Subjectivity and Contemporary Inequality: Young Homeless Australians.

Introduction

The continued existence of homelessness amongst young people in Australia and elsewhere reflects the difficulty that many young people have in negotiating the instability and insecurity that characterises contemporary social structures. In many ways, homelessness describes a process whereby young people are deprived of the material and symbolic resources required to build lives and construct positive and capable identities in this unstable context. Through a focus on the forms of subjectivity being experienced by homeless young people in Australia, this paper explores the meaning of this form of inequality, and reflects on the relationship between lived subjectivity and structural inequality for contemporary youth.

Literature describing the forms of subjectivity being experienced by people going through homelessness has identified the negative impact that homelessness has on young people’s sense of self. In particular, people experiencing homelessness often blame themselves for their own disadvantage (Carlen, 1996, Harter, Berquist, Titsworth, Novak and Brokaw, 2005). The result is a form of subjectivity voiced in terms of a discourse which constructs homelessness as a personal biographical event, rather than the experience of systematic inequality. Homelessness is therefore associated with shame and low self worth (Kidd, 2007). Homelessness is also associated with stigmatisation, with some studies arguing that young people experiencing homelessness think that others see them as a group separate from the rest of society (Stephen, 2000). This is reinforced by popular imagery, which tends to represent people experiencing homelessness as irresponsible and aesthetically displeasing (Beresford, 1979, Hodgetts, Hodgetts and Radley, 2006; Rossiter, 2001).

This literature has strong resonances with work in the sociology of youth which draws on theorists of social change to argue that strong normative ideas about the kind of identity that young people should be aspiring to exist alongside a changing structural context which makes these ideas irrelevant, undesirable, or out of reach (Blatterer, 2007; Wyn and White, 1997). Drawing on the work of Beck (1992), these authors argue that structural instability is individualising: young people are under pressure to manage their biographies themselves, and reach milestones on the basis of their identities as sovereign individuals. Essentially, structural fragmentation and instability means that individuals are required to work harder to manage their engagement with social structures, reinforcing an individualised subjectivity (Beck, 1992). This structural fragmentation must be managed in ongoing biographical work in which the events of one’s life must be drawn together into a coherent narrative (Giddens, 1991). This process does not represent a new form of agency. Rather, it describes a form of detraditionalised subjectivity which relates to social structures in an individualised way.

The creation of individualised identities also operates on a discursive level. Drawing on Beck as well as governmentality theorists describing neoliberal governance, Kelly (2006) has argued that the ideal subject of this late or second modern context is the entrepreneurial self: a responsible, self managing, reflexive individual actively suited to dealing with structural instability. Kelly argues that discourses aimed at governing ‘youth at risk’ construct disadvantaged young people as the binary opposite of this
entrepreneurial subject. In this way, structural fragmentation associated with modernity, as well as neoliberal governmentality, result in a context in which systematic structural inequality is invisible to those who experience it, or rather, only visible as a personal misfortune. Describing the persistence of systematic structural inequalities amongst contemporary young people, Furlong and Cartmel (2007) refer to this as the epistemological fallacy of late modernity.

Young people experiencing homelessness occupy a contradictory position within these processes. On the one hand, these young people typically come from acutely disadvantaged backgrounds, and are usually cut off from any family support due to family breakdown or abuse (McCarthy, Williams and Hagan, 2009; van der Ploeg and Scholte, 1997; National Youth Commission, 2008). Furthermore, the experience of homelessness makes it extremely difficult for these young people to maintain contact with school or the labour market in a hostile policy environment. Instability with regards to the basic necessities of life means that holding down a job or attending school are lower priorities than finding food or accommodation. Nevertheless, homelessness is a part of wider social structures, and young people experiencing homelessness are experiencing the most extreme consequences of individualised disadvantage. They as much as anyone must relate to the idea of personal responsibility despite the structural disadvantage they are experiencing.

Against this backdrop, this paper explores the subjectivities of young people experiencing homelessness in order to theorise the relationship between structural inequality, the idea of personal responsibility in an individualised society, and lived subjectivity. I conducted qualitative interviews with young people in Melbourne, Australia as part of a project aimed at exploring and theorise the process of subjectivity for these young people. I analyse their biographical narratives and foreground the interaction between structural and discursive processes in analysing the consequences of homelessness for the biographies of contemporary youth.

**Individualised Narratives**

In what follows, I present narratives from young people describing themselves and the meanings they ascribe to the experience of homelessness. In these narratives, the experience of homelessness is made meaningful through a discourse of moralised personal responsibility. This discourse has complex outcomes for different young people, but all can be understood as dimensions of an individualised relationship to structural inequality. All young people who experience homelessness are, by virtue of their structural location, positioned in relation to the meaning of homelessness in contemporary modern societies. As the following narrative from Sarah indicates, homelessness describes a distinct subject position:

> Just the thought that I was living in a youth refuge, a “homeless people’s place”...was just really intense because like growing up like I always had a place to live. So to actually be “homeless” was really intense for me.

