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HOMELESS WOMEN AND SHELTER REGIMES: A GLIMPSE OF EVERYDAY PRACTICES THROUGH SOCIAL WORKERS' NARRATIVES

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Abstract

Homelessness in South Africa is a multi-faceted issue with enormous dimensions; an issue which is deeply interrelated with questions of power, human dignity and social justice. In South Africa, women have been frequently neglected and marginalized with regard to contemporary housing policy and practice. In seeking to understand the nature of this marginalization, this paper focuses on structural disadvantages faced by homeless women in relation to the shelter regimes. To illustrate the latter, I engage excerpts from four in-depth interviews which I conducted in 2014 with homelessness social workers employed in homeless shelters and the government in Johannesburg, South Africa. Social workers' narratives present a glimpse of how inclusion and exclusion is constructed in every day practices at the shelters. The shelters under investigation are exclusively for women. The results reveal that 1) migrant homeless women are preferred by the shelters 2) homeless women construct idiosyncratic modalities to manage the perceived shame that seem to accompany the homelessness condition and 3) women who are categorized as mothers with minor children are the most vulnerable. I draw implications from these findings that in order to understand how inclusion and exclusion criterion is constructed in everyday practices it is necessary to delve into the details of the homeless women shelter regimes as presented by social workers employed at the specific shelter under investigation.

Keywords: Homelessness; homeless women; shelter regimes; social workers; South Africa

1. Introduction

How and to what extent is homelessness in general and women's homelessness in particular constructed as a social problem in South Africa? What categories of women are most affected and what factors are critical in the distinct dimension of women's homelessness? How is the homeless women shelter regime criterion on inclusion and exclusion constructed in policy and everyday practice? Homelessness in South Africa is a multi-faceted issue with enormous dimensions; an issue which is deeply interrelated with questions of power, human dignity and social justice. To underline this claim, (Morrow, 2010, p. 61), notes that 'Any attempt to confront homelessness in contemporary South Africa must start with a sober recognition of the

formidable, many-faceted and historically rooted nature of the problem'. In South Africa, women have been frequently neglected and marginalized with regard to contemporary housing policy and practice (Cosser, 2000). In seeking to understand the nature of this marginalization, this paper focuses on structural disadvantages faced by homeless women in relation to the shelter regimes. Social workers' narratives present a glimpse of how inclusion and exclusion is constructed in every day practices at the shelters. The shelters under investigation are exclusively for women.

As a point of departure, I borrow the concept 'Inequality Regimes' from the study of inequality in work organizations (Joan Archer, 2006, p. 443). Inequality Regimes are the interlocked practices and processes that result in continuing inequalities in all work organizations. Work organizations are critical locations for the investigation of continuous creation of complex inequalities because much societal inequality originates in such organizations (ibid: 441). In the discussion, I engage the concept to refer to constructed interlocked practices and processes that result in the continuing production and reproduction of inclusion and exclusion inequalities as they find expression in the admission criterion of the homeless women shelter under investigation. There is a possibility to perceive *shelter regimes* as structural disadvantages constructed by the homeless women's shelter with a view to create a border to demarcate inclusion and exclusion for their admission purposes. To illustrate the latter, I draw from excerpts of four in-depth interviews I conducted in 2014, with homelessness social workers in the employ of homeless shelters and the government in Johannesburg, South Africa, respectively. The shelters under investigation are exclusively for women.

There are three categories through which the homeless women shelters perceive women are migrant women, mother and woman as a gendered profile. I attempt to make sense of inclusion and exclusion criterion as constructed in everyday practices of the shelter regimes. The study is about *Women and homelessness in Johannesburg Inner City, South Africa* which is aimed at developing understandings of homelessness from the perspectives of social workers as service providers. The project is guided by the following theoretical and methodological perspectives: Social Constructionism, interactionism and ethnography (Fine, 1993; Gubrium & Holstein, 1999, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 2001; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). To make sense of the empirical material I engage Discourse Analysis (DA) and Narrative Analysis (NA) (Talja, 1999; Cameron, 2001; Fairclough, 2003).

The purpose of this paper is to examine how the analysis of interview material generated by narrative approaches can contribute to understanding the everyday practices of the homeless shelter regimes; practices that may often be hidden, assumed and unacknowledged. Narrative approaches that are increasingly employed across the social sciences have been particularly useful in enabling people to reflect upon practices that have become habitual or taken for granted, as I shall elaborate in the analysis of the selected excerpts (Phoenix & Brannen, 2013, p. 12).

The material presented here has not previously been submitted to a scientific journal for possible publication. In the discussion, I set out some theoretical aspects about the concepts home and homelessness. Then, I show how successful NA is in illuminating how the shelter regimes are routinely administered to produce and reproduce interlocked everyday practices and processes that enforce the exclusion criterion for women categorized as mothers with minor children, especially.

2. Home and homelessness

The overarching question my research is seeking to answer is: How do homeless women living in shelters in Johannesburg Inner City conceptualize, explain and account for *home* and *homelessness* and their own life histories? Theorizing the concept home, Sarah Ahmed starts by asking a question, which she adequately answers, in my view, even as she draws on Avtāh Brah to illuminate the affect aspect of this concept *home*. What does it mean to be-at-home? Certainly, definitions of home shift across a number of registers: home can mean where one usually lives, or it can mean one's native country. You might say I have multiple homes, each one a different kind of home. The association of home with familiarity which allows strangeness to be associated with migration (that is to be located beyond the walls of the home) is problematic. There is already strangeness and movement within the home itself. It is not simply a question then of those who stay at home and those who leave as if these two different trajectories simply lead people to different places. Rather, 'homes' always involve encounters between those who stay, those who arrive, and those who leave. Given the inevitability of such encounters, homes do not stay the same as the space which is simply the familiar. There is movement and dislocation within the very forming of homes as complex and contingent spaces of habitation. The issue is that home is not simply about fantasies of belonging- where do I originate from- but that it is sentimentalized as a space of belonging ('home is where the heart is'). The question of home and being at home can only be addressed by considering the question of affect: being at home is here a matter of how one feels or how one might fail to feel (Ahmed, 1999, pp. 338, 340, 341). To underline this notion, in Brah's consideration of diasporic space, she rethinks the difference between home as where one lives and home as where one 'comes from' in terms of affect as well. Like Ahmed, she starts by asking: Where is home? On the one hand, 'home' is a mythical place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of locality, its sounds and smells (Brah, 1996, p. 192 cited in Ahmed 1996, p. 341).

On the other hand, O'Malley holds that 'Homelessness itself can be described as a type of victimization whereby the social structure bars an underclass from the protection enjoyed by the larger society'. At the same time, 'Homelessness is the condition and social category of people without a regular house or dwelling because they cannot afford, do not desire, or are otherwise unable to maintain regular, safe, and adequate housing, or lack fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence' <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homelessness>, (accessed online on Sep 23, 2010). According to Cynthia Phiri (2015), homelessness is 'A situation where one lacks habitable housing and is excluded from the affiliate bonds that link settled people to a network of interconnected social structures'.

3. The study

To get a sense of social workers' and managers' respective experiences with working with the homeless and how they conceive of homelessness in Johannesburg Inner City, I managed to make contact with four social workers with the help of their manager and interviewed them individually. I subsequently conducted one focus group interview with three intake social workers; one service user NGO representative - homelessness claims makers; one focus group interview with three (non-social workers) representatives of a service user Faith-Based

Organization (FBO) that owns and administers three homelessness shelters strategically located in different places of Johannesburg city. A total number of 11 participants were involved in these interviews conducted in September 2014.

The interviews were thematically analysed to provide an overview of the findings and the two interviews from which the following excerpts were drawn were selected for detailed narrative analysis on the basis of the particular issues they raised with regard to the shelter regimes, especially Phoenix and Bauer: 2012: 493. Also, the narratives are analysed in relation to the socio-economic context of Johannesburg Inner City and the South African post-1994 democratic dispensation with the view to explore selected themes emerging from social workers' in-depth interviews. The aim is to illustrate how inclusion and exclusion criterion is constructed in everyday practices within the context of shelter regimes (Brah, 1999, p. 4).

4. Homelessness constructions

This excerpt is about construction of homelessness by the respondent which highlights the embedded criminal activity among the homeless street-dwellers. In the first sentence, the respondent constructs the homeless people as: 'people who live-and-work-on-the-street'. But in the same vein and interview his construction of the same homeless people changes to that of criminals. This is in line with the observation made by Talja 1999:462 who indicates that in different sections of the interview, the interviewee approaches the topic from different angles and expresses mutually contradictory views.

For example: Interview with government homelessness social worker, September 2014.

Some of them, that's what they do for their survival. Normally, we call them people who live-and-work-on-the-street. They do recycling (recycling waste products) for a living. They collect papers, they collect metal and some of them they sort of steal copper. That is why you find that sometimes the telephones (land lines) are not working. They steal copper and go and sell it and at the end of the day and they cause the local businesses to go down because their copper has been stolen. You know, Eeeh normally, many of them get arrested and they are referred to us and when they come to us they tell us because we ask them how they survive on the street, so they tell us. When they are with us they open up and tell us how they survive. As social workers, they reveal to us what they do and how they survive on the street.

5. Homeless women and shame management

It seems to me, there is always a possibility that women who are currently living at the shelters have themselves lived on the street at some point during their life course. The next excerpt is a depiction of the hidden element of women's homelessness condition and the shame management that seem to characterize their survival on the street (where applicable). This notion is summarized by (Doherty, 2001, p. 12) who notes that 'In conditions of inadequate provision of affordable housing, hidden homelessness has become a significant dimension of homelessness among women across Europe':

Interview with the government social worker, September 2014.

Yes, they [homeless women] are there, but they are very few and you might not recognize that this is a woman because sometimes they will wear like men, they wear trousers, and they (.) wear a cap (.) they will leave their hair not long but as short hair, so how will you know that

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this is a man because they wear many jackets, they look so big and you won't know whether this is a man or a woman (laugh). When I asked whether the respondent engaged women on their reasons for sleeping rough, he said:

Yes, we did (.) some of them will tell you, you know women will usually tell you. 'No, I'm going home tomorrow, eeh don't worry about me, tomorrow I'll be home' (.) but you will be coming tomorrow and the person is still there (.) There are so many reasons for women to be on the street (.) some of them will tell you that 'Eeh you know what? I left my home from the time when my parents passed away, I stayed with my sisters and my uncles and they have chucked me out of the house, so I no longer have space at home. My uncles have taken my family home. So, all my uncles and their ladies [intimate partners] have taken my family home'. That's what they will tell you, they will tell you that way (.) but then when you go and investigate you find that that's not true. Some are true, some are not true

Here the respondent constructs homeless women as people who falsely present themselves as victims of family exclusion. At the same time, he portrays them as hiding their gender. The tone of this particular one sounds like a call to recognize the peculiarity of individual homeless women's life courses and the need for a comprehensive and appropriate nation state welfare intervention. This view is supported by (Doherty, 2001, pp. 10, 12) who says '...for the development of a full and constructive understanding of women's routes into and out of homelessness, the diversity of women's situations and individual experiences has to be acknowledged. In such circumstances, if women are to avoid the risk of homelessness, the capacity of the welfare state in providing social protection becomes critical'.

6. Migrant women preferred

To establish the possibilities of migrant women being admitted in their shelters, the respondent was asked: You have been referring to our South Africans (.) does it mean you only admit South Africans (.) is that a specific criterion for your shelters?
Interview with shelter social worker, September 2014.

No (.) for our shelters it is not a criteria (.) South Africans is not a criterion. Most of our homeless people, those who come to apply are (.) I would say 50% who come to apply are from the neighboring countries (.) Zambia (.) Congo, whatever eeh. Actually (.) we prefer them because they are better behaved than our South Africans ((laugh)). It's just like (.) people who grew up (.) were born and raised in Johannesburg eeh have this sense of entitlement (.) they sort of think they own the shelter you know (.) and the government (.) we are mandated to have them just for a year. It was six months but we sought of pushed it to a year because we felt that six months was too little for one to get your life back. So we asked the government to grant us that we must at least have them for 12 months (.) it's actually 10 because every year in December we close from the 15th to the 15th of January (.) Ja. And from our side it will depend on the person's behavior. If they are well behaved then we do re-admit them (.) they apply afresh (0.3) for the following year depending on your behavior

This excerpt is an example of using the category of migrant women's identity as a resource to create the hierarchy of difference among the shelter residents. I interpret this constructed difference as the 'border-between'. Meaning, the interlocked process that translates into a resource meant to differentiate between categories of migrant women and South African women. According to the social worker's narrative, this is used for purposes of distributing

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preferential treatment biased in favor of migrant women. In order to analyse this narrative, it is important to understand the meaning she makes in the excerpt as she ‘does narrative’ and how this is central to her identity construction of migrant women as a preferred category of shelter residents. The narrative analysis of the social worker’s interview illustrates how she uses the shelter regime as a resource to make meaning and to construct distinctive identities among the residents. This is one indication of how key narratives can direct researchers to investigate participants’ expressed concerns in a specific context, in this case, perceiving migrant women as a preferred choice for the specific shelter (Phoenix, 2008, p. 70). Thus, according to this excerpt, there is a possibility that the shelter regimes may be used as a basis for exclusion for homeless natives where every day practices are concerned.

On the contrary, Cherubini’s study on the migrant women’s experiences in Andalusia revealed strong element of inequality between migrants and native people, since the power of public regulation is greater for the former than for the latter (Cherubini, 2011, p. 127). Moreover, for (Joan Acker, 2006, pp. 449-450) where recruitment and hiring is concerned, a distinction should be made between the gendered organization of work and the gender and the racial characteristics of the ideal worker. She holds that the ideal worker for many jobs is a woman, particularly a woman who, employers believe is compliant, who will accept orders and low wages. This is often a woman of color; immigrant women are sometimes even more desirable. This preferential bias is reflected in the tone of this excerpt and the way the social worker is ‘doing narrative’:

‘Most of our homeless people (.) those who come to apply are (.) I would say 50% who come to apply are from neighboring countries (.) Zambia (.) Congo, whatever eeh. Actually (.) we prefer them because they are better behaved than our South Africans’ (my own emphasis).

In the same vein (Rachel Silvey, 2004, p. 497) on space and place, cites a study where (Secor, 2002, p. 7) developed a feminist angle on space as it is reworked through mobility. She examined Turkish women’s various experiences of moving in and out of spaces with different codings of the practice of veiling and women’s mobility. Her work shows that women’s decisions about veiling in relation to their mobility play a central role in the production of particular spaces as more or less secular, Islamic, democratic and urban. She presents a non-essentialist understanding of gender identity and the veil and simultaneously reveals the gendered production of place. In this, she illuminates the ways that space, whether sacred or profane, is not produced in a vacuum, but rather through a web of cross-cutting power relations that are themselves forged at multiple scales from the local to the global. In her work, power operates in and through a range of scales and places to generate particular meanings of space with distinct social norms attached to them for specific social groups. It is no wonder that Silvey 2004: 496 argues that historically, most migrant research conceptualized the space through which migrants travel largely in economic terms with very little attention to the cultural struggles that shape the meanings of space and migrants’ experience of them. Migrants’ space have tended to be understood in terms of economic pushes and pulls, and their boundaries have been addressed primarily as empirically identifiable distinctions rather than as political constructions in need of interrogation. The same argument could be made in terms of the way the social worker is ‘doing narrative’ to communicating the shelter’s preference of migrant women.

7. Mothers: trading your baby-for-a-bed?

(Interview with shelter social worker, September 2014)

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You mentioned that you do admit foreign nationals in your shelters. My questions is (.) what kind of examinations do you do to decide on applications (.) as I said (.) who comes in who doesn't come in (.) what guides your admission criterion?

Our criterion for admission is not very fancy. It's just the age [30 to 59 years] and otherwise if the person is able to pay [R10.00 a day]. That's about all (.) we don't do much. We don't do any health or eehh anything ((laugh)). But in (name of shelter) we don't want children /.../No. It's a no no (.) children can't be accommodated here because we don't have facilities for that (.) or the staff. Somebody must admit that child or the child must go to court ((laugh)). No. For those that come in (.) the children (.) mother and the child will be referred to a shelter that accommodates mother and children (.) If it comes to a push we can ask the shelter that accommodates children to take the children (.) they'll do the statutory process and we'll take the mother. Those that are in close proximity (.) it's been working okay for us. The mother can go see the children or the children can come for a visit but she must sit with them (.) Babies we never admit because we never could find a place that could take them nearby

This excerpt highlights the vulnerability of women all-the-more, showing how the nation state welfare policy effectively increases the risk of living in poorer quality or insecure housing; as well as, increasing the risk of homelessness for women who are categorized as mothers with minor children. To this, (Baptista & Bruto da Costa, 2000, p. 21) seem to offer a succinct explanation: 'Where homelessness is conceived in narrow conception of 'sleeping rough' then the visibility of homelessness as a woman's issue is less evident'. Furthermore, (Jones, 1999, p. 12) says that since women often avoid homelessness services which leave them feeling vulnerable or unsafe, the extent of women's homelessness is often 'underestimated in official figures and statistics from hostels and night shelters'. Since descriptions of these claims are informed by their respective empirical studies, they seem to provide sound directions for the South Africans to borrow homelessness policy lessons, with particular reference to *Women and homelessness* – seeking to answer, among others, the question: What groups of women are most affected and what factors are critical in the distinct dimensions of women's homelessness? Separating mothers from their minor children is a case in point according to this excerpt.

8. Everyday practices and the shifting inclusion and exclusion criterion

This final excerpt shows the shifting inclusion and exclusion criterion, the competing explanations offered by the respondent, and how women and homelessness are not perceived as a social problem when 'doing narrative'. At this juncture, the respondent chooses to play the role of the gatekeeper for the shelter regimes' constructed inclusion criterion. When I asked the respondent how they conceptualize their intervention for homeless women, she said in an Interview with shelter social worker, September 2014:

Well (.) as a social worker (.) I must admit (.) I don't do much with them because people who come to our shelters do not necessarily come for social problems. They come because they need accommodation. Some of them left (home) through reasons they wouldn't like to talk to a social worker about (.) but those who come with needs (.) their needs are like (.) usually for their moms to get Grant [Child Care Grant] for their children when they get a Child Care Grant (.) I write recommendations (.) they usually ask that I write a recommendation letter for their moms to get the Foster Care Grant to make it a bit better (.) that type of thing. If it's an abused woman I usually refer them to the abused shelters (.) abused women shelters (.) we don't usually deal with them. Once the abused women shelters are finished with them they close their

files there (.) then they refer them back to our homeless shelters if they are still homeless. They can come to our shelters (.) so they refer them to us

A taken for granted assumption in this seemingly neutral account for handling homeless women is the shelter policy, according to which no shelters owned by this [name of the organization] admit mothers with minor children. This accounts for the reason why the social worker is saying ‘/.../ they usually ask that I write a recommendation letter for their moms to get the Foster Care Grant to make it a bit better (.)’. This means that when their shelter makes a decision to admit a mother with a baby, the woman has to make independent arrangements for the custody of the child /children. In this narrative, the social worker is drawing our attention to the fact that the women in question have children left in the custody of their natural mothers; and by law in South Africa, the latter is eligible to receive the means-tested welfare Child Support Grant on behalf of their daughters. However, approval (by a designated government agency) of this type of application is granted only with a written recommendation from a professional social worker. The welfare grant is renewable annually until the child turns 18 years.

9. Conclusion

Overall, my view is that from the social workers’ narrative it is clear that the shelter admission policy excludes mothers with minor children in the event they are unable to organize and/ or find custody for their child /children. Since this shelters receives a subsidy from the government for the services they render, this specific situation challenges the current South African welfare policy in many different ways. It raises questions about *who belongs to the group of legitimate (women) recipients of state welfare support*; but also *how this social welfare policy facilitates and/ or hinders the socio-economic inclusion of women with minor child /children*. Moreover, narratives of social workers’ from the shelters show how, as gatekeepers of the respective shelter regimes, they navigate the shifting meanings of their policies in the everyday practices. The tension apparent between the shelter policy and the everyday practices also serves to aid the production and reproduction of the very shelter regimes. To the extent that currently there is no national policy on homelessness, including women and homelessness in South Africa, this paper is ‘A Call’ for the government to officially recognize that homelessness among women is a particular problem and that the nature of this problem warrants closer policy scrutiny and vigilant monitoring and evaluation, with particular reference to mothers with minor children.

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