Cameron Parsell (2018)

The Homeless Person in Contemporary Society

London: Routledge

Drawing on his career in homelessness research and building upon a series of peer-reviewed publications, that have both added to our basic knowledge of home-lessness and contributed to ongoing discussions around the conceptualisation of homelessness, this short book from Cameron Parsell is an interesting addition to current debates about the nature of homelessness. Parsell describes the book as a critique of what he sees as longstanding ideas about the nature of the people who experience homelessness, his particular goal being to attack what he terms the assumed difference of the homeless person both in terms of how this image of homelessness may blunt service effectiveness and with respect to the ways in which other academics have viewed and interpreted homelessness.

The first chapter is a review of the literature, in which Parsell seeks to demonstrate that existing research has built constructs of homelessness that reflect the various biases and preconceptions of academics, rather than the realities of homeless people's lives, experiences, characteristics, needs and, crucially, their agency. He argues that homeless people have often been denied their own identities and that research too often projects the world-view of the academics undertaking it, their 'image' of homelessness, rather than homelessness itself. Chapter 2 provides what Parsell calls the 'theoretical scaffold' and here Parsell focuses on ideas and theory around human identity and individual agency.

Chapter 3 uses a mix of qualitative and quantitative analysis to assert that choices by homeless people, as individuals, is key to understanding the nature of homeless-ness. Within this, there is further discussion and analysis asserting that homeless people exist independently from the various constructs that academia has imposed upon them, both in the sense of simply being different from the 'expected' image and in resisting that image. The fourth chapter considers how choices might be constrained or enabled, an example being effective support 'enabling' choices to exit homelessness, while both the situation of homelessness itself and wider contextual factors, like an insufficient supply of affordable housing, can undermine someone's pursuit of their choice to exit homelessness. Chapter 5 brings all this

together and argues that by constraining choices, by effectively excluding people from housing and creating service systems that either do little more than warehouse homeless populations or attempt to support or treat the individual without addressing their – fundamental – need for an adequate home, homelessness is being perpetuated. Services also fail, Parsell argues, because they often seek support or treat a false construct of a 'homeless person' rather than recognising the individual, their opinions, experiences and, most of all, enable their agency.

Parsell does have a point. There is a danger that by focusing on cuts to welfare and health systems, housing market failure, commodification of housing, labour market failure and the massive concentration of global wealth among a tiny elite as being the things that 'really' matter in understanding homelessness, the human beings who experience homelessness can get rather lost from sight (Pleace, 2016). The emerging and the longstanding evidence that women take different trajectories through homelessness than men, is an interesting example of how individual agency – because the arguments here are about how women's *choices* produce gender differentiated patterns of homelessness – are becoming central to debates on the nature of homelessness (Bretherton, 2017).

Equally, Parsell avoids the key traps of work centring on homeless individuals, a tendency to inflate the personal over the structural to the point where there is a risk of distortion. He argues that individual agency is not the only thing that matters in understanding homelessness, noting that (p.116) "…the overwhelming majority of the service system would be unnecessary if we provided homeless people with housing". The core argument of the book, "the service and charity system is predicated on assumptions of homeless people as not only different but also deficient" (ibid.), also resonates with the wider evidence base. It has been clear for over a decade that user-led services, using coproduction and personalisation models, recognising, respect and follow the wishes of the diverse human beings experiencing homelessness are the *only* effective solution to long-term and recurrent homelessness. The main reason why Housing First works – at least in terms of ending homelessness in a physical sense – is because it is a user-led service, that recognises, respects and listens to the human being who has become homeless (Pleace, 2016a). The same holds true of every intervention from basic housing advice, across the whole range of homelessness prevention and in respect of fixed-site and mobile housing support services, services that respect, listen to and respond to people work better.

Research has shown that homeless people can, when required, present themselves in ways that are most likely to elicit sympathy and support, 'passing' by presenting themselves as if they are in synchronisation with expected constructs of homelessness, if that will get them the help they need. It has also been demonstrated that

non-conformity with the 'expected' construct of homelessness, i.e. being a homeless person who exists outside the narrow bandwidth definition of what an inflexible service 'expects' homeless people to be like, is at the core of service failure (Liddiard and Hutson, 1991; Dordick, 1996).

There are three issues with the book. One is the interpretation and presentation of the existing evidence base, another in what is meant by homeless identity and agency which centres on who, exactly, Parsell is talking about and the third centres on the inherent risks that come with using an analysis of homelessness centred on individuals.

In looking at the evidence, Parsell is not always as generous to preceding generations of homelessness researchers as he might be. The idea that how homelessness is conceived of and processed undermines and distorts service responses, that homeless people have an identity imposed upon them by services, is longstanding. Equally, decades of ethnographic and – if we are honest about it – essentially journalistic work by academics, has looked at the lives of homeless people as *people*, including the ways in which their agency influenced their trajectories through homelessness (Vincent *et al.*, 1995; Dordick, 2002; Marr, 2015).

The portrayal of some earlier research within the book, as 'denying' the identity and agency of homeless people, seems like an almost wilful misreading. Arguments against what Gowan terms 'sin' and 'sick' talk (2010), the ultimate homelessness stereotypes, i.e. "they do it to themselves" or "cannot help it", are presented as examples of work that "denies" the agency of homeless people, when such work was attacking the single most dehumanising construct of homelessness that exists. Parsell portrays his ideas as challenges. However, his criticism of some existing homelessness research is almost quixotic. This is a book that keeps charging at groups of people that basically agree with the author, at least in terms of the essentials of homelessness. There is a sense that earlier work is being set up as lacking in morality, robustness and conceptual clarity, as 'ignoring' the real and diverse humanity of homelessness, to make the core argument seem more radical and dynamic. A more modest criticism, i.e. there has been too much emphasis on structural factors, or whether homeless people have shared characteristics, and we need to rebalance things by understanding more about homeless people's identities and agency is enough, and that is a reasonable point to make. As it stands, Parsell takes things too far, the consideration of existing evidence is not careful enough, both in the sense of presenting earlier research as saying things it does not actually say and in the sense of recognising that his core arguments are not venturing into entirely new territory.

The book echoes some of the earlier arguments that asserted that the humanity and agency of homeless people is crucial to understanding homelessness but have become somehow lost in a sea of structuralism (McNaughton-Nicholls, 2009). Again, this earlier work presented the need to strike a blow against an army of (probably Marxist) structuralists who said all homelessness is caused by evil capitalism, which was particularly evil when it starts doing things like cutting welfare states and social housing to pieces. There was always a problem with this argument, in that this army of (probably Marxist) structuralists have always been very thin on the ground. Mainstream academic debate has been fixated on trying to determine how exactly *individual* needs, characteristics, experiences and agency intersect with structural factors like inadequate housing supply, how a *mix* of individual and structural factors caused and perpetuated homelessness, the oft-cited 'new orthodoxy' (Pleace, 2000), for more than 30 years. Conceptually, as was being argued two decades or more ago the 'new orthodoxy' was a mess (Neale, 1997; Pleace, 2000), because it never came up with a convincing framework that showed quite how the individual and the structural worked together (Pleace, 2016).

We tend to classify a state of 'homelessness' by whether or not someone is in a range of 'homeless' locations, usually locations that can be easily found and visited by researchers. Homelessness as an experience is explored by a sample, or samples, selected as 'homeless' on the basis of being a) without a house and/or b) in a space designated as containing 'homeless' persons. Even where we can combine data longitudinally and at scale, homelessness research involves tracking people across the spaces and sites where researchers define populations as being homeless. One issue here is that homelessness is defined inconsistently. Hidden homelessness in Finland is 'homelessness', but not necessarily defined or researched as 'homelessness' elsewhere, in fact the only real constant across Europe is that people on the street and in emergency shelters are usually defined as 'homeless' across most member states (and soon to be ex-member states).

Another issue is the duration of homelessness and at what point someone becomes or has experienced a state of homelessness. In Denmark, homelessness is pretty rare, strongly associated with high and complex needs and tends to endure or recur, but in other contexts, like say the USA, there is more homelessness, the bulk of which is experienced transitionally, by people whose overwhelming characteristic is poverty (Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015). There is evidence of populations that transition from poverty and housing precarity, into homelessness and poverty and then back out again into poverty and housing precarity, people who are transitionally, temporarily, homeless (Pleace, 2016). Beyond this, evidence also suggests that young homeless people, at least to some degree, share experiences, characteristics and needs, as do homeless families, individuals experiencing long-term homelessness or lone adult women who become homeless.

The point that agency and identity among homeless people will not necessarily be a constant is not a criticism of Parsell's position. One can study an Australian long-term and recurrently homeless population with high comorbidity of addiction, severe mental illness, contact with criminal justice system and limiting illness and look at the roles of agency and identity. Equally, homeless families in temporary or emergency accommodation, in Dublin or London, can be the subject of the same analysis and one might expect to generate different results, although it would be rather interesting if there were more similarities than differences. One should extend this analysis to transitionally homeless populations, precariously housed, poor people, who fall into and climb out of homelessness, say they are homeless for a week, or three months, or nine days, not least because identity and agency may be fundamental to explaining their trajectories. This is all the more important in the light of American evidence suggesting that long-term and recurrent homelessness may be the result of individuals who initially had characteristics associated with transitional homelessness being unable to exit homelessness and experiencing marked deteriorations in wellbeing and social integration, i.e. addiction and mental illness arising after homelessness occurred (Culhane *et al.*, 2013). Looking at the needs, characteristics, experiences, identity and agency of transitionally homeless populations, and contrasting them with long-term and recurrently homeless people, is also important for testing the argument that homelessness is more the result of bad luck, than particular characteristics, or decisions (O'Flaherty, 2004).

