Theorising homelessness

Peter Somerville, University of Lincoln

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It is nearly 20 years since I argued that homelessness is to be understood, first and foremost, as an ideological construct, that is, as created by our experiences, our intellects and our imaginations (Somerville, 1992: 531). It remains the case, however, that thinking about homelessness is dominated by accounts that assume it is what Durkheim (1982) called a ‘social fact’, that is, a truth about social relations that can be measured or quantified independently of our experiences of those relations. The situation now appears, if anything, worse than before, because what Ravenhill (2008) calls ‘the homelessness industry’ has since monopolised the definition of homelessness, and governments have more actively targeted for interventions those populations whom they choose to label as ‘homeless’ (or ‘socially excluded’ or ‘multiply excluded’ or suffering from ‘deep exclusion’, etc). The facticity (Sartre, 1993) of homelessness has grown stronger over the years, tending to eclipse those few serious attempts to understand its ideological construction.

In my 1992 paper, I tried, perhaps unsuccessfully, to show that homelessness is not just a matter of lack of shelter or lack of abode but involves deprivation across a number of different dimensions – physiological (lack of bodily comfort or warmth), emotional (lack of love or joy), territorial (lack of privacy), ontological (lack of rootedness in the world, anomie) and spiritual (lack of hope, lack of purpose). Although these dimensions are sometimes a little confused in the literature, there is ample evidence now to show that they all feature in the lived experiences of people who are commonly regarded or labelled as homeless (see, for example, Craig et al, 1996; Fitzpatrick et al, 2000; Lemos, 2000; McNaughton, 2008; Ravenhill, 2008; Fitzpatrick et al, 2009). If they are to be of any value, therefore, explanations of homelessness have to take account of all these dimensions.

If homelessness is to be understood as part of human experience, then it cannot be explained purely in terms of the decisions and actions of individuals, if only because many, if not most, of our experiences just ‘happen’ to us rather than being actively chosen. Some experiences, indeed, such as spiritual ones (e.g. hope and sense of purpose) cannot be chosen at all. On the other hand, pointing to certain forces outside an individual as being responsible for their homelessness can be equally problematic, because there is no simple or direct relationship between the action of these forces and what happens to that individual. One must therefore conclude that any worthwhile explanation of homelessness must specifically address the nature of the relationship between individuals’ experiences of homelessness and the whole environment in which those individuals operate.

In the first part of this paper, I want to criticise those approaches to theorising homelessness that do not focus on this relationship between individual experience and the environment in which that experience occurs. I shall then go on to evaluate studies that do take account of this relationship, asking what we can learn from these studies about the nature of homelessness. Finally, I shall draw conclusions about how our understanding of homelessness can be improved in the future.
Neale (1997) represents a useful starting point for my analysis. She dismisses the idea that homelessness is an ideological construct as being too vague. For her, it is important that homelessness be precisely defined in order for policy to be successful: ‘If policy cannot even define homelessness, how can it hope to provide for homeless people?’ (Neale, 1997: 46) One could of course respond that plenty of effective welfare provision occurs even in the absence of any clear definition of welfare. More than that, however, this search for a precise definition can be understood as an attempt to identify a definite ‘target population’ for government intervention, with all that this implies for negative stereotyping, dependency creation and stigmatisation (see, for example, McNaughton, 2008). The sense of homelessness being an ideological construct (which actually does have a clear, though complex, meaning – Somerville, 1992) is lost, and along with it is lost any sense that policy approaches to homelessness may also be ideologically driven. Ironically, Neale does not attempt to define homelessness herself but either takes its meaning for granted or assumes it is something for policymakers to define. Her discussion of theories of homelessness is therefore fundamentally flawed because she never states clearly what it is she thinks these theories are purporting to explain.

For Neale, therefore, homelessness is effectively a ‘social fact’ (though never clearly defined), which can be ‘explained’ in a number of different ways. Her preferred model of explanation is a simple causal one in which: ‘Potent social forces [capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism, home ownership] do exist and being homeless is to lose a stake in several of them’ (Neale, 2007: 46). But she is also attracted to poststructuralist concepts of resistance (Foucault, 1979; Weedon, 1987) and Giddens’ structuration theory – approaches that do not treat homelessness as a social fact and will be considered further below.

Like Neale, Pleace (1998) wants homelessness to be defined in policy terms, as a product of processes of social exclusion. This continues to be his position, as can be seen from his most recent publication, where homeless people are classified according to whether they count as homeless under current legislation or ‘are in a situation of housing exclusion’ (Jones and Pleace, 2010: 9). Since the latter situation is not defined, we have at once a definition that is both precise (in terms of legal prescriptions) and vague (in terms of its interpretation of non-statutory homelessness). This publication is a good example of the empire of facticity that has expanded around homelessness, with increasing amounts of data related to different categories of homeless person, in different kinds of housing conditions, and an increasing variety of policies and practices targeted at the people so categorised. But what does all this data and practice add to our understanding of homelessness? In a revealing short section (Jones and Pleace, 2010: 26-9), the authors unwittingly highlight the key problems with what I shall now call the ‘social fact’ approach. They start by agreeing with Neale (1997) that explaining homelessness requires more than just listing a variety of ‘individual’ and ‘structural’ factors, because it is necessary to identify the relationships among these different factors and how they all relate to homelessness. Then they refer to Pleace (1998), in which many of these factors are grouped together under a broad heading of ‘social exclusion’. Those experiencing these factors are said to be ‘at heightened risk’ (Jones and Pleace, 2010: 26) of homelessness (and
presumably, the more of them they experience, and the more severe the factor, the greater the risk). The fact of homelessness itself is then to be explained in terms of the degree of social exclusion experienced by individuals and the capacity of those individuals to cope with that exclusion.

Unfortunately, Pleace’s (1998) interpretation of social exclusion makes this line of explanation unintelligible. Social exclusion is seen ‘as a result of long term processes, such as bad childhood experiences, growing up in a highly disadvantaged neighbourhood, attending a badly run school, being exposed to illegal drugs, committing crime at an early age, as well as the effects of health problems as an adult, such as severe mental illness and problematic drug use’ (Jones and Pleace, 2010: 26). Many of these factors are clearly ‘individual’ (e.g. bad experiences, committing crime, taking drugs, health problems), whereas others (e.g. disadvantaged neighbourhood, badly run school) are ‘structural’, so instead of two lists of disparate individual and structural factors we now have one list, and this is presented as if it were some kind of improvement. Moreover, Jones and Pleace (2010: 26) argue that: ‘This view of the causes of single homelessness saw individual characteristics and high support needs as “causes”, but saw those characteristics and needs as a consequence of social exclusion.’ So individual characteristics, such as mental illness, seem to be both causes and consequences of social exclusion at the same time, and the concept of social exclusion appears suddenly to lose all explanatory force. It could also be pointed out, as noted above, that Jones and Pleace have earlier defined homelessness as involving ‘housing exclusion’, so that they appear to be saying that social exclusion (which includes homelessness) causes, and is caused by, social exclusion (which also includes homelessness). The result of this is that the relationships among all the different factors are not merely unknown but unknowable.

Next, Jones and Pleace (2010) consider the arguments of Fitzpatrick (2005), whose critical realist position I shall evaluate in the next section of this paper. They interpret Fitzpatrick to be saying that ‘a variety of risk factors, both “individual” and “structural”, can combine in various ways to heighten the risk of homelessness. The more someone exhibits individual risk factors and/or is exposed to structural risks, the greater the risk that they will become homeless’ (Jones and Pleace, 2010: 27).¹ This ‘risk factor’ approach is an improvement on Pleace (1998) in that it seems to imply that the relationships among the factors can be known. It is, however, yet another example of a ‘social fact’ perspective, because it assumes that homelessness is a social fact (represented here as a dependent variable), which can be distinguished from all the risk factors (independent variables). It is flawed because homelessness itself has still not been clearly defined, no measure of the degree of risk posed by any factor has been identified, and the ways in which the risk factors can combine have not been specified. I will argue that, if the different dimensions of homelessness are taken seriously, then such a risk factor approach to explaining homelessness becomes otiose, and indeed irrelevant.

**Homelessness as ‘constructed’ or ‘real’ or constructed as both real and ideal**

¹ Pleace (2000) refers to this as the ‘new orthodoxy’ in explaining homelessness, according to which ‘structural’ factors create the conditions within which homelessness occurs, and then ‘individual’ factors determine the likelihood of becoming homeless in those conditions.
Since I have argued that homelessness is an ideological construct, it might reasonably be expected that I would be sympathetic to a ‘constructivist’ perspective, in which social problems are seen as being formed by the power of identifiable groups in society to define a certain issue as a “problem” that needs tackling in a particular kind of way (Jacobs et al., 1999: 13). I am indeed sympathetic to such a perspective, even though it seems rather banal – after all, how else would a social issue come to be recognised as a problem to be tackled by policy makers? My problem with it here, however, is that to define homelessness in terms of its construction as a social problem seems unsatisfactory – homelessness may well be a social problem, and how it is constructed as a social problem is an important focus for research, but homelessness is not just a social problem, it is a condition that is experienced by many people. The constructivist position, as expounded by Jacobs et al. (1999), does not seem to me to throw any light on that experience.\(^2\) When I say that homelessness is an ideological construct, I do not mean that it is constructed by ‘others’, whether powerful ‘others’ or not, but by all of us, in our everyday lives, our thoughts, our feelings, our actions. It is ideological because, as Althusser (1970) said, we all live in ideology; and it is a construct in that it exists only because we construct it.

Fitzpatrick (2005) argues that the problems in theorising homelessness up to now derive from inadequate conceptualisation of its causation. She points out that many factors, such as marriage breakdown, can be interpreted either as ‘structural’ or as ‘individual’, so the distinction between two different kinds of ‘cause’ is unclear. She criticises what she calls ‘positivist’ explanations, which interpret causation in terms of high levels of correlation between certain factors and homelessness. She further argues that a ‘risk factor’ approach is unsatisfactory because it does not explain why these factors might increase the risk of homelessness. She argues that what is important in understanding and explaining homelessness is the ‘recurring pattern of life events and circumstances implicated in “pathways” into homelessness’ (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 6), a pattern that varies from one person to another (this point will be taken up later in this paper). She therefore agrees that homelessness is ‘socially constructed’ (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 8), and goes on to argue that this social construction is to be understood in terms of realist social theory.

Central to Fitzpatrick’s realist explanation of homelessness is the claim that: ‘Homelessness … is not a cultural phenomenon, but rather a signifier of objective material and social conditions’ (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 12). Here ‘structure’ is contrasted with ‘culture’, ‘objective’ with ‘subjective’, and ‘material’ or ‘real’ with ‘ideal’. The ‘causes’ of homelessness are then identified mainly as ‘structures’ of different kinds (economic, housing and patriarchal/interpersonal) plus ‘individual attributes’ (basically, factors that reduce personal resilience). She goes on briefly to explore how these different factors might be related in different contexts, specifically, poverty among particular groups in particular places, acting to increase the ‘weight of the weighted possibility’ (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 14) of their homelessness. She cites the example of a link between poverty, domestic violence and homelessness.

\(^2\) Ravenhill (2008: 37) agrees: ‘Constructionist theory is useful when looking at the homeless industry and the way knowledge, intervention and practical solutions are implemented, evolved and changed. It also facilitates understanding of the role of the media and public attitudes in policy development, the financing of projects and research… As a theory of homelessness, it is severely limited as it tends to ignore the individual completely by lumping them together into labelled groups which have been classified and defined and around which policy and organizations have been created.’
Putting to one side the merits or otherwise of critical realism as a perspective (for a critique of critical realism, see Somerville, 2011), it does not seem as if Fitzpatrick’s analyses add much to what we have already learned about homelessness from the ‘social fact’ approach (to which, incidentally, Fitzpatrick herself has contributed). In particular, the causal mechanisms, which she regards as so important, remain largely mysterious. Worse, the ‘culture’ of homelessness (whatever that might be – but see the section on ethnographic approaches in this paper) is denied, or at least downgraded, with homelessness being reduced to, or reconstituted once again as, a social fact. To be fair, there is a suggestion that this social fact may need to be explained in a different way, as an episode (or possibly a sequence of episodes) in the life history of an individual rather than in terms of how it correlates as a dependent variable with a determinate set of independent variables. This suggestion, however, is not explored further theoretically.3

McNaughton’s theory of homelessness

McNaughton’s (2008) work represents a clear advance in our understanding of homelessness. Based on a longitudinal study of the experiences of 28 people over the course of a year, McNaughton develops a new theory of homelessness, using key concepts of social network, capital, edgework, trauma, and integrative and divestment passages. Her approach is to place the experience of homelessness firmly in the context of the lives of her respondents, and to make sense of their actions in terms of the choices available to them over the duration of the study, with these choices being constrained by what she calls the ‘structural context’. Most importantly for the argument in this paper, her focus is not on explaining homelessness as a social fact but on understanding how people become homeless and how they make transitions through homelessness. Her book is rich in insights into both these questions.

What McNaughton found was that ‘all the people studied had relatively low levels of human, social and economic capital’ and that ‘at some point [their] lives had become imbued with experiences of highly traumatic incidents, and involuntarily experienced

3 Ravenhill (2008: 96) suggests that May (2000), and a number of other writers (including Fitzpatrick, 2000) whom she collectively describes as the ‘Scottish contingent’, ‘attempted to create a set of simple trajectories to explain the complex routes homeless people take into housing. If homelessness were simply a housing or employment issue, then May and the Scottish contingent succeed in offering an explanation of the structural aspects of homelessness and their impact on the individual. However, homelessness is far more complex than simple binary structural problems.’ Ravenhill (2008: 182-3) repeats this criticism: ‘the focus remained on routes into housing, not the complete resettlement process; physical, emotional and psychological reintegration into housed society. There were also problems with the application of pathways to exit routes. They could not cover the whole gamut of circumstances. Thus there was no recognition that successful pathways could include people returning to the parental home, those entering relationships or house/flat shares, those offered temporary unsupported accommodation, those going through drink or drug rehabilitation programmes and those helping themselves by using the private rented sector. Authors found it difficult to demonstrate the way some people alternated between different paths, moved up and down pathways or used different paths simultaneously (Fitzpatrick 2000). There was a tendency to oversimplify exit routes. The pathways used relatively short time-spans as a measure of successful reintegration ([for example] six months). This is despite existing evidence to suggest that this stage of resettlement takes far longer (in excess of 18 months; Dane 1998). Pathway analysis is useful as a snapshot view of tenancy outcomes and routes into and through a variety of types of accommodation. However, it offers very little information about episodic rooflessness, time-scales, the struggle to resettle and the obstacles and hurdles faced by those attempting to rejoin housed society.’
risks, such as abuse, mental illness and attempting suicide. Many had also engaged in extreme forms of voluntary risk taking such as intravenous drug use’ (McNaughton, 2008: 107). Their homelessness occurred due to an interrelation of factors of three kinds, namely, their social networks, the edgework they engaged in or experienced, and their lack of resources: ‘their social, economic and human capital became increasingly depleted due to their edgework, coupled with the low level of resources they already had. Due to this they came to the point that they had to rely on the state to access accommodation, and had to access services or apply for housing as a homeless person’ (McNaughton, 2008: 107-8). In other words, they became homeless because they already had low levels of capital resources, which were reduced further by their edgework (such as drug use or abusive relationships).

The first key element in McNaughton’s explanation of homelessness, therefore, is that of capital. Capitalism is a system that inevitably creates winners and losers, and to be identified as homeless is at once to be labelled as a loser within this system. For McNaughton, the anarchy of capitalism means that: ‘Anyone may become homeless, but they are more likely to when they have a low level of resources’ (McNaughton, 2008: 108). This much may seem obvious, but what McNaughton adds is that it is the specific nature of their lack of capital and resources that actually leads certain people to engage in certain kinds of edgework, and this then increases the risk of their becoming (and staying) homeless. Edgework therefore seems to be the ‘missing link’ between the systems of capitalism, patriarchy, social welfare, etc, and what happens to individuals in their life courses.

This of course raises the question as to why people who are already low in resources would follow courses of action that deplete those resources further. Here McNaughton talks about ‘the rationale of irrational behaviour’ (McNaughton, 2008: 72), according to which behaviour that in other circumstances would appear to be excessively risky or directly harmful for the individual concerned actually makes perfect sense in the particular situation in which the individual finds themselves. As McNaughton (2008: 72) puts it: ‘people engage in edgework as a means to individually find some self-actualisation or control in the context of an increasingly disenchanted, liberal individualised modern society; or to escape the isolation or disaffection they feel by being marginalised and “poor” within the structural conditions of inequality and poverty that exists.’ The two main motivations for voluntary edgework, therefore, typically involving the misuse or excessive use of substances of various kinds, are self-actualisation and a desire for joy through escape. This does not look like irrational behaviour to me but is rather a classic example of what Bo Bengtsson and I have called ‘thin rationality’ or ‘contextualised rational action’ (Somerville and Bengtsson, 2002). Such behaviour is perhaps more easily explained if the life of an individual is viewed as having a number of dimensions (physiological, emotional, ontological, spiritual) situated in a single environment.

