SEARCHING FOR MEANING IN 'HOME' AND 'HOMELESSNESS'

Maya Beit-Arie

I was first introduced to The Centre[1] by a good friend and fellow student at St Andrews. Michael was both a guest and, later, a volunteer at The Centre, as he was 'homeless' for a couple of years before coming to university. He told me that The Centre 'saved me in many ways. It's where I found home'. This statement deeply confounded me: how could he identify himself as having been 'homeless,' whilst recognizing his 'home' at The Centre? My conversations with other guests only increased my confusion, as I learned that many of them did not self-identify as 'homeless', and that they came to The Centre for 'social reasons', 'comradeship', 'community' and 'friends'. I became increasingly intrigued by the use of the term 'homeless', both in the ways guests and volunteers used it to describe their own identities or living situations, and in how they perceived and labeled others. Definitions of 'homelessness' varied based on whom I spoke with, and on the context of the conversation prior to my asking for a definition. Sarah, the caseworker assigned to The Centre explained that 'home is about community'. Many of the guests had indeed described The Centre as a place of community, one that felt like 'home'. But how can a caseworker allocated to a community to, amongst other things, help them find accommodation, not define a 'home' as such? How can someone identify as both 'homeless' and having a 'home'? If it is, indeed, 'possible to be homeless and at home at the same time,' (Moore, 2007: 150), then what does it mean to be 'homeless' or 'at home' in the first place? Is there any meaning to it at all?

'Clearly in literal semantic terms homelessness refers to being without a home – but this then opens up the problem of defining what "home" refers to' (McNaughton, 2008:7). While some guests initially self-identified as 'homeless', through further probing on what 'home' means to them, they then reflected that they did feel they have, or have had, a 'home'. Valado concurs that the complexity in the term 'homeless' lies in the ambiguity of

[1] To protect the anonymity of those who contributed their experiences and opinions to this essay, the names of all interviewees have been changed, and the name and location of the drop-in centre will not be shared. Instead, it will be referred to simply as The Centre.

the term ‘home’, and posits that this complication may be easily avoided by using the term ‘rooflessness’ instead (2006: 25). Some of the guests I spoke with agreed with this practical definition of ‘homelessness’ as ‘rooflessness’ – such as, Sam, ‘being homeless means not having accommodation’. The more common sentiment, however, was that ‘homelessness is more than just a lack of access to resources to a place to live’ (Michael), or that ‘homelessness is more than a physical state; it’s a state of mind, a way of life, how people define themselves’ (Tom). I eventually realized that if I wanted to begin to understand the complex and often obscure experience of ‘homelessness’, I first needed to untangle the various and multifaceted meanings of ‘home’.

Experiences in the field

The Centre is based in a large church on a quiet suburban street in central London, surrounded by impeccably clean, large white houses, chauffeured town-cars and fenced-in private gardens. I first arrived an hour before The Centre opened to help the volunteers set up for the day. We organized the room in a layout similar to a large café or cafeteria: tables surrounded by chairs in the middle of the spacious hall, with couches along the sides and at the far end of the room, by the church’s altar. I joined the volunteers for their song and prayer circle, heard them ask God to help them see the guests ‘through his eyes’, with love, compassion, patience and understanding. Once the doors opened to the public, I helped serve coffee and breakfast which allowed me to introduce myself through a routine which was familiar to the guests, and which gave me an opportunity to observe the interactions amongst the guests, and between guests and volunteers from a non-intrusive position. Eventually, as the queue for breakfast died down, I collected my notebook and began wandering around the room, looking for an opportunity to engage someone in conversation. To my surprise, nearly everyone I approached - both the guests and the very busy volunteers - was eager to speak with me and to have their experiences included in my understanding of ‘homelessness’. Many wanted to hear about university, what else I was studying, and what led me to want to research ‘homelessness’. Some offered suggestions for websites, videos, magazines, and books I could read, and most of my conversations ended with an introduction to a friend who ‘will help you out’.

