve about theory.

A specific theory, like a specific technology, has agency. If one looks to studies of social exclusion for explanation and understanding what comes into focus are ‘at a distance’ structural factors related to employment and the labour market, educational and geographic variables, and so on. This formulation tends to be amnesic to the personal and idiosyncratic, to the local and the phenomenological. Similarly, a strengths-based approach constructs the person in terms of resilience, resources and capabilities. This builds a particular understanding, a view which contrasts with, say, cognitive-behavioural theory where differing elements – private thoughts and actions – are placed into a position of privilege.

In effect every theory, every conceptual practice, relegates to the background the dimensions of life the particular theory, or practice, assigns a lesser priority: strength-based approaches de-emphasize structural factors, ethics and trauma; cognitive-behavioural theory de-emphasises emotions and personal accountability; the social exclusion tradition is unimpressed with personal agency. No theory is neutral.

Record keeping systems and statistical protocols have a similar power. Amongst others, Parton (2008) has examined how ‘bureau-thinking’ – the systematic collating of details about service users which now routinely occurs in the United Kingdom – builds a narrow, albeit detailed, representation. This regime, Parton argues, is organised to govern service providers and target service use. Parton contends this form of knowledge leads to services which de-personalise, act defensively and are disabled by short term thinking.

It is easy to recoil at this form of representation. Sadly, there is no escape from the fact that even humanistic, well-intended practitioners and researchers are, more or less, in the business of being vandals. For example, seeking to build an understanding of homelessness as the endpoint of certain ‘pathways’ may seem progressive but such a formulation, such a method for arranging the facts, de-animates and de-individualizes. This is the consequence of people being made subject to the discipline such a process of aggregation and analysis demands: to have credibility as ‘real evidence’ in the hierarchical, evidence-based business game individuals must be rendered as objects.

Better understood is the politics of title: should people who are, or who are at risk of, homelessness be composed as consumers, service users or someone with ‘lived experience?’ In the homelessness sector which, on balance, is our preferred depiction given
the conferring of titles castes participants into defined roles and responsibilities. Labelling me a ‘consumer’ and you a ‘service provider’, for example, is constitutive as it assigns a specific role to each of us as it also determines what is at the foreground, which becomes the focus of attention and what is pushed into the background. Literally, the mix of characteristics and configurations that is downstream of the allocation of roles goes a long way towards structuring the interaction. Sticks and stones will break your bones, but it’s the names that really work you.

If a deep understanding is sought, if some kind of verstehen is desired, alternative forms of knowledge complement what has been put forward by the industry insiders who are the true outsiders in the field of homelessness. In contrast to the industry accounts, there are forms of representation which, more or less obviously, select in, and select out, less mediated aspects of experience and circumstance. Such a knowledge can be accessed from many nodes: rumour and gossip, literature, auto-biography and oral history, the media more generally – the list is long. In contrast to technical discourses these non-fictional and fictional accounts do not seek to be instrumental. This is a definite advantage but, as noted previously, each source is partial and has its bias.

First person accounts, both non-edited and edited, can be illuminating: listening to This American Life is a case in point. Auto-biographical accounts know in their own special way. Soren Kierkegaard spoke to this when he wrote:

“To really be able to help another person ... first and foremost I must understand what the other understands... But all true help starts with humiliation. The helper must first subordinate himself to the one he wishes to help, and thereby understand that helping is not to rule but to serve” (Kierkegaard, 1848: as quoted by Wainberg, 1991).

Despite the attempt to be gritty, to render to the representation of homelessness the quality of authenticity, there can be a romanticisation of disadvantage present when a socially capitalized author chooses to be homeless: see, for example, George Orwell’s still fabulous quasi-autobiography Down and out in Paris and London. Like much of the professional study of nomads, such accounts are based on a kind of elective homelessness which, while often striking, have their verisimilitude discounted given the sub-text this author-researcher is ‘only temporarily slumming.’ Oral histories – for example Wendy Lowenstein’s Weevils in the Flour (1978) – do not suffer the same credibility issue and have much to offer.

What appeals to me is to seek out, and to appreciate, first-hand accounts (‘what it is like in the rapids and the ravines?’) and to complement this form of knowledge with accounts that are historically and culturally specific (‘what constitutes homelessness in a particular place and time as it is observed from the river bank or ridge line?). Mark Davis’ City of Quartz (1990) is one such account. In this book Davis presents in some detail how Los Angeles city authorities deliberately set out to spike bus-shelter seats and to randomly time the watering of parks in order to deny homeless people the refuge of sleep.
A fine kind of description is also found in the work of Manuel Castels. Castels (1997) presents no dedicated examination of homelessness; his focus is far more pacific. What he did say, and which has the advantage of being both historically and culturally specific and of adding something which is interpretive and new, was to argue that the life-world of a homeless, unemployed, mentally ill person in New York has more in common with a homeless, unemployed, mentally ill person in Mumbai than it does with the liebenswelt – the life world – of Manhattan’s elite. That is, he suggests there are now sub-populations within the ‘first world’ who are captured within a ‘third world’ mode of existence in terms of their life world and life prospects. More generally, his argument is that if you are at the bottom of the pecking order you experience a fundamental quantum of inequity and exclusion independent of what laneway you sleep in or which language you speak.

This is a provocative idea, a proposition that speaks to the transformations which are re-shaping the twenty-first century. Acknowledging Castels’ central point, something further might be ventured: perhaps the New York aristocrat and the street person do have more in common than geographic location? The street person’s lived experience may be of boredom and deprivation, of a flattening routine occasionally interrupted by acts of intimacy and violence, whilst the wealthy person remains cocooned and accessorized. This is a tremendous difference, yet both are likely to have internalized the language of individualization (Bauman, 2001). That is, in so far as the street person has been incited to blame themselves for their situation – ‘I am responsible for my own life’ – the wealthy will also tend to blame themselves if they feel dissatisfied: ‘isn’t everybody, including me, the product of their own decisions? Like everyone, I am in charge of my life. So, if I am not happy, I am the problem.’

Clifford Geertz (1995), wrote that the task he spent his life investigating involved being ‘clear at a distance, jumbled up close.’ Before one plunges into an immersion with this village, this tribe, this cultural group, he felt he had a confident outline of an understanding. This always proved illusory – it was a kind of vanity – but it was also defensively sensible. Yes, conceptually I may be aware that I have lost it if I think I’ve got it, if it – understanding; knowledge as possession – is claimed this pre-empts the chance of a deeper, more dynamic engagement with difference, but it can be overwhelming to feel I might capsize, and then drown, in uncertainty.

Not-knowing may be a precondition for remaining alive in the process of discovery but an urgency for closure, for premature certainty, tends to trump curiosity and wonder, mystery and openness.

Much is known about homelessness. It is known, for example, there is insufficient housing stock being built. Nonetheless, we can access no unilateral, objective and comprehensive knowledge about homelessness. What we can know intuitively, and it is a powerful form of knowledge, is to recognize how I would feel if I put myself in another’s shoes – in the position of the parkie or the teenage couch-surf, the dispossessed aboriginal or the woman fleeing domestic violence. This knowledge is uncomfortable, even terrible.

Psychoanalysis tells us anxiety, or more precisely our aversion to anxiety, organises our responses. For this reason we ward off an imaginative understanding because it connects and unsettles rather than shelters and accommodates.
References
Parton N 2008, Changes in the form of knowledge: From the ‘social’ to the ‘informational’?,