

**At home in the world: the moral and political language
of homelessness**

**Presentation by Dr Andrew Hollows, Manager Research
& Policy, Hanover Welfare Services and Adjunct
Professor with RMIT University to the SPRC Conference
12 July 2007**

Slide 1: Introduction

Hello, my name is Dr Andrew Hollows. I am the Manager of Research & Policy with Hanover Welfare Services and Adjunct Professor with RMIT University, Melbourne.

The purpose of this presentation is to argue the case for a new moral and political language about homelessness, or what I prefer to term, the homeless experience. It revolves about the twin questions: 1) who is responsible – both for

homelessness and its solutions; and 2) what does the home provide?

Slide 2: Intolerance

Why you may ask? Why these themes about homeless experience? There is, I believe, a moral and political imperative for us to think and to think well about homelessness. And, indeed, we should not shy away from these issues and in using such language.

This need is evident by work undertaken by Hanover Welfare Services last year into public perceptions of homelessness we commissioned, in partnership with Roberts Research House and the law firm, Maurice, Blackburn and Cashman. While this research revealed that there was clearly a sense of compassion and concern about the issue, it would be fair to say that **the community is generally tolerant of homelessness but intolerant of the homeless** – a point I shall return to shortly.

Slide 3: Representations of homelessness

A fair degree of emphasis was also given in the focus groups on individual factors. In short, when asked to think about **homelessness** most people tend to shift their focus onto the particular attributes and behaviors of the **homeless**. This is accompanied by a shift from structural issues, such as a lack of affordable housing, to individual level issues.

In short, as represented by this random selection of images from the web, our views and perceptions are typically shaped by stereotypical images.

Slide 4: Thinking well

I wish to propose that we – as a community - tend to find it easier and perhaps preferable, **not** to think about homelessness. Indeed, there is a risk in not thinking well about homeless. And what I mean by ‘well’ is thinking critically, with a focus on equity and social justice, and a necessary precursor to and accompaniment of action.

As shown in this quote here from the political philosopher Hannah Arendt: our daily habits and our everyday, private, concerns that surround us are the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against the reality of homelessness. And if we do begin to think about homelessness - as we have seen - we tend to draw on stereotypes in a way that tends to gloss over the real life experiences of people.

Accordingly, there is a need for a moral and political language adequate to the task of thinking about homelessness. As Furedi (2005) reminds us, politics seems to be lost for words: public figures and the media struggle to understand or explain the big issues of the twenty-first century. It is also as Ignatieff (1984: 141) remind us we “...need, as much as anything else, language adequate to the times we live in.”

So let's start.

Slide 5: The elephant in the room is....

One of the elephants in the room – to borrow a somewhat over-used term from George Lakoff - is the issue of responsibility or more correctly, irresponsibility.

In our work on public perceptions, the perceived causes of homelessness fell into three main categories including

- Economic factors included low socio-economic status and job loss
- Social/domestic factors included family background and the lack of a support network
- Individual factors such as poor coping skills and the absence of a support network were thought to intensify the causes of homelessness.

But as already noted, a fair degree of emphasis was given to this later point; on individual factors.

From the perspective of solution responsibility, our research also showed that a solid majority respondents to our national telephone survey expressed strong support for the role of government (85%) and public services (74%). This, however, is tempered somewhat by the fact that 71% of survey respondents also saw it was the responsibility of people experiencing homelessness themselves to address homelessness.

This of course raises interesting questions about 'responsibility' and homelessness, and what can be fairly expected from people who experience homelessness, and all that this entails.

Slide 6: Responsibility

This whole issue of attributing responsibility and irresponsibility for both the cause and solution to homelessness came abundantly clear to me courtesy of a letter from my local newspaper a couple of weeks ago. As you can see the views expressed are quite strong, though not atypical.

Clearly, such a view about homelessness is heavily cast in the language of agency, choice, responsibility and decisions. Depending on our judgments about the choices and life-style of people who experience homeless tends to determine the extent of our sympathy.

Slide 7: One more.....

And as we read further, the issue of responsibility and irresponsibility is front and centre.

Slides 8-17: And more...

As illustrated by these key words and themes...

Slide 18

What we have here is a variation of what I call the 'neighbour game'. At heart are questions such as: who is my neighbour? Are they a stranger or friend? Are they like me? Here we get the basis of judgments about worth and value, inclusion, rights and responsibility.

Slide 19: Irresponsibility

Here we get one, of many, paradoxes afflicting any discussion of homelessness: Those experiencing homelessness are held responsible for their own 'irresponsibility' as well as the irresponsibility of others.

There are three things I mean here.

First, there is a strong sense that those who experience homelessness have no-one to blame but they own selves. This, of course, is a recurrent theme in both homelessness and welfare politics for many decades now.

Second, however, the paradox is that people who are seemingly irresponsible now need take on their responsibilities and effectively rectify their homeless circumstance.

In work Hanover commenced late last year with RMIT we looked at the different ways homelessness is framed.

One such story is the typical stereotype of the homeless older male. The individual is usually seen as a loner, possibly drug effected, more likely to be addicted to alcohol – or to use the old parlance, a homeless drunk. These are the people we imagine a sleeping rough, have no family and are pretty well disengaged from society.

The accompanying moral judgments that fit with this story is that this individual is ultimately responsible for his (or her) homelessness, has essentially chosen to live this life-style and opting out of the obligations of being a responsible citizen. In short, we can be quite damning of this individual and our response may be one more of fear than compassion.

There is also a third element here about responsibility. It would seem that we - the community - risk becoming so focused on these immediate concerns that our interests and connection with other people – who we would consider ‘strangers’ – is seemingly absent. It can lead to what another theorist –Joan Tronto - termed the risk of ‘privileged irresponsibility’.

This means that due to our social and economic standing we do not need to concern ourselves about the well-being and welfare of others, including those members of our community experiencing homelessness. With an increasing emphasis on our own private lives, on accumulating material wealth and the compression of political debate and discourses, it is no wonder that we are encouraged ‘not to think what we are doing’ (to quote again from Hannah Arendt) and perhaps not being either able to or not wanting

to *think* from the standpoint of somebody else – and certainly not from the standpoint of someone worse off than we.

Slide 20: Institutional responsibility

I think one way of moving the discussion forward is to follow the suggestion of Marion Iris Young who makes an important distinction between individual and institutional responsibility. She notes that there are things that are rightly within the domain of individuals to influence and to have some control over. To ignore this is to essentially consider people as passive victims of structural causes and so denying any agency and responsibility. But the real question is what is reasonable to expect from people placed in quite dire circumstances, and the broader responsibility of community and government in preventing and addressing homelessness. Hence, Marion Young's focus on institutional responsibility and the need for moral agents, both individual and collective, to think about our responsibilities in relation to homelessness as a structural social injustice.

Slide 21: What does the home provide?

So if the talk of responsibility (and irresponsibility) is the proverbial elephant in the room, then the notion of the 'home' is akin to a spectre that persistently haunts discussions about homelessness. The notion of the 'home' may seem a somewhat obvious point when discussing the homelessness experience but is usually dealt with rhetorically rather as a political and tangible entity.

There are a number of features that need to be considered with the most evident being the presence of adequate shelter. That is, to be homeless is to be without shelter or to be roofless.

Slide 22: Give me shelter....

The policy response lies in providing shelter where possible.

In this context the home effectively equates with shelter.

This is essentially the sentiment expressed in the quote shown here.

But there is a risk of considering homelessness in terms of what has been called the 'bare life'. The bare life refers to the biological needs common to all humans and draws attention to the barest of life's necessities and looks at a person more in terms of their functioning and biological needs rather than as a citizen. As a consequence the logical and seemingly sensible response to homelessness is seen as nothing more than meeting the basic human needs of food and shelter.

But it is at this point that we begin to see the need for a distinction between housing and the home is warranted because the human condition requires more than the attendance to a bare minimum. The provision of shelter and housing, while necessary, is not a sufficient condition when addressing homelessness.

Slide 23: Home, safety and security 1

The experience of homelessness is also characterized by the exposure to harm or at least its potential. This harm may derive, for example, from the violent, aggressive and threatening behaviour from others – such as the violence of a partner, spouse or other significant family member. There is also a general need to feel a sense of security or what some commentators refer to as ‘ontological security’.

Slide 24: Home, safety and security 2

Accordingly the home takes on more significance and meaning than the mere provision of shelter and protection from the physical elements. Issues of security and safety, as well the bodily integrity of an individual becomes paramount. In short, the home provides personal safety and protection from the incidence of violence and harm. It also provides **security** of the person and the security of place. It is here that issues of tenure security, for instance, also come in to play.

These points are neatly encapsulated in this quote shown here.

These are of course ideal conditions. The persistence of family and domestic violence starkly highlight the frailty of

the home and the provision of a safe and secure environment.

Slide 25: Home, privacy and intimacy 1

A natural follow-on from the issue of home and safety is the some times idealized notion of home as a place of privacy and intimacy. The experience of homelessness shows us that it is fundamentally these attributes of the home that are commonly missing. This is evident from the experience of primary homeless which essentially entails exposure and display in public spaces – where by definition any sense of privacy is difficult to exercise. This is also the case if you are couch surfing and continually reliance on the good will and use of someone else's home space. Consequently the ability to exercise freedom, control and choice are limited.

Likewise, homelessness can compromise the experience of intimacy, be detrimental to the maintenance of relationships between partners, with children and others.

Slide 26: Home, privacy and intimacy 2

In short, and as outlined by the quote shown here, there is a compelling need to have the ability to 'shut the door' and to have a **home space**.

This notion of the home - as a home space - differentiates the home as a place very distinct from the outside world of social activity, and focuses on how people construct different notions of privacy, the importance of possessions and the care of personal belongings. Likewise, a focus on the relationships we make, the intimacy involved, as well as the mutual and shared responsibilities that develop – such as care responsibilities for children and adults.

Slide 27: Home and the social

Clearly there is a need to have a 'home space' so to attend to life sustaining activities before we can exercise our capacities as citizens, but the home is more than a safe haven and the penultimate expression of privacy and, for some critics, a privatized space of human interaction. Rather the home also entails a sense of connection, community and the home providing a basis for social and economic participation (i.e. **home as a home-base**).

We know that for people experiencing homelessness the sense of belonging, the degree of connectedness to a local area and community, as well as the ability to participate social, economically and politically are necessarily limited.

Slide 28: Home and the political 1

Indeed, this account of the home remains limited if it does not include the political persona of being human, which is to be recognized and to participate as a political being; – as a citizen.

The politics under consideration here is not only the issue of winners and losers; that is who gets what particular redistributive resources; but us also about participation and recognition. The political non-recognition of people, who find themselves homeless, especially for rough sleepers, can take on many forms including: seeing the ‘homeless’ as non-people, as disruptive subjects, helpless victims of circumstances; and as clients with pathologies.

Slide 29: Home and the political 2

Homelessness, as one theorist noted, is tantamount to civil death as starkly spelled out in the quote shown here: “to be excluded from the political community – a civil death – is to be deprived of the right of action and of opinion” (Feldman).

Unfortunately, there remains a persistent disenfranchisement of many people eligible as citizens to vote. This was confirmed in recent research by Hanover about participation in the 2006 State Election, the results which are being presented by my colleague later at this conference.

Slide 30:

The opposite of what the 'home' provides is homelessness, but an experience understood in terms of the shrinking of the private, social and political spaces for people in such a circumstance. In effect, homelessness is not only a loss of a home but is a displacement from the very basis of the human condition. It effectively results in what could be called the 'no-space' of homelessness: 1) no or compromised shelter; 2) the use of and exposure of open/public areas; 3) the risk of assault, compromised safety, an absence of privacy, and no sense of belong etc 4) not engaging or appearing in social spaces including the economy; and 5) a loss of autonomy in the private, social and political realms, which is typically matched by a no-think situation in the public's mind – the homeless remain the unthought-of and hence the thoughtlessness of public opinion.

Slide 31: Conclusion

It has been my contention that the inclusion of notions of the home – or what the home provides – as well as the issues of responsibility, can help us to articulate a different understanding of the homelessness experience than that present in contemporary community opinion. For me, that means engaging with the political and policy issue of homelessness as a **values debate** about perceptions, attitudes and (re)frames seemingly **common-sense** accounts of homelessness. Such considerations are ultimately political questions as they concern how we, collectively, take care of the world and assume responsibility for it (again, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt).

And in so doing, this helps provide a basis for a moral and **political language that concerns issues of** agency,

vulnerability and needs, the care we accord other, and ultimately of human rights and citizenship.

Slide 32

Thank you for your interest.