Initially, I was hoping to study 'homeless' people's perception of public space. How, if at all, they perceived privacy and private space when they didn't have the typical 'private' space ('home') to contrast 'public' space ('the street') with. I soon realized, however, that this wasn't a topic people at The Centre found particularly interesting or important. Furthermore, many of the guests didn't identify as 'homeless', either because they had fixed accommodation, they were staying in shelters or hostels, or because, despite legal or policy-driven definitions of 'homelessness', they simply did not perceive their way of life as 'homeless'. I decided to abandon the set of questions I had come prepared with, and instead, to try to initiate broader conversations about the guests' lived experiences of 'homelessness', eventually trying to focus on what 'home' and 'homeless' mean to them. This approach proved beneficial to me in a variety of ways. While having no pre-planned questions made conversations slightly disorganized, it also made them more fluid, natural and easy-going. I was surprised by the willingness of guests to speak with me, and by their candidness and straightforwardness when discussing intimate details of their lives. The vast majority of the content I collected through interviews will not be included here, mostly due to the brevity of this essay, but also due to the personal and vulnerable nature of these conversations. Some of the guests experienced mental illness, addiction, criminal activity, and abuse – usually either due to or resulting in their various states of 'homelessness'.

It is important to note that all of my fieldwork took place in a single drop-in day centre, in the context of confined conversations[2], and were therefore composed of 'perspectives of action', meaning they were 'constructed and articulated in response to the queries of researchers or other outsiders', and were therefore 'post-factum, idealised accounts that place[d] the action in question within a larger normative framework' (Snow & Anderson, 1987: 1343). I felt, however, that since my research focus was on defining 'homelessness', gleaning from individuals the discursive ways in which they established and described their identities and experiences was equally important - and perhaps even more so - to witnessing their interactions with the world outside The Centre.

[2] Confined both temporally and spatially: temporally in the sense that I only spent two days at The Centre, and spatially because we were, after all, in a church with clearly set rules of conduct.

Seeking a definition for 'home'

Despite Valado's suggestion that the term 'rooflessness' may be a more useful description, 'the debate on homelessness has moved slowly from a lack of physical shelter [toward] a loss of home' (Moore, 2007: 144). This has, in turn, opened up debate on the definition of 'home'. Watson and Austerberry's (1986) cumulative research with homeless women in London suggests a number of requisites, which taken together, constitute a type of definition of 'home'. These categories include basic standards of living (including, primarily, a place to sleep), emotional and physical welfare, positive social relations (with family, friends and/or self), and control and privacy over the living space (*ibid.* 93-7). They then define 'homelessness' as the opposite, or lack, of the above conditions (*ibid.* 98-101). In his analysis on the meaning of 'home', Somerville similarly divides the concept into various 'dimensions of meaning', which he identifies as, 'shelter, hearth, heart, privacy, roots, abode, and (possibly) paradise' (1992: 532). Somerville's 'signifiers' parallel Watson & Austenberry's definitions almost exactly, with the exception of two additional elements, 'roots', which he uses to relate to individual identity, and 'paradise', an 'ideal' or 'dream-home' that is, in practice and/or imagination, distinctly different from the 'home' of daily life. Although Somerville asserts that 'taken together, all these signifiers comprise the meaning of home' (Somerville, 1992: 532), Watson & Austerberry's research proves that 'home' is not as simple a category to define, even when it is broken down into several components: Thirty percent of the women they interviewed did not identify as 'homeless', despite the fact that they specifically defined their present accommodation as *not* being 'home', while 32% of the women who *did* define their present accommodation as home nevertheless identified as being currently 'homeless' (Watson & Austenberry, 1982 cited in: Somerville, 1992: 530). These findings should be taken as a clear example of the multi-dimensional, individualised, and contextual, nature of the meaning of 'home' and, therefore, of 'homelessness'.

