Agency, Structure and Biography: Charting Transitions Through Homelessness in Late Modernity

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This paper presents research that qualitatively and longitudinally charted the life course of 28 individuals, all experiencing homelessness or housing problems during the initial stage of data collection. The paper frames the exploration of the participants' biographies within theoretical perspectives that claim there is increased individualization, choice and risk, in late modernity, and examines how these claims may impact on the narratives that research respondents present of their lives. Although individual action and family background were identified as key influences on the participant's transitions through homelessness, it is argued that this may actually illustrate how the concept of individualization obscures the structural underpinnings that can still denote the chance people have to negotiate with insecurity and risks such as homelessness. The paper concludes by highlighting how the continued use of biographical research in this way is crucial if knowledge on, and social policy to address, social problems such as homelessness are developed that 'fits' with how life is lived, and understood, by those experiencing these problems within the structures of contemporary society.

INTRODUCTION

Despite claims that there is now increased 'freedom' for people to construct their own individual history and socio-biography (Giddens, 1991; 1992; Beck, 1992) do 'lives as lived' in late modernity remain grounded in the objective structures of economic, social and cultural institutions? Has this structural underpinning become obscured by the notion of increased individualization? Developments in the social and economic structures of western societies since the second world war have led to claims that a 'transformation' is taking place in how it is to live and understand our lives in a time of late or reflexive modernity (Beck, 1992; 1999; Giddens, 1991; 2005; Beck *et al.*, 1994). However, if the reality and extent of this change is to be

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assessed alongside the positive or negative impact these changes may have had on social life, there is a need to explore empirically both 'lives as lived' alongside 'lives as talked about' (Jamieson, 2004). Empirical qualitative data on how people make sense of and can negotiate with their circumstances can begin to illustrate the extent to which these 'transformations' have perhaps been overstated or misunderstood. It may also be used to illustrate how the narratives people present about their lives are bound up in internal and external discourses that surround the circumstances they live in, in an ongoing hermeneutical relationship.

This paper looks at how the experiences of those whose risk of extreme inequality or difficulty (here manifested by the experience of homelessness) has become reality, and how they make sense of and present this as an event embedded in their life course. This is done through an analysis of empirical data collected through qualitative longitudinal research. These data consist of the participants' retrospective life history, and a series of three in-depth interviews on their current circumstances, conducted at six monthly intervals, over a period of a year in their life. All of the research participants were accessing accommodation or support services designed to assist people who had been, or were at risk of homelessness, at the time of the life history/first interview phase of the research. Over the course of the year in which the research was conducted, the participants' circumstances continued to change, and this analysis allows for an exploration of both 'what happens' to people over the life course, and how people make sense of, and talk about these events, over time.

The theoretical perspectives that underpin this analysis are briefly discussed in the next section. In the remainder of this paper the participants' biographies are analysed and the influences they identified to explain how their circumstances changed over the course of the research are presented, to argue that the structural underpinnings that may still trigger problems such as homelessness have become obscured, rather than eroded, by increased individualization. The paper concludes by highlighting how qualitative, longitudinal research such as this may be used to further our understanding about the processes that lead to inequality and exclusion. By charting and analysing biographical data in this way, longitudinal qualitative research can be used to examine both objectively 'lives as they are lived', and how this is subjectively conceptualized and understood by those living them. In this way, knowledge on social problems, and the processes that lead to them, can be based on reality and not misunderstanding.

FREEDOM OR FALLACY? CONSTRUCTING THE INDIVIDUALIZED NARRATIVE

As is now well known, Beck (1992; 1999) asserts that we currently live in a 'risk' society, a qualitatively distinct period of second modernity,

characterized by the negotiation and identification of new global, incalculable, risks that are generated as unintended consequences of the systems of modernity. This leads to people experiencing a sense of uncertainty, constantly renegotiating their circumstances, and facing new choices and challenges over their life course, through a process of individualization. Some (such as Giddens, 1991; 1992) have argued that social change has brought increased reflexivity for individuals to construct their own individual history and socio-biography in a time of 'reflexive modernity'. Structural positions of class, gender, or ethnicity, for example, become secondary to individual subjectivity and lifestyle in the construction of these biographies. As such people perceive their individual 'lifestyle' choices to be the central tenet to how secure, or insecure, they are – 'they see their decision-making as individual 'choice' rather than the product of structured constraints' (Ball *et al.*, 2000: 2). But does this understate the role that structural constraints actually have, and overstate the sudden prevalence of the individualized negotiation of risks and opportunities as a central tenet to people's life chances?

Breen and Rottman (1995: 19) argue that 'commonly cited forms of stratification – class, gender, ethnicity, age and so on – are all … bases on which to a greater or lesser extent life chances … are distributed'. How power, opportunity and constraints are distributed and controlled in society is stratified along certain lines – of which 'class' position may be an important indicator of who will have access to, and can maintain, the resources necessary to participate in society. Resources here refer to a range of cultural, human, social and material resources, such as education, qualifications, networks, contacts, knowledge, possessions, alongside financial capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Halpern, 2005; Baron *et al.*, 2000). This is how class is conceptualized in this paper – the access to various forms of resources (cultural, economic, social and human) that people have due to their social grouping of family, social networks, and often geography, that stems from the structural position of birth, but may change over time. Other forms of stratification, for example age and gender, will intersect with class position in the formation of individual life chances. However, these other forms of stratification appear to be identified by people more readily than class position to explain the events that occur over their life course (Anthias, 2005; Phillips and Western, 2005). This paper argues that class position, as it is defined here, remains important to understanding inequality in late modernity, but may be increasingly obscured through the process of individualization.

Studies into the predicators of homelessness rarely use the term 'class'; however, they do usually identify both structural and individual factors as influencing the risk of experiencing homelessness. Predicators of

homelessness that have been identified through empirical research include insecure family backgrounds, low educational attainment, long-term unemployment, drug and alcohol misuse, experiences of living in institutions such as prisons, children's homes, or hospitals, poor mental or physical health, or a history of abusive or violent relationships (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2000; Fitzpatrick and Kennedy, 2000; Jones, 1995; Randall and Brown, 1999; Owens and Hendry, 2001). Whether these factors actually 'cause' homelessness or not, it is clear that people experiencing homelessness often lack some or all of the resources of human, social, cultural and economic capital, which will underpin the life chances they have, and therefore 'class' position is also an important predicator of homelessness.

A life history characterized by these predicators of homelessness is also one characterized by trauma, difficulty and inequality, but how do people make sense of these situations as they occur over their life course? The problem of the relationship between the objective social situation of individuals and their own subjective perception of that situation is not new (Bulmer, 1975; Lauder *et al.*, 2004). However, it is asserted in this paper that the relationship between 'what happens' over someone's life course, what the actual circumstances of that life course have been, and how these circumstances are subjectively talked about can be brought together in the form of biographies to begin to understand and overcome this problem.

A second assertion to be illustrated in this paper is that dominant theoretical perspectives may influence how people subjectively make sense of, and talk about, their situation, creating a hermeneutical relationship that may obscure structural constraints, whilst also being implicit in reproducing them. And this hermeneutical relationship is one in which all social interactions and processes are bound up, including the process of research. Even the language used in research to describe and conceptualize biographies changes to reflect the predominant perspective of that time. For example, the use of the term 'life trajectories' implies a set, linear course, stemming from predictable structural positions, that the life course will develop in predictable ways based on someone's class or gender for example. However, a new structural landscape, of transforming employment, gender and social relationships, means that people may have more options to negotiate with now (Agulnik *et al.*, 2002; Gershuny, 2004). Evans and Furlong (1997) note in their exploration of theories about young peoples' transitions to employment, the loosening of these structural trajectories in late modernity, and the emergence of post-structuralist ideas has led to this language of 'negotiation' to describe the transitions people experience over their life course. This implies and emphasizes a more individualistic perspective, such as that argued by Beck and Giddens, underpinning the idea that people feel they have increased 'freedom' to 'construct' their own socio-biographies, in an

ongoing process, negotiating with the different options they have. When charting and making sense of the narratives people present of their negotiation into and through homelessness, the influence that language and discourses may have has to be taken into account. And as Evans and Furlong note:

> The fact that people feel that they act autonomously and independently over their own biographies is not necessarily at odds with the view that much of the biography continues to be structured and determined by external factors ... The issue now is the relationship between structure and agency arising from 'manufactured uncertainty' – uncertainty created by acceleration of the information and the 'knowledge society' and the increase and diversity of individual risk situations.
>
> (1997: 37)

There may be increased pluralism, flexibility and choices, but it is an 'epistemological fallacy' to suppose people can now negotiate their own position in society (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997), without acknowledging that the 'chance' people have of being able to negotiate with the risks they face may still be grounded to some extent in the structural class position they began from. Has the process of individualization Beck and Giddens identify led to people perceiving their biography is 'free' for them to develop as they wish? It is this relationship of agency and structure, and how this can be explored through collating biographies, over time, that this paper explores. How do people explain when their biography 'goes wrong' – when the risk of homelessness becomes a reality? Before presenting the strategy used to collect and analyse these biographies, how homelessness is currently conceptualized is briefly discussed.

CONCEPTUALIZING HOMELESSNESS

Some of the recent literature on homelessness (such as Forrest, 1999; Kennet and Marsh, 1999; Hutson, 1999) has engaged with the idea that the structural changes that characterize late modern society means homelessness affects an increasingly heterogeneous group of people, and that more people may be negotiating with the risk of homelessness than in previous eras:

> Flexible labour markets, greater job insecurity, the erosion of the Keynesian Welfare state and a greater fragility in relationships may ... mean that it is possible to fall further and faster and that risk and insecurity are now more pervasive. Homelessness is ... a general metaphor for severe and typically multifaceted experiences of marginality and exclusion from mainstream society.
>
> (Forrest, 1999: 17)

Homelessness, and therefore what it means to 'be homeless' are socially constructed concepts (Jacobs *et al.*, 1999). Although often seen as an objective and identifiable phenomenon, a universal definition of homelessness does not exist. Statutory definitions of homelessness may exist but these are relative to the political and social context they develop in, and change over time. Most of the literature on homelessness acknowledges that it can refer to a range of circumstances, such as being housed in inadequate accommodation, rough sleeping, or staying with friends (Doherty *et al.,* 2002; Cranes and Warnes, 2003; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2000). There has also been some examination of the meaning of 'home' (Somerville, 1992) and what it means to have or not have a home. However, there has been little research exploring homeless people's own definition of what homelessness is and how they encapsulate it (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2000).

Historically, ideological and political concepts of homelessness have developed along two lines, seeing homelessness as either an objective structural problem requiring state intervention to address structural inequality, or as the outcome of individual actions and behaviour – the choice, or fault, of the individual experiencing it, or an outcome of their individual vulnerability or characteristics, setting them apart as somehow fundamentally 'different' from those who are not homeless (Pleace, 1998; Jacobs *et al.*, 1999). The significance of the latter is that it individualizes the ability someone has to negotiate with the risk of homelessness. This then 'individualizes' failure, blaming people for their inability to negotiate with risks such as homelessness, and setting them apart as somehow 'different' from people who can negotiate with the options available to them successfully (Bauman, 1998; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). Individuals who experience homelessness, will have multifaceted identities, motivations and experiences. People experiencing homelessness will be aware of different discourses and 'knowledge' that exists about homelessness, but if this does not fit with how they perceive themselves, when they experience homelessness, how may this knowledge affect how they describe their circumstances? Furthermore, if empirical knowledge about social issues does not appear to 'fit' with the subjective understanding and accounts people present of how it is to experience these issues, it may indicate that social policy to address these issues is shaped by misunderstanding (Jamieson, 2004). Hence the continued importance of qualitative, longitudinal research, such as this, that builds up biographical information on people and their circumstances, to inform future policies and theoretical perspectives on how social problems arise, and can be addressed, within the structural context of late modernity.

Collating biographical data

The empirical data utilized in this paper were collected over an 18-month period. Initially, 75 people who were, or recently had experienced, homelessness, or the risk of homelessness, completed a structured questionnaire on their route into homelessness, their current situation, and related aspects of their life such as employment, health, and social networks. These people were recruited from 13 different support services and accommodation projects, managed by a voluntary sector organization that aims to assist people experiencing housing problems or homelessness in a UK city. Therefore they were all actively engaged in accessing support services that defined them as 'homeless' and perceived themselves to be, or to have recently been homeless or at risk of homelessness. The range of housing circumstances this homelessness could refer to is diverse, however. Some of the participants had 'slept rough' on the streets for years; others had never slept rough, but lacked permanent accommodation and moved between hostels and bed & breakfast accommodation; some of the participants had their own home at the time of the first interview, but were still receiving support to 'maintain' this housing, having previously been homeless; some were accessing homeless services after being served eviction notices for their housing but had not yet left that housing.

From this questionnaire sample of 75, 30 people were selected through stratified sampling (to represent a spread of age, gender and housing situation) to take part in in-depth life histories and then three waves of in-depth interviews conducted over an 18-month period, to discuss and chart how their circumstances had changed and what they felt about their situation. Twenty-four participants took part in all three waves, with some contact or a second interview being conducted with a further four of the participants. The data from these 28 people are analysed in this paper. The sample consisted of 13 women and 15 men, with an age range of 25–60. The data were used to collate the participants' biographies, by bringing together the narratives they gave about both their retrospective life history and their circumstances over the three waves of in-depth interviews.

The interviews were used to explore the processes that had led to them becoming homeless, what they objectively did to resolve or negotiate with this situation, and how they subjectively felt about this. Baseline information relating to where they had lived over their life course was gathered, on the location of that accommodation, who they lived with, how they occupied their time during this period of their life (such as education, employment, social networks), how they felt about that period of their life, and what happened to change this situation. This was taped and transcribed and

using these transcripts their biographies were collated, in their words. These same issues were explored at each subsequent interview to allow for some baseline information on the participants' circumstances to be collected. However, what was important at each stage of the data collection was to allow for the participants to discuss and describe these experiences in their own words, whilst ensuring the baseline questions on what was 'actually happening' in their lives were covered. The research was not only biographical, as specific sections of the interview focused on the participants' opinions on services for people experiencing homelessness, and what they thought about homelessness. However, one of the key aims of the research was to develop detailed biographical accounts of the participants' lives before and during their experiences of homelessness.

Analysing biographical data

Whilst this research examined objectively 'what happened' to people over their life course, it is also concerned with how this is subjectively experienced. Ricoeur's theories of emplotment and narrative identity (1984; 1985; 1988; 1991a; 1991b; Ezzy, 2001) were adopted as means to understand how objective and subjective elements of a life are brought together in the narratives people present of their life. Ricoeur argues that through a process of 'emplotment', actual events, and how people present them and make sense of them as part of their 'story' of life, become interwoven subconsciously by them, over time. People are always in a process of reconstructing the 'plot' of their past and present life, and future plans, so that it continues to conceptually make a cohesive 'whole' life story. In this way they can maintain a sense of identity over time – they are the 'same' person today as yesterday – even if their circumstances change. This sense of 'sameness' can be maintained through the process of emplotment because it allows for the heterogenous actual events that occur in their life to be made into one homogenous autobiographical story through the introduction of their subjective understanding of it. People use their own experiences, knowledge and the external influences of different discourses to construct this narrative or 'plot' and maintain its coherence – '*narrative-identity constructs a sense of continuity and character in the plot of the story a person tells about him or herself. The story becomes for the person their actual history*' (Ezzy, 2001: 31).

This is the perspective adopted in this analysis. People present narratives about their life, from which their biography can be charted by the researcher. This biography will include objective things that 'have happened' but these will also be described, talked about, and explained subconsciously by the participants to maintain the cohesive sense of identity, the 'plot' of their life story. By constructing a cohesive narrative of the different

events that have occurred in their life, they can present a cohesive autobiography and maintain ontological security.

Events such as homelessness, where something has 'gone wrong' in the 'plot' are crucial to explore, to understand how people attempt to maintain this cohesion in a 'crisis', and what mechanisms they use to do so. The argument in this paper is that by utilizing qualitative longitudinal research in this way an examination can be made of how people do this and how agency and structure may affect the transitions people make over their life course. There is a hermeneutical relationship implicit in this, knowledge and ideology about homelessness, and its causes, will affect how people define and make sense of *their* experience of homelessness, and how they describe negotiating with this situation – lives as talked about, may only present one dimension or one discourse of lives as actually lived, even by those talking about them. And it is through research such as this that these different dimensions of objectively 'what actually happens' over time (such as gaining permanent housing), subjectively how it is presented and experienced, and the 'fit' that exists between these objective and subjective dimensions, may begin to be identified and explored. In the next section, this is illustrated through presenting the participants' biographies before examining how individual choice and family background were highlighted as key influences on people's transitions through homelessness.

PRESENTING BIOGRAPHIES: BECOMING AND BEING 'HOMELESS'

In the previous section, predicators of homelessness were outlined, and these were apparent in some of the biographies of the research participants. Six of the 28 participants had been in residential care as children, and a further two had left their parental home before they were 16 to stay with friends or other relatives. However, the biographies the participants described were also diverse. Some described their life as 'settled' and 'positive' for many years, into their fifties, before what they identified as their first incidence of housing insecurity began. Eight of the participants described their childhood negatively and those who had been in residential care were particularly likely to have felt their childhood was negative than those who had not been. Twenty of the participants described their childhood as positive, or 'alright', 'normal', 'we had our ups and downs but nothing different from anyone else'. However, even those who described their childhood as 'normal' often identified both structural poverty and family situations that they attributed to their current situation:

> (Where we grew up) it was a room and kitchen, outside toilets, probably a
> slum. It was, it was a slum, didn't have any baths inside, outside toilets, lived
> there from I was about one to eighteen ... This was from the 60s goin' up to

the 80s and my mother moved to another house, an up and downstairs house – bath, everybody had their room but my older sister had moved on by then … So we were all older. I think my mother got the house a bit too late for the family, you know. But from when I was eighteen I spent a lot of time in prison. It was – maybe I didnae have the right like role model. My father used to go out to work and come in drinking and he'd be drunk every day. Maybe – maybe that is something to do with it. I think it's a, nurture, nature, isn't it? So I don't know. See, I'm not putting the blame on anything but I don't think I was – I think I'd have stood a better chance with a father that never drank.

(39-year old male)

All of the participants were asked when they had been 'most settled' in their life. Two of the participants said that they had never felt settled. Nine of the participants reported that they were the most settled 'now' at the time of the interview. Domestic circumstances and family life were important to how settled the participants recalled they had felt over their life course with the remaining 17 participants saying that they had been most settled at a point in their life when they were living with their family or partners.

   The causes of their homelessness described in the participant's narratives usually illustrated a complex interrelation of 'individual factors' (such as drug misuse and relationship breakdown) with 'trigger' events (such as attempting suicide, or prison sentences) as what led to their homelessness, but rarely mentioned structural factors. Experiencing homelessness was usually precipitated by the gradual deterioration of their social and economic security. This deterioration of security that the participants described often involved complex interactions, such as being made redundant from employment due to drug misuse, at the same time as becoming increasingly estranged from their family or stable social networks, increasing mental or physical health problems occurring, and perhaps being evicted or losing their housing due to the breakdown of a relationship, or through non-payment of rent, which they attributed to using their income to buy drugs. In total, 16 of the participants 'slept rough' whilst homeless, and 18 had experienced homelessness repeatedly. The following quotes describe this complex interrelation of factors that some of the participants identified:

It was a lovely wee house (I had lived in) right enough, but it was all getting condemned. They just flattened it. So I had to move, which was the worst move I've ever made in my life, you know. Once they put you in an area like that you can't get out. And then my husband died. I wasn't caring, you know, I wasn't eating … wasn't doing anything, I was just waking up in the morning, opening a bottle, and just sitting there all day. And I was myself then you know, the children were all away. Once he went that was me.

(59-year old female)

> I've always had housing problems. Homeless at 16. Left my dad's. Well I never left him, I got kicked out. I went into housing for homelessness, but they did, they gave me a flat, but it was in a really bad area, it was full of junkies, and I got involved, as you do.
>
> (26-year old female)

Although the participants themselves usually identified 'individual' factors as the primary cause of their homelessness, it was clear from their descriptions of their transition into homelessness, that they implicitly felt other structural and cultural influences interacted with this. These influences are identified and explored in the following section.

AGENCY, STRUCTURE AND BIOGRAPHY: MAKING SENSE OF TRANSITIONS THROUGH HOMELESSNESS

The actual pathways through homelessness the participants took are summarized in Table I. How the participants discussed their changing circumstances over the different waves of interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of these transitions to be made. In this section, the extent to which the participants explained transitions through homelessness as individualized, or as a product of structures outside of their control, is discussed.

The participants were asked in the final interview to describe why homelessness occurs and how it could be resolved and their responses highlighted key mechanisms they identified as causing homelessness. The mechanisms they identified could be divided into two categories; first, the individual and their actions (agency) and second, the structure of society and inherent inequality (structure). And usually they identified an inter-relation of these factors as what may lead to some people's risk of homelessness became a reality.

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THEIR ACTIONS

The 'role of the individual' to explain homelessness occurring fell into two further categories: explanations for homelessness underpinned by a belief in individualized culpability, or due to the characteristics of the person experiencing it; and explanations that highlighted that people could negotiate with and make the 'right choices' (or not) due to their upbringing and family background.

These explanations were often presented as ways to explain *other* people's situation with most of the participants identifying a more complex relationship of agency and structure to explain their own experience of homelessness,

TABLE I   Matrix of homeless history and housing outcomes (*n* = 28)

At the first wave interview	At the third wave interview			
	Remained in own accommodation	Obtained own accommodation	Remained or become homeless	Total
Currently housed in their own permanent accommodation after a single episode of homelessness	3			3
Currently housed in their own permanent accommodation after repeated experiences of homelessness	5		1	6
Were still in the process of gaining permanent accommodation during a single episode of homelessness		4	1	5
Were still in the process of gaining permanent accommodation after repeated experiences of homelessness		5	7	12
Had maintained their permanent housing despite being at risk of becoming homeless	2			2
Total	10	9	9	28

or setting themselves apart as 'different' from others who may actually be negotiating with the same problems as they themselves were:

> Drugs have torn apart all the communities, definitely, definitely, I wouldn't bring a (child) up in (name of area) if I had any kids, I would try and get away into whatever area I could, but I suppose every area is the same and all, most places. They've done them all up and that and all, I think that's just stupid, it might make things a wee bit better, but … it doesn't change anything, the children are still wild and the mothers are still wild and all! The amount of lassies pushing prams, I never see a dad, it's all just young lassies pushing prams, a (child) needs a da' know what I'm talking about? (And to prevent homelessness) you need to ask for that support, don't you, do you know what

I mean? I think it's the drugs, people are doing that to themselves, to feed a drug habit, they're not paying the rent, they're not caring about the house, you know what I mean. I think you need to deal with the drugs, and make people realize that once they lose that house they might not get another one.

(39-year old male)

The following quote illustrates how a complex interaction of structural and individual mechanisms was also identified by the participants to explain why people become homeless:

I mean you don't know the background they have came from, might be abusive family, physical, mental whatever, I don't know if it's getting worse, I would say if you stay in the (certain areas), see the younger ones, the ones, there are, you know are going to turn into junkies, you look out the window and you see them running about and you know how they'll turn out, even ones from good families. But a lot of other folk it's their circumstance, maybe their dad battered them or abused them or whatever. Then again, I would say it's not just upbringing, it's the environment, that sort of thing, if they're growing up, all jumping about there . . . so I think that is maybe, like the area also, the housing area.

(29-year old female)

So some of the participants indicated belief in a discourse of 'culpable' individuals, with 'illegitimacy', illegal activities such as drug use, and an erosion of 'communities' being seen as creating a group of people whose homelessness or situation could be 'predicted' as an inevitable trajectory due to their actions. However, they also rejected that they were 'the same' as this, and appeared to both uphold these discourses whilst also rejecting that they, as homeless people, were actually like this. This may reflect the need to maintain a coherent and positive 'narrative identity'. As the next section illustrates, the participants' accounts of their ability to negotiate with homelessness, due to family upbringing and 'belief', highlighted this 'difference' between them, and others experiencing homelessness – whilst in fact they may have had similar biographies.

The discourse of culpability some of the participants identified did often interact with an awareness of structural explanations, such as the influence of a concentration of poverty and exclusion in some housing areas; and other individual factors, particularly family background and upbringing. Multidimensional reasons were identified by the participants to explain why homelessness occurs, that recognized the complex inter-action of agency and structure. In the narratives the participants presented of *their* lives certain individual factors were identified, particularly that of family background and the influence this has, which is explored in the next section.

FAMILY BACKGROUND AND THE 'EPISTEMOLOGICAL FALLACY'

Some of the participants felt strongly that their individual 'actions' and 'choices' were the reason they negotiated a route out of homelessness. However, they felt these 'choices' stemmed from their upbringing, and the 'culture' it had instilled in them:

> Well the support helped (me) but I think, well, from my past, I have some belief in myself, just in the way my parents brought me up . . . I think anyone can (find a route out of homelessness), if you want it, then, find a way, try your hardest to do the best with what you can and not tire yourself out with it all.
>
> (25-year old female)

> I think, actually (I resolved my homelessness due to) a mixture of everything, myself and my family support, but I think, more myself, more myself, I feel like I developed a back bone, and a will, and a fight to live on, which I never had when I was homeless . . . Because I hit my rock bottom, I hit my rock bottom and I seen, I seen two points in a road and just enough was enough. I'd just had enough; I didn't want it anymore, any of it. I believe that some people, they've not known any different. I was, I suppose I was lucky in that way that I had, that I had had a settled life (growing up with my family), previous to being homeless and I had experienced being settled, so I had something to compare it to.
>
> (28-year old female)

Do these individualized explanations for gaining a route out of homelessness indicate that there is more flexibility and freedom for people to choose their own 'life course' but that they are 'responsible' when these 'choices' go wrong and they 'hit rock bottom'? Or do they indicate that discourses of individualization and culpability actually obscure – even for those who are experiencing it – the structural underpinnings that lead to the risk of homelessness becoming a reality for some people?

If family background is viewed as one of the key causal mechanisms apparent in the participants' narratives to explain why they were able to 'negotiate' their own route out of homelessness and why some people were not, does this not return to the 'class' background they started at as being a key aspect? Or at least the resources and opportunities their family background gave them access to within the economic and social structures of the society they live in? However, rather than seeing this structural position as something that may have negatively affected their life chances – which may have led to them becoming homeless initially – the idea of individualization and increased freedom and agency has obscured this influence that structural position may have on their life course. There may have been some renewed

interest in class analysis in recent years (Crompton *et al.*, 2005; Skeggs, 2004), however, the role that class may still have in influencing both the life chances someone has, and the cultural and social resources they have to draw on to make sense of and define their identity and life history certainly requires ongoing examination (Phillips and Western, 2005; Anthias, 2005). Whilst the participants in this research may indeed have more flexibility, and be negotiating with different risks in late modernity than in previous generations, it also may be that the ongoing structural underpinnings that will still denote life 'chances' are obscured by the discourse of increased individualization and 'freedom' – Furlong and Cartmel's (1997) epistemological fallacy of life in late modernity in operation. The need to maintain a positive sense of identity and 'ontological security' as they made transitions through homelessness may also explain why participants individualized their experience of homelessness further by 'blaming' others in the same situation for their homelessness whilst highlighting they were 'different' due to family background and 'choosing' to resolve their homelessness. However, the participants' 'chance' of becoming homeless may have been related to their structural position and this position may actually have been similar to others experiencing homelessness. However, the acceptance of this discourse of individualization to how people explain the events in their life should not be overstated either, and this is discussed in the following section.

THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY AND INHERENT INEQUALITY

Some of the participants' narratives included the explicit recognition that structural inequality was the cause of homelessness, and the recognition that this structural inequality was embedded in processes they felt to be outside their control:

> I think the root problem could be just having the class system, the rich and the poor, I think the root problem is, if you're poor, you're life is a struggle, you know, I definitely believe that is a root problem, if you are poor, people are not caring about what you say, you know, people have less opportunities, and the more you struggle, the more stress you have to live with, and you know, it's all relative to the one thing.
>
> (29-year old male)

> It's not just a, it's a whole social deprivation thing going on there, with drugs, employment, and all that. But access for people to improve their situation still isn't there. Like education … it's really about choice and I think unless they provide adequate choices for people to make, then it's never really going to change.
>
> (34-year old male)

So crucially, some of the participants *did* describe structural inequality as the primary cause of homelessness, and there may need to be more exploration of how aware people negotiating with inequality or exclusion over their life course are of the structural context they are negotiating with, and the extent to which they may feel powerless to change this. Life chances are still bound to some degree to the structural 'class' position of birth, or at least the resources it allows access to. Perhaps only those who have the resources to enjoy increased freedom and mobility (through access to economic and cultural capital, and resources such as education and employment) are evidence of this reflexive modernity, and the ability to create our own life course. For those without equal access to these resources the discourse of increased individualization may actually act to individualize their collectively increased risk of exclusion from some or all aspects of society, and may exclude them further, subjectively, through the discourse of an individual whose 'failure' in society can be viewed as a product of their deviance, culpability or actions. The influence that this may have on how people construct, present and make sense of their life biographies, the 'plot' of their life, should also be acknowledged. It may also act to further individualize people – as they feel they are 'not the same' as other people experiencing the same situation as they are. How they explain other people's homelessness does not fit with how they explain their own homelessness to maintain the cohesive 'plot' of their life, a cohesion that they require to maintain their 'narrative identity'.

In the concluding section, the potential that biographical research may have to develop greater understanding of lives as they are lived in late modernity, and how to address problems that may arise, such as homelessness, are discussed.

CONCLUSION: THE ADDED VALUE OF BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH TO UNDERSTANDING INEQUALITY

Qualitative, longitudinal research that charts biographies over time can illustrate the long-term processes of change that people experience, the multidimensional nature of this, and particularly how people perceive both structural constraints and acts of agency to explain the life course they have. The hermeneutical relationship that exists between language, knowledge and 'reality' means it may be difficult to identify whether the narratives people's present are influenced by, or actual evidence of, current social theories and ideas. It may be that theories that state there are increased risks and individualization, enter into the public consciousness in the form of discourse and then act to allow for blame to be apportioned onto people for their own exclusion from some aspects of social life. Another outcome of this is that people experiencing inequality set themselves apart as

'different' from others who are experiencing the same circumstances as them. This mechanism then acts to obscure the structural underpinnings that actually do appear to influence their life chances. Transitions through homelessness occurring within the social and political context of late modernity can be explored using biographical research. The value of this is that the interaction of agency and structure, and the impact this has on these transitions, can be explored, in an approach that recognizes objective events over the life course and how they are described and explained will be interwoven in a narrative 'plot' of people's lives.

What requires particular exploration in the continued analysis of this data is the extent to which people do actually recognize the structural and cultural influences that they are negotiating with, the existence of different, conflicting discourses of risk, responsibility, and the role of the individual, that are actually operating, and how these may impact on the narrative identity, and ongoing actions people may take. The value that research of this kind will have in the future is to continue to develop understandings of the processes that occur as people negotiate with their life chances, inequality and opportunity in late modernity, and to 'pull together' gaps between lives as talked about and lives as lived, so that public policy and responses to inequality can be based on an accurate understanding of these issues.

This paper is intended only to open up debate on the potential that research such as this has, and the ongoing analysis of this data will aim to realize this potential further and assess how individuals negotiate with the risk of extreme inequality. Those who cannot access a home in the current social structure may represent some of the most excluded individuals of late modernity; however, their position and motivations are not passive or static, they are active participants in how they negotiate with and understand this situation, and this active participation must be recognized and explored if theoretical perspectives on how it is to epistemologically and ontologically experience life in late modernity – for everyone – illustrate reality and are not based on fallacy or misunderstanding. And this paper asserts that research exploring the biographies people present of their life, alongside other methods and sources, has a key role to play in the development of these perspectives.

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