

Understanding the Problem of Homelessness: A Case for using Habitus as a Tool

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Abstract: *Homeless people are perhaps the most faceless and voiceless group in a city's populace. It is imperative that they are given a voice to articulate their views and experiences. So far, there have been a few analytical studies in the West which have tried to capture the lived experiences of the homeless. However, very few studies in India have incorporated their world views and perspectives, as a result of which, we do not know much about their day to day life experiences. Therefore, for addressing the problem of homelessness and for planning interventions, it is necessary to understand and document the various causes and cultures of homelessness by incorporating the lived experiences and world views of the homeless. This paper argues that while building a nuanced peoples' narrative in this manner, the concept of habitus and social field as given by Pierre Bourdieu can prove to be of immense value.*

Key Words: homelessness, lived experiences, habitus, homeless

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Introduction

The recognition that the problem of homelessness exists in Indian cities and villages is relatively a recent phenomenon. Almost all the citizenship entitlements in the modern welfare state are routed through one's house address and therefore, being without a house or home is a serious obstacle in availing one's rights and entitlements. Homelessness can lead to a lack of identity which in turn could deprive homeless people of their basic citizenship rights. Most of the times, homeless people do not have any valid proof of identity with them. Because of the societal prejudice and anti-poor mindset of state machinery, homeless people face a lot more difficulty than others in getting documents like ration cards, voter-ID cards and caste certificates etc. This also means that they are not able to access state services like housing, public distribution system (PDS), health care, water, sanitation and various other welfare schemes. Such type of capability deprivation leads to increased vulnerability of the homeless people. To make it worse, even the most basic facilities such as toilets, bathrooms and water are not easily accessible to the homeless (Kothari, 2005). Not only the homeless have to face the societal stigma attached with destitution, they also bear the brunt of obsolete colonial adage of a draconian law like Bombay Prevention of Begging Act (1959) which

criminalizes the poor in general and homeless and destitute in particular. Thus, the homeless people stripped of their livelihoods and entitlements and deprived of their legal recourse to justice (as even the State criminalizes them in the form of acts like Bombay Beggary Prevention (1959) Act) are for all practical purposes, non-citizens. They hardly enjoy any civic rights and generally do not vote as they have not been able to get themselves mainstreamed in the electoral politics because of the apathy and non-interest of the political parties and their representatives in them. Without political rights, it becomes all the more difficult to mobilize such people thereby diminishing the chances of the creation of any political agency in them.

In the times of neo-liberal policy paradigm and withdrawal of the state from various social sectors including housing, and the emphasis on economic growth as a statistic far removed from human development, marginal and socially excluded groups of people in the society have become increasingly vulnerable. The clamour to achieve faster growth rate has led to rapid and haphazard urbanization which on the one hand has led to improvement in infrastructure but on the other hand has rendered many a marginal groups

invisible. As a result, different forms of homelessness, resulting from evictions, lack of affordable housing and shelter homes and weak social safety net is emerging. In such a scenario, increase in the number of homeless people becomes an inevitable consequence of urbanization. Homeless people are perhaps the most faceless, voiceless and invisible group in a city's populace. Therefore, not only it is important to hear them but it is also required that they are given a voice to articulate their views on issues that matter to them. So far, there have been a few analytical studies in the West in which the attempts to elicit the causes and nature of homelessness have been made. Although some of the recent studies have incorporated the world views and perspectives of the homeless people, very few such studies have been conducted in India as a result of which we do not know much about day to day life and experiences of the homeless people. Therefore, for addressing this problem and for planning interventions, it is necessary to understand and document the various causes and cultures of homelessness by incorporating the lived experiences and world views of the homeless people. This paper argues that while building a nuanced peoples' narrative in this manner, the concept of habitus and social field as given by Pierre Bourdieu can prove to be of immense value.

