

## Homelessness and identity: a critical review of the literature and theory

Lindsey McCarthy\*

PhD Research Student, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research,  
Sheffield Hallam University

---

### Abstract

Within the news media and literature, alike, people experiencing homelessness are often categorised into various stereotypes revolving around their lack of abode. In such a practice a 'homeless identity' becomes the defining feature of a person's character. Very few theoretical studies have critically addressed this discursive construction and its implications. This paper contributes to the few existing debates around the 'homeless identity' by arguing that such constructions are binding and misguided. The paper takes insight from the many and varied theories of 'identity' – how different approaches have theorised it and what might be borrowed from them to (re)conceptualise the 'homeless identity'. After outlining several approaches to identity, the paper asks how someone experiencing homelessness might resist or challenge prescriptive identities and how the literature and research around homelessness might progress. It concludes that an intersectional approach will enrich a literature which tends to focus on a singular 'homeless identity'. Such an approach will address the intersection of lines of difference and recognise that the identity of any individual is multiple and fluid.

Keywords: identity; self; homelessness; gender; discourse.

---

### Introduction

The term, 'homeless identity', is used throughout this paper as that which is socially constructed through various discourses and consists of an amalgam of stereotypes. Whilst it does not exist per se, it continues to influence perceptions and has severe implications for those experiencing homelessness, as well as their sense of self. In such a practice, a 'homeless identity' becomes the defining feature of a person's character, overshadowing all other axes of identity. By subsuming all people experiencing homelessness into a marked category – usually that of 'the dishevelled man in a duffel coat on the street' (Burman in Breeze and Dean, 2012: 134) – without reference to differentiations, the subject status called forth is that of the white man as the universal (Pascale, 2005); poverty is thought of neither as racialised nor gendered. Much past research has ignored the vast range of experiences of the growing number

of homeless women in Great Britain (May *et al.*, 2007). One effect of this oversight in terms of gender has been the construction of a defined homeless person as quintessentially male, which is reinforced further by media portrayals of the 'male panhandler' (Klodawsky, 2006: 378) or the 'bearded, dirty male' (Radley *et al.*, 2006: 437). But, as Watson (2000: 160) posits, dominant masculine discourses are 'demobilising to those who cannot recognise themselves within them'. In other words, both statutory and academic masculinist discourses of homelessness are not fitting to *all* women, which according to Watson (2000), leads to a sense of passivity and inability in homeless women to do anything about their situation. However, more recently, the specificity of homelessness and housing is increasingly being explored in terms of gender, through a feminist perspective (Klodawsky, 2006; Watson, 2000; Casey *et al.*, 2008). Work within this field has levelled critiques at previous approaches and definitions of homelessness for their failure to adequately acknowledge gender differences within the homeless population, suggesting that services may not have been sufficiently developed to support the needs of homeless women.

It is important to situate this paper within the broader socio-economic and political context at the time of writing. This paper has been written at a time of weakening welfare protection and a wider context of recessionary and housing market pressures, a time when 'policy measures which are weakening the housing safety net previously available to those in greatest need may further exacerbate homelessness' (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2012: 3). At the time of writing, rough sleeping and statutory homelessness are sharply rising (there has been an increase of 23 per cent in rough sleeping between Autumn 2010 and Autumn 2011 in England; and statutory homelessness acceptances have risen by 34 per cent between 2009 and 2012); there has been a rise in temporary accommodation placements (Bed & Breakfast placements have almost doubled over the past two years); and forms of 'hidden homelessness' are broadly rising across Great Britain (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2012: 3-4). Weakening welfare protection measures range from national benefit caps on Local Housing Allowance rates; the introduction of the 'under-occupation penalty' on Housing Benefit for working age social tenants; and the suggested removal of under-25s from the remit of Housing Benefit (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, the issue of homelessness has found itself located within the context of 'responsible citizenship' (Whiteford, 2010: 193). The vocabulary of responsible citizenship spans across both New Labour and New Tory political spectrums, and has at its heart an emphasis on responsibilities and the 'active citizen' (Whiteford, 2010: 194) rather than rights. Consequently, the most disadvantaged people in society, including homeless persons, are being 'responsibilised', provided with 'meaningful activity', and encouraged to earn certain services rather than having them available by rights. Whiteford (2010: 203) concludes that this emergent ideology fails to recognise that the real cause of homelessness is not a lack of personal responsibility but a lack of affordable housing and support services in a profoundly and increasingly unequal society.

