

Understanding how young people exit homelessness in Australia: A critical realist approach

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Keywords

critical realism, homelessness, young people, exiting homelessness, lived experience

Abstract

Despite years of policy attention and increasing intervention, the numbers of young people experiencing homelessness in Australia continue to increase. Previous meta-theoretical approaches to understanding homelessness amongst young people are largely unable to explain the conditions which enable young people to exit homelessness and maintain stable housing. We put forward Critical Realism as a way of overcoming the limitations of the three main sets of approaches which have been used to date: Empiricism, Interpretivism, and Interactionism / Epidemiology. The meta-theoretical assumptions made by Critical Realism can allow researchers to more robustly explain what enables young people to exit homelessness and maintain stable housing by identifying what it is about the structures and mechanisms, or the absence of these structures and mechanisms, which leads to this outcome. By using a Critical Realist approach, we hope to be able to contribute to more robust explanations of how young people exit homelessness and maintain housing.

Homelessness amongst young people in Australia

The disproportionate impact of homelessness upon young people has made research in this area a topic of priority, largely focusing upon the likelihood of experiencing homeless, the risks of homelessness, and successful interventions to support young people (Kidd 2012; Farrugia 2016; Mallett et al. 2010). Despite this research focus, young people in Australia remain over-represented in official homelessness statistics which are likely to be an under-estimation of the true prevalence of homelessness amongst young people (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). A significant proportion of young people experiencing homelessness face the possibility of remaining homeless into adulthood (e.g. Johnson and Chamberlain 2008).

In this article we will briefly introduce critical realism as the perspective that will be adopted as part of a larger doctoral research project looking at what enables young people to exit homelessness. As we will demonstrate, critical realism as a meta-theoretical approach allows us to develop an explanation for what enables young people to exit homelessness. We will provide a brief outline of the aspects of critical realism that will be drawn upon to develop this explanation which will be the focus of future work. To develop this explanation we will be building upon the work of Allen (2000), Fitzpatrick (2005), McNaughton-Nicholls (e.g. 2009), and Hastings (2020). This article will then conclude by looking at how a critical realist meta-theory can build upon what is already known about homelessness amongst young people. We recognise that previous explanations for

homelessness based upon individual factors, structural factors, or 'the new orthodoxy' have been well criticised by Fitzpatrick (2005), Johnson and Jacobs (2014), Neale (1997), and Pleace (2016) amongst others, and refer the interested reader to works by those authors. We will take the view that these explanations have developed out of the meta-theoretical approaches taken to researching homelessness amongst young people: empiricism, interpretivism, and interactionism / epidemiology. We will look at how those meta-theoretical perspectives have shaped the way that homelessness, and exiting homelessness, is explained and then look at how critical realism can offer a more robust framework for developing these explanations further.

Previous approaches to understanding homelessness amongst young people

Empiricist, interpretivist, and interactionist approaches have furthered our understandings of homelessness and exiting homelessness amongst young people by examining the role of individual characteristics and structural inequality which have underpinned the way that homelessness is understood, researched, and responded to in policy (Bullen 2015; Farrugia and Gerrard 2016; Neale 1997). Our aim is not to critique the knowledge developed by these approaches as that argument has been made elsewhere by many authors. Additionally, we do not intend to rehash critical realist arguments about the limitations of empiricism and interpretivism which have been made by Bhaskar (2008, 2015), Collier (1994), and Sayer (2000, 2010) amongst others. Instead, we present them here to provide context for arguing that a critical realist approach is necessary to overcome their limitations. We should also note that while our focus in this article is upon young people, the arguments we make in this section are also applicable to other groups of people experiencing homelessness.