Theoretical frames on homelessness

In this section, an attempt is made to survey the major theoretical frames on homelessness which have been espoused over the last forty years or so in most of the academic discussions around the issue. The earlier studies of homelessness in the West have mostly centred on the "culture of poverty" discourse. From a theoretical point of view, it is worth noticing that the Western understanding of homelessness has constantly changed over time. Homelessness was attributed to personal "pathology" in the mid-1970s to the late 1990s (Jacobs et al., 1999 cited in Speak, 2004). This view placed the responsibility of homelessness on the homeless person. The causes of homelessness were located in the inadequacies like learning disabilities and mental illness, or behaviour problems like drinking or drug abuse. According to Julia and Hartnett (1999) as cited in Suzanne Speak, until the late 1990s the number of reports on homelessness with a focus on mental illness was ten times more than those which had a focus on poverty or housing (Speak, 2004).

However, towards the end of the 1990s, 'social exclusion' arrived as a basis for policy development which has shifted the focus to structural causes. Shlay and Rossi (1992) argued that the focus of research should be on the structural forces that permit

homelessness to occur. According to Neale (1997) and Kennet and Marsh (1999) as cited in Suzanne Speak, this "structural" view has been increasingly dominant in the theoretical debates around homelessness (Speak, 2004). It implies a lack of social ties and relations revealing social exclusion or marginalization (Edgar et al., 1999 cited in Speak and Tipple, 2005). However, this particular nature of perceived structural factors is open to debate. With the fiscal crisis affecting the local, national and global economies in the 1990s there has been a trend to cut public spending on welfare of the people. This has led to a weakening of the welfare regimes in developed countries and an increased risk of poverty and homelessness for the mass of the population (ibid). 'The scale and nature of homelessness in developed countries is strongly influenced by the levels of poverty and inequality that are produced by welfare regimes' (Fitzpatrick and Stephens, 2007). Thus in the recent past, in western writing, social exclusion has become a major component of the concept of homelessness.

Apart from 'personal pathology' and 'social exclusion' frameworks, some of the 'new wave' studies have also focussed on deciphering the various causes and cultures of homelessness from time to time. Elliot Liebow's 'Talley's Corner' and William Whyte's 'Street Corner Society' are classics which have portrayed street life with a complexity, comprehensiveness, and subtlety that many contemporary accounts lack (Desjarlais, 1996). In the same fashion, Wagner (1993) studied homeless people in the North City and came up with an insightful account of their lives in his seminal work 'Checkerboard Square: Culture and Resistance in a Homeless Community' by using his contextualized "experience-near" gaze. Similarly David Snow and Leon Anderson studied "survival strategies and routines" of the homeless adults staying on the streets of Austin in the mid-1980s. They also studied as to how these routines vary among them, apart from the social, cultural and political forces that shape them (ibid.). In their publication titled 'Down on Their Luck: A Study of Homeless Street People', findings point to a paradoxical combination of isolation and sociability, both of which are functional survival strategies of the homeless people (ibid.).

'Paths to Homelessness: Extreme Poverty and the Urban Housing Crisis' by three sociologists- Doug Timmer, Stanley Eitzen, and Kathryn Talley (1994) develops what the authors call an "extended case method" approach to the macro level causes of homelessness in order to combine a "structural approach to homelessness" with an ethnographic attentiveness to "the

concrete experience" of being homeless (Desjarlais, 1996). Similarly, in her work 'Homelessness in Global Perspective', anthropologist Irene Glasser (1994) has worked to develop a cross-cultural understanding of homelessness and dislocation through her ethnographic study which attempts to come up with "conceptualizations of homelessness in international perspectives" (Ibid.). Most remarkably, in his "experience-near" monograph, 'Travels with Lisbeth', Lars Eighner (1993) rues that "reality of homelessness" entails the absence of narratives (Ibid.). The strength of new wave studies is that they use more and more ethnographic modes of data collection, look at reality from the point of view of the researched and bring out the lived experiences of the people through their narratives and life stories. Taking an inspiration from the studies mentioned above, in the proposed study, the researcher intends to employ a similar approach for studying the lives and experiences of the homeless people.

Evangelista (2010) applies capabilities theory given by Amartya Sen as a conceptual frame to study homelessness. In his paper titled 'Poverty, Homelessness and Freedom: An Approach from the Capabilities Theory', he has come up with the definition of 'home', 'homeless people' and 'homelessness' in terms of capabilities in order to show that in many cases Government policies are assessed according to the budget allocated to the area, or the amount of specific assets offered, rather than according to the entitlements of people and the capabilities they generate (Evangelista, 2010). Capability Approach is useful in understanding the concept of homelessness and the social exclusion resulting from it, as a constituent part of poverty which incidentally highlights the relational roots of poverty. Lack of home implies lack of freedom and it severely restricts a person's capabilities to avail entitlements and freely develop himself as per his choice. Homelessness pushes people to the extreme margins of poverty and unfreedom and so it should be seen as causing capability deprivation in homeless people which severely restricts their life choices and curtails their freedom to develop themselves. Thus, homelessness should be viewed not only as absence of housing, but also as an obstacle to the exercise of an individual's capabilities and functioning. Conversely, from the viewpoint of capabilities, the concept of 'home' would be understood individually as comprising what each person 'inhabiting' the space contributes to it, as well as what the living space contributes to each person (ibid.). Apart from providing shelter, housing also enables to increase our capabilities. Therefore, any intervention plans which seek to check homelessness by providing shelter to the homeless must

entail the fundamental requirement of increasing their capabilities through the housing arrangement. If a particular shelter or housing arrangement is not able to enhance capabilities of the person living in it thereby affecting his functioning, then it ceases to be an adequate option for him. Homeless people suffer from different degrees of the lack of freedom in terms of capabilities and so the efficacy of intervention plans on homelessness should be judged by the measures for capability-generation of the homeless through shelter or housing arrangements.

Habitus as a theory and tool

According to Bourdieu, habitus comprises a set of dispositions acquired through one's inculcation into any social milieu. It means the moulding of a set of individual dispositions interlocking with the specific cultural characteristics of the society concerned (Elliot, 2009). Bourdieu defines habitus as "structured structures that are predisposed to function as structuring structures" (Bourdieu, 1977 as cited in Elliot, 2009). Habitus marks the site of a socially inscribed subjectivity which defines a person's sense of his/her place in the world. Bourdieu argues that through a protracted process of conditioning, people internalize the objective chances they face by 'reading the future' and choosing the fate that is also statistically the most likely for them. He further argues that practices within a given situation are conditioned by expectation of the outcome of a given course of action, which is in turn based, thanks to the habitus, on experience of past outcomes (Maton, 2008 as cited in Grenfell, 2008). The concept of habitus offers a possible basis for a cultural approach to structural conditions and permits a focus on the 'embodiment' of cultural representations in human habits and routines (Scott & Marshall, 2009). Thus, using habitus as a tool can enable us to get useful insights on studying the daily routines, survival strategies and coping behavior of people living in inadequate housing arrangements or in the state of homelessness.

Habitus is socialized norms and tendencies that guide peoples' behavior and thinking in their day to day life. It is the way society becomes deposited in a person in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guides her actions and behaviour. Habitus is an ongoing and active process which implies that we are engaged in a continuous process of making history, but not under conditions entirely of our own making. Habitus links the social and the individual as the experiences of one's life course as a homeless person may be unique in their particular contents, but are shared in terms of their structure (the

objective reality of homelessness) with others who are also homeless. The homeless individuals experiencing homelessness share structurally similar positions within society that engender structurally similar experiences of social relations, processes and structures. Each homeless individual is a unique configuration of social forces, but these forces are social, so that even when a homeless individual with his/her unique life trajectory is “different” from others in his social group or social class, this differentiation occurs in socially regular ways (Bourdieu 1990c: 52–65; 1991a: 37–42 as cited in Maton, 2008 in Grenfell, 2008). In many ways, Bourdieu’s theoretical scheme seeks to combine the objectivism of Durkheim with the subjectivism of phenomenology. It seeks to replace ‘individual-society dualism’ with ‘individual-society duality’ by claiming to go beyond the opposition between structuralism and hermeneutics, between providing an objective account of social regularities and a subjective focus on the meaning making of social agents. The concept usefully serves to transcend the structure-agency dichotomy. According to Bourdieu, habitus is internalized structure or the objective made subjective (Maton, 2008 as cited in Grenfell, 2008). In habitus, the personal comes to play a role in the social as its dispositions underlie our actions which in turn contribute to the social structures (Ibid.) Thus, habitus brings together both objective social structures and subjective personal experiences in any given theoretical formulation or explanatory scheme.

Homelessness and habitus

Through the notion of habitus, Bourdieu has developed an idea of socialization which emphasizes on the skills and the ways of looking at the world that people inherited from the unequal objective social structures around them. A person’s effectiveness or ‘capital’ (social, economic, or cultural) within a particular institutional ‘field’ (objective reality) results from the degree of symmetry or conflict between the field and their habitus. (Scott & Marshall, 2009) This approach helps in generating insights about the structure of homelessness as a ‘field’ or objective reality in which homeless people form their world views, and where their coping mechanisms and day to day life struggles are nothing but manifestations of the dispositions created out of their subjective lived experiences or ‘habitus’. When placed in the theoretical framework of Bourdieu which marks the interplay of ‘field’ which means objective structural conditions, and ‘habitus’, the experiences of homeless people with respect to their life situations would generate tremendous insights for not only understanding the social structure, but the way people make sense of their world and act upon it. Habitus, which is the disposition (that includes life style,

perceptions, coping mechanisms, daily struggles etc.) of homeless people in this case would constitute the link between social structures and social practice or social action.

Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, in simple words, explain how structural conditions condition people in definite ways, and how people thus conditioned, reinforce and reproduce the very same structures. The structures like social and economic inequality, social exclusion, weak social security, violence on the streets, poverty etc. not only cause vulnerability and marginalization of the homeless people, but they also create certain dispositions like survival strategies on the streets, peculiar sleeping and eating habits, addictions etc. in them for ‘living through’ the structural conditions caused by them. While living through such objective conditions, homeless people consciously and unconsciously are helping in the reproduction and reinforcement of the same structures that oppress them. However, this is not to undermine the agency of the people. Through their agency and resistance, homeless people, like any other socially excluded and marginal group, can bring changes in the structures around them. Thus, in order to contextualize the experiences of the homeless people with regard to their social condition, habitus can be used as a tool for deciphering the way homeless people view their life situation and act upon it, which in turn would be useful in addressing their problems and planning interventions with them. Homelessness for individuals and families can be seen as a continuum of exclusion from adequate shelter or housing arrangement. Homelessness can also be viewed on a social and economic continuum where both the economic condition or status and social location of the homeless person explain the reasons for his or her current situation and the trajectory that led him or her into it. Based on these two perspectives, the conceptual framework of ‘habitus’ can be usefully employed to understand and explain homelessness.

Conclusion

In order to receive befitting policy response to the problem of homelessness, it is necessary to have an understanding of what does homelessness actually mean especially to those experiencing it. Very little is known about the economic, social, political and psychological forces that can lead one to a state of homelessness. It is pertinent to know the processes and factors that operate in the peoples’ lives leading to the creation of homelessness. Apart from understanding the structural reason of their poverty, a sociological approach like habitus will help in explicating their everyday struggles and resistance on the street. As a theoretical tool, the theory of habitus can be useful in conceptualising and

defining homelessness. It can provide insights on how homeless people live their daily routines, what kind of choices are available to them, what kind of struggles they go through in their day to day lives, and what experiences of marginality and vulnerability they have to face in their lives. While doing so, not only it would explicate the subjective and lived experiences of the homeless, but it would also help in deciphering and understanding the structural factors that lead them to such experiences and create dispositions in them for living those realities.

The concept of habitus and social field as given by Bourdieu can prove to be of immense value for developing an understanding of homelessness. Homelessness can be seen as a cultural habitat which becomes internalised in homeless people the form of dispositions which determine their way of life, coping mechanisms, survival strategies, daily routines, indulgence, addictions, support systems etc. Such a habitus in the form of homelessness is acquired through acculturation into certain social groups such as social classes, gender, caste groups etc. Each of these groups has different habituses which are associated with them. Thus each homeless individual's habitus is a complex mix of these different habituses together with certain individual peculiarities. Habitus is also useful in analysing a particular agent's behaviour in changing societal conditions. Although the subjective experiences and life trajectories of homelessness people are different, all of them are faced with the structural and objective reality of living without the condition of secure and 'proper' housing. Thus, condition of homelessness is as much an objective reality as it is a subjective experience for the persons living under it. Therefore, it is pertinent to understand this 'condition' and how the people living under such condition(s) view or perceive their life situations. In the researcher's opinion, Bourdieu's framework which seeks to combine objectivity with subjectivity, would address the issue judiciously.

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