The projected image of homelessness matters because it can have implications for who is seen as homeless, how that person is received by the public as well as by people working in the field of homelessness. As Young (2012: 2) argues, how homelessness is defined is fundamental to making progress towards ending it. Similarly, Swain (2011) insists that to find the most adequate solutions to homelessness, it must first be understood *who* is homeless and *why*. Swain (2011: 11) believes that the current image of homelessness being portrayed is inaccurate and 'out-of-date', and that the real image, that of 'a foreign national living in appalling conditions in a garage or shed... is not going to bring in the donations' and is thus not the image of choice for most media stories or charity fundraising appeals. This paper takes the concept of the discursive 'homeless identity' as its central concern, arguing that such constructions are binding and misconceived, 'locking people into an image

that bears no resemblance to the real possibilities they have of being something different' (Grammatico, 2012: 7). This paper situates itself within this research gap and dilemma, by advocating (and contributing) an intersectional, interdisciplinary approach to attempt to capture the nuanced nature of 'homeless identities'.

A legitimate question that arises is how 'homeless identities' may be negotiated by people experiencing homelessness. In order to critically address the notion of the 'homeless identity', it is necessary to take insight from the varied debates around 'identity' – how different approaches have theorised it and what might be borrowed from them to (re)conceptualise the 'homeless identity'. After outlining several approaches, the paper will ask how someone experiencing homelessness might resist prescriptive identities and how the literature and research around homelessness might progress.

Green (2004), Grossberg (1996) and Hall and Du Gay (1996) agree that the questioning of identity as a concept has been interdisciplinary with critiques advanced from social science, cultural studies, feminist theory, anti-colonialist investigation, psychoanalysis, philosophy, geography and psychology. This wide-ranging interest demonstrates the centrality of the concept to understanding the human and social world from the mundane to the 'out-of-the-ordinary'. While Jenkins (2004) argues that reflections on identity are nothing new – an established sociological and psychological literature about identity goes back to the turn of the twentieth century and before – it does seem that the ways in which we understand it are frequently changing. Earlier nineteenth century versions of the self were much more conflated with the idea of human individuality in which people were highly detached from their social milieu (Sibley, 1995). Sibley sees the turning point of theorising as occurring alongside Freudian psychoanalysis, as Freud situated the self in society. More recent strands have expanded on this idea by critiquing the notion of a singular, integral and unified identity. Hall and Du Gay (1996) note that identity is a concept operating 'under erasure' – it has been deconstructed to its very fragments and is no longer 'good to think with' in its original form. However they proceed to state that without it, key questions could not be thought through at all. Thinking with identity, in its new form, requires that its fluid and shifting nature is recognised; a far cry from earlier constructions of the 'individuated self'. Ensuing discussion seeks to further elaborate on how other key theorists – specifically, Nancy Fraser, Anthony Giddens, Erving Goffman, and Judith Butler – have conceptualised identity. Both Fraser and Giddens acknowledge the importance of considering individual and structural factors in conceptualising identity. Giddens further asserts the inescapability of identity-thinking in late modernity insisting that thinking about identity does matter. Goffman and Butler add to debates by conceptualising identity as performance enacted for an audience. This allows the 'homeless identity' to be seen not just as something derived from within but the performance of a set of behaviours externally imposed and performed.

## **A review of the theoretical debates**

### ***Identity politics and social justice***

For the most part, accounts of identity tend to be divided between macro structuralist and post-structuralist theories. The former places individuals as products of macro socio-economic forces, trapped by structural positions and dominant ideologies. The latter approaches veer away from collectivity to emphasise unique individuality and difference (Jenkins, 2004). Taking feminism's theorising on the identity category of 'gender' as an example, structuralist feminists would hold that what is important is to articulate 'femaleness' as a unifying notion whereas post-structuralist feminists would

deny the existence of the distinctly 'feminine', arguing that 'womanhood' is too restrictive a category if all women do not experience it in the same way (Johnson-Roullier, 1995). Both structuralist and post-structuralist approaches have their flaws: the former turns the individual into a 'cultural dope' with little agency; the latter goes too far in the opposite direction by deconstructing categories of identification and rendering group identification difficult to argue for. This may lead to further disempowerment for marginalised groups, if these are the ways people identify themselves and find meaning (Green, 2004). The problem may not be within the two approaches but may revolve around how the two are seen as dichotomous – that we have to choose one or the other. Green (2004: 16) insists that any theorisation of identity must accommodate the individual *and* the collective in equal measure.