Empiricism

Empiricist approaches to understanding homelessness have been used to provide information about young people who are experiencing homelessness (Farrugia and Gerrard 2016; C. Parsell and Marston 2012). This is underpinned by the search for factors which are over-represented amongst young people experiencing homelessness compared to their housed peers (Batterham 2019). This approach has provided information about young people experiencing homelessness in terms of their rates of specific disorders, such as mental health and substance use diagnoses, and sexually transmitted infections and blood-borne viruses (e.g. Hodgson et al. 2013; Medlow, Klineberg, and Steinbeck 2014). These empiricist approaches have also examined whether factors, such as age, gender, ethnicity, education, substance use, and mental health, were associated with exiting homelessness (e.g. Milburn et al. 2009; Roy et al. 2016) and has compared interventions aimed at helping young people to exit homelessness (e.g. Fitzpatrick-Lewis et al. 2011). In summary, empiricist approaches have allowed for the quantification of young people experiencing homelessness, developed estimates of the prevalence of specific disorders requiring treatment, and looked for factors which alter the risk of a young person becoming or remaining homeless.

Interpretivism

Interpretivist approaches to understanding homelessness, particularly social constructionism and ethnography, broadened the recognition of homelessness amongst young people from the historically narrow conceptualisations of homelessness (Fopp 2009, 2008; Somerville and Bengtsson 2002). Interpretivist research provided for broader definitions of homelessness by outlining how definitions of who was considered homeless were linked to political ideological perspectives rather than supposedly objective measures (Fitzpatrick and Christian 2006; Fopp 2008). For example, statutory definitions of homelessness have typically been fairly narrow as a means of limiting access to services, while activist definitions are typically fairly broad as a means of raising awareness of homelessness (Fitzpatrick 2000; Kyle 2005). These broader definitions of homelessness were particularly important for recognising homelessness amongst young people (and families) as a response to poverty which meant that homelessness began to be understood as a result of adverse structural and economic conditions (Somerville 2013; Bullen 2015; Neale 1997). Finally, it also helped to articulate the experiences and process of exiting homelessness amongst young people by introducing the use of metaphors into academia and policy, the most popular of which have been "trajectory", "career", and more recently "pathway" (Fopp 2009; Raitakari 2020). In contrast to the quantification of homelessness amongst young people in empiricist approaches, interpretivist approaches attempt to broaden our understanding of homelessness as faced by young people.

Interactionism and Epidemiological approaches

Interactionist and epidemiological approaches allowed for both individual factors (broadly identified by empiricist research) and structural factors (broadly identified by interpretivist research) to be combined to show how both sets of factors could operate to cause and sustain homelessness amongst young people. The popularity of these approaches within homelessness research and policy (Busch-Geertsema et al. 2010; Pleace 2016) is based on the fact that, as outlined previously, individual characteristics and structural inequality underpin homelessness conceptualization, research, and policy responses (Bullen 2015; Farrugia and Gerrard 2016; Neale 1997).

The interactionist approach is encapsulated by the "new orthodoxy" identified by May (2000) and Pleace (2000) and elaborated upon by Fitzpatrick (2005) (see Pleace 2016 for further detail). Adverse social and economic factors which disproportionately impact certain groups including young people (such as high unemployment, low job security, unaffordable housing, and a lack of welfare systems) create the conditions in which homelessness occurs. Individual problems, such as illness, disability, limited education, poor finances, poor mental health, or substance dependence, render a person vulnerable to becoming homeless. This understanding of homelessness was developed because interpretivist approaches were unable to account for why people exposed to the same adverse social and economic conditions had different outcomes, and were unable to explain the disproportionately high rates of certain individual characteristics amongst young people experiencing homelessness compared to their housed peers (Busch-Geertsema et al. 2010; Johnson and Jacobs 2014). In short, while the "new orthodoxy" asserts the primacy of structural conditions in causing and sustaining homelessness (e.g. Busch-Geertsema et

al. 2010), individual characteristics determine the likelihood of people becoming homeless (Pleace 2016; Somerville 2013). These individual characteristics associated with homelessness are metaphorized as "risk factors" (Batterham 2019; Somerville 2013).

