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# Theorizing Homelessness.

## An urban sociological perspective on the interplay of individual, institutional and structural contexts

Presentation at the 17<sup>th</sup> European Research Conference on Homelessness  
Leuven, September 14-15, 2023

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## Setting: „It's your own fault... isn't it? A comparative, urban sociological explanation of homelessness in the interplay of individual, institutional and structural factors“ (project title)

- funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG)
- **Our interest:** Understanding how access to / exclusion from housing is realized in everyday practice
- **Scope of study:** Three medium-sized German cities as case studies
- **Research design:** a) expert interviews and narrative, biographic interviews with (formerly) homeless persons, b) systematic content analysis using MAXQDA, c) triangulation of interview data (observations, official documents, media)



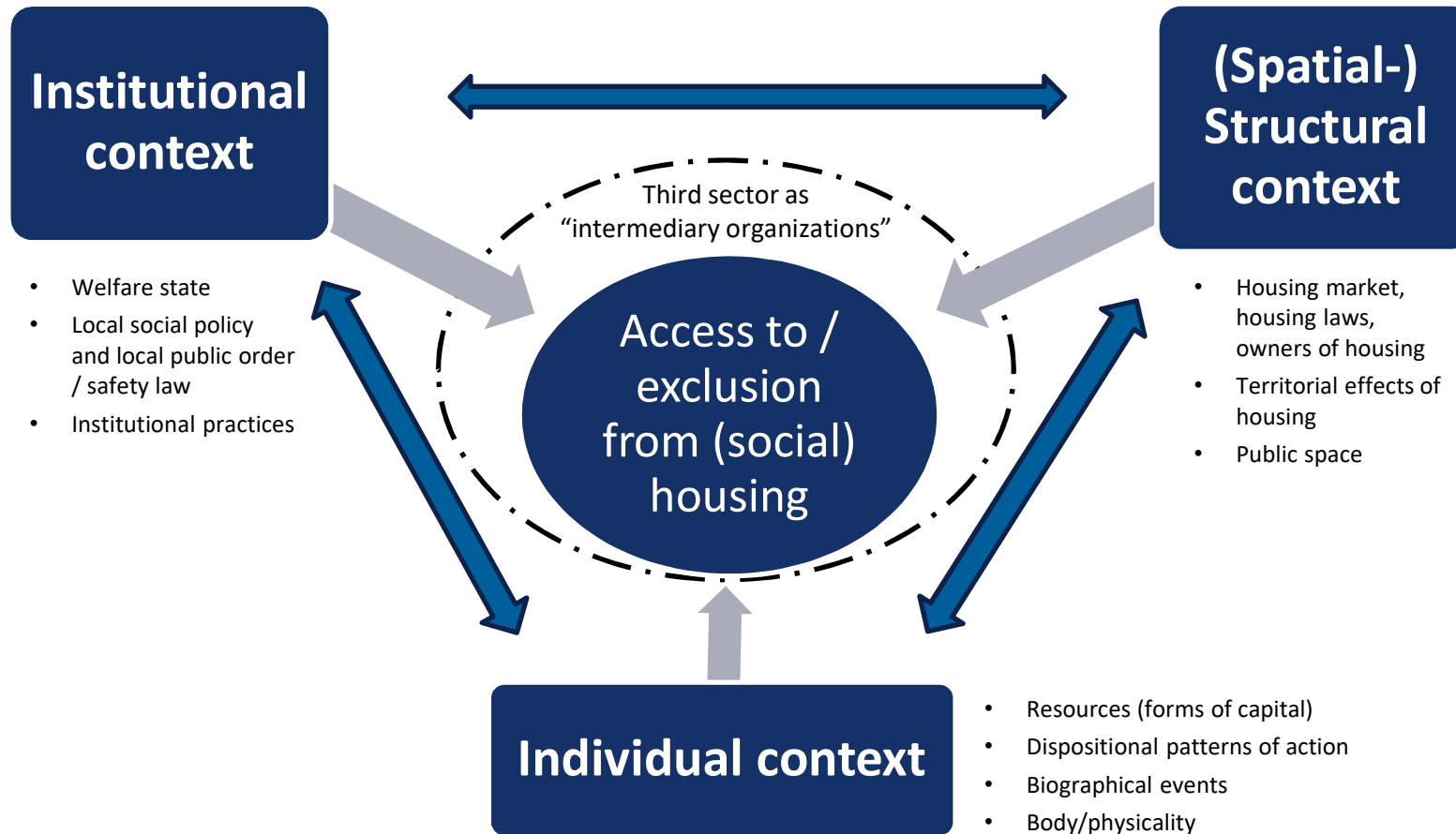
## Long debate on causes of homelessness: So, what is still missing? 1/2