In this narrative, Sarah comes to terms with what it means to be a “homeless person,” using her fingers to place quotation marks around the term to indicate that a “homeless person” is associated with an identifiable set of meanings. For Sarah, being “homeless” involves a movement into a different subject position from that of being
homed. She goes on to describe the consequences of this in terms of her inability to construct a successful biography, stressing the importance of self reliance:

*You know cos I was unemployed, living off centrelink, living in a youth refuge you know with barely any money to my name...I guess I always grew up with the thought that oh ‘you have to work 9-5, you have to rent your own place, you have to support yourself you know and if anyone helps you then you’re a failure.’ So um to kind of think like ‘oh fuck I’m a failure...you know and um yeah it was just really intense, the thought of it.*

These milestones are difficult for Sarah to accomplish due to structural instability. The Australian youth labour market is low paid and highly casualised, meaning stable full time work of the kind Sarah describes is out of reach of many young people. The outcome of Sarah’s disconnection from these milestones is her feeling that her experience of homelessness represents a personal biographical failure. Sarah’s biography, and the subject position she constructs in this narrative, is constructed at the intersection of her individualised experience of structural inequality and the power of normative models of youth. The outcome of her position as a “homeless person” is a feeling of shame:

*I guess cos in my family...just kind of ingrained this during my developmental years that you have to be successful, you have to be successful. So you know to be living in a youth refuge is not successful so it kind of brings shame.*

In *Modernity and Self Identity*, Giddens (1991) argues that as an aspect of reflexive identity in late modernity, shame depends on feelings of personal insufficiency, reflecting anxiety about the kind of biography that a person has constructed. Giddens does not emphasise the impact of social structures on feelings of personal adequacy, but in Sarah’s account it is her experience of structural inequality that has positioned her in relation to normative youth biographies in a way that makes her feel ashamed. Sarah’s shame is an outcome of the way her structural location positions her in an individualistic discourse. Her narrative describes a movement into disempowerment, and the consequences that this has for lived subjectivity.

Sarah’s narrative indicates what it means to experience a subject position defined as homeless. The narratives which other participants relate in describing their efforts to escape homelessness and make homes of their own also demonstrate the meaning of homelessness as a part of contemporary modern inequality. These young people are in the process of constructing biographies which are not defined by failure or shame, and the kind of identity work they perform again reflects the power of discourses of personal responsibility for young people to feel capable and agentic. Emma was literally homeless for ten years, and was living in a housing service in which young people are provided with a lease on their own accommodation and pay their own rent. Emma describes the importance of a feeling of active, reflexive subjectivity for her self worth:

*I’m trying to get something going for me you know because one thing I’ll definitely say about homeless people, if they’re not doing something with their lives to try and make things better for themselves they get incredibly down...I*
am homeless still at the moment, but one thing I’ve definitely said to you is that I’m trying to do something to try to better my life.

Emma describes a process of responsible interaction with various institutions which facilitate her effort to construct a new form of subjectivity:

And like I think it was, a good 13 months of me isolating myself and really taking in everything about myself and within that 13 months I actually started joining [support] groups to really build my self esteem again and I kept talking to my workers and I kept seeing doctors and I kept you know, I kept going through a process when I was really realising who the hell I was, and I asked all the good people in my life to help me with it.

According to Beck, with the decline of forms of subjectivity which draw on collective ways of understanding the world, contact with institutions constitutes the modern form of social integration. This narrative reflects this process, whereby Emma’s reflexive narrative work is enabled by a variety of professionals and institutional contacts. In this way, Emma is able to articulate a form of active, reflexive subjectivity, and distance herself from what she now sees as her previous identity. In describing a process of realising who she really is, Emma describes a narrative movement from homelessness to home. After describing her efforts to escape homelessness, Emma says:

But most homeless people don’t do that. And some of them don’t give a damn, they just think ‘oh everything’s just a free ride.’ Well it’s not just a free ride, you can’t scam everything and free ride you know.

I still see people who are still using and that and they think ‘oh free ride this, free ride that, I get everything for free blah blah blah’ and then it makes me think ‘I can’t believe that I used to be one of them.’ But now I’m like changing.

Emma’s description of her earlier identities reflects the way that homelessness, as a subject position, is characterised by irresponsibility and moral failing. In this narrative, Emma accepts this, and goes on to distance herself from these meanings to articulate a responsible, active subject position. Her biographical distance from her experience of homelessness is accomplished by positioning herself as the responsible self manager that people experiencing homelessness are thought not to be. Emma’s new subjectivity thus draws on the same discourses which define homelessness as the outcome of personal irresponsibility. Her contact with institutions provides her with a new position in this discourse and facilitates her move out of homelessness, whilst also requiring the reflexive construction of an individualised biography.

Emma still considers herself homeless, although not a “homeless person” in the sense described by Sarah. Her narrative describes ongoing work – she does not feel as though she has completed her process of biographical transition. The following narrative from Laura demonstrates another interaction between structural position and the meaning of personal responsibility, this time from a young person who has managed to enter the private rental market after a period of homelessness. Laura moved through a variety of accommodation services before eventually securing
privately rented accommodation. Whilst Laura blames herself for her experience of homelessness, she does not describe feelings of failure or shame:

*I don’t like people feeling sorry for me. Why should people feel sorry for me? Homelessness, experiencing homelessness was my fault pretty much. But I needed that experience to be me now if you get what I mean. I’ve found myself from getting out of homelessness. I’ve grown up into an independent woman. I’m not a little girl anymore you know that makes me really proud of myself.*

Like Sarah and Emma, Laura accepts that homelessness is an outcome of personal irresponsibility. However, through engagement with a variety of accommodation services, Laura is able to draw on a discourse of personal responsibility to articulate a strong and capable subject position. Her movement from homelessness to home is also the movement from irresponsibility into adult responsibility through a process of ‘finding herself.’ For Laura, achieving a home of her own is evidence of her own personal responsibility. Her movement into this structural position means that her position in a discourse of personal responsibility is as a capable, active individual who is the author of their own success. Her pride is the affective dimension of this narrative describing movement from one structural position to another. Laura also contrasts herself to others who are not able to escape homelessness:

*They don’t wanna make their life better.*

*I reckon it’s stupid to be honest with ya, well I’ve been through it and yeah I can say it was shit but look at me now I’m still alive, I’m still well. You know you just need to get over it. You know what I’m saying? You just got to get over it. They have a problem of getting over it. That’s why there’s psychologists and counsellors and stuff out there. For them.*

Also like Sarah and Emma, Laura associates homelessness with personal failing. Like Emma, her description of others who experience homelessness demonstrates the biographical distance she has achieved between herself and the idea of the ‘homeless person’ in a movement from homelessness to home.

**Discussion**

The meaning of the idea or ideal of responsibility therefore varies according to the biographical narrative that this discourse becomes a part of. For Sarah, the importance of personal responsibility means feelings of shame and failure as she moves from a position in privately rented accommodation into a youth refuge which she describes as a “homeless people’s place.” Sarah’s narrative describes a movement into disempowerment. In that narrative trajectory, the association between homelessness and irresponsibility positions Sarah as irresponsible, a failed self manager who has become a “homeless person.” In contrast, Emma’s narrative describes a movement out of homelessness and into a new identity constructed as the opposite of a previous subject position defined by irresponsibility and homelessness. Since Emma’s narrative is one of movement into a relatively less disempowered structural location, the subject position Emma constructs is one of reflexive, active, capable subjectivity. Laura’s narrative is similar in trajectory to Emma’s, and reflects a similar articulation of active subjectivity. Laura goes so far as to say that she has ‘found herself’ after movement
from homelessness into a home, and describes a sense of pride in her accomplishments. All three of these narratives are constituted by the same discourses, in relation to the same overall structural context. However, the meaning of the idea of responsibility varies as the narratives describe different kinds of movement between structural locations. Movement into disempowerment is articulated in terms of failure and shame. Movement out of homelessness into home is articulated in terms of strength and pride. These emotions are outcomes of the same discourses, but vary according to the structural movements which these narratives describe.

These narratives invite reflection on the meaning of contemporary poverty more generally. Homelessness describes a process of disempowerment. The consequences of this disempowerment are for many young people feelings of failure and shame. Young people experiencing homelessness draw on the same discourses, and aspire to the same milestones, as all other young people. However, it is their structural location that positions them within this discourse. Relating to their experiences of structural inequality in an individualised way, these young people describe homelessness as a personal biographical event. The meaning of this biographical event is an outcome of the place it has in the overall narrative of the young person’s life, and the movement between structural positions that this narrative describes.

Homelessness is a profoundly individualising experience. It involves exclusion from the benefits which contact with structures such as the labour and housing market distribute, and in the absence of collective ways of understanding the world, places young people in a position in which they are forced to view themselves as reflexive self managers in order to survive. However, their ultimate survival and their chances for making homes of their own depend on institutions such as accommodation services. These power relations are managed as part of the reflexive biographical narration that this paper has described. The consequences for these young people are outcomes of the tension between structural inequality and discourses of personal responsibility constituting the meaning of poverty in contemporary modern societies.

References


