Homelessness

Peter Somerville
University of Lincoln
15 January 2014
Perceptions of homelessness

• Visible ‘rough sleepers’
• Unproductive/parasitical, dangerous/unpredictable, and largely responsible for their own plight (Takahashi, 1997)
• Victims – of the system, of health problems, of life (misfortunes of upbringing, etc)
• The case of Michael Gething
Explaining homelessness?

• Homelessness is not a measurable ‘fact’ or ‘real object’ or ‘cultural phenomenon’
• ‘Homeless’ is just a label that is pinned on people, many of whom reject it
• Narrative approaches – see homelessness in terms of episodes in a life-course, which are often symptomatic of deeper problems
• Each life is unique (see www.bit.ly/somewhere-nowhere), yet common factors exist – childhood traumas, substance misuse, mental health problems and institutionalisation (social services care, prison) (see Brown et al, 2012)
• Limitations of narrative approaches – people can tell a good story but cannot always understand the circumstances surrounding past events in their lives or even remember the events themselves (how reliable can one be as a witness of one’s own life? Yet can anyone else be more reliable?) See the case of Ruth
Losing and Finding a Home: homelessness, multiple exclusion and everyday lives
By Philip Brown, Gareth Morris, Lisa Scullion and Peter Somerville
Ruth’s story

• A couple of weeks before my birthday I'm going down to the groups, you know, getting my samples on and off. Once I scored I was feeling like shit 'cos my contact had been cancelled. Having a load of gear in. I was like, I've had enough. Sorted all my shit out, went in the bathroom. Wrote a letter. The lot. You know, goodbye world. To my kids, “You're better off without me. Go and have a future 'cos I'm always letting you down. At least now I'm gone you can move forwards without me. It's not you. I love you that much I'm leaving you so I don't put any more shit on you.” You know, one of those types of things. Anyway, I gets about 15mil into the thing and I looked up into the mirror and I could see like my youngest son waving to me and he's crying saying, “Don't leave me.” I'm like, “What the?” Anyway, I took the pin out my arm and I launched it across the room. It was full and I just fucking launched it. Was like, “What the fuck am I doing?” and just launched it. I've not touched it since.
Responses to homelessness

• Revanchism – the exclusion (from prime spaces) and abjection of homeless populations (Mitchell, 1997, 2003)

• Abjection (Kristeva, 1982) – cast out and down into marginal spaces such as ghettos (Wacquant, 2008) and shelters, where they are contained, confined or ‘maintained’ (in abeyance) – ‘coercive care’ (Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2010)

• Limitations of revanchism – some services provide unconditional support and ‘receptivity to the other’ (Cloke et al, 2010)
The position of homelessness organisations

• Ambivalence on revanchism
• Progress requires service coordination and user empowerment
• This can be achieved by keyworker advocacy within a politically driven community of practice
• This is illustrated by the case of Stoke-on-Trent
Stoke-on-Trent

- The politically salient event (compare the death of Michael Gething in Totnes)
- The Priority Needs Group – a community of practice
- The consortium of ‘big players’ – ensures service coordination
- Dilemmas of ‘professionalisation’ – bureaucratisation/managerialisation versus specialisation, serving government versus receptivity to the other, containment versus rehabilitation, professionalism versus voluntarism, monopoly versus competition, quantity versus quality, picking low-hanging fruit versus unpicking deep-rooted problems
- The ‘smaller players’ – on the periphery of mainstream service provision but increasingly specialising in more complex cases
Conclusion

• Homelessness is complex and contested
• The revanchist thesis explains much (but not all) about the contemporary response to homelessness
• We do know how to assist and rehabilitate homeless people but the political will is lacking at both national and local levels – policy tends to reflect the prejudices of the powerful majority rather than the needs of the powerless few
References

Acknowledgments

• The research on which this presentation was partly based was funded by ESRC, JRF and DCLG – research award RES-188-25-0016.

• The research team included:
  – Peter Somerville: psomerville@lincoln.ac.uk
  – Lisa Scullion: lscullion@salford.ac.uk
  – Phil Brown: p.brown@salford.ac.uk
  – Gareth Morris