This becomes a particular issue in instances of struggle for social justice for marginalised groups in an 'age of identity politics', or a 'difference-friendly world, where assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect' (Fraser, 1996: 1). Nancy Fraser (1996) comprehensively engages with this dilemma in her paper, *Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition and Participation*. While different terms are employed ('redistribution' in place of macro structuralism, and 'the politics of recognition' instead of post-structuralism/individual approaches) Fraser maintains that the dichotomy is false. Social justice requires both redistribution and recognition of difference. Since every identity category is bivalent, to achieve social justice requires changing both the redistribution aspect (for example, economic structure) and the recognition aspect (for example, redressing the status order). Taking the identity category of 'class' as another example, Fraser acknowledges that while economic structure may be the ultimate cause of class injustice, focusing solely on a politics of redistribution has the danger of reinforcing injustice by falsely universalising dominant group norms, requiring subordinated groups to assimilate to them. Class justice also requires that cultural attitudes are challenged and difference within a 'group' is recognised. What is needed, according to Fraser (1996: 23) is a two-pronged approach 'that can address the twofold need for both'. This is further complicated by the particular case in hand. As Fraser points out, it depends on what misrecognised people need in order to be able to participate as peers in social life as to what type of recognition should be strived for. Fraser's two-pronged approach recognises the intersectionality of different axes of identity: no one occupies just one identity position; people subordinated along one axis may be dominant along another. This brings us full circle back to arguments from cultural theorists, such as Hall (1997: 33) who refer to the 'slipperiness' and complexity of the concept of identity in addition to its necessity as a theoretical concept: it is 'not fixed' but 'not nothing either'. This highlights the importance of acknowledging the interaction between macro and micro factors and the futility of taking a dichotomous approach when fighting for social justice.

### ***Anthony Giddens: reflecting on identity in late modernity***

Giddens (1991) merges micro interactions and macro theories to attempt to understand society and the individuals within it. He argues that there is a social structure which establishes traditions, institutions and moral codes but it is the repetition of acts by individual agents that reproduces these structures. Giddens characterises the 'self' as active; not simply a 'cultural dope' determined by external influences but heavily involved in shaping them. The self, in this case, is intricately bound up with events in the external world sorting through them to form 'an on-going "story"' (Giddens, 1991: 54). Giddens locates these questions of identity within a post-traditional, modern order in which self-identity has become an inescapable issue:

*What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity – and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour (Giddens, 1991: 70).*

In the above quote, Giddens not only emphasises the inescapability of thinking about identity in late modernity but how it is done in a reflexive manner. As Gauntlett (2008) suggests, the story of who we are, or the narrative of 'ourselves', is continuously revised and re-thought on a day-to-day basis whether consciously or on a more subconscious level. In a project to investigate this, Gauntlett (2008) found that participants framed their own identities in relation to a multitude of other stories encountered in everyday life such as plots from films, soap operas, news reports, anecdotes and advertisements, suggesting that reflection on self-identity is a common occurrence.

Giddens is not however without his critics. Jenkins (2004) argues that reflection on identity should not be thought of as a unique characteristic of late modernity; it began long before the twentieth century and there is nothing to suggest that people before this time did not know who they were or even think about it. Jenkins (2004: 12) insists that what Giddens terms the 'reflexive project of the self' is simply not something in which we are all engaged:

*The many millions of people, in Europe and the US, never mind anywhere else, who do not spend much, or even any, time agonising over "life narratives" and "personal growth"...who have other things to fret about.*

Jenkins raises a valid question by asking if self-identity fixation is something everyone equally takes part in; that those who have more pressing issues to worry about simply do not have time to reflect on who they are. Jenkins seems to be suggesting that identity-thinking is a time-consuming activity far removed from the routine and constancy of ordinary lives. But perhaps Giddens is implying that identity-thinking is so routine and subconscious that we take it for granted; it is simply not acknowledged as something that we *do*. Contrary to what Jenkins posits, thinking about one's identity may in fact be prompted by 'things to fret about' or 'an essential problem [that] arises that calls one's habitual character into question' (Boydell *et al.*, 2000: 28). While identity-thinking may not just be a feature of late-modernity, it is most likely something which we all do to some extent, perhaps even more so in the midst of a problematic situation. Here the work of Erving Goffman (1959) is of use as he recognises identity-work as not just 'what's-going-on-in-our-heads' but how we present ourselves to others. Taking this insight into account we can understand how one's identity is not just something we 'think' about but something we negotiate through 'presentations'. As such, it is easier to see how identity is an almost inescapable aspect of everyday life.

### ***Erving Goffman and 'The Presentation of Self'***

Identity for Goffman (1959) is implicated in elements of social interaction. This is carried out through 'impression management' – how a person might adjust their facial expressions, posture, or clothing in a given situation. Goffman (1959) notes that we may either willingly 'give' or inadvertently 'give off' such impressions. Individuals are conceptualised as performers who project particular images of themselves to their audiences as well as detecting images presented by other people (Boydell *et al.*, 2000). According to Goffman, identity is a person's subjective sense of his or her own situation and the character that the person comes to as a result of his or her various social

experiences. Goffman distinguishes between felt identities (personal identities) and social identities (those which others assign to the actor) but notes an overlap between the two. Despite this overlap, scholars have pointed out that the meanings ascribed to an actor by others and those ascribed to the self may be notably different (Boydell et al., 2000).

Goffman later precedes poststructuralist feminism by arguing against essentialist notions of gender: '...one might just as well say there is no gender identity. There is only a *schedule for the portrayal of gender* [emphasis mine]' (1976: 8). While different 'presentations of self' is something everyone engages in, Brekhus (2003) affirms the more stigmatised an identity attribute, the more difficult it is to present as if it is one aspect of life and self, or to move away from these schedules. The more unique the attribute in relation to the general population, the higher explanatory value it is given in conveying that identity (Parsell, 2008). While individuals experiencing homelessness engage in other 'presentations of self' the very fact of their homelessness – and how this is made to mean something 'other' by society – means that these negotiations are constrained. No matter how multiple and fluid their identities may be, it is their 'homeless' attribute which is seen as the ultimate 'self' by others and may be more difficult to resist for homeless individuals themselves.

One possible flaw with Goffman's theorising is his lack of reasoning provided as to why a person may express particular presentations in a certain situation. Gauntlett (2008: 114) draws attention to this: 'the problem with *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, though, is that it is very difficult to see what might lie behind all the displays of self'. Such issues have been picked up by queer theory, whose approach to identity, while focusing mainly on sexuality is nevertheless valuable and applicable to other axes of identity.

### ***Troubling gender and identity***

Judith Butler (1990) sought to re-encourage 'gender trouble' by asserting that traditional views of masculinity and femininity should be challenged. Although Butler's arguments focus primarily on sex and gender, her thesis can be applied to other axes of identity such as class and race, to argue that none of which can be singled out as a person's sole identity. Butler argues that gender, like other aspects of identity, is a performance reinforced through repetition, and that the divide between masculinity and femininity is a social construction, derived from the binary divide between men and women (Gauntlett, 2008: 145). It follows that no kind of identity is more 'true' or 'real' than any other; 'there can be no "real" or "authentic" male or female performance' (Gauntlett, 2008: 151). Here lies the potential for change – if gender, or any axis of identity, is a performance then it can consequently be performed as *anything*; it may be steered in a different direction through daily presentations. Butler recognises the limitations of this: gender performances are always discursive. Individual agency is negotiated in relation to the categories created as ontological realities, as well as being limited by the weight of past performances and social interactions (Giddens, 1991). Butler's suggestions have faced critique, not least for their level of abstraction (Green, 2004). Nussbaum (1999) does not agree that Butler's propositions are practical enough; she labels them too idealistic and abstract for addressing entrenched forces of patriarchy (or any other oppressive system). Gauntlett (2008) counters this critique by arguing that Butler is aware of the reality of gender and sexuality roles but sees these as being made real through discourses of gender and sexuality – for instance through 'heteronormative' images of sexuality and gender within the mass media, popular culture or institutional discourse. As Green (2004: 52) states:

*...the media continues to impart the message that men and women are very different creatures, men often being portrayed as powerful, ingenious and fearless and women as passive, needing protection, depicted in subordinate stances.*

Butler suggests that the way to challenge these discourses is through the dissemination of non-traditional images of gender and sexuality to deconstruct the moulds of 'male' and 'female'. The main crux of Butler's debate highlights the necessity of being aware of the instability and performative nature of identity categories and the potential to replace them. At the same time, it must not be forgotten that such categories are alive and well in society and remain 'a primary and fundamental way of categorising and identifying self and others' (Green, 2004: 44). That there can be potential to change these constraints of identity, many are positive about (Butler, 1990; Gauntlett, 2008), while some remain sceptical (Green, 2004; Nussbaum, 1999). Past literature on homelessness and identity has only touched upon insights from Butler's work on identities. Huey and Berndt's (2008) work is the only paper to use these concepts as a central part of its thesis. Their paper is significant because it moves emphasis away from fixed identity categories to the potential for exploiting these unstable positions as a means of performance and tool for resistance. Huey and Berndt (2008) recognise gender as a performance which can be turned on its head. The homeless women in the study could equally perform as 'feminine' (girlishness, flirtatiousness, emotionalism and maternalism) as well as 'masculine' (assertiveness, aggressiveness, toughness, fearlessness); these were referred to as sets of socially defined behaviours rather than distinct internal identities. The study showed that despite the ways in which gender structures homeless women's lives (a woman named Celeste revealed that the threat of sexual assault significantly affected the choices she made) gender could also be cleverly and creatively *performed* as a strategy of survival. In these performances lay homeless women's individual agencies.

The question of identity is a priority question for other gender theorists, closely tied up with emancipatory politics and the concern to eliminate inequality and oppression. Such issues are bound up with gender identity. It is now a well-established tenet that gender is a matter of learning, a repetition of acts and continuous work rather than an extension of biologically given sexual difference; there is no bodily trait separating all women from all men (Giddens, 1991: 63). Despite this, essentialist notions of sex and gender are entrenched in the private sphere of the family, the public sphere of work, politics, organisations and the cultural sphere. While it is acknowledged that gender stereotypes have little relation to people's actual behaviour or identities, they are very real in the sense of how they might affect how people are seen and how they are expected to behave.

To assume a single and collective identity of 'woman' (or to suggest that marginalised groups should 'stick together') is acceptable for people who do not have any other form of oppression to worry about. This issue came to light in the early years of the feminist movement when feminism was dominated by white, middle-class women fighting for rights and suffrage for white, middle-class women. This was a politics exclusionary of African-American women, ignorant of 'race' and class. Sojourner Truth's speech – *Ain't I a Woman?* – at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention shattered this misrecognition. By asking, 'Ain't I a woman?' Truth questioned black women's absence from the women's suffrage movement where 'whiteness' was the norm. Truth's speech challenged essentialist thinking 'that a particular category of woman is essentially this or essentially that' (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 77).

Discussion has shown that attempts to explain identity have been varied, with some more hopeful than others about the possibility for change. Most explanations veer

towards fluidity: 'the evidence put forward therefore suggests people accommodate to and adapt to gender identities to varying degrees, *but are not totally bound by them*' (Green, 2004: 57 [emphasis mine]). Perhaps the search for a perfect theory of identity should be replaced with a toolkit approach drawing on theories as and when they seem useful or appropriate for the group in hand. This approach resonates with Fraser's (1996: 35) suggestion that 'the remedy should be tailored to the harm'. Subsequent discussion will elaborate on the above approaches in the specific context of people experiencing homelessness and see how they might develop current strands of the homelessness literature.

### Problematising the 'homeless identity'

The earliest ethnographic study of 'homeless identities', carried out by Snow and Anderson (1987), concluded that there are three stages of identification among homeless people: a). 'distancing', either from the association of themselves as homeless, or from other homeless people and the role of the homeless person; b). 'embracing', either with the association of themselves as homeless, or with other homeless people and the role of the homeless person and; c). 'fictive story telling', either 'embellishment or outright fantasising, typically of the future' (Seal, 2007: 3). Snow and Anderson (1987) as well as several other scholars (Farrington and Robinson, 1999; Osborne, 2002) have in such a way reinforced the notion of the 'homeless identity' as a central trait. As Parsell (2008) purports, studies demonstrate that people who are homeless do things that would be considered outside the norm, whether begging or going through rubbish. Placing emphasis on 'out-of-the-ordinary' activities is problematic for various reasons. Such constructions are largely negative and place 'too much concentration on the disease aspects of the homeless, overlooking their assets' (Boydell *et al.*, 2000: 28). This serves to reify the homeless person as 'other', emphasising problematic differences and results in producing the conditions of alienation such studies attempt to describe (Pascale, 2005). The model leaves questions unanswered: what factors influence how roles are constructed? What is the dynamic between these constructions and people's personal identities? (Seal, 2007: 4). People without homes have little option but to display what would normally be considered 'private' activities that would otherwise be concealed. This does not mean they are 'out-of-the-ordinary'; simply 'out-in-the-open' (Parsell, 2008). 'Fictive story-telling', as Radley *et al.* (2005) claim, is a result of extreme urban exposure rather than an inherent part of a 'homeless identity'. A participant in Radley *et al.*'s (2005: 291) study told how she engaged in fantasizing 'because it keeps you alive'. Parsell (2008) found that the majority of participants spent a large part of time doing 'ordinary' things, voicing 'unremarkable' worldviews. Parsell found that many people experiencing homelessness rejected the notion of being a 'homeless other', describing themselves with reference to their families. Later studies (Parsell, 2008; Pascale, 2005; Seal, 2007) have since asked what purpose is served by this 'othering' of homeless people.

Parsell (2008) argues that uncritical construction of people with a 'homeless identity' runs the risk of considering their homelessness as an all-encompassing characteristic. Many now agree that homeless people's identities are constructed for them to such an extent that they become 'objects of discourse' (Pascale, 2005: 261) rather than subjects of their own experience. Seal (2007: i) notes that homeless people's identities are 'foisted on them'; Pascale (2005) insists that most knowledge about homelessness and homeless people comes from the news media; and Boydell *et al.* (2000) argue that western society presents a particular set of messages about the value of homeless people. Butchinsky (2007) argues how these images typically connote a lack of shelter, privacy, retreat and warmth; images of criminality and anti-



social behaviour; vulnerability and victimhood. Swain (2011) posits that representations of homeless people typically occur through images of 'rooflessness'. Clearly, the issues involved in homelessness are much more complex and wide-ranging than such representations allude to: more nuanced forms of homelessness such as sleeping in temporary accommodation, hostels, or sleeping on the sofas of friends are likely to be left out of dominant representations (Kemp, 1997). Whether these meanings derive from the media, the news, or literature about homelessness, they all share the tendency of categorising homeless people into various stereotypes and making assumptions about their lives (Seal, 2007). This act of misrepresentation does matter significantly (Fraser, 1996). Following Goffman (1959), the sense of self is intimately connected to the social, to how we are seen by others and made to be seen by others. Identity is not just something claimed by the individual but is dependent on an individual's identity being recognised or accepted by a wider community (Bell *et al.*, 1994). The messages presented by discursive practices about homelessness will undoubtedly have discernible impacts on the development of self-concepts within the homeless population (Southard, 1997). Empirical research carried out by Breeze and Dean (2012: 136) found that homeless participants felt that most images used in homelessness charities' fundraising campaigns were 'too generic and failed to contribute any understanding to the issues surrounding homelessness to potential donors'.

