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Introduction To Sociology

Homelessness Through The Sociological Imagination

Homelessness stood out to me in this course because it is something that I've never really paid attention to before when it is an ongoing issue everywhere, especially in my local town Asheville. After learning about the causes, effects, and ways governments and cities try to solve it, I have come to understand homelessness more and recognize how societal structures and attitudes can greatly affect it.



Images from *The Asheville Citizen Times*- December, 2021.

Module 1 Reflection:

One theory from this module that made me see the world from a different perspective is structural functionalism. Structural functionalism focuses on the “way each part of society functions together to contribute to the functioning of the whole,” (OpenStax, 2023, Section 1.3). Before learning about this theory, I had never really considered how each and every little thing in our society brings it together and helps it function as a whole. Things like schools, government laws, our healthcare system, etc are huge contributors to our society and how it functions. Without these, our world and society would be less structured and very unstable. After completing Discussion Forum three on fads and culture, I pay a lot more attention to the different fads I see people participating in. I also have come to pay more attention to the trends I engage in as well. I often find myself noticing common fads that are used or people participate in everywhere I go. I also find myself thinking about how these popular trends spread. Based on what I have learned in this past discussion forum and observed in public, fads spread mainly through social media. Although I do not participate in social media myself, a majority of my peers do. I have come to learn through my peers and other people that they pick up these trends through social media platforms, especially TikTok. Social media however is not the only contributor to the spreading of fads. Since I do not have any social media platforms, I pick up on trends through school. If I see a new style being worn by a classmate or an item being used such as a Stanely that I like, I will search it up online and add it to my shopping cart. Whether it's the sweat set look or zig zag headbands, I now see these common fads being used and continuing to spread everyday.

Module 1 Reflection:

These sociological perspectives have made me come to see how I have become the person I am today. Discussion Forum four on social institutions, social concept, and self concept have especially helped me figure this out. I learned what an institutional agent/agent of socialization is and the many ones I am affected by. The two that influence me the most are family and peer groups. Family includes “mothers and fathers, siblings and grandparents, plus members of an extended family,” (OpenStax, 2023, Section 5.3). Family members are the first people we are exposed to and learn from. Whether it’s the habit of making sure to look left and right before crossing a street or to never judge others, they have taught me and influenced my morals, beliefs, and values greatly. A peer group “is made up of people who are similar in age and social status and who share interests,” (OpenStax, 2023, Section 5.3). Peer groups have also influenced my values as they allowed me to be exposed to more and see things from different perspectives. They also affect what kinds of things I take interest in, involve myself in, my style and more. After completing Discussion Forum four, I have come to realize how much the people and things I surround myself with affect me. I have become the person I am today because of these institutional agents and many others such as education and workplaces. I will continue to change though as the environments and situations around me change.

Personal Troubles vs. Public Issues:

Sociological imagination is the ability to connect personal experiences with larger structural forces in society. Homelessness is affected by personal experiences, but structural forces mainly cause the issue. Some of these personal experiences include being born into a low-income family and not being able to pay for college. These personal experiences and issues can increase the chance of someone becoming homeless. The way society is structured however, often pushes these people to homelessness. The main structural forces that cause this are the lack of affordable housing and shortage of houses in society. A person who cannot afford college and is therefore forced to work a low-paying job when their rent price increases, can end up being homeless. This is an example of how personal experiences (not being able to go to college and get a high-ranking and well paid job) can make a person more likely to be homeless and how structural forces in society (increase in rent and housing prices) can push someone to homelessness.

Inequality, Conformity, or Social Movements:

According to the textbook, social stratification “refers to a society’s categorization of its people into rankings based on factors like wealth, income, education, family background, and power” (OpenStax, 2021, Section 9.1). People who aren’t as wealthy, have a lower income, not as much education and power, and are born into a lower class can face more challenges and consequential decisions in life socially and economically. These challenges and decisions often lead people to become homeless. After completing the simulation in forum discussion six I saw how hard it is to face these decisions and maintain economic stability. In forum discussion six I said, “In the game, I faced challenges such as my child becoming sick with the flu. In this case I was limited with my options due to not having access to childcare. I decided to stay home in order to help my child get better, not spread the flu at their school (from sending them to school sick), and not leave them home alone when the sickness could worsen without me being there.” This is just one of the difficult decisions I had to make. Unfortunately, it led to me being fired from my job and receiving no income to support my child and I. This then led to me being in debt which would’ve eventually led to my child and I becoming homeless since we had no money to pay the rent of our apartment. Therefore, being in a lower class can make it more challenging not to become homeless.