Throughout the book, there is a sense that this is not quite what Parsell is thinking of when he talks about identity and agency. Parsell includes data from populations in transitional housing and shelters. This 'homeless' population is then used to convey his core arguments, that identity and agency matter and that pre-judging, or denying, the identity of homeless people produces bad research and bad services.

Crude individual pathology, the utterly dehumanising construct that homeless people *always* – and the crucial point here is the assumption of *always* -"do it to themselves" or are "too sick" to avoid homelessness, sin-talk and sick-talk, is an instrument of the Right. If Capitalism does not provide, so the argument runs, it is because someone is not working with it, or is too ill to participate, the reason there is no job and no house is because of you, not anything related to the massive concentration of planetary wealth in tiny elites or the commodification of housing, or, come to that, cuts to welfare systems. Parsell is clear that he is not buying into these arguments. Of course, it must be accepted that the possibility that someone deliberately sets themselves on a trajectory that ends in homelessness must exist, but Parsell cannot be read as an argument in favour of the idea that all, or even most, homelessness is a result of such decisions. Housing markets and wider structural factors matter and as he notes at one point: "What people who are

homeless do, the same as all of us, is a product of the environment and social conditions in which they live" (p.87). He is also cautious about linking homelessness and choice in what he terms 'simplistic' ways, noting "linking homelessness and choice can be counterproductive by moving the focus away from structural condi-tions to the individuals experiencing poverty" (p.67).

A challenge for homelessness researchers is that, as Parsell describes in Australia, although it is probably equally true in Europe, mainstream culture, mass and social media and mainstream political discourse tend towards interpretation of homeless-ness through the use of sin-talk and sick-talk, with sin-talk probably being the predominant discourse (Gowan, 2010). A limitation of Parsell's book is that the way homelessness is conceived of, defined and analysed, looks a lot like the main-stream image of homelessness. Parsell is talking about identity and agency in people in shelters and in accommodation-based services, and that definition is a *construct*; it is imposing limits on who can be 'homeless' and who can have 'identity' and 'agency' as a homeless person.

For there to be a narrative around choice, homelessness has to have some sort of coherence, clear boundaries that are about where it is experienced and in terms of the duration of that experience. Setting those kinds of boundaries creates meth-odological limitations, but the issue here is more about expectation, that there is a homeless population, that takes choices and, in particular, that those choices result in homelessness and can perpetuate homelessness, in recognising agency, there is a need to recognise bad, self-destructive agency. It is not that this possibility does not exist – of course it does – but while Parsell tries to create distance between what he is arguing and the imagery of the Right, the imagery of mass culture around homelessness, cracks appear. For example, we are informed that homeless people are frequently "thoughtful and reflective" (p.64), okay, but why would they not be, where is that coming from exactly and why is there a need to be told that homeless people have shared characteristics with other human beings?

By focusing on the individual, the other factors at play become harder to see; talking to someone, exploring their needs, experiences as an individual, looking at their decisions through qualitative analysis, structure is visible, the apartment was no longer affordable, the job did not pay enough, there were barriers to health care, to social housing, no support from welfare services; but structure is at one remove and seen through the eyes of the person being talked to. The person, their percep-tions, their self-image, and their self-image in a context that is likely to lower self-esteem within a culture that tends to blame people for their own homelessness, is what is directly visible. So, the person got into drugs, they made this mistake, that mistake, their choices made things worse because they were bad choices, this is what can be seen, what can be recorded in the most detail, not the context and not

the systemic failures. If a researcher is then working in a cultural context that inter-prets homelessness in terms of sin-talk, it is almost difficult not to *expect* bad choices to have a causal relationship with homelessness.

Again, it is not that Parsell does not have valid points to make, bad choices can be the trigger for homelessness or the reason why homelessness persists, and services can fail if they do not recognise and respect the identity and agency of homeless people, indeed they are likely to do so. Equally, the book is not some simplistic Right-Wing polemic, structure is acknowledged and even the risks of focusing on the individual are acknowledged. However, the issues with the review Parsell presents of existing literature are present elsewhere, things go too far, the argument is over asserted, choice is not an important variable but instead has to be the *dominant* variable. Crucially, there are points where the book drifts off the road, where it risks presenting not the case for a greater focus on identity and agency, which is a strong one, but instead presents homelessness *as* 'choice', using an imposed construct, about who homeless people are and how they behave, which feels all too close to sin-talk. Ultimately, the point is that looking for absolutes will never be productive, absolutes and universal truths relating to homelessness do not exist (Neale, 1997). Does choice matter? Yes. Is it sometimes the main reason behind homelessness? Yes. Is choice always more important than commodification of housing, cuts to health, social care, welfare and social housing systems and the concentration of planetary wealth into tiny elites? No, certainly not, even if that might be read as (probably) Marxist.

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