An epidemiological approach then looks at how these risk factors, whether identified statistically or through narratives, can be used to develop typologies of young people experiencing homelessness or outline the pathways they take (e.g. Johnson, Cook, and Sesa 2016; Mallett et al. 2010). The epidemiological approach and development of pathways are popular within policy-based research owing to the ability to operationalize the interactionist approach (Raitakari 2020), the apparent associations between individual characteristics and homelessness (Farrugia and Gerrard 2016), and because of their ability to recommend specialization within homelessness services in order to meet the needs of subgroups of young people experiencing homelessness (e.g. Johnson, Cook, and Sesa 2016).

Where empiricist approaches focused heavily upon individual factors and interpretivist approaches focused upon structural factors, interactionist approaches represent a truce between these antithetical positions by attempting to show how both sets of factors could operate to cause and sustain homelessness. Despite accepting that homelessness is due to an interaction between individual characteristics and structural inequality, interactionist and epidemiological approaches to understanding homelessness still rely upon individual factors to delineate the pathways and typologies or identify those at risk of homelessness (Farrugia and Gerrard 2016; Somerville 2013).

The three approaches compared

Each of these three approaches have contributed to better understandings of homelessness amongst young people. Whether this is in the form of empiricist knowledge about how their health differs from that of their housed peers, interpretivism's broadening of definitions of homelessness away from stereotypes of older men who drink alcohol, or the interactionist and epidemiological accounts of how some young people are more likely than others to experience homelessness, each of these pieces of knowledge has broadened our understandings of homelessness amongst young people. However, these understandings are unable to provide explanations for what is necessary to enable young people to exit homelessness and maintain stable housing. This lack of ability to provide explanations is due to the meta-theoretical assumptions inherent in each of these approaches which limit them to providing descriptions of observations in the cases of empiricism and interactionism/epidemiology, or of interpretations in the case of interpretivism. In both sets of circumstances, they are limited to what is experienced by participants and observed by researchers.

Building upon the previous approaches

The approach to explanation that we are adopting as part of an ongoing doctoral research project entails asking a different set of questions about what enables young people to exit homelessness and maintain housing. As noted when looking at previous approaches, research into young people exiting homelessness has typically asked questions along the

lines of 'what are the individual characteristics (or structures) associated with exiting homelessness?', (e.g. Milburn et al. 2009; Roy et al. 2016) or 'how can we understand the process by which young people exit homelessness?' (e.g. Karabanow 2008), or 'what does it mean for a young person to exit homelessness?' (e.g. Mayock, Corr, and O' Sullivan 2011). While these questions have provided valuable information about young people exiting homelessness, the answers are largely limited to what can be observed of young people. To build upon the information that has already been gathered, we want to ask 'what is it about these conditions [characteristics, structures, processes, etc] that enables young people to exit homelessness and maintain stable housing?' In doing so we will follow Batterham ((2019)), Fitzpatrick ((2005)), and Johnson and Jacobs ((2014)), in recognising that no single condition will be necessary (i.e the outcome cannot occur without a specific condition) or sufficient (i.e. exiting homelessness could occur with that condition alone) to enable young people to exit homelessness, with one exception: we will consider a 'home' to be necessary, but not sufficient, for exiting homelessness. We also recognise that what enables young people to exit homelessness will be an interaction of conditions (characteristics, structures, and processes etc.) and that the same outcome can be enabled by different sets of these conditions (Byrne 2005, 2011). Since we are working on the basis that, other than a home, no single condition is necessary, we will also look at what enables young people to exit homelessness in the absence of certain conditions that have been typically associated with exiting homelessness (e.g. Norrie 2010).