Module 2 Reflection:

I have found myself “going along with the group” multiple times due to the pressure I’ve felt. I’ve noticed that I usually feel obligated to do or agree with whatever the group says or wants. This means that even when it’s something I don’t agree with or don’t really want to do, I agree or do it anyway because I don’t want to question the group or be left out. We see this conformity everyday, whether it’s with ourselves, a peer, a stranger and their friend group in public, etc. According to the textbook, conformity “is the extent to which an individual complies with group norms or expectations” (OpenStax, 2021, Section 6.2). In forum discussion five, we saw how high conformity can be in people. After watching a video on Jim Jones and the People’s Temple he created, I realized that groups allow people to feel accepted in something and a majority of members will conform to these groups and their expectations no matter the cause. Learning more about conformity has caused me to notice it in everyday life and helped me realize how high my conformity is. It has made me realize that when I’ve experienced conformity I only do it to belong just like the people that were a part of the People’s Temple. I see that I am just like everyone else who will do almost anything their peer group does. It has allowed me to see that I don’t have to and shouldn’t conform to everything my peer groups say and do. I need to be my own person who’s not afraid to say no to things and stand up for what I think is right.

After completing the simulation and forum post in discussion six, I saw what it was like to live without much economic stability and opportunity. I also saw the difficult decisions people face because of these things which are influenced by inequality and social stratification.

After researching and creating an infographic about social movement in discussion seven, I learned about the lifecycle stages it takes for groups of people to create change with a movement. These include the preliminary stage (people become aware of the issue), coalescence stage (participants come together and start organizing), institutional stage (movement is established), and decline/transition stage (movement loses its mass mobilization force). All of these and how much time a movement plays into each stage impacts how large a movement is, how much it spreads, and how long it will last. The amount of organization and task-orientation in participants also affects these things. The movement I researched and created an infographic on was the ICE Out movement. This is an ongoing movement in the U.S. that is focused on abolishing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) due to controversial detentions practices and violent actions towards immigrants. Something that surprised me about this movement is how it started. It started as a localized response in Minneapolis to aggressive immigration enforcement that led to the death of Renee Good. I knew this movement was current and its purpose but I had no idea it was triggered by this event and the localized response in Minneapolis. It shows how one major event can spark a movement and cause it to spread from a local to national and maybe even global level.

Status:

Homelessness is a social status defining individuals who lack safety and stability due to settling in places not meant for human habitation. It is generally viewed in a negative way and as a devalued social position. The homeless are often looked at as people who are lazy, dangerous, and responsible for their own misfortune. Homelessness is also an economic status defining people who are poor and lower-class. The public usually believes the homeless become poor due to poor personal choices. This however is a lot of the time not the case, as structural forces in society are the main things that cause homelessness. Even if these stereotypes of the homeless are inaccurate, they represent the common public perception of homeless individuals and their status in society.