Despite the above index of variables which comprise a seemingly thorough definition of 'home', one further element came up frequently in my conversations at The Centre which is missing from the aforementioned lists: permanence. Veness (1993) suggests that the maintenance of a 'home-habitus' requires a habitual form of self-identification nurtured

through routine action. Robinson further argues that, 'once someone becomes categorised as "homeless", [this routine] does not vanish but continues to be creatively negotiated in new environments' (2002: 33). While rightfully recognising the agency 'homeless' individuals have in constructing and maintaining their sense of self and space in relation to their environments, this position neglects the importance of stability and permanence in placement as a crucial facet of 'home'. When discussing how he decides where to 'sleep-rough'[3], Peter, who self-identified as 'homeless', explained, 'Even if [you] have a place to come back to, to sleep or whatever, it isn't just a question of safety, but of permanence. Wherever I go isn't home because it's not permanent'. Patrick was another 'rough-sleeper' who identified as 'homeless' and who seemed to give equal weight to the importance of permanence. Early in our conversation he emphasised that 'home is a place to live so I don't have one', but as we continued talking he described a church stoop that had been 'his spot' for over a year. The caretaker of the church knew him and would sometimes bring him a blanket or tea, and they both seemed to have an understanding that the stoop was, indeed, his 'spot'. Patrick went to Scotland for a couple months, and when he returned to the church, another man was there claiming it as his own 'spot'. Patrick said he gave up on the stoop because the man looked 'in a bad state' and he didn't want to displace him. At first he shrugged off this incident and took the conversation in a different direction, but when I mentioned the story again, his face clouded for a moment as he said, 'I do miss it…. In a strange kind of way, [the spot] felt like home. It was [a place] I could come back to'. Aside from the obvious 'abode' (place to sleep) and possibly the 'heart' (positive social relations), none of Somerville's 'signifiers' correspond with Patrick's sense of 'home' on the stoop of the church. And yet, it was the sense of stability, of permanence, knowing that he could go back there, that made it feel like his 'home'.

The meaning of 'homelessness'

I have so far attempted to problematize the labelling of certain individuals or lifestyles as 'homeless' by questioning the meaning of 'home', and whether 'homeless' can justifiably be seen as merely a correlated binary opposite to the 'home'. In other words, I

[3] 'Sleeping rough' or 'rough sleeping' describes sleeping outside, typically on the street, as in Peter's case, sometimes in parks or yards.

have sought to question whether being ‘homeless’ means lacking a ‘home’, and how this lack may be felt or perceived by those who identify as ‘homeless’. As both a semantic term and a method of classification, ‘homeless’ is inarguably an intricate and variable category. It is dependent on a variety of signifiers, interconnected symbols and meanings, and, of course, on a diverse range of mechanisms for personal identification. It is also a concept determined by societal constructs of hierarchy and status (Somerville, 1992), and can therefore be construed ‘as the opposite of what society wants and expects. It keeps a category reserved for those who do not conform’ to the most fundamental aspects of the normative human experience: permanent, private, exclusionary habitation of built accommodation (Veness, 1992: 464). These pre-conceived roles manifest themselves in the ways ‘homeless’ people or those who seem to appear as ‘homeless’ behave and are treated. Tom, who stayed at the winter night shelter and did not identify as ‘homeless’, told me he was asked to leave a McDonalds when he was sitting there reading the paper because he ‘had been there long enough’. Phil, who was a ‘rough-sleeper’ for many years but now lives in a council flat and therefore no longer identifies as ‘homeless’, told me a similar story: ‘McDonalds stopped serving me because they thought I was homeless, which I’m not’. He went on to explain, ‘the stigmas and prejudice you face can change your perspective and your relationship with your city’, with Tom adding, ‘they’re cleansing the streets of the uncleansed and unwanted’. These stories are not uncommon. 'Homeless street people are confronted continuously with the problem of constructing personal identities that are not a mere reflection of the stereotypical and stigmatised manner in which they are regarded as a social category' (Snow & Anderson, 1987: 1340). The attitudes of others, especially business-workers and passers-by on the streets, were the most oft-cited reason given by those I spoke with, for maintaining a clean appearance. Turner’s posits that ‘people tend to conceive another person on the basis of the role behaviour they observe’ (1978: 6), through correlating the appearance of that person with a supposedly associated social role. By upholding a look of cleanliness, ‘homeless’ people (or those who are identified by others to be ‘homeless’, such as in Phil’s case in McDonalds), may attempt to subvert the stigmas, and the associated treatment, they would otherwise be subject to. George confessed to me that he ‘doesn’t let on that he comes here [to The Centre]’, and Roger abruptly left The Centre once he had eaten lunch because he didn’t want to ‘share a stage with this lot’. Both George and Roger were ‘rough-sleepers’, although only Roger identified himself as

'homeless', and both gave 'comradeship' as their reason for frequenting The Centre, instead of food, shelter, or other offered services. This shows the complexity of 'homeless' identities and the complicated balance between the desire for companionship, and the need to avoid feelings of social degradation (either perceived or received) that accompany association with 'homeless' behaviours or spaces.

Final thoughts

It is surely the case that 'the concept of homelessness needs to be used in a much wider sense, inclusive of the cultural perceptions, needs and aspirations of this culturally diverse group' (D'Angelo et al., 2009: 6), or even that a universal definition of 'homelessness', one which encompasses all of its various and fluid forms and states, is a difficult, and possibly futile attempt at creating a single-narrative to encompass multi-faceted and unique individual agents (McNaughton, 2008: 6-7). However, is also important to recognize that as a lived condition, 'homelessness is a social problem' (McNaughton, 2008:1) and a denial of basic human rights, which means some type of working definition is necessary in order to adequately apply the resources and services needed to alleviate the tangible and physical suffering of those identified as 'homeless'. Moreover, 'homelessness', however it is defined - as a situation, a state of lacking 'home', a socio-political category, a form of self-identification, a method of stigmatized classification – is a concept and condition that is both structurally and individually constructed and perceived. Therefore, in order to gain a more balanced and sound understanding, models of 'home' and 'homelessness' must be examined from a multitude of angles, which I am not in the position to cover. Lastly, I feel I must address the obvious lack of equal gender representation in my field work. I have tried to resolve this issue by relying on others' research which includes feminist analysis and field-work amongst homeless women, but it is important to distinguish that this does not mean that the views of 'homeless', and non-'homeless', women and men are represented equally here. This is partially due to the small number of women present at The Centre during my stay[4], and partially to the more vulnerable nature of some of the conversations I did have with women. Gender disparities aside, I do believe I learned more

[4] To a certain degree this may actually be reflective of the proportion of 'homeless' women in London in general, as "there are less homeless women because they get housing and benefits faster", according to Phil, and "women are definitely given priority", according to Sarah.

about ‘home’ through my conversations with ‘homeless’ people at The Centre than I had initially expected. Rezana, a young ‘homeless’ woman in Sydney, summarizes: ‘I think home is more than a building; it’s like a church or a temple. It’s more than the actual concrete, the bricks whatever. It’s more the concept and it’s the atmosphere … Having freedom, sort of sense of belonging to where you are living … Be happy there, feel comfortable… ummm, it mightn’t be a house, but it might be a community sense…’ (Robinson, 2002:37), and for now, I think that’s as good a definition as it gets.

Works Cited

D'Angelo, A., Fumanti, M. & Brown, R. 2009. Young homeless refugees in London: An exploratory research. Project Report. London: Middlesex University.

McNaughton, C.C. 2008. *Transitions through homelessness: Lives on the edge.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Moore, J. 2007. Polarity or integration? Towards a fuller understanding of home and homelessness. *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 24(2) 143-159.

Robinson, C. 2002. "I think home is more than a building": Young home(less) people on the cusp of home, self and something else. *Urban Policy and Research* 20(1) 27-38.

Snow, D.A. & Anderson, L. 1987. Identity work among the homeless: The verbal construction and avowal of personal identities. *American Journal of Sociology* 92 (6) 1336-1371.

Somerville, P. 1992. Homelessness and the meaning of home: Rooflessness or rootlessness? *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 16(4) 529-539

Turner, R.H. 1978. The role and the person. *American Journal of Sociology* 84 (1) 1-23

Valado, M.T. 2006. *Factors influencing homeless people's perceptions and use of urban space.* PhD. The University of Arizona.

Veness, A.R. 1992. Home and homelessness in the United States: Changing ideals and realities. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 10 (4) 445-468.

Veness, A.R. 1993. Neither homed nor homeless: Contested definitions and the personal worlds of the poor. *Political Geography* 12(4)319-340

Watson, S. & Austerberry, H., 1986. *Housing and homelessness: a feminist perspective.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul