

Homelessness Through the Sociological Imagination

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How sociology changed my perspective

Throughout my research my perspective on homelessness has changed due to certain sociological concepts. The main concept I learned about was symbolic interactionism. "the exchange of meaning through language and symbols"(ebook 1.3). People act and communicate differently to certain symbols based on their own personal associations and meanings. This can relate to homelessness through labels and interactions. Many people interpret homeless people as a certain idea in their head; that can commonly be inaccurate. People often associate homelessness to addiction, laziness, or mental health issues. Before my research, I might have also experienced that idea in my own mind when perceiving homeless people. Now that I have learned further, my perspective has changed.

Personal troubles vs. Public issues

During my research on homelessness, I discovered a very interesting comparison focusing on the causation of homelessness. The two ideas are personal troubles, and the failure of social institutions. When it comes to personal troubles, factors like mental illness and addiction come into play. Addiction can lead to wasting lots of money, in which you could use to pay for things like housing. On the other side, economic social institutions like current housing availability are important to someone's status. Viewing through the sociological imagination allows you to connect the personal issues to the social institutions like healthcare and housing.

Inequality, conformity, or social movements.

Inequality

Social Inequality can easily cause homelessness. In my D7 response, I said "Law enforcement and the legal system favor dominant groups and disadvantage the others." People experiencing unequal pay or job availability will struggle to pay bills. Race, disabilities, mental health are all things that can cause someone to be unequal in society.

Conformity

Homelessness can also connect to conformity. Society expects people to behave in certain ways, and homeless people might not be able to fit this. Expectations like jobs, housing, and stability are all things homeless people might not be able to meet. This can cause wrongful assumptions to be made about them by society.

Social Movements

Homelessness and the idea of preventing it has sparked many social movements. These movements include bettering the economic situations of things like housing and rent. Work to provide better mental health services and rehab. Work to change public opinion.

Growth Reflection

My view on some of these ideas has vastly changed through my research. In D5, I learned about conformity, and related to it a lot. I have experienced conformity a lot in my life, through things like my style. Thankfully, because of my status, I am able to decide what I conform to and have the will to chose. During the simulation game I played in D6, I was unable to make the choice i wanted to because of my economic situation. This connects directly to conformity in homelessness, where someone might want to follow a norm, but is not able to because of their status. This experience changed my view on conformity and status. I also learned about social movements and inequality in D7. I researched BLM and was presented with many illustrations of inequality. I can now see how unfair factors like wage gap can lead to economic deficit. Functionalism is a term that views movements as a response to failure in the social system. Homelessness movements can be the same way, where a failure like the housing market can lead to a movement to improve it.

Status

Status can have a major effect on someone's life, and can even define them to the general public. A status of a homeless person impacts how one is labeled and treated by society. Society usually has many perceptions about homeless people, like that they are lazy, dangerous, or maybe mentally ill or addicted. Having these labels on your head can lead to discrimination based on how other people perceive you. Everyday things like using public space might be seen differently by other people if you are homeless.

Role strain, Role Conflict, and Role performance

Being homeless can consist of many different roles. These roles might include finding shelter to stay in, finding food to eat, maintaining hygiene, and potentially taking care of a family. Combined, these roles can cause a lot of stress, and lead to role strain. "If too much is required of a single role, individuals can experience role strain."(ebook 4.3). Trying to find a place to sleep while also needing to find dinner and stay clean is very tiring and will cause a lot of stress. Another result from this is role conflict. If someone needs to fill the roles of being homeless, while also having to fill the roles of being a parent, those two can overlap and cause role conflict. All of this can be very stressful and straining for someone to handle. Additionally, if you are trying to maintain a good perception of yourself for other people, that is role performance; which can be another stress.

Looking-glass Self

Looking-glass Self follows the ideas of imagining what others are thinking of you, and then internalizing those judgements of yourself. “we base our image on what we think other people see”(ebook 4.3). When it comes to homelessness, this can play a huge factor into someone's mental state, because they might feel judged by many people when they shouldn't. The internalization of these judgements can mess with someone's perception of themselves, which might lead to negative feelings and falling further into poverty.

Three Approaches

Norway

Norway views homelessness as a failure of social institutions and policies rather than personal issues. The “Housing First” policy is designed to prioritize improving the housing market and provide it for everyone. Norway places homeless people in real permanent housing. They believe that the best way to prevent homelessness is to stop it before it happens.

Asheville

The Asheville Continuum of Care designed to organize services, funding and housing for homeless people. The CoC has a way of personally connecting with its targets and helping them get through there status. The CoC starts with shelters, and eventually all the way to permanent housing.

Grant Pass

Grant Pass is very different than the other 2. Grant Pass views homelessness as an obstacle and doesn't work to fix it. Grant Pass only focuses on the criminalization of homelessness by trying to prevent homeless people from sleeping in public areas for public safety. While this may seem to “protect” the general public, it only makes it harder for homeless people to get out of there state.

"Tipped my world upside down. I never expected to be out here for this long." Laura Gutowski, Grant Pass article

HD1: Causes

During my HD1 response, I learned and talked a lot about homelessness being caused by social and economic institutions, not just personal issues like addiction or mental illness. The Grant Pass article mentions Laura Gutowski who, after her husband died, slipped into homelessness for over 2 years. Just like her, many people expect homelessness to be a short, fair thing, but it isn't. This article and the public opinion article go over how lots of people believe that housing is a large factor of homelessness.

In Asheville, I have seen many homeless people that maybe seem mentally ill or suffering from addiction, which can cause a distance between the homeless and the rest of society. In result of this, the homeless people won't get the help that they need

HD1: Roles

In my HD1 reflection I could see many examples and connections to social roles. I mainly focused on role strain, and found it very interesting. Role strain is the stress and tension that someone might experience while trying to fill a certain societal role. I can see very well how hard this could be for a homeless person, there is a lot to maintain while struggling for money and shelter, presentation of self is another thing that could cause stress, caring about others opinions of you is very hard when you have so much else to worry about like food, shelter, money and family.

In my own experiences in Asheville, I have seen many homeless people with family and pets that they have to raise and take care of, this stress is an example of role strain and role conflict.

Role conflict is when "two or more roles are contradictory" roles like being homeless and taking care of a family can collide and cause lots of stress

HD2: Causes

In my HD2 post, I was able to see and discuss how different places reacted to and acted on these potential causes. Norway seems to be fully on the social institution and housing side.

The Norway article describes that homelessness is not a personal failure, but an institutional and policy failure of Norway, they believe that housing is the prominent cause of homelessness-- and attack this through their "Housing First" policy that prioritizes housing for all people. Asheville's Continuum of care is similar in that it focuses on institutions, but also looks a little more into the personal side. CoC also aims to provide housing

"Takes homelessness in our main continuum plan", Howard Grant, Norway article

HD2: Roles

In my HD2 post, I learned and wrote a lot about different approaches to these social roles, Norway's "Housing First" ideal really helps role strain, being homeless causes lots of stress and worry about getting what you need, Norway gets rid of one of these main worries by supplying housing. Stress might lower significantly for someone if one of their main worries is erased, Asheville CoC also works to help this by providing step by step support to help people regain roles, meanwhile, Grant Pass seems to be mistreating homeless people through criminalization, Grant Pass ignores all of the ideas of trying to help homeless people by preventing it, and instead focuses on stopping homeless people from staying in public places. Grant Pass punishes Homeless people for failing to meet roles that they can't possibly fulfill in their current situation

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One side argues that what Grant Pass is doing is "forced and imposed punishment" which violates the 8th Amendment

Structural Causes and Solutions

In the public opinion article from HD1, people voice that housing and unemployment are the biggest factors/causes for homelessness. I really agree with this. Not being able to afford housing will clearly lead to homelessness, and this might happen because of unemployment. Other causes include mental health and addiction, which can lead to homelessness through lack of funds or a societal disadvantage. I believe the best approach to homelessness comes from Norway. I like their idea of providing housing for everyone. Housing is the core idea of homelessness and crossing that off can really help someone. I also understand the focus to prevent homelessness before it happens. One thing the Asheville CoC does well is connecting with the individuals they help. An idea that I appreciate from the CoC is how they personally connect with individuals. In The Obvious Answer to Homelessness article, it reads "if homelessness is about personal failure, it's easier to dismiss as something that couldn't happen to us." I really like this idea, because it explains how many people don't see homelessness in the bigger picture. The article then goes on to explain how homelessness is not only caused by personal issues, but also housing availability and other social institutions.

Local Evidence

Bridge that Gap-

This article goes over what it was like after hurricane helene for many people in WNC. Mutual aid stepped in to provide support through distributing supplies, sharing information, and wellness checks. The article shows how neighbors help each other to step in for formal systems that cant.

BeLoved-

BeLoved is also a mutual aid/ nonprofit organization focusing on helping people in WNC. Their main goal is to provide "home, health, equity, and opportunity" for everyone. This organization helps provide affordable housing, supplies, and healthcare for people in need.

Sociological analysis

Functionalism-

Both of these sources show examples of social movements. These sources organize collective action to take on homelessness. These organizations do this as a movement because they can't rely on government systems. These Organizations show functionalism. The movements are clearly a response to failures of social institutions like housing.

Conflict theory-

The formation of these organizations and movements hints at the idea that people aren't getting the help that they need. Social and economic inequality hit homelessness hard by not supplying them with fair pay or job availability. Housing will always be a strong factor because homelessness leads to an unequal chance of obtaining it. These movements step in to help with empty, vulnerable spots. Through conflict theory, we can see how housing and jobs are limited resources, and homeless people get excluded from them.

Personal Growth

Learning about homelessness through a sociological lens this semester has really opened my eyes. One of my favorite concepts from this semester was the conflict between social institutions and personal problems for the cause of homelessness. Before this, I had never overly thought about what truly causes homelessness because I have never experienced any unfair conditions that could possibly way me down. When I played the simulation game in D6, I was able to see what it was like—very interesting but also sad. Before this semester, I had always figured that homelessness was a result of something rare that would only happen to some people, but when reading the Grant Pass article, I learned more. Laura Gutowsky became homeless soon after her husband died, which wasn't her fault. She expected to only be homeless for maybe a month, but it quickly turned into 2 years. To me, this illustrated how slippery of a slope homelessness really is, and how it can happen to anyone.

Why this matters

Homelessness is a very misunderstood concept. A large portion of people become distant from the homeless because they associate them with laziness, mental issues, or addiction. It is important to be informed on the core foundations of what causes such a thing. Many people fall down the slippery slope of homelessness, and there is no way back up because of the ideas and discrimination society has built around it. Homeless people will only ever get the help that they need if people know why to help and how to help.