Neither must it be assumed that homeless people are simply victims of discursive practices. The 'homeless identity' can be negotiated and contested by homeless people and others at the local, political and personal level (Seal, 2007). Subsequent discussion will consider insights from Giddens (1991), Goffman (1959) and Butler (1990) in relation to the potential for negotiation of the 'homeless identity' by people experiencing homelessness.

### **Discussion and conclusions: contesting the 'homeless identity'**

Key to Giddens' (1991) theorising on identity is the 'reflexive project of the self' in late modernity: expressions of identities, narratives and life stories lie somewhere between the production and reproduction of social life by the people that are part of it. This emphasis on constructing individualised identities and the increased personal responsibility that accompanies it runs alongside increasing structural instability and material disadvantage (Farrugia, 2011) as well as popular constructions that portray 'the homeless' in a limited number of ways. Studies have noted that people experiencing homelessness are well aware of such constructions (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2005). While Giddens (1991) outlines how people have scope to ignore, replace, or reproduce social structures, further studies with homeless people suggest that popular characterisations significantly influence the way that people experience themselves and understand their place in society. Giddens' emphasis on increased agency and personal responsibility in the process of identity negotiation means that homeless people may feel personally responsible for events in their lives that are the outcome of structural processes (Farrugia, 2011). Still, Giddens' merging of macro and micro forces in shaping identities is useful in understanding how people experiencing homelessness will be aware of the structures, institutions and dominant discourses that they must negotiate. In shaping their identities, homeless people come to terms with the meanings of homelessness as stigmatised difference, and may partly draw on the same discourses which define homelessness as 'other' or as moral failing to construct their own subjectivities. Such an account leaves little room for negotiation and resistance but highlights the importance of taking structures and discourses seriously.

Much of the literature on homelessness and identity draws on insights from Goffman (1959). For the most part, this discusses how homeless individuals create and assert identities that are congruent with internal self-identities and social identities. Some have argued that homelessness means a loss of social identity – loss of permanent address, work, school, relationships and a place to call one's own – and go as far as to say that homelessness can mean loss of a sense of self (Boydell *et al.*, 2000). An understanding of Goffman (1959) highlights the constant renegotiation and re-presentation of different social roles depending on social context and interaction. This is of great significance when thinking through identity-work among people experiencing homelessness and any other stigmatized groups. 'Homelessness' should not be taken to mean a constant defining attribute. At different times of the day, in different contexts, with different people, individuals might align more with any other attribute: whether that is their gender, their sexuality, their role as a mother or father. Snow and Anderson (1987) show how the 'homeless identity' may be overcome by exploiting surface appearances and interactions to 'present' different identities. This is outlined in their 'distancing' model; the only problem being it does not recognize the social constructed-ness of the 'homeless identity'. Instead, it can be seen that conceptualising the 'homeless identity' as some singular or fixed starting point of identity from which to deviate is over-simplistic.

Preceding discussion is further complicated by Butler (1990). Both Butler and Goffman conceptualise social behaviour as a performance enacted for an audience. Where they differ is where they place emphasis – Butler concentrates on the unstable nature of gender, allowing us to 'understand gender play as dynamic processes delimited by discourses' (Huey and Berndt, 2008: 183) whereas Goffman provides tools for exploring the details of these performances, the symbolic meanings of certain mannerisms, costumes and so on. In terms of gender, Butler asserts that individuals do not have a gender identity which informs behaviour but rather that behaviour is all that identity is. It follows, there is no 'homeless identity' which informs behaviour; on the contrary, that behaviour is all the 'homeless identity' is. Butler (1990), as well as Parsell (2010), would both agree that a 'homeless identity' is not something derived from within but the performance of a set of behaviours externally imposed. Taking this to its conclusion, Huey and Berndt (2008) argue that Butler's account of performativity allows room for individual agency but agency that is always negotiated in relation to the categories created as ontological realities – whether gender, 'race', class, or sexuality.

An overemphasis of the 'homeless identity' has subsumed other identities, particularly gender, 'within the category of the "undifferentiated he"' (Lofland, 1975: 45). This paper emphasises the idea that identities are fluid intersections of multiple axes of differentiation (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 76). If the intersections of 'race' and gender are considered with homelessness the picture becomes complex and dynamic. More recent scholarship has begun to look at how gender structures homeless people's lives (Huey and Berndt, 2008; Casey *et al.*, 2008; Wardhaugh, 1999). The 'homeless identity' is complicated once you begin to understand it in terms of intersections of differentiated identity categories – gender, 'race', class and so on. Neither is a person's identity stabilised or essentialised by these ontological identity categories (Butler, 1990) since ways of existing in the world shift depending on social relations (Goffman, 1959), societal structures, institutions, discourses (Giddens, 1991; Butler, 1990), historical experiences and material conditions.