Interestingly, McNaughton also talks about involuntary edgework (specifically, mental illness and being assaulted), and the distinction between voluntary and involuntary edgework seems to be not so clear-cut. Clearly, it is not a matter of a straightforward choice between engaging in edgework or not. The lack of capital

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4 Note that these two motivations correspond to what Somerville (1992) called the spiritual and emotional dimensions, respectively, of homelessness.
resources, plus the experience of trauma (what McNaughton, 2008: 70, calls the ‘duality of edges’), not only shapes the choices that are available to certain individuals but also to some extent makes those individuals who they are, how they feel about themselves and how they relate to others. It cannot be ruled out that, for some of these individuals, depression, for example, would be an understandable and indeed reasonable response to what they might perceive as the hopelessness of their situation. McNaughton’s insight therefore sheds new light on the meaning of human agency: ‘Agency does not refer to actual actions or outcomes, but to the internal processes, independent of but embedded in structures, that individuals subjectively experience… agency does not refer to the actual “doing”, but the internal narratives that people have of their lives that affects how they act, and are embedded in the course their life has and will take… Exercising “agency” relates to each individual’s ability to construct a narrative (and narratable) identity – a conceptualisation of who they are, over time’ (McNaughton, 2008: 46-7). Here agency is understood clearly, not in terms of conscious action, but in terms of individuals’ own life histories. It follows that homelessness has to be explained in terms of how it figures within the plot of each individual’s life story, although this is not to say that this is the only way to explain homelessness.

McNaughton’s work therefore offers a new understanding of homelessness in terms of a specific interrelationship between ‘structure’ and ‘agency’, drawing upon concepts of capital and edgework. She also has important things to say about the processes of becoming homeless, e.g. ‘trips to the edge’ as fulfilling the needs mentioned above, and ‘going over the edge’, which occasionally resulted from such trips and is closely associated with homelessness. Some edgework (e.g. use of heroin) enabled individuals to control the trauma they had experienced but, at the same time, it increased the risk of further trauma. In some cases, this led to what McNaughton (2008: 91) calls ‘spirals of divestment passages’, processes of negative feedback as a result of which the status and resources of individuals followed a downward path, ending in overdoses, fatal accidents or attempted suicide. Most of the homeless people in her research followed such a path after they became homeless, e.g. losing their jobs, drinking heavily, increased drug use, health problems, being assaulted, etc. ‘Crisis points’ led inexorably to ‘breaking points’, as a result of which they moved into a rehab, were admitted to hospital or died.

In other cases, however, what McNaughton (2008: 95) calls ‘integrative passages’ occurred, whereby individuals achieved ‘a clearly delineated new social status that adheres to “taken for granted” normative assumptions about the social status someone should have’. For example: ‘For the people here, gaining their own housing was clearly a key outcome required for them to adhere to normative ideas about how integrative passages should develop’ (McNaughton, 2008: 95). She emphasises, however, not only that: ‘Obtaining their own tenancies was part of a long process, occurring after they made many “micro” integrative transitions’, each of which brought new challenges and risks, but also that many of these changes did not relate to housing – for example, reducing alcohol or drug use, making contact with family members, and accessing training courses (McNaughton, 2008: 95-6). McNaughton shows how routes out of homelessness are complex and multi-layered, and the unstable states of homeless people can continue long after they have been housed – as she puts it, they may still be living ‘close to the edge’ (McNaughton, 2008: 97), still engaging in edgework, which places them at risk of becoming homeless again. She
reaches the important conclusion that none of her respondents actually attained a stable state during the year that she was in contact with them. Instead, for many of them: ‘Their social status was caught, flip-flopping in the space on the edge of society… [They] appeared to make integrative transitions out of homelessness by obtaining their own tenancies. However their transitions were actually characterised by a flip-flopping of integrative and divestment passages, interacting with, and triggering each other’ (McNaughton, 2008: 99). This flip-flopping occurs primarily because of the way in which their edgework is generated by their low resources but then generates further divestment of resources, as explained above. In addition, however, each integrating transition, such as moving into a hostel from the streets, brings with it new risks, which require resources or further edgework if they are to be negotiated successfully. If the resources are lacking (e.g. to cope with life in a hostel) or the edgework is too risky (e.g. using heroin within the hostel), then divestment passages will follow (namely, exit from the hostel).

McNaughton’s final insight has to do with the relationship between homeless people and the social welfare system. She argues that ‘going over the edge’, in the absence of one’s own resources to bring one back from the edge, results in becoming targeted by this system. Those who go over the edge are labelled as irresponsible, as failed individuals, and the task of the welfare services is then to discipline them into becoming responsible agents. The irony is that such discipline denies the agency and reduces the status of those so targeted: ‘these people are not perceived as “capable” of making the right choices and living independently – they are in effect not seen as “real” with the same needs and wants as others’ (McNaughton, 2008: 116). This is then doubly ironic because it makes them more rather than less likely to go over the edge again: ‘Their only form of either escape from this, or of reasserting their agency in the face of this, may have been to go back “over the edge” again, through the use of substances, or surrendering emotionally to hysteria or temper, for example’ (McNaughton, 2008: 118). This then meant that they remained over the edge because they became excluded from the very institutions that could help them resolve their problems (McNaughton, 2008: 119). And even when excluded from or rejected by the system, they could still continue to be controlled by it (see Lorna’s story – McNaughton, 2008: 134).

McNaughton comments further on how the relationship between homeless people and the ‘professionals’ who assist them reinforces and amplifies the stratification between those who have to rely on the state to access resources and those who do not. For example, she relates how drugs workers, social workers and housing workers

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5 In a study of homeless people in San Francisco, Gowan (2010) identified three types of discourse relating to them, which she called ‘sin talk’, ‘sick talk’ and ‘system talk’. Homelessness was said to result from the homeless person’s own actions or ‘sins’ (criminality, irresponsible behaviour, etc), their health problems (mental or physical) or the failures of market and state provision. Similarly, Rosenthal (2000) identified ‘slackers’, ‘lackers’ and ‘unwilling victims’. These discourses were found both in official circles and among homeless people themselves. In spite of their inadequacies, therefore, ‘individualist’ and ‘structuralist’ explanations continued to be the most popular ones. The three types of discourse are then reflected in three official approaches to solving homelessness: responsibilisation (emphasising behaviour modification) (Ravenhill, 2008: 207, calls this ‘normalization’), medicalization (emphasising treatment) and what Ravenhill (2008: 207) calls the ‘battle for the mind’, where the individual is enabled to cope with their own past and with future events, connecting them with the reality of mainstream society, and giving them a sense of hope and purpose in dealing with that society – perhaps not so much (or not only) a battle for the mind but more a struggle for a life worth living.
collectively ‘filter’ the distribution of the finite resource of socially rented housing available, and so tend to channel homeless people into areas of concentrated deprivation, where this housing tends to be more likely to be available (McNaughton, 2008: 123). Clearly, this could make it more, rather than less, difficult for them to develop integrative passages. She notes that: ‘Some people felt that once they were living in their own tenancy they actually required more intensive support and ongoing targeting from support workers if they were to be able to continue to live “independently”.’ (McNaughton, 2008: 124) They suffered from loneliness, isolation and boredom (McNaughton, 2008: 159) and, partly because of this, often continued to engage in extreme edgework, and to flip-flop, caught at the edge, with few opportunities to move on (McNaughton, 2008: 126) – a feeling of ‘being in limbo’ (McNaughton, 2008: 128). She recognises, however, that it can be very difficult to strike the right balance between, on the one hand, pathologising people as ‘needy’ and providing support that they do not really need and, on the other hand, providing so little support that their tenancies fail (McNaughton, 2008: 125). In general, McNaughton likes to emphasise that we are all the same, for example, in having the same needs, but she also recognises that, in terms of how and the extent to which these needs are met, we are all different. Fundamentally, McNaughton argues that the services are not addressing the ‘structural underpinning’ or ‘root cause’ of problems such as addiction and poor mental health, with the emphasis being only on ‘case management’ (McNaughton, 2008: 130). Those who made successful routes out of homelessness were those who were able to restore ties with family and friends from before they were homeless (McNaughton, 2008: 155; see also Robinson, 2008: 90); making relationships with new people was difficult because of not wanting to tell people about their ‘past’ (McNaughton, 2008: 159-60).