Empiricist and interactionist research into what enables young people to exit homelessness and maintain housing reports numerous conditions (i.e. characteristics, factors, structures) which have been found to be associated with the likelihood of exiting. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive listing of all of these conditions, but as an example, young people are more likely to exit if they are younger (Milburn et al. 2009; Tevendale, Comulada, and Lightfoot 2011), are involved in or have attained at least high-school level education or training (Karabanow 2008; Milburn et al. 2009; Mayock, O'Sullivan, and Corr 2011; Roy et al. 2014), or have received support from their families (Mayock, Corr, and O' Sullivan 2011; Milburn et al. 2009). Conversely, they have been reported to be less likely to exit homelessness if they are using substances (Tevendale, Comulada, and Lightfoot 2011; Roy et al. 2014). These results are occasionally inconsistent with some studies finding that men are less likely to exit homelessness (Fitzpatrick 2000; Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan 2013; Zlotnick, Tam, and Robertson 2003), while others find no gender differences (Roy et al. 2014), or that the difference depended upon how exiting homelessness was conceptualised (Milburn et al. 2009). While inconsistent results may be attributed to study design (e.g. Roy et al. 2014), they may also indicate some problems with how researchers have conceptualised what they are studying (such as gender differences in homelessness, see Bretherton 2017), or differing contextual factors which have not been accounted for in the studies. This list of conditions has been used to develop interventions to support young people to exit homelessness: for example, the 'Foyer Model' which is based upon engaging young people in education, employment, or training (Foyer Foundation 2018; Levin et al. 2016), or the 'Family Reconciliation and Mediation Program' which is based upon helping young people to re-establish relationships with their families (Mallett et al. 2010; National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness (Australia) 2008). While these interventions, based on the evidence available, may be fit for

purpose in supporting young people who are experiencing homelessness, we argue that the way these interventions operate to support young people could be more robustly explained by referring to what it is about these conditions, and changes in these conditions, which enable young people to exit homelessness.

Explanations provided by empiricist, interpretivist, and interactionist approaches for how young people exit homelessness generally cannot answer questions about how these conditions operate to affect the young person's ability to exit homelessness for three key reasons. First, and particular to research about characteristics of young people experiencing homelessness (see empiricism section), lists of characteristics do not tell us if or how these characteristics are related to each other. Fitzpatrick (2005) has critiqued this style of inquiry as failing to recognise the complex relationship between the characteristic and homelessness, and failing to distinguish between characteristics that are necessary for homelessness to occur (e.g. lack of a 'home') and those which occur alongside homelessness (e.g. substance use). Some research has attempted to ask young people or service providers about relationships between characteristics to look at why changes in these characteristics may affect a young person's outcome. For example, Karabanow (2008) reported that substance use was 'interwoven' with cultural and familial relationships amongst people experiencing homelessness. From this, it could be suggested that it is not substance use in and of itself that decreases the chances of young people exiting homelessness, but it is a feature of substance use that it maintains connections to homeless communities that in turn decrease a young person's chances of exiting homelessness. Second, the conditions which enable young people to exit homelessness will be heavily dependent upon the time and context in which young people experience homelessness. For example, what enables a young person to exit homelessness in Australia will differ compared to other countries such as Finland, United Kingdom, and the United States where there are different legislative and policy environments around access to housing, income support, treatment for substance use and so on. Similarly, structural changes in labour and housing markets over the past 40 years have contributed to shifts in the reasons why some young people become and remain homeless (Johnson and Chamberlain 2014). Thirdly, and most crucially, the focus upon the conditions does not tell us anything about instances when a condition does not impact upon the ability to exit homelessness. For instance, the condition is still present but does not affect the ability of a young person to exit homelessness and maintain housing: such as when young people exit homelessness while still using substances (Tevendale, Comulada, and Lightfoot 2011; Roy et al. 2014). Similarly, the condition which is associated with the likelihood of exiting homelessness is absent and yet the young person exits homelessness: such as when a young person exits homelessness without any form of family support.

It is this final question, of how young people are able to exit homelessness in the absence of factors which are normally associated with exiting homelessness and in the presence of factors which are normally associated with remaining homeless that, as we will demonstrate, we believe critical realism is able to support us to answer. This means as well as asking 'what is it about [substance use, family support, age, etc.] that alters a young person's ability to exit homelessness?', we need to ask 'what enables young people to exit homelessness and maintain housing in spite of [ongoing substance use, lack of family

support, lack of educational attainment, etc.]?' What we are proposing is to re-analyse existing evidence to determine how the presence of various characteristics, structures, factors, etc., or how the absence of one of these conditions, enables young people to exit homelessness and maintain housing. By doing this, we hope to be able to contribute to more robust explanations of how changes in young people's individual characteristics, or interventions to support young people, alter their capacity to exit homelessness and maintain housing.