Image from *AVLtoday*- July, 2019

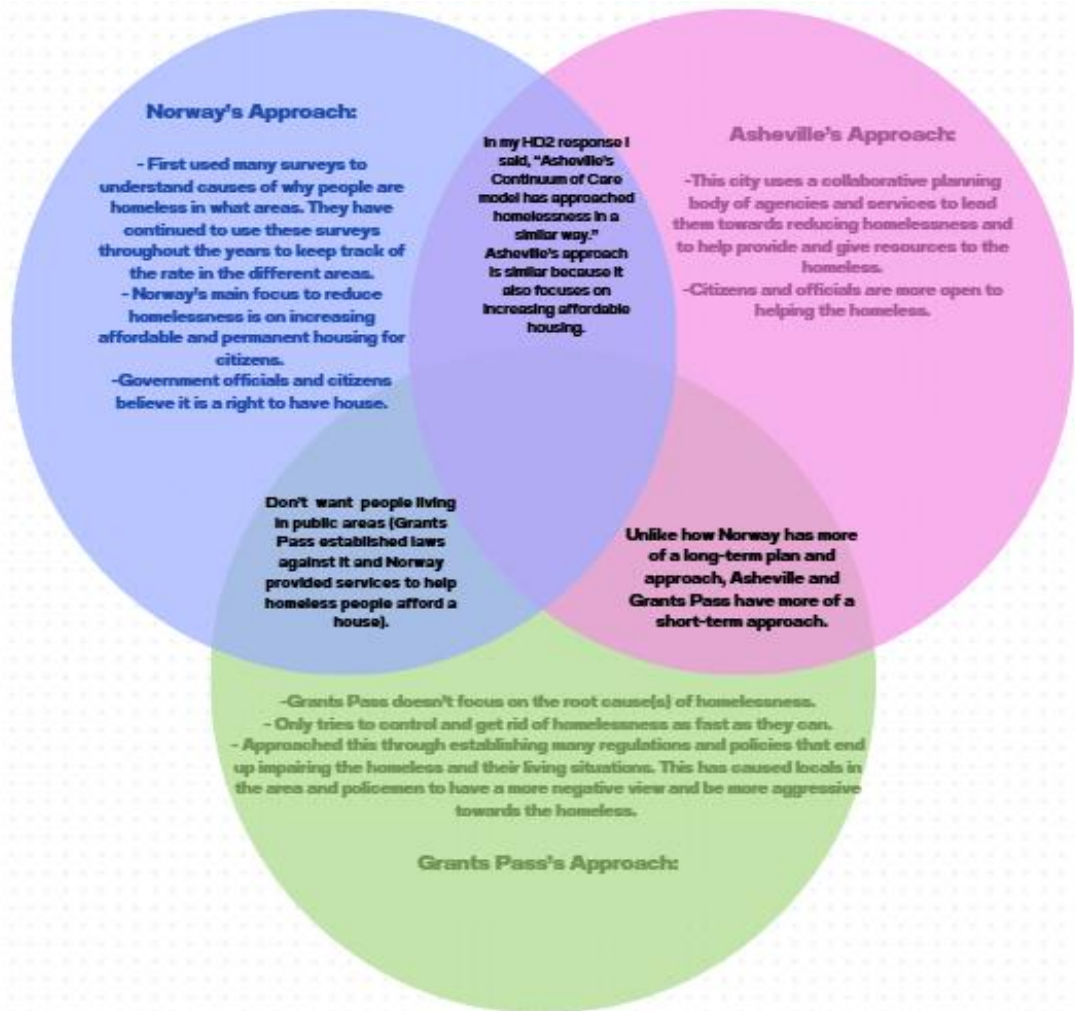
Role Strain, Role Conflict, and Role Performance:

According to section 4.3 in the textbook, role performance “is how a person expresses his or her role.” We express and present ourselves to others based on how we hope to be perceived. Homeless people often present themselves as people who are in need of a little help and would love to be offered anything. They establish this role in order to be offered more from people and help them get by. I have personally seen this in downtown Asheville and the many other cities I’ve visited. Homeless people’s role performance can alter though based on where they are and who they are around. For example, if a homeless individual is settled in a public area and a policeman walks by, they may try to blend in and go unnoticed to avoid trouble.

Looking-Glass Self:

According to chapter four of the textbook, looking-glass self is “our reflection of how we think we appear to others” (OpenStax, 2021, Section 4.3). If a homeless person is offered kindness and other things such as food and money, then their reflection of themselves will include being someone who is cared for and accepted for who they are. Like I mentioned in HD1, this may in turn affect their role performance, “then their role performance will include expressing themselves as someone who is also kind and would be grateful for any help.” Therefore, public actions towards homeless people can affect a homeless person's looking-glass self which then alters their role performance.