McNaughton’s theory certainly advances our understanding of homelessness, but there are some problems with how it is interpreted or should be interpreted. She tells us that: ‘The approach taken in this study fuses critical realism and structuration’ (McNaughton, 2008: 41), but it may actually be better to understand it as a fusion of narrative explanation with complexity theory. Individuals are understood primarily in terms of narrative pathways interacting with and within complex social systems. Homelessness is explained, not as a social fact that is independent of people’s experience of homelessness, but precisely as an event or episode in the lived experience of individuals, which is then interpreted by those individuals in different ways, and related to the environment in which they find themselves. As Luhmann (1995) argued, social systems are self-referential, in that they achieve, through the communication of meanings, relations with themselves and a differentiation of these relations from relations with their environment. A complex system is neither totally ordered nor totally chaotic, but based on iterative cycles in which the output from one cycle becomes the input to the next. In the case of McNaughton’s research, the flip-flopping between divestment passages and integrative passages is a typical example of such an iterative cycle. Within complex systems, transitions commonly occur from more stable to more complex behaviour and back again, and this is reflected in the pathways followed by homeless people, with the stable states (or ‘attractors’ in the language of complexity theory) being ‘normal life’ and ‘death’. Such transitions are also marked by patterns of bifurcation (Dean, 1997), such as those observed by McNaughton (2008) in terms of the cleavage between those who are ‘trapped’ within the homelessness system and those who are not. Complexity theory is therefore able to explain many features of McNaughton’s thinking – indeed, I think the concept of
edgework may be more precisely understood as working at the edge of chaos. Complexity theory can also throw light on how ‘structural’ factors can generate complex behaviour – for example, Byrne (1997) shows how an increase in male worklessness from 10% to 30% in Teesside from 1971 to 1991 led to a range of edgework that looks similar to that described by McNaughton.

Complexity theory can be classified as a realist theory (Byrne, 1998), but this does not mean that such classification adds anything to our knowledge of the world. Unfortunately, as we saw in the case of Fitzpatrick (2005), a critical realist perspective seems to result in an emphasis on asymmetric dualisms of structure/culture, objective/subjective, and so on, which are not really helpful for understanding the relationships between and within complex systems. For example, McNaughton does touch on aspects of what might be called the ‘culture’ of homelessness – the importance of social networks, edgework as a social not just an individual activity (McNaughton, 2008: 149), the homeless as a group of ‘outsiders’ created by the welfare state (McNaughton, 2008: 151), who develop ‘close emotional ties’ over time (McNaughton, 2008: 153), how such groupings and ties exacerbate rather than alleviate the problems experienced by their members (McNaughton, 2008: 152), and so on. Nevertheless, she sees homelessness as primarily a structural rather than a cultural phenomenon, and this makes it difficult for her to explain how people can really exit homelessness. So, for example, she suggests that ‘resilience … may actually be the crucial mechanism that can act to allow people to develop integrative passages over their life course wherever they start from. Yet this resilience is deeply undermined by poverty, trauma, and a lack of resources, generated on multiple causal levels’ (McNaughton, 2008: 156-7). This seems to be saying that resources (which are ‘structurally’ produced and made available) are the key to successful transitions, and those who have access to resources are those who can show resilience; those who lack resilience are precisely those who lack resources and therefore fail to make successful transitions. In other words, ‘resilience’ is simply a label for an abstract capacity of an individual to develop integrative passages over their life course wherever they start from. The social and cultural context of resilience, in terms of support networks, family and friends, etc, is acknowledged, but is not integrated within the overall structure of explanation.

A final problem with McNaughton’s theory concerns what she means by ‘structure’ and the relationship between structure and agency. If we ask what agency is embedded in, then the first answer is that it is embedded in the life course of an agent, and an agent is understood as one who can narrate their life course, that is, who can structure their life course in terms of a story. So ‘structure’ first of all means the narrative structure of an individual life course, and this narrative structure might not be quite the same as that observed by another individual. The next answer, however, is that life courses are embedded in something else, but this ‘something else’ is not so clear (for example, what is the specific configuration of the capital that they lack?). Different individuals will tell different stories about their lives, and in these stories they will relate to their environments in different ways, and the stories of these

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6 These issues are all discussed below, in relation to Ravenhill (2008).
7 For a more plausible definition of resilience, see Walker, cited in McInroy and Longlands (2011: 13): resilience is ‘the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change so as to retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks.’ In other words, resilience is the capacity of a system (which could be an individual organism or it could be a social system) to survive change.
different individuals may or may not intersect at particular points, and the observations of third parties such as researchers may generate different stories again. What McNaughton calls ‘structure’ is then not so much something in which all of this is embedded as something that is interpreted within the stories of all these different individuals. The ‘structure’ is not outside of all these stories but is an integral part of each story (for example, as a set of themes or as a backdrop to the narrative). This consideration is what now leads me to discuss approaches to understanding homelessness that emphasise ‘culture’ rather than ‘structure’.

**Ethnographic approaches**

In this section, I look at the work of Ravenhill (2008), Gowan (2010) and Cloke et al (2010). All of these authors adopt what they call an ‘ethnographic’ approach, which means roughly that they study homeless people in their own settings and in their relationship to others. Nevertheless, their studies are profoundly different from one another.

Based on interviews with 150 homeless people over the course of ten years, Ravenhill’s work makes a major contribution to our understanding of homelessness. As Tunstall says in her preface to the book: ‘Ravenhill’s first great innovation is to see homeless people as social beings’ (Ravenhill, 2008: xviii). Ravenhill sees homeless people as to be understood primarily in terms of their relationships with others; she emphasises the social networks in which they participate and the ‘cultures’ they create together. She talks about a ‘culture of homelessness’ or ‘homeless culture’ or ‘homeless community’, which involves not only the individual edgework that McNaughton describes so vividly but also the emotional and social support that homeless people find on the streets. Whereas McNaughton tends to see association with other homeless people as predominantly negative (leading to divestment passages), Ravenhill views such association as both positive and negative at the same time. This suggests that in a culture of homelessness it may not always be possible to distinguish between divestment and integrative passages, because the relationships among the people concerned may be both supportive and threatening, risky and reassuring, uplifting and depressing, oppressive and liberating, bringing both joy and misery, hope and despair. There may well be flip-flopping from one condition to the other but both conditions exist within the same relationship. This is a crucial point that McNaughton’s theory seems to miss.

Ravenhill defines homelessness not as a social fact but as a set of relationships ‘that encompasses individuals’ relationship with themselves, their peers, the community as well as the employment and housing markets’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 13). She also talks about a ‘homeless industry’, which ‘includes statutory and voluntary sector organisations, campaigners, churches and charities, plus academics, intellectuals, research organizations, authors and even university or college training courses’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 14). She is critical of the homeless industry not only for ignoring the dynamics of the homeless community but also on the grounds that it is itself ‘inadvertently part of the cause of rooflessness’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 15). This happens for a variety of reasons but it appears that they may all relate to McNaughton’s point that homelessness services target individuals rather than communities - they tend to cater for needs that are easier to meet, they require individuals to follow rules that they would not follow themselves (e.g. no smoking, no alcohol, no sex, etc), and they
do not address the conditions that give rise to homelessness. In addition, overall provision is inadequate in many areas, which results in homeless people migrating away from their home communities to areas of better provision and sometimes being ‘exported’ back again (Ravenhill, 2008: 17-18).

Ravenhill provides the most comprehensive account to date of theoretical perspectives on homelessness. Unfortunately, however, it is not clear what this account adds to our understanding of homelessness. She seems to favour theories of structuration and the risk society, but her concepts of agency and structure are less developed than in McNaughton (2008) and there is no clear application of structuration theory anywhere in the book. At some points (Ravenhill, 2008: 73-4, 100, 234-7), she appears to follow or advocate a ‘risk factor’ or ‘predictor factor’ approach without recognising that this does not fit easily with her definition of homelessness as a set of relationships. To be fair, however, she does emphasise that: ‘The importance lies not with the predictors of homelessness, but the accumulation of triggers over time’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 101). I take this to mean that she is reaching towards a concept that is similar to that of McNaughton’s passages of divestment\(^8\), but set within a life course rather than a period of one year. Her analysis of these processes is unusually rich, and contains many insights into the long-term effects on children of frequent changes of home address, and of trauma, particularly child abuse, parental separation, and alcoholic or drug-addicted parents (for details, see Ravenhill, 2008: 101-14). For Ravenhill, pathways into homelessness for young people tend to start some years beforehand and: ‘Rooflessness appears to be the solution to their problems rather than the problem’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 114). Hence her caution in interpreting the oft-quoted finding about the high proportion of care leavers among the roofless: ‘The literature on care-leavers tends to focus on transitions from childhood to adult, leaving home early and institutionalisation.\(^9\) This ignores the reasons why a child is placed in care’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 116). Referring to the route-map of one homeless individual, Ravenhill (2008: 117) declares: ‘This demonstrates the need to view time in care in terms of the life-course for its impact to be fully understood.’ So each ‘trigger’ of homelessness is to be understood only in the context in which it occurs, as part of the life course of a particular individual, and this context is primarily (at least in the case of young people) to do with their family and their schooling.

