

The Causes of Homelessness: A Critical Realist View

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December 1, 2019

Introduction

Homelessness is one of the great “wicked” problems of the modern world (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Because homelessness is so wide-spread, the causes of this problem are difficult to isolate. In a simplified sense, the different theoretical causes of homelessness can be broken down into two categories: individual factors and structural factors. Essentially, there is a debate waged on the modern front about whether or not homelessness tends to be caused by individual features of the homeless people, or by societal structures that create a broken system. Most theorists agree that the answer lies somewhere in the middle, with a healthy amount of both categories contributing. However, this debate can be somewhat simplistic, because it addresses the general idea of factors related to homelessness, but it fails to offer any “clear conceptualization of causation” (Fitzpatrick, pg. 5).

In her article “Explaining Homelessness: A Critical Realist Perspective,” Suzanne Fitzpatrick addresses the failure of what she calls the “new orthodoxy,” or the view that homelessness is caused by a mix of structural and individual factors. In an attempt to rectify the simplicity of this model, she proposes that critical realism be used as a more effective and thorough framework to understand the causes of homelessness.

The world of homelessness so often deals only in facts and very little in theory, so this article offers a clear contribution of theory to a real-world problem of great magnitude. The application of a theoretical perspective to provide a clearer picture of the causes of a difficult problem such as homelessness is bold and, to some degree, dangerous, since the complexity of the problem has hitherto all but preempted such attempts. At the same time, this application links the theoretical and the practical in a way that serves to clarify both and lends a degree of usefulness that might otherwise be unrecognized by the application of theory.

In her article, Fitzpatrick critiques not only the “new orthodoxy,” but also four different perspectives that are often used to form causal analyses. These perspectives are positivism, social constructionism, feminism, and postmodernism/post-structuralism. Ultimately, her goal is to explain how helpful a critical realist perspective can be when providing a causal analysis of homelessness.

First and foremost, the article begs the question: what is critical realism? Plain realism is the idea that the world has a set reality that exists separate from the perceptions of the people that live in it. According to this perspective, there is an objective reality that exists regardless of whether or not it is acknowledged. This logic suggests that if a tree fell in the woods and no-one was around to hear it, it would still make a noise. Critical realism, on the other hand, sees the world as the product of structures which cannot be observed, but must be understood in order to fully understand social and natural relationships in the world (pg. 2). This view offers a sort of middle ground approach between the ideas that causes can only exist if they are statistically observable, and that reality does not exist beyond our perceptions. To this end, Fitzpatrick’s critique of various theoretical frameworks as inadequate for addressing homelessness demonstrates the importance of developing a complex middle ground perspective.

Positivism and Interpretivism

Fitzpatrick’s critique begins with positivism, or the idea that something can only be said to “cause” something else if it produces that result 100% of the time. In a very set, mathematical way, positivism suggests that reality is completely objective and can be determined by scientific measures. Fitzpatrick makes the point that according to this view, something can only be said to “cause” homelessness if it results in homelessness 100% of the time. Thus, poverty cannot be said to cause homelessness, because some poor people are not homeless (pg. 5). On the other

hand, social constructionism, or interpretivism, sees objectivity and mathematical causality as limited in the sense that it fails to recognize the reality of the un-empirical. Instead, the focus should be on the meanings that people assign to different things. Thus, if something is perceived by individuals as causing homelessness, it can be considered to cause it (pg. 6-7). Fitzpatrick critiques both sides of the spectrum by suggesting that, while there is, to some degree, a reality that is objective and a causality that can be mathematically proven, social factors are often much more complex and difficult to understand than math allows. Thus, critical realism offers the idea that we cannot fully understand all causal relationships, and that something can be considered a “cause” of homelessness, even if it does not result in homelessness 100% of the time. At the same time, critical realism recognizes that the way we define problems and causes has direct and tangible impacts upon the ways that those problems are addressed. For example, if poverty is constructed as causing homelessness, it can result in policies that target the poverty-related aspects of homelessness. Thus, while actual, objective causation is important, the meanings assigned to the problem are equally important (pg. 7).

Feminism and the Post-Critiques

Fitzpatrick does not stop with a simple critique of positivism and interpretivism, however. She also critiques feminism and postmodernism/post-structuralism. Feminism tends to see homelessness as caused by the patriarchal structure of our society. In general, feminism focuses on the tendency of women to have a greater proclivity for housing instability than men and puts that tendency up to the fact that women have less power to protect themselves and determine their own economic needs. Fitzpatrick acknowledges these ideas, but notes that as a rule, the feminist approach is empirically unsound. Ultimately, there is not enough research out there that demonstrates a correlation between being a woman and having housing instability.

According to a positivist perspective, feminism's argument would be flat and ill-founded. However, critical realism finds a way to support the lived experience that women have more housing instability than men without needing the degree of empirical evidence that positivism would require. Thus, while the point made by feminism is not necessarily untrue, it does not offer a backing for its own lack of empiricism in the same way that critical realism does. The importance of the socially constructed that is held up by critical realism offers an out for views that are not, as of yet, empirically substantiated (pg. 8-9). Thus, critical realism offers some validity between the view that women tend to experience more housing instability than men in spite of the lack of empirical evidence to demonstrate this problem.

Lastly, Fitzpatrick addresses the relationship of the "post-critiques" – postmodernism and post-structuralism – to critical realism. These views offer the idea that a single dominating force cannot be said to be the ultimate cause of inequities and subjugation in society. Unlike feminism, which looks most closely at the patriarchy as the dominating force, the post-critiques suggest that there are indeed a variety of factors which can cause today's problems. They also suggest that it is impossible to create clear, rational solutions to problems, the only basis of which is knowledge. This view is simultaneously hard to refute and difficult to quantify because it offers a broad perspective of the post-critiques while, at the same time, acknowledging a tendency of the post-critiques to lean toward irrationality, subjectivity and relativity. Due to the complexity of the post-critiques, Fitzpatrick advocates a more watered-down view of the post-critiques, known as "structuration theory," which suggests that humans can make choices regarding their circumstances, but such choices also have unintended results. Essentially, structures can be influenced by human action, while human action is, at the same time, influenced by those structures (pg. 9). This view, Fitzpatrick suggests, is consistent with critical realism in that it

suggests that there are a variety of understandable and not-understandable factors which may and may not influence homelessness. Ultimately, between the results of human choice and the structural factors that produce a proclivity to homelessness, it is next to impossible to determine exact causes of homelessness. However, critical realism and structuration theory offer a perspective that allows for a variety of factors to be causal and non-causal in relationship at the same time (pg. 10).

Fitzpatrick's goal was to produce a theoretical framework that could adequately encompass what is known about homelessness. For such a wicked problem, there must be a complex solution, and critical realism is intended to provide that solution. While it is admirable to provide a framework that offers a clear space for all that is currently known about homelessness, including the empirical factors on those which are known but not substantiated by statistical evidence, it is difficult to see how much further this framework takes the world on a quest to solve the issue of homelessness. If anything, critical realism suggests that homeless cannot simply be "solved," because there are some many factors that could (or could not) lead to homelessness. Practically, it is quite useful to know that there are a variety of factors, functioning in a variety of ways, which influence any given case of homelessness. At the same time, though, Fitzpatrick's framework does not bring humanity any closer to understanding the deep roots of homelessness. Critical realism suggests that, ultimately, there may be no clear deep root of homelessness.

Implications of a Theoretical Framework

As the culmination of her article, Fitzpatrick addresses the implications of her critical-realist framework and sketches out a basic format that the framework might provide. To do this, she utilizes a criticism by Malcolm Williams which suggests that the category "homeless" might

not be accurate at all. Williams, and, through him, Fitzpatrick argue that because there is no root cause of homelessness, it is difficult to determine what, exactly makes someone “homeless.” In a complex world where a million different paths can lead to homelessness, it is difficult to determine a finite model of causal paths that might lead in that direction. In an attempt to classify these paths at least to some extent, Fitzpatrick divides potential “causal mechanisms” related to homelessness into four categories: economic structures, housing structures, patriarchal and interpersonal structures, and individual attributes (pg. 13). These categories outline all of the possible types of structures that could lead to homelessness, albeit in a very broad fashion.

Conclusion

Fitzpatrick’s work is enlightening because it tears down everything we know about homelessness and rebuilds a model that clarifies the confusing causal aspect. How useful this model will be in practice is yet to be seen, but a fuller understanding of the way that so many different paths can lead to the thing which we call “homelessness” may be able to help us as we develop further models for solving the problem. What Fitzpatrick’s work seems to indicate is that there is no specific problem or solution that can be addressed to solve the issue of homelessness. Perhaps the best thing we can do is try to determine which causal structures are more prevalent in our communities. For example, housing might be a problem in some communities and not particularly problematic in others. There is no specific set of solutions that can address homelessness, and the sooner we realize that, the sooner we can adjust the way we address it to include a complex model.

In terms of policy, critical realism may be a difficult model to put into practice. Most policy is aimed at solving more linear problems, so developing a complex policy that addresses a wide variety of aspects, both empirically driven and not, may be tricky. The fact that there is no

set problem or solution in the world of critical realism makes the development of this kind of amorphous policy nearly impossible. Future work may want to find a way to narrow critical realism down into set arguments so that policy can more easily be made to address the causal factors espoused by this framework. At the same time, however, it is almost contradictory to the argument of critical realism to narrow it down into set arguments. Thus, while this theoretical framework is quite useful for considering the broader causal patterns for homelessness, the actual development of policy based on this framework is difficult in the short term. In the long run, however, a more effective solution model can be gained if we are viewing the problem in a way that makes sense of the complexity that it faces.

References

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