It is now asserted, across an array of disciplines, that identities are fluid amalgams, never singular and never situated on one axis of difference. As scholars have argued (Brah and Phoenix, 2004) attention must be paid to the intersection of lines of difference and the fluctuating investment that individuals have in different subject positions. From this line of thought, it is clear that homelessness ought not to be taken

to mean the principle or only way a person experiencing it should be identified. At the same time, by drawing on the work of Giddens (1991) it is clear that identity work does not occur in a vacuum; people position themselves in relation to dominant frameworks in producing particular narratives of self. Butler (1990) and Goffman (1959) draw attention to the instability and performativity of identity through the iteration of social roles. Negotiation of such ontological categories allows agency but agency that is limited since it is exercised within these ontological realities. Progress from a bulk of literature about homelessness, which is fixated on the 'homeless identity', requires further elaborating on other axes of identity (and how these are performed, parodied, resisted, and turned on their heads) that contribute to how homeless people see themselves. Only by further exploring the diversity of homelessness is there a chance of overcoming current forms of misrecognition. An overemphasis on the 'homeless identity' has meant that the gendered nature of homelessness has, for the most part, been overlooked (Klodawsky, 2006). Future research would be enriched by seeking to understand how homeless people position themselves and negotiate their identities as homeless *and many other things*, against sets of social narratives which try to do the defining for them. It remains crucial to question how homelessness is constructed, to explore how these constructions influence the solutions offered and the policies developed. Expanding the debate further could entail asking people who are experiencing homelessness about their feelings towards the discursive practices used to depict homelessness and homeless people, and how that representation might be improved. In exploring these individual homeless narratives, it would be possible to assess the relevance of the various concepts of identity to the lived realities of homelessness. As Grammatico (2012: 8), in his interpretation of Jacques Lacan, posits 'we shouldn't just ask ourselves what a specific word means to us, rather we should ask what it means to the recipient of my message and for the somebody it refers to'.

## Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Kesia Reeve, Rionach Casey and Feona Attwood for their feedback on an earlier draft of this paper.

\*Correspondence address: Lindsey McCarthy (PhD Research Student), Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University, Howard Street, Sheffield, S1 1WB. Email: [Ljmccart@my.shu.ac.uk](mailto:Ljmccart@my.shu.ac.uk)

## References

- Bell, D., Binnie, J., Cream, J. and Valentine, G. (1994) All hyped up and no place to go. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 1, 1, 31-47.
- Boydell, K. M., Goering, P. and Morrell-Bellai, T. L. (2000) Narratives of identity: Representation of self in people who are homeless. *Qualitative Health Research*, 10, 26-38.
- Brah, A. and Phoenix, A. (2004) Ain't I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5, 3, 75-86.
- Breeze, B. and Dean, J. (2012) Pictures of Me: User Views on their Representation in Homelessness Fundraising Appeals. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 17, 132-143.
- Brekhus, W. (2003) *Peacocks, chameleons, centaurs: Gay suburbia and the grammar of social identity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- Butchinsky, C. (2007) Identities of rough sleepers in Oxford. In: Seal, M. (ed.). *Understanding and responding to homeless experiences, identities and cultures*. Dorset: Russell House: 10-26.
- Butler, J. (1990) *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. London: Routledge.
- Casey, R., Goudie, R. and Reeve, K. (2008) Homeless women in public spaces: Strategies of resistance. *Housing Studies*, 23, 6, 899-916.
- Farrington, A. and Robinson, P. (1999) Homelessness and strategies of identity maintenance: A participant observation study. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 9, 175-194.
- Farrugia, D. (2011). Youth homelessness and individualised subjectivity. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 14, 7, 761-775.
- Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G. and Wilcox, S. (2012) *The homelessness monitor: Great Britain 2012*. London: Crisis. [http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/policy\\_research/TheHomelessnessMonitor\\_GB\\_ExecutiveSummary.pdf](http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/policy_research/TheHomelessnessMonitor_GB_ExecutiveSummary.pdf). Accessed 19 March 2013.
- Fraser, N. (1996) Social justice in the age of identity politics: Redistribution, recognition, and participation. In: *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, 30 April 1996. Stanford University: Stanford University Press: 1-51.
- Gauntlett, D. (2008) *Media, gender and identity: An introduction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Routledge.
- Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Goffman, E. (1976) *Gender Advertisements*. New York: Harper Colophon Books.
- Grammatico, G. (2012) Putting it into words: from talking social to doing social. *Homeless in Europe*, Winter 2012/2013.
- Green, L. (2004) Gender. In: Spencer, S. and Taylor, G. (eds.). *Social identities: A multidisciplinary approach*. London: Routledge: 35-63.
- Grossberg, L. (1996) Identity and cultural studies: Is that all there is? In: Hall, S. and Du Gay, P. (eds.). *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: SAGE Publications: 87-107.
- Hall, S. (1997) Interview on culture and power. *Radical Philosophy*, 86, 24-34.
- Hall, S. and Du Gay, P. (1996) Introduction: Who needs 'identity'? In: Hall, S. and Du Gay, P. (eds.). *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: SAGE Publications: 1-16.
- Hodgetts, D., Cullen, A., and Radley, A. (2005) Television Characterizations of Homeless People in the United Kingdom. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 5, 1, 29-48.
- Huey, L. and Berndt, E. (2008) "You've gotta learn how to play the game": Homeless women's use of gender performance as a tool for preventing victimization. *The Sociological Review*, 56, 2, 177-194.
- Jenkins, R. (2004) *Social Identity*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Routledge.
- Johnson-Roullier, C. (1995) The singularity of multiplicity. In: Elam, D. and Wiegman, R. (eds.). *Feminism Beside Itself*. London: Routledge: 179-196.
- Kemp, P. (1997) The Characteristics of Single Homeless People in England. In: Burrows, R., Pleace, N. and Quilgars, D. (eds.). *Homelessness and Social Policy*. London: Routledge.
- Klodawsky, F. (2006) Landscapes on the Margins: Gender and Homelessness in Canada. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 13, 4, 365-381.
- Lofland, L. H. (1975) The "thereness" of women: A selective review of urban sociology. In: Millman, M. and Moss Kanger, R. (eds.). *Another voice: Feminist perspectives on social life and social science*. New York: Anchor Books: 144-170.
- May, J., Cloke, P. and Johnsen, S. (2007) Alternative cartographies of homelessness: Rendering visible British women's experiences of 'visible' homelessness. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 14, 2, 121-140.

- Nussbaum, M. (1999) The Professor of Parody. *The New Republic*, 22, 2, 37-45.
- Osborne, R. (2002) "I may be homeless, but I'm not helpless": The costs and benefits of identifying with homelessness. *Self and Identity*, 1, 1, 43-52.
- Parsell, C. (2008) Problematising the 'homeless identity': Considering people beyond their homelessness. In: 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual *Australian Housing Researchers' Conference*, 2008, 1-13.
- Parsell, C. (2010) Homeless identities: Enacted and ascribed. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 62, 3, 442-461.
- Pascale, C. (2005) There's no place like home: The discursive creation of homelessness. *Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies*, 5, 2, 250-268.
- Radley, A., Hodgetts, D. and Cullen, A. (2005) Visualizing homelessness: A study in photography and estrangement. *Journal of Community & Applied Psychology*, 15, 273-295.
- Radley, A., Hodgetts, D. and Cullen, A. (2006) Fear, romance and transience in the lives of homeless women. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 7, 3, 437-461.
- Seal, M. (2007) Introduction: Homelessness and identity. In: Seal, M. (ed.). *Understanding and responding to homeless experiences, identities and cultures*. Dorset: Russell House: 1-11.
- Seal, M. (2007) Preface. In: Seal, M. (ed.). *Understanding and responding to homeless experiences, identities and cultures*. Dorset: Russell House: v-vi.
- Sibley, D. (1995) *Geographies of exclusion: Society and difference in the West*. London: Routledge.
- Snow, D. and Anderson, L. (1987) Identity work among the homeless: The verbal construction and avowal of personal identities. *American Journal of Sociology*, 92, 1336-1371.
- Southard, D. (1997) Uncertainty in future identity: Homelessness and socialization. In: *Society for the Study of Symbolic Interactionism Conference*, August. Toronto, Ontario.
- Swain, J. (2011) Busting the Myth. *Inside Housing*, <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/care/busting-the-myth/6519274.article>. Accessed 18 February 2013.
- Taylor, G. and Spencer, S. (2004) Introduction. In: Taylor, G. and Spencer, S. (eds.). *Social Identities: A multidisciplinary approach*. London: Routledge: 1-13.
- Wardhaugh, J. (1999) The Unaccommodated Woman: Home, Homelessness, and Identity. *The Sociological Review*, 47, 91-109.
- Watson, S. (2000) Homelessness revisited: New reflections on old paradigms. *Urban Policy and Research*, 18, 2, 159-170.
- Whiteford, M. (2010) Hot tea, dry toast and the responsabilisation of homeless people. *Social Policy & Society*, 9, 2, 193-205.
- Young, S. (2012) Looks can be Deceiving: Perceptions of Homelessness. *Homeless in Europe*, Winter 2012/2013.