One of Ravenhill’s many insights relates to children running away from home for at least one night, of whom we know that significant proportions sleep rough. Her argument is that: ‘One of the biggest deterrents to sleeping rough is the fear of sleeping rough. Once a person has slept rough for as little as three days they can become accustomed to the lifestyle and learn how to “be” homeless and survive: their worst fears are over… To a certain extent this nullifies that deterring fear and although they may run away and then return home, they are more vulnerable to rooflessness in the future’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 119). This is a good example of what could be called a ‘cultural’ approach to understanding homelessness because it sees the process of becoming homeless as a process of learning how to be homeless (for

\(^8\) She also refers to it as a ‘chain-reaction process’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 128).

\(^9\) Ravenhill (2008: 139) comments further: ‘Institutionalization must be viewed in terms of the life-course rather than an episode in time and its immediate aftermath. Thus it is important to view why people entered the institution, their experiences in the institution and the long-term impact of that institution as one long process within the context of their lives. Institutions appeared to delay rooflessness as well as trigger it.’ (see in particular Table 6.2 on pp140-1).
further discussion, see Ravenhill, 2008: 156-160 – e.g. experiencing ‘culture shock’ and learning to ‘fit in’). This is very different from McNaughton’s more ‘structural’ theory, and indeed seems incompatible with it. From this conclusion that homelessness is to some extent learned, Ravenhill is then able to explain her finding that each episode of homelessness for any individual makes it more likely that they will become homeless again and that each successive episode will be longer than its predecessor. This looks very like a divestment passage as described by McNaughton but, instead of being explained in terms of the negative feedback circuits associated with edgework, Ravenhill sees it primarily as a process of accommodation to the ‘homeless culture’. On the same basis, she is able to explain the link between early occurrence of homelessness in an individual’s life and long-term rooflessness when that individual grows up – because the earlier they learn how to survive on the streets, the more likely they are to have recourse to the streets when they encounter crises in their lives later on.

Another of Ravenhill’s findings is that a significant proportion of children being thrown out of their homes are from middle-class families (Ravenhill, 2008: 121-2). This seems to contradict McNaughton’s finding that homeless people generally have low resources, but actually it does not because it seems likely that the resources of these children are also very low. Similarly, Ravenhill (2008: 122) argues that: ‘it is not the really poor … but the nearly poor who are the most vulnerable to homelessness.’ Again, this fails to distinguish between the position of the children and that of their parents. It may well be that ‘nearly poor’ parents are more likely than ‘really poor’ parents to throw their children out (because they have more to gain by doing so – or, if you prefer, more to lose by allowing them to remain at home) but the resources available to the child may well be just as low in both cases (the higher levels of education of middle-class children may not help them in such a crisis situation). In fact, Ravenhill (2008: 122, fn25) contradicts herself by recognising that ‘most people were unemployed immediately prior to their rooflessness, or had never been capable of work’ – in other words, they were ‘really poor’! Furthermore, she has an explanation for this, namely because of ‘the high incidence of roofless people having left home at or before age 16’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 123). So the story here is one of early experience of homelessness associated with poverty on leaving home (irrespective of class of origin), making further episodes of homelessness more likely, in a cumulative process of divestment of resources and acculturation to homeless ways of life.

A further of Ravenhill’s insights concerns the sheer length of time that can pass between ‘triggers’ of homelessness and homelessness itself. The triggers may be pulled over a relatively short period (e.g. a succession of traumatic events), which cumulatively ‘destabilize the individual, rupturing their protection against rooflessness and leaving them unable to cope when a housing crisis occurs’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 132), but this crisis may not materialise for many years. She asserts, however: ‘The crucial time appeared to be during the natural recovery period after trauma, when most people tend to withdraw to recoup and recover. If other triggers occurred at this stage, then vulnerability to PTSD, mental health problems, addiction and rooflessness dramatically increased’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 132). Those looking for early warnings of a fall into homelessness (in order for homelessness to be prevented), however, are likely to be disappointed, despite Ravenhill’s occasional comments to
the contrary, because the events that she talks about do not seem to be at all predictable.

For Ravenhill (2008: 145-6), homeless culture is a subculture, defined as ‘the system of beliefs, values and norms adopted by a significant minority in any given society or culture, in this case, the roofless, homeless or precariously housed in Britain… Subcultures (including the homeless culture) have discernable identifiers, for example language, dress, demeanour and behaviour. These give an identity to both the group and individuals within it… Subcultures enable members to become “mainstream” within their group. A key feature of the culture is its paradoxical capacity to absorb loners, who remain isolated yet part of the homeless culture… In general homeless culture is characterized by dense social networks and reciprocity, with people experiencing anxiety and depression when they leave or are denied access.’ The latter occurs probably because: ‘The intense friendship and reciprocal care received within the homeless culture seems not to be prevalent in mainstream society’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 155).

Within this homeless culture, which she argues exists in many countries and in most major towns and cities in England, Ravenhill (2008: 147-155) identifies a number of subcultures, such as street drinkers, drug addicts, daycentre/hostel groupies, specialist daycentre groupies (with mental health problems), precariously housed street users (squatters, flophouse dwellers, etc), intermittent participants (loners and drifters), homeless advocates and activists (who used to be homeless), and the ‘homeless at heart’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 154-5). The last of these seems to be a particularly interesting group in terms of thinking of homelessness as an ideological construct. The process involved is an inverse of normalization, in which those who feel uncomfortable in mainstream society choose to create a society in which they are the norm. They become part of the homeless culture by participating in it and identifying themselves as homeless, even though they are not roofless, at least not for most of the time.

In a very important paragraph, which is worth quoting almost in full, Ravenhill (2008: 155) argues as follows:

Each of the above subcultures forms an integral part of the homeless culture, but the culture is far more complex than groups of people that associate together. To understand it and its impact on its members and those who are excluded, we need to understand how people enter the culture, how they become a part of it, how the culture’s norms and values are transmitted and what they are. It could be argued that in many ways the process of becoming roofless mirrors Goffman’s (1961) description of the process of institutionalization. There is the initial inertia, the stripping of self-identity as clothes wear out, hygiene and personal care becomes impossible to maintain and the corporate identity is absorbed. This depersonalization includes the loss of their name (street people are often known by nicknames and aliases), personal demonstrable history (photographs, keepsakes, forms of ID) and the loss of “me” (the stories, memories attached to photographs and keepsakes).

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In their research, Cloke et al (2010) found evidence, even within hostels, of distinct subcultures of ‘drinkers’, ‘junkies’ and ‘straightheads’.
There is a language and demeanour that needs to be adopted for survival. Homelessness then becomes one of Goffman’s (1970) games, the rules of which need to be learned and accepted, before the actors within that game can play. The idea of learning to play the game is a form of institutionalization that is reinforced by mainstream society through labelling (Goffman 1961, 1968).

Ravenhill (2008: 161) stresses that the close-knit character of the homeless culture makes it very difficult to leave:

Once an individual has acclimatized to rooflessness and survived the first few days and weeks, it becomes increasingly difficult to help them move back into mainstream society. This is, in part, because of the intensity and strength of the networks and friendships formed early on. Separation from such intense friendships can be painful and may become increasingly difficult the longer a person remains within the homeless culture. These cohesive friendships and informal support networks are at the heart of the culture’s continued existence.

When an individual did attempt to leave the homeless culture, serious negative effects ensued, which were similar to those experienced by people leaving other kinds of institution:

Those who had been entrenched in the homeless culture were accustomed to years of intense social support and company 24 hours a day. As with those leaving the armed forces, prisons and other institutions, withdrawal of this level of intense human contact appeared to cause distress, the onset of mental health problems (depression) and feelings of isolation and loneliness.

(Ravenhill, 2008: 194)

Within this culture, Ravenhill (2008: 165) argues that a hierarchy exists, which appears to be the inverse of the hierarchy in mainstream society, in that those who have survived the worst child abuse, addiction, the most roofless episodes or the longest duration of rooflessness are the most respected. In this culture: ‘Leaving was seen by some as a sign of weakness and failure to cope with rooflessness… Failure in the resettlement process appeared to be another badge of honour, proving they had deep-seated complex multiple problems unlike other roofless people’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 165).

Ravenhill (2008: 166) goes to show how, to some extent, such inverse hierarchies are:

developed and are reinforced by the homeless industry, medical profession, social services and housing departments. For example, when applying for social housing, the more problems you have the more points you gain. If you have complex multiple needs, you are a “special case”, one meriting more time and more elaborate support. In court, if you can claim to have a dysfunctional family, this is a useful status that excuses or dilutes the strength of the crime committed. There was evidence to suggest that language and jargon of professionals is incorporated into the homeless culture’s vocabulary.

11 These accounts complement McNaughton’s earlier explanations in terms of lack of resources and edgework, but place more emphasis on the role of social relationships and the gap between two different kinds of culture.
Common understandings were assumed that shortened explanations of common problems or sets of circumstances. This avoided painful, complicated explanations. The use of jargon acted as a series of labels adopted by people within the homeless community that in mainstream society would have been viewed as negative, embarrassing or shameful. These labels represent more badges of honour.

Ravenhill describes how the homeless culture is shaped to a significant degree by violence and people’s reaction to that violence. Violent incidents are frequent, mainly because: ‘Angry, violent (especially) men are common within the culture. A number have been diagnosed with behavioural problems and have trouble controlling their tempers and violent outbursts. Many are angry at “life” and at the way things have turned out for them. There were also feelings of intense frustration and anger at a system that excluded them from accommodation or the help they needed. This led to intolerance and provoked anger at the apparent injustice of much smaller matters. When mixed with drink or drugs, little incidents easily sparked off rage and violent outbursts’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 166). These incidents affected other homeless people in different ways. Some perceived them as part of everyday life, being ways of ‘airing a grievance’ or ‘clearing the air’, or even ‘a good laugh’, others spoke of a ‘buzz’ and associated this with being ‘like a drug’, while others again experienced the violence as intimidating or terrifying and withdrew from the culture or linked with a ‘protector’ within the culture (Ravenhill, 2008: 167).

Throughout the book, Ravenhill passes judgments on what she calls the ‘homeless industry’ (this term appears to originate from the US – see Snow and Anderson, 1993). Some of these are stinging criticisms, for example on the practice of some social services and rehabilitation programmes in using homeless women’s children as bargaining pawns to get them to reform their behaviour (they can have their children if they ‘do well’): ‘for those with complex problems, “treat and reward” simply increased feelings of guilt and failure. This tactic was used even when the chances of being given custody were remote. This appeared to be cruel, destructive and caused unnecessary pain’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 174). She recognises, however, that:

The homeless industry, primarily involved in prevention and resolving rooflessness, is an inevitable part of the homeless culture and so is involved in constructing and shaping that culture. As established hostels and daycentres become meeting places, places to socialize, they create social networks and perpetuate the culture. Precarious housing (hostels) and resettlement are functions of the homeless industry yet facets of the homeless culture. This is not a failing of the homeless industry. It helps create a more stable unified subculture and facilitates the flow of useful information between members. It firmly links the subculture to mainstream society. Structural facilities (hospitals, casualty, police, homeless persons’ units) are part of the homeless industry and become institutions within the homeless culture. They create social networks, shape the culture’s language and pass on useful knowledge. Similarly, the legislative process shapes the demographic profile of the

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12 These often related to disputes over begging patches (Ravenhill, 2008: 167). Another status hierarchy came into play in relation to begging, with those refusing to beg being at the top, those who beg at the bottom, and Big Issue sellers and buskers coming somewhere in the middle (Ravenhill, 2008: 169).
homeless culture, opening and closing entry and exit routes in and out of the culture.

(Ravenhill, 2008: 176; italics mine)

This makes an interesting contrast with McNaughton’s theory. The homeless industry is seen as both part of the ‘structure’ and part of the ‘culture’ of homelessness. It is both inside and outside the homeless culture, and it acts as an intermediary between the homeless culture and mainstream society. It reinforces homeless culture while at the same time it is dedicated to the destruction of that culture. It lifts people up only, in some cases, to put them down – or, to put it the other way round, it puts some people down only in order to lift them up. It is riven with its own internal contradictions. It creates new divisions and reinforces existing divisions within the homeless culture, but it also provides new sources of unity and solidarity within that culture.

A final important aspect of the homeless culture, which is explored in greater detail in Cloke et al (2010), concerns the possession and use of space, e.g. creating an obstacle on the street, creating a safe place to sleep, defining a visible identity such as Cardboard City, and creating a meaningful living space that can be called ‘home’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 177). All of this can be explained as a response to the lack of privacy that is commonly associated with rooflessness (what Somerville, 1992, called the territorial dimension of homelessness), with the response taking the form of marking and controlling new boundaries of one’s own.

Given the power of the homeless culture and the multidimensional character of homelessness, exiting from homelessness is bound to be extremely difficult. Ravenhill is implicitly critical of simplistic approaches to resettlement such as ‘housing first’ or ‘employment first’ or ‘treatment first’ (or presumably anything first unless it addresses all the dimensions of homelessness affecting each individual at one and the same time). She describes four ‘catalysts’ that began the exit process in her research: ‘First, they felt that they had reached the bottom and the only way from that point was up’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 185). In McNaughton’s terms, this corresponds to a ‘breaking point’, but interestingly McNaughton notes that this can end in despair and/or death rather than resettlement – or, in her terms, further divestment rather than integration. It is not clear, therefore, why someone who has been homeless for a long time should wake up one morning and suddenly decide that they want to change their lives. Since this seems to be an absolutely crucial decision, more research would appear to be necessary if we are to understand how such decisions come to be taken.

A second catalyst in the resettlement process mentioned by Ravenhill (2008: 186) is sudden shock or trauma, which could be an assault, rape, disabling accident, near-death experience or the death of a close street-friend. It could be that such an incident is what induces them to feel they have reached the bottom (the first catalyst) or at least to conclude that life on the streets is too dangerous for them or involves too much suffering for them to bear. These first two catalysts, pushing people out of homelessness, may well be related, and again it is not clear why such trauma should have this effect rather than pushing them into depression, resignation and despair.

The other two catalysts are factors pulling people out of homelessness. One of these is the recognition that someone outside the homeless culture cared about them:
'Typically it was staff at homeless facilities or outreach workers who showed care. The sudden realization that they existed and mattered to people outside the homeless culture increased self-esteem, created hope and motivation to begin resettlement’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 186). This suggests that it may be the showing of care at the breaking point that makes the difference between descent into perdition and ascent into a settled way of life (see Cloke et al, 2010, on ‘the ethic of kindness’). The fourth catalyst is then the availability of support and guidance from a range of people and organisations outside the homeless culture, mainly within the homeless industry. Ravenhill (2008: 186) argues that this is different from care because: ‘The person who showed care was not always the person who could help.’ Strictly speaking, this support and guidance is not so much a catalyst in starting the resettlement process but more of a necessary condition for the resettlement to succeed.

What Ravenhill’s research shows here, I think, is that the key to starting the resettlement process for some people within the homeless culture is an interaction of a particular kind that occurs at a breaking point in the life of the homeless person, and this interaction involves contact with someone outside the homeless culture who offers them an unconditional caring relationship. If this caring person is someone within the homeless industry, they are then in a position to secure support and guidance for the homeless person and thus advance the resettlement process.¹³ Not surprisingly: ‘The degree of support was fundamental to long-term success’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 190), but actual support was usually inadequate in many ways, leading to further rooflessness. Ravenhill (2008: 193) clearly agrees with McNaughton that there is a ‘fine line between facilitating independence and creating clients overly dependent on charities and the Government’.

Apart from support from homelessness organisations in accessing housing (particularly good furnished accommodation – Ravenhill, 2008: 202), Ravenhill (2008: 193) found that the most important source of support for exiting homelessness was family (see also Robinson, 2008: 90): ‘Those rehoused and in contact with their families appeared to find it easier to resettlement and reintegrate into housed society.’ This fits well with her finding about the importance of having people who cared for them outside of the homeless culture, because it seems that such people are most likely to be members of their family. Many homeless people, however, are alienated from their families, so caring intermediaries are required in order to re-establish contact. Other sources of support included probation officers and religious organisations. Overall, Ravenhill (2008: 203) is keen to stress the difference between rehousing and resettlement: ‘Providing people with a tenancy is not resettlement, but rehousing. The transition from rooflessness to integration into housed society is far more than a route into adequate accommodation and support to keep that accommodation. There are a series of physical, emotional and psychological changes that need to take place. These form the rehabilitation process.’

Another interesting point that Ravenhill (2008: 212) makes is that: ‘The most successful resettlement programmes appeared to be those beginning with light, broad

¹³ McNaughton would call this an integrative passage, but she does not explain why the route taken by a homeless person would begin to be integrative rather than divestment. Ravenhill and McNaughton would probably both agree, however, that resettlement is a long process, involving complex flip-flopping from integrative to divestment passages, related primarily to the changing character of the caring relationships concerned and the quality of support and guidance being made available.
rules that were then added to as and when individuals could cope with the next phase of resettlement. For most, rules needed to exist to create a sense of security. Rules that were too slack were counterproductive, leaving people feeling unsafe both physically and ontologically. Equally rules that were too rigid made it impossible for the individual to achieve, feel valued and learn how to decipher right from wrong behaviour for themselves.' Here again there is the issue of a happy medium to be found between harshness and leniency, between strictness and permissiveness, between ensuring compliance and encouraging independence, between making it too difficult or too easy to access settled accommodation. Basically, having learned how to be a homeless person, the individual now has to (re)learn how to function in housed society: ‘Fitting in, belonging to any society requires that we learn the rules and know how to play the game to be able to fully participate. If we are serious about reintegrating the roofless into housed society, we need, at the very least, to teach them how to play the game and give them the skills and the means with which to participate’ (Ravenhill, 2008: 212).

One of the puzzling aspects of Ravenhill’s work is that, if rooflessness is the solution to longstanding problems, as she shows, why does she emphasise theory and practice concerning rooflessness rather than these problems? Fortunately, perhaps because she has followed a grounded theory approach (Ravenhill, 2008: 79-81) and clearly recognises the multidimensional character of homelessness, her research provides plenty of evidence about the nature of these problems. We are left, however, with some questions about the kind of theory that is implicit in her work. For example, in terms of complexity theory, homeless culture and mainstream society could be regarded as complex social systems but it is not clear what viewing them in this way adds to our understanding of the processes involved. One would expect, however, that moving from one such complex system to another would involve highly complex behaviour, with no clearly defined set of pathways, and this does seem to be supported by the evidence, not only from Ravenhill’s research but more generally. There is a risk, with theories that explain behaviour in terms of ‘culture’, that it can make individuals seem ‘trapped’ in their culture, but seeing the situation in terms of complexity theory indicates that it is more fluid and changeable, while still retaining a degree of order. Just as people are not ‘structural dopes’, neither are they ‘cultural dopes’, but they are nevertheless constrained by the relatively ordered structural and cultural context in which they live. This context includes, perhaps most importantly, their own life history, only part of which is determined by themselves, with the rest being produced by largely unforeseen and unforeseeable concatenations of events.

Compared with Ravenhill, the ethnographic approaches of Gowan (2010) and Cloke et al (2010) are much more geographical. For Gowan (2010: 80): ‘Homelessness is all about being deprived of claim to place.’ She talks, for example, about ‘the homeless archipelago’ (Gowan, 2010: xxvi, 47, chap 6), which refers to the ‘islands’ of shelters for homeless people provided by a wide range of agencies – ‘islands of deprivation, mundane and ubiquitous yet socially apart’ (Gowan, 2010: 187). Almost from the start of her research, she identified subcultures of homeless people such as ‘recyclers’ (who earned income by collecting empty bottles from commercial and domestic premises and selling them on to recycling centres, and who regarded themselves as the new hobos – Gowan, 2010: 165), ‘hustlers’ (who got by largely by selling drugs and petty crime), and ‘dumpster divers’ (who made their money by salvaging from rubbish dumps), who all had different moral codes and statuses. Studying these
different groups, she showed ‘how specific city spaces become discursively “charged” within the homeless scene, concentrating, nurturing and symbolizing different forms of street existence’ (Gowan, 2010: 96). In other words, she sees a close connection between the homeless subculture or ‘form of street existence’ and the space in which that subculture dwells. The hustlers, for example, were confined to a small area of San Francisco known as the Tenderloin, and: ‘All of them carried the ghetto walls within them, feeling little desire and no sense of entitlement to move outside of what for them was a safety zone’ (Gowan, 2010: 97). In contrast, the recyclers and the dumpster divers felt free to travel over large areas of the city.

One of Gowan’s (2010: 106) main achievements is to show how homeless men ‘combined, blended, subverted, and reworked popular narratives and schemas to make sense of homelessness, both as everyday life and as extraordinary stigma.’ Each homeless subculture had its own way of doing this. The hustlers, for example, ‘disdained the term “homeless”, instead identifying themselves as life-long street people’ (Gowan, 2010: 107) – born to run wild, getting high, getting laid, and easy money. ‘Often they described an arc peaking in their early twenties and tailing steadily into failure over the ensuing years. In the context of such a career, homelessness signified rock bottom… Homelessness was a sure sign that he was losing or had lost the game of street life’ (Gowan, 2010: 107-8). Nevertheless, many remained loyal to that game. In McNaughton’s terms, these were people who had embraced edgework as a way of life. The ‘sin talk’ of mainstream society, labelling them as ‘bad’ people, was reclaimed to mean something more positive, though with a certain ambivalence, being often mixed with regret, guilt and nostalgia. Like everything else in the US, this took a racialised form, with ‘black’ being identified with ‘people of the night’ and the ‘dark side’ (Gowan, 2010: 110).

Similarly, the recyclers appropriated an ethic of working class respectability. ‘The physical demands of the job suited people used to getting dirty and working with their hands, those with a blue collar habitus, in other words’ (Gowan, 2010: 169). But there was more to it than this: ‘the recycling way of life in San Francisco tied together various forms of survival. On the most basic level, they could make money and keep physically safe by camping near each other, but they could also exercise a grammar of action and way of talking that drew on the more extensive cultural trope of “blue collar decency” to restore masculine worth. This project was certainly attractive to men already strongly invested in working class masculinity, but it also attracted men of much more ambiguous identity who were just flailing for psychic survival’ (Gowan, 2010: 167). This serves to highlight how one particular subculture meets human need on a variety of dimensions – physical, emotional, ontological (rooted in social action and structure) and spiritual (having a sense of purpose).

The sheer cruelty and vindictiveness of the US system is sometimes difficult for Europeans to fathom. In San Francisco alone, thousands of people, mostly African-American, continue to live without being able to get work or state support of any kind, so end up homeless (Gowan, 2010, reports that only about 13% of homeless people in the US worked regularly, and much of this was ‘radically temporary’ (p147), while no more than 20% were likely to be receiving General Assistance (like income support in UK) at any one time (p305)). They are usually already criminalized and often continue to resort to crime in order to survive. As homeless, they are ill-treated by the police and city authorities, who destroy their makeshift shelters and
attempt to drive them off the streets. They are frequently arrested and imprisoned, even for trivial offences, incurring huge costs for the criminal justice system. The homeless industry simply provides insufficient material resources to lift these people out of homelessness, even in the richest state (California) in the richest country in the world (this is well documented in Gowan, 2010, chap 6). Consequently, as Gowan (2010: 134) says: ‘The primary therapeutic exit from homelessness remained what it had been for decades: disability payments for the minority who could prove that their physical health had been permanently ruined by street life.’ The majority of homeless people in the US, therefore, have to fend for themselves as best they can, and much of Gowan’s book documents how they manage to do this. When they get angry about it, they are recommended to go on anger management courses (Gowan, 2010: 135)! Apart from those who became severely disabled, those who successfully exited homelessness in Gowan’s research were helped to do so by family and friends (Gowan, 2010: 212).

It is largely the US experience that gives rise to Neil Smith’s (1996, 2002) revanchist thesis, whereby the elimination of the poor (including homeless people) from urban areas is seen as part of a radical neoliberalising project to make the city ‘safe’ and attractive for gentrifiers and for commercial activities – mainly shopping and tourism (see Gowan, 2010: chap 7, especially 271-2; and for a similar account in relation to Los Angeles, see Davis, 1990). In the US, homeless people have effectively been cleared from the streets14 and coerced into shelters, where they have been further coerced into medicalised rehabilitation programmes that rarely address their real and diverse needs (for work, respect, loving kindness, and even back surgery – Gowan, 2010: 216-7) and provide inadequate support for them to access routes into settled housing. The latest twist is to justify this lack of support in terms of neoliberal notions of self-management – it’s up to you now, you’re in charge! This is of course impossible to square with the continuing coercive approaches of clearance and shelterising (or exclusion and containment), as homeless people themselves know only too well (Gowan, 2010: 222, 270).

In contrast, in other countries, Cloke et al (2010: 9) argue that revanchism is rather less in evidence: ‘the available evidence suggests that both homelessness and recent responses to homelessness, and wider trends in urbanization and urban politics, take different forms in different countries.’ They recognise that there has been a certain amount of policy transfer from US to UK, in terms of technologies and techniques designed to ‘manage’ a problematic ‘street culture’ – for example, ‘variations of zero-tolerance policing, making begging a “recordable offence”, the “designing out” of certain street activities, the introduction of “diverted giving schemes”, and the introduction of Designated Public Places Orders (to restrict the consumption of alcohol in public places) and of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders. Yet crucially, even if central and local government approaches to homelessness have undoubtedly become more targeted around issues of enforcement, containment and control in Britain in

14 Through routine police harassment and, on the part of local government, a combination of ‘architecture to repel invaders, surveillance cameras to watch them, subsidiary police to roust and remove them, sprinklers to drench them, and stadium lighting to prevent them from sleep’ (Gowan, 2010: 237). In general: ‘We spray our fellow men and women with freezing water, slash their tents, destroy their shanties, and tow their cars, all in the name of a compassionate crusade to save them from their inner demons’ (Gowan, 2010: 272).
recent years, … these measures have been accompanied by programmes that are much less easily characterized as revanchist’ (Cloke et al, 2010: 9).

Cloke et al (2010) are very clear that homelessness has emotional and spiritual dimensions, which are ignored by governmental approaches in the UK as well as in the US. For this reason, they emphasise the role of non-statutory organisations in providing services for homeless people, and of faith-based organisations in particular. The research on which their book is based focused mainly on homelessness services in seven contrasting towns and cities in England, and involved interviews with 131 representatives of homeless organisations and about 90 homeless people. They examined the ethical discourses of 101 hostels and 48 day centres and attempted to discover whether they showed evidence of one or more of three ideal types of ethos: ‘Christian caritas’ or ‘faith-in-action’ or evangelism, involving a sharing of faith with, and acting out of love for, others (Cloke et al, 2010: 53); secular humanism, typically based on notions of human rights and rules of social justice, involving obligations to our fellow human beings (Cloke et al, 2010: 55); and postsecular charity, which is based on a critique of the first two types for their lack of receptivity to the ‘otherness’ of service recipients, and which does not judge the other in a general way but aims to meet their specific needs unconditionally, through an ‘interconnectedness of responsibility between self and other’ (Cloke et al, 2010: 58). With regard to homelessness organisations, Cloke et al’s (2010: 59) main distinction is between those who attached conditions to the services they provided (e.g. changes in behaviour, attitude, lifestyle) and those who did not. As I understand it, their preference for the third type of ethos means that they regard the personal relationship of unconditional loving care given by a homeless service provider (self?) to a homeless person (other?) as most important for a successful process of rehabilitation. If so, this fits well with the findings of Ravenhill (2008) and Gowan (2010).

Like Gowan (2010), Cloke et al (2010: 62) describe the homeless city, in some detail, as ‘constituted by a complex assemblage of places to sleep, eat, earn and hang out’, where the ‘journeys and pauses of homeless people … are punctuated by different kinds of performativities’, which are ‘in turn bound up in complex ways with the architecture of the city itself.’ Further, like Ravenhill (2008), they concentrate on articulating what they call ‘the performative and affective geographies of homelessness’ (Cloke et al, 2010: 66). They draw from Goffman with regard to the stage management of impressions (e.g. begging and busking), from Butler in terms of understanding how everyday practices enact identities (e.g. of the hostel dweller, the rough sleeper), and from Thrift in relation to ‘the ongoing creation of affects, of unplanned and unaccountable outcomes of relational encounters’ (Cloke et al, 2010: 67) – examples of what I referred to earlier as unpredictable events (such as traumas, but also acts of kindness) in people’s life histories. Although, unlike Ravenhill or Gowan, they do not draw upon a concept of culture, they do succeed in painting a picture of homeless culture generally, as it is lived in English cities, and they also identify particular subcultures such as ‘pissheads’, ‘junkies’ and ‘straightheads’ (Cloke et al, 2010: 84, 134). This picture seems very similar to that found by Ravenhill (2008), but with greater precision concerning the spaces used by homeless people and the movements that they make around the city. They argue that this precision is important if the needs of homeless people are to be met (Cloke et al, 2010: 90).
Most of Cloke et al (2010) is indeed concerned with responses to homelessness rather than with homelessness itself. It is important to note, however, that such responses themselves have major effects on homeless people, and so influence the nature of homelessness and in particular how it is experienced and how exiting from it is managed. Cloke et al (2010) are at pains to show, above all, that kindness is its own reward. Through a detailed analysis of soup runs, day centres and hostels, they document how unkind approaches, for example, involving ‘tough love’, are harmful for homeless people. They are particularly critical of the growing governmentalisation of the voluntary sector and of homelessness itself, which they argue is associated with an undermining of what they call the ‘voluntary attitude’ (Cloke et al, 2010: 245), which is essential for meeting the needs of homeless people. These points largely echo and reinforce those made by Ravenhill (2008) and, although in a very different context, by Gowan (2010). Cloke et al (2010) also stress, however, that the ‘voluntary attitude’ still survives, for example, in soup runs, and many day centres and hostels, providing continuity of care and ‘service without strings’ (Cloke et al, 2010: 157), though often without sufficient competence or resources, particularly in terms of access to affordable housing. It seems that Britain’s ‘high support’ hostels are not the same as US designer shelters because their support programmes ‘are very rarely (if ever) forced upon residents’ (Cloke et al, 2010: 173). The downside of this, however, is that ‘such support is … sometimes more apparent than real, such that hostel life may in fact be better characterized by the constant fight to secure access to staff and support’ (Cloke et al, 2010: 173). One is left wondering which is preferable: malign neglect or oppressive coercion. But Cloke et al (2010: 174-9) do describe one example of a hostel that works, with clear rules that are valued by the residents, a friendly environment, and considerable autonomy for, and spontaneous acts of kindness by, the staff.

A final point that Cloke et al make concerns the local variability of homelessness and service provision. They argue that this relates to ‘culturally significant local “scenes” of homelessness’ resulting from ‘particular interconnections between service provision and service consumption’… The importance of these scenes lies both in the particular experiences of being homeless in a particular place, and in the characterization of that place in the tacit knowledges and urban myths of wider communities of homeless people’ (Cloke et al, 2010: 184). Such scenes have of course been described in Ravenhill (2008) and Gowan (2010), so this represents an explicit recognition of different subcultures of homelessness. Cloke et al (2010: 185-208) go on to provide detailed case studies of the homeless cultures in two cities. They conclude that unevenness in geographies of homelessness ‘needs to be understood as a collective culture of place, people, organizations, facilities and experiences, that co-constitutes the feel of a place for a homeless person’ (Cloke et al, 2010: 209). The theory of homelessness emerging here is therefore similar to those of Ravenhill and Gowan, in that it foregrounds the role of culture in constituting the environment and experience of homeless people, but it seems to attach particular

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15 For example, they note that, with the Homelessness Action Programme (1999-2002), ‘British homelessness policy moved considerably closer to the principles underpinning a US approach, within which “rather than poverty, unemployment, or low-income housing shortages” it is homeless people themselves that are the “problem” to be “addressed and corrected” through increasingly coercive programs of “welfare support” (Williams, 1996: 75)’ (Cloke et al, 2010: 153).

16 This is perhaps where ‘professionalism’ comes in – Cloke et al (2010: 246) recognise that the ‘voluntary attitude’ is necessary, but not sufficient.
importance to explaining the geographical aspects of this (e.g. ‘the feel of a place’). In contrast, for Ravenhill, and even more so for Gowan, geography is not insignificant, but it is only one factor among many in the lives of homeless people (or one dimension of homelessness).

**Conclusion**

Homelessness is a multidimensional phenomenon, which can be explained in terms of a complex assemblage of relationships of a number of different kinds. Perhaps the most important of these relationships are those involving unconditional care and commitment, based on kinship and/or kindness. Without these relationships, the risk of becoming homeless is very high, and, if already homeless, the chances of successful rehabilitation are very low.

This paper has considered a variety of theoretical approaches to homelessness and come to the conclusion that ethnographic approaches, focusing on homeless cultures and the relationships between those cultures and mainstream culture/society, hold out the greatest promise for understanding homelessness as a multidimensional phenomenon. According to these approaches, homeless people are seen as primarily social beings, with specific histories, living in specific environments, and relating to those environments and to other homeless and non-homeless people, and also to themselves, in different ways. The work of Ravenhill, Gowan, and Cloke et al, and of others not considered here, has contributed significantly to our understanding of such relationships. These studies, however, seem to have been done entirely independently of one another, and there is now a need for ethnography that is informed by their different insights (which, indeed, are largely compatible and complementary) and deepens our understanding further.

What these ethnographies teach us is, first, we must pay more attention to people’s life stories; second, we must set these life stories in the context of the life stories of those with whom they come into contact; third, we must reflect on the meaning of these life stories in the construction and maintenance of different cultures, seeing cultures as interactively and discursively constructed across a number of dimensions; fourth, we must analyse the relationships between different cultures, thus building up an overall picture of how homelessness is produced. The homeless industry or archipelago, for example, appears not to be a system in itself, but it could form part of a wider system (namely, capitalism or neoliberal hegemony). Following a grounded theory approach, the constant comparison of different narratives within different life stories should lead to the emergence of new understanding about homelessness. Narratives in themselves are a form of knowledge ‘that allows people to know how to increase their awareness of their social environment… To study stories and their telling, one should explore the way stories elicit experiences of the listener and order them, to be returned as knowledge’ (Garcia-Lorenzo et al, 2008: 17). This means that we should not only pay more attention to people’s life stories but also to the relationship between the story-teller and the listener. The researcher as listener is inevitably part of the story itself.17

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17 This point is well illustrated in the case of Ravenhill, whose pregnancy during her fieldwork prompted major responses from some of her interlocutors, especially a sense of grief from having lost contact with their own children.
Bibliography


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