Three Approaches:



Concept Map:

Structures in Society:

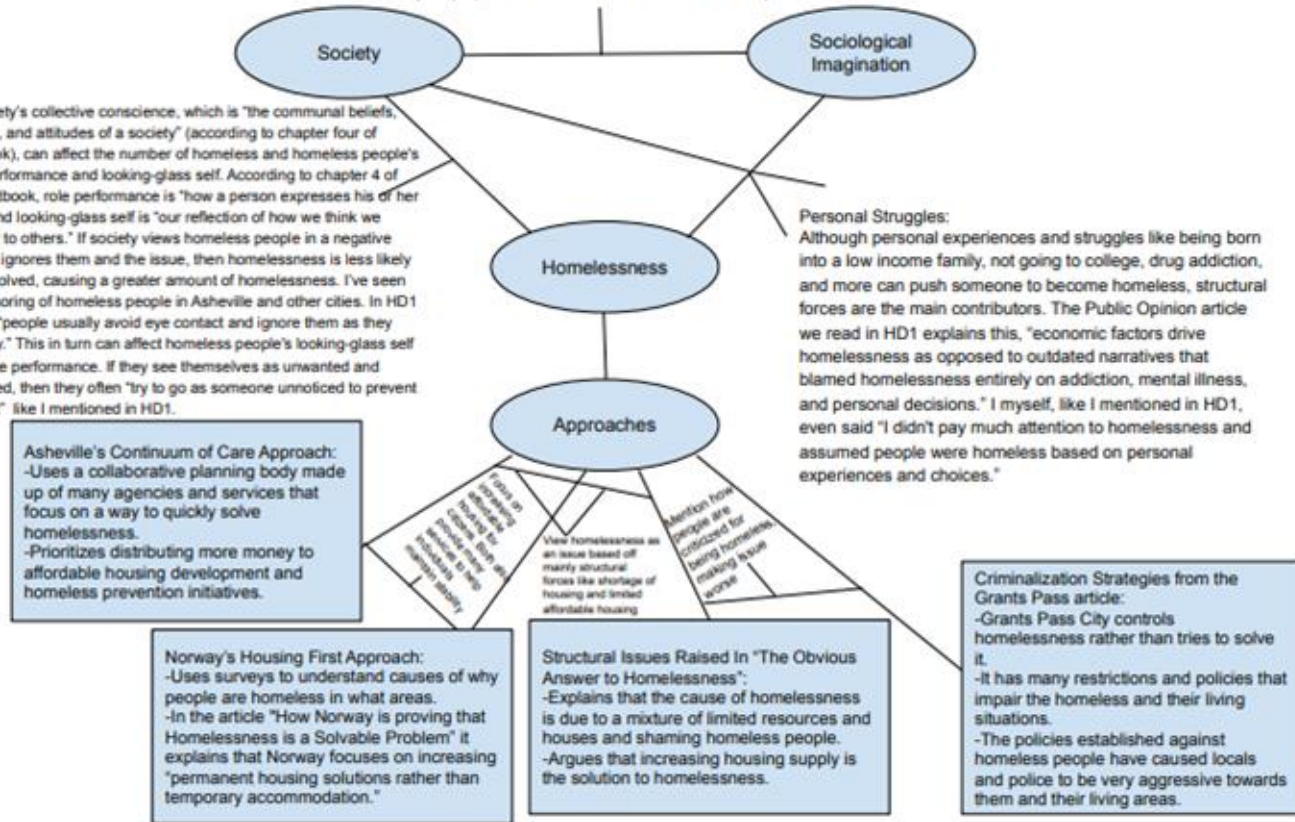
Structures in society affect homelessness a great amount. One of these is the policies set up to control homeless people. In the Grants Pass article it says that one of the policies in Grants Pass City is "people living in parks are required to move every 72 hours." If homeless people have to move every day they probably are more focused on what stuff to keep or afraid to leave their stuff (because it might get raided or taken). This can keep them from going out to look for a job to make the money they need to support themselves and eventually buy a house. Many regulations and policies like these just control the homeless and actually end up hindering their ability to get back on their feet and afford a house. Another large contributor, and often believed the main one, is the lack of affordable housing. In the article "The Obvious Answer to Homelessness" it says, "Yet when we have a dire shortage of affordable housing, it's all but guaranteed that a certain number of people will become homeless." This quote explains that due to the shortage of affordable housing in our country, it is inevitable that some people will become homeless. If there simply aren't enough houses for everyone, people are left to find another home whether it's in a park or on the streets.

Views:

A society's collective conscience, which is "the communal beliefs, morals, and attitudes of a society" (according to chapter four of textbook), can affect the number of homeless and homeless people's role performance and looking-glass self. According to chapter 4 of the textbook, role performance is "how a person expresses his or her role" and looking-glass self is "our reflection of how we think we appear to others." If society views homeless people in a negative way or ignores them and the issue, then homelessness is less likely to be solved, causing a greater amount of homelessness. I've seen this ignoring of homeless people in Asheville and other cities. In HD1 I said, "people usually avoid eye contact and ignore them as they walk by." This in turn can affect homeless people's looking-glass self and role performance. If they see themselves as unwanted and criticized, then they often "try to go as someone unnoticed to prevent conflict" like I mentioned in HD1.

Personal Struggles:

Although personal experiences and struggles like being born into a low income family, not going to college, drug addiction, and more can push someone to become homeless, structural forces are the main contributors. The Public Opinion article we read in HD1 explains this, "economic factors drive homelessness as opposed to outdated narratives that blamed homelessness entirely on addiction, mental illness, and personal decisions." I myself, like I mentioned in HD1, even said "I didn't pay much attention to homelessness and assumed people were homeless based on personal experiences and choices."



Structural Causes and Solutions:

I believe Norway's long-term focus on housing best addresses the root cause of homelessness. The lack of affordable and available housing is the main cause of people ending up without a home. In the article "The Obvious Answer To Homelessness" it says, "Yet when we have a dire shortage of affordable housing, it's all but guaranteed that a certain number of people will become homeless." This quote explains that due to the shortage of affordable housing in our country, it is inevitable that some people will become homeless. If there simply aren't enough houses for everyone, people are left to find another home whether it's in a park or on the streets. Since Norway first started working on increasing affordable housing, there has been a major decrease in homelessness. This proves that approaching homelessness by focusing on housing is the best and most impactful approach.

Local Evidence:

Mutual aid played a huge role after Hurricane Helene hit Western North Carolina. Locals came together and volunteered to help the public everyday. Some of these things included gathering water and food for people and completing wellness checks. One of the largest mutual aid groups in Asheville, BeLoved Asheville, used trucks, massive containers of water, and a makeshift pulley system to provide water to more than 30 assisted living complexes. They also helped in flushing toilets days after the storm by filling buckets of water from creeks. Other mutual aid groups did similar jobs to these and also made sure citizens knew they were there to help if needed. They did this through things such as posting papers on bookstores. After the storm, papers have continued to be posted. These papers range from information on where to find mental health help to an invitation to a chainsaw safety class. Overall, these mutual aid groups helped the community significantly right after Hurricane Helene and even set up to help people who were still in need of help now (especially the homeless). They continue to help citizens everyday whether it's through getting them water and food or helping them look into finding a home to live in.

Sociological Analysis:

Mutual aid groups are based on collective behavior. According to section 21.1 in the textbook, collective behavior is “a noninstitutionalized activity in which several people voluntarily engage.” Mutual aid groups are made up of multiple people (often locals) who voluntarily participate in helping the community. These people can be referred to as acting crowds, which are “crowds of people who are focused on a specific action or goal” (OpenStax, 2021, Section 21). In this case, this crowd of people is focused on working together to help the community in multiple ways. These include getting citizens the resources they need, offering services to help them get a job, find a house, and more.

Personal Growth:

Before I took this class, I hadn't noticed all the different things that affect not just myself but everyone else. Things like family, environment, and peers are all huge contributors. They have shaped and continue to shape my personality, beliefs, how I express myself, and more. Through this class, I have also come to see how things such as fads and social movements start and spread throughout the public. Social media plays the largest role in this. The way society and countries are structured and how these affect people (especially the homeless) is another thing I have learned from this class. Overall, I now pay more attention to and see these different things in my life due to understanding them more. Whether it is picking out a fad I've noticed spreading through the teenage population or recognizing why a homeless person changes their role performance when a policeman walks by, I have come to see and view things in a new way.

Why This Matters:

Understanding homelessness sociologically matters beyond this class because it helps me grasp that things don't happen just because of individual experiences and challenges but because of the way society is structured. I learned that homelessness is mainly caused by the lack of affordable housing in society. Most people blame the homeless for individual choices when in fact it wasn't a bad choice that caused them to become unhoused. I thought this as well, before I learned more about the causes and contributors towards homelessness. This has taught me not to assume things until I really understand them. I can now use this skill to notice and identify other issues going on in society and recognize what factors including personal and structural affect them.