- A systematic application of sociological theory to the empirical research object of homelessness is rarely undertaken (at least in the German context) (Dittmann/Drilling 2018, Ratzka 2012).
- Despite the New Orthodoxy, the modes of interaction between individual and structural factors are often not clarified in many studies (Somerville 2013).

## Long debate on causes of homelessness: So, what is still missing? 2/2

- The role of the welfare state as a third factor is underexposed/subsumed (a thus underspecified) under structure
- Role of the social assistance system (“third sector”) as intermediary organizations that can mediate, mitigate or amplify the situation (in relation to the welfare state).

We develop a distinctly praxeological (and critical) approach: Mediation between society and the individual, between structure and action. Reproduction of the structure through action.



**Fig. 1: Heuristics to explain homelessness and housing exclusion**

## Individual context

- Individual context (*not* individual responsibility)
- **Resources:** Amount of economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1983)
- **Dispositions:** Habitual patterns of action for the use of available capital and the social position itself (Bourdieu 1982)
- (Individual) **biographical experiences** (traumatic live events): Triggers of crisis moments, accumulation of many small personal crises (-> pathway approach)
- **Body:** physicality as a product of social origin (hexis), but particularly deep incorporation of inequality relations in homelessness (Kawash 1998, Wimmer 2022)

## (Spatial-)structural context

- **Commodification** and **financialization** of the housing (profit maximization, gentrification processes)
- **Withdrawal of the state** as a provider of housing: privatization, lack of social housing, shift from funding “objects” to “subjects”
- **Increasing competition** in the low-price segment between various precarious/marginalized social groups -> spatial concentration in ‘problem districts’, ‘sink estates’ -> last step before homelessness
- **Systematic exclusion** of certain groups of people on the housing market (discrimination, racism)
- Impact of **commercialization also of public space**: inner cities as ‘clean’ consumption areas. Displacement and expulsion of homeless people from lucrative places, restriction/prohibition of toilet use & personal hygiene, hostile architecture (Petty 2016).
- Referencing back to **body and illness**: increasing distance from appearance, demeanor, and practice of mainstream society.

## Institutional context

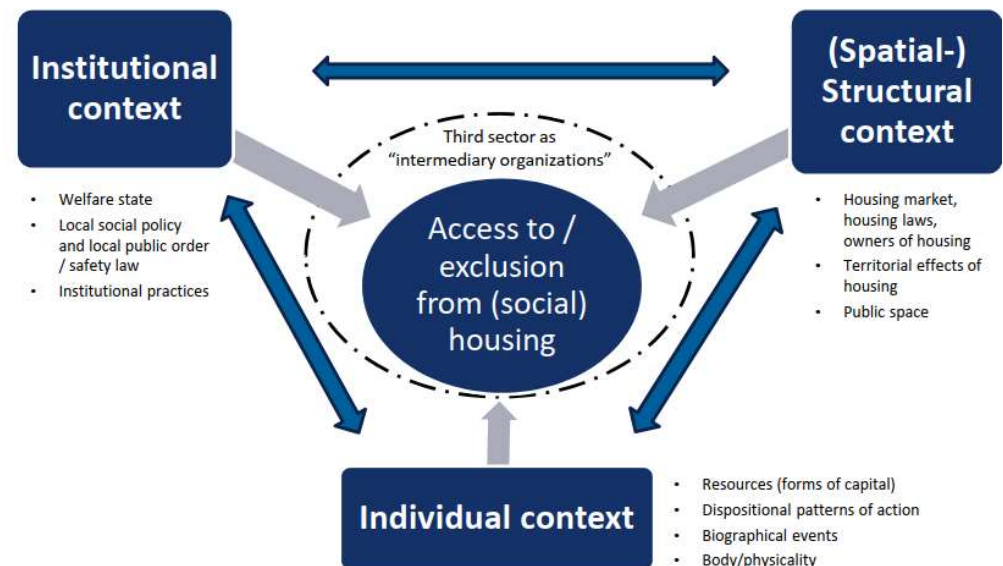
- German welfare state should "contribute to ensure a dignified existence [...] and to avert or compensate for special burdens of life, also by helping people to help themselves" (SGB I, §1).
- „**Triple promise**“ of the welfare state: prevent, protect, reintegrate
- Numerous intervention possible, but in practice:
  - **Access barriers:** Complicated application processes, unclear responsibilities (different agencies, different legal spheres), limited opening hours, lack of accessibility, opening hours, language barriers, fear & shame.
  - **Gaps in coverage/legitimized exclusions:** limited availability/access to women's shelters, prohibition of drug use in facilities, restricted use for EU citizens, etc.
  - **Transitions to nowhere:** from battered women's shelters, youth welfare facilities, prison, specialized psychiatric clinics etc.
- **Street-level bureaucrats (SLB):**
  - High levels of **discretion at local level**
  - **Conflicting roles:** social assistance vs. mandate of monitoring and sanctioning behavior
  - **Asymmetrical relationship** btw. SLB and welfare recipient
  - **Socio-structural/habitual distance** (-> stigmatization from above, non-recourse from below)





## Intermediary role of third sector

- Local structure of the support system for homeless people: a) Inpatient assistance (residential and overnight shelters), b) Outpatient assistance (counseling, day care, health care, food banks, lunch tables), c) Permeability and access to further (high-threshold) social services: e.g. drug, debt and crisis counselling.
- Contradictory mandates of social workers: a) Helping clients (to help themselves) vs. ensuring order in public space, b) Dependence on local administration for funding



**Fig. 1: Heuristics to explain homelessness and housing exclusion**



# Illustration of the interactions on a biographical case Emilio (pseudonym)



## Individual context: the case of Emilio

- Born 1969 in Mediaș (Romania)
- Placed in a children's home at the age of 8, after the death of his father (alcoholism).
- Factory work at the end of the 80s. Unemployment during the transformation period from socialism to democracy/capitalism.
- 90s: First experiences with alcoholism and homelessness in Romania
- After Romania joined the EU: stays in France and Italy (begging and street music). Through the hint of an friend in Göttingen (Germany) since 2010.



## Interaction Individual & (Spatial-)structural

Can I ask how you ended up in the wheelchair? #00:39:48#

*“Um, so when I came to Germany, uh, I could still walk, that wasn't a problem at all. Um, but yes, then I made a big mistake: I was here in the railway station last year in February, um, because it was so cold. Um, and, um, then I was thrown out because it was night and you're not allowed to sleep there at night. And then, exactly, I ended up on the bench. Then I was thrown out, landed on a bench here, um, where I was then found, um, half frozen to death. And then I was taken to the hospital and, um, had injured toes. Um, two that had to be cut off and I've been in a wheelchair since then.” #00:41:59# (Interview Emilio)*

## Interaction individual & institutional

A social worker reports on the failed attempt to place Emilio permanently in a homeless shelter:

*„Um, and (I) somehow managed that (Emilio) was first assessed by the medical service, the health department, instead of just going to the normal homeless shelter. Exactly, the health department initiated a conversation with Emilio, where someone then came. In the end, I was a bit disappointed, because it was primarily about whether he was willing to return to Romania and to offer him a return ticket. It wasn't really a medical assessment. (...) Um, even if it didn't lead to the desired result in the end, that is: he was released again after two or three days. So he was sent out of the homeless shelter because, yes (.) he didn't have any social benefits at that time and nobody took over the costs, so to speak.” #00:05:17#  
(Interview social worker)*

## Conclusions & reflections

- Homelessness as an extremely complex, multi-causal social phenomenon
- Risk of becoming homeless and the possibility of ending homelessness are unequally distributed in society. Biographic crises are dealt with differently on an individual basis and in the immediate environment, dependence on the existence (and taking advantage) of assistance etc.

### **The presented model offers:**

- Systematization of the interactions between individual, spatial-structural and institutional factors on exclusions from - or inclusions in – housing (“logic of discovery”, not “logic of hypothesis-testing”).
- No singular focus on a micro-, meso- and/or macro-perspective; instead a multidimensional and praxeological approach
- Integration of a distinctly critical sociology of the welfare state

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# Thank you for your attention!

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