Our Critical Realist Approach

Critical Realism is a meta-theoretical perspective which aims to develop explanations, in this case for young people exiting homelessness and maintaining stable housing, in terms of the structures and mechanisms which make this possible. (Bhaskar 2008; Bhaskar and Danermark 2006; Collier 1994; Danermark et al. 2002). We cannot provide a comprehensive overview of critical realism in this article, partly because of the sheer volume of work to traverse, but aim to provide a brief introduction to the concepts which we believe are key to developing explanations for how young people exit homelessness and show how these concepts can be, or have been, applied. These explanations will build upon the work of Allen (2000), Fitzpatrick (2005), McNaughton-Nicholls (e.g. 2009), and Hastings (2020). In order to outline our critical realist view of young people exiting homelessness we will provide an outline of nine key concepts which we believe are most fundamental to developing explanations for how young people exit homelessness and maintain housing.

Transitive / Intransitive Divide

A fundamental aspect of critical realism is the distinction between reality (the intransitive dimension), and our fallible, time and context dependent, and socially constructed knowledge of that reality (the transitive dimension) (Bhaskar 2008). This distinction allows us to acknowledge that 'homelessness' refers to something that has a real existence independent of whether or not we conceptualise it and, as we shall see later when we explore the contribution of interpretivism to homelessness scholarship, how we define it. It also allows us to recognise that the concepts we use to explain how young people exit homelessness and maintain housing: 'youth', 'home', 'homelessness', 'exiting', amongst others, are all fallible, time and context dependent, and socially constructed terms. In addition to the immediate distinction between 'reality' and 'knowledge of reality', we will follow the distinction between transitive and intransitive domains outlined by Al-Amoudi and Willmott (2011) and Go (2018) who distinguish between them on the basis of referent (transitive) and reference (intransitive). In this distinction the transitive domain (in our case: knowledge of homelessness) is part of the intransitive domain (the reality of homelessness). Subsuming our knowledge of homelessness within the reality of homelessness allows us to acknowledge that conceptualizations have real effects upon people. For example, different conceptualizations of "homelessness" will determine whether a particular young person's circumstances render them eligible for services. On the one hand, these conceptualisations are transitive: they are fallible, time and context

dependent, and socially constructed. But simultaneously, these conceptualisations are also intransitive: they have a real existence which has a substantive effect upon people.

Depth of Reality

Critical realism asserts the separation of experiences, events which lead to these experiences, and the causal mechanisms which lead to events: three overlapping but distinct domains of reality respectively called the empirical, actual, and real (Bhaskar 2008). The 'real domain' consists of the structures and generative mechanisms which, in this case, impact upon homelessness: housing, employment, discrimination, sex/gender, ethnicity, support, etc. The 'actual domain' consists of events that occur when the structures and mechanisms in the 'real' are activated: young people experiencing homelessness are discriminated against in a job interview, they are offered material support when they are in rental arrears, policies are enacted to assist those who are 'at-risk' of homelessness. The 'empirical domain' consists of the events that are observed or experienced by young people experiencing homelessness or those in contact with them.

The separation between experiences, events, and structures has two key consequences. Firstly, it enables researchers to account for events which have a material impact upon homelessness amongst young people, but about which young people or those in contact with them are not cognisant. For example: in the 'empirical domain', young people experiencing homelessness may not be aware of enacted policies to curb discrimination against them, even though the policy is active in the 'actual domain'. The second consequence of this separation is that it allows researchers to look at the mechanisms underpinning events, even when the event does not occur. It is the structures and mechanisms in the 'real domain' that we are most interested in, and we shall look at how these mechanisms and structures are conceptualised in critical realism.

Stratification of Reality

Structures and causal mechanisms, in the 'real domain' and which have the power to cause homelessness, are organised into strata or layers according to their complexity. A stratified approach to housing was first put forward by Allen (2000) to explain the lack of a one-to-one relationship between 'bad housing' and illness by looking at the interaction between mechanisms on physiological, psychological, and social levels (see Allen's description of the case of Mary for further details). Fitzpatrick (2005) has provided a stratified model in which the mechanisms relating to homelessness exist on four layers: economic, housing, interpersonal, and individual mechanisms, none of which is more fundamental to homelessness than any other layer. This model is part of the 'transitive domain' of science (see above) which means that it, and anything built upon it, is both fallible and corrigible. The work of Zlotnick, Tam, and Robertson (2003), while it relates to adults and not young people specifically, provides us with an example of how mechanisms operating within different strata interact to alter the ability of a young person to exit homelessness. As mentioned earlier, young people are more likely to exit homelessness if they receive some form of family support (Mayock, O'Sullivan, and Corr 2011; Milburn et al. 2009). Zlotnick and colleagues reported that the typical relationship between receiving family support and exiting homelessness did not hold if the person had a current substance use disorder. A

potential answer to the critical realist question 'what is it about substance use that alters this person's ability to exit homelessness?' could be that a person's substance use may trigger discrimination (a normative mechanism not really accounted for in Fitzpatrick's model) which blocks or negates family support (an interpersonal mechanism in Fitzpatrick's model). The separation of mechanisms into different layers and the assumption that no layer is more fundamental than any other layer allows us to understand that homelessness exists as the result of mechanisms operating within at least the four layers outlined by Fitzpatrick (2005) (with perhaps the addition of 'norms' or 'culture' as an additional stratum), and produces outcomes which are not simply the aggregate of these mechanisms.

Emergence

A consequence of conceiving of homelessness as a real object which exists in a stratified reality is that homelessness occurs due to the process of 'emergence'. The stratification of homelessness, particularly Fitzpatrick's model, has allowed us to see that homelessness is caused by several interacting sets of mechanisms, none of which are sufficient or necessary. Fitzpatrick (2005) has outlined how homelessness is due to the effect of feedback loops between various mechanisms implicated in the causation of homelessness and gives the examples of how poverty intersects with disadvantage in neighbourhoods or family violence to increase the likelihood of homelessness. Consequently, homelessness exists because of mechanisms operating at other layers. As a result, homelessness is not simply the sum or aggregate of these causal mechanisms, but emerges from the interaction of these causal mechanisms. The concept of emergence also allows us to explain how homelessness, as a real object which exists and has powers that are emergent from but irreducible to those of its causal mechanisms, can be involved in feedback loops acting upon the causal mechanisms implicated in homelessness (e.g. Elder-Vass 2012; Go 2018). An intersectional approach can help to illustrate how the effects of homelessness are greater and qualitatively different from those of the mechanisms which are presumed to have caused homelessness (e.g. Bower 2018; Vickery 2018; Vázquez et al. 2021). Following Fitzpatrick's previous example, while the interaction of poverty with neighbourhood disadvantage or with family violence may increase the likelihood of homelessness, homelessness may in turn increase the likelihood of exposure to poverty, family violence, or neighbourhood disadvantage. For example, a young person experiencing homelessness may not have the resources to undertake paid employment, may be forced to endure unsafe relationships, or their 'way out' of homelessness may place them in forms of housing situated within disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The concept of emergence allows us to see how homelessness exists because of feedback loops within its causal mechanisms and how homelessness has powers that are emergent from and irreducible to those of its causal mechanisms.

Relationship between 'Structure' and 'Agency'

The concept of emergence allows critical realism to more adequately consider the agency of young people experiencing homelessness. Specifically, the morphogenetic approach articulated by Archer (2003, 2007, 2012) allows us to view 'structure' as having powers

that are emergent from and unique to those of 'agents', and that an individual's agency and society's structures are interconnected through reflexivity (Decoteau 2016). Historically, the agency of young people experiencing homelessness has largely been overlooked by previous research as a way to avoid stigmatizing young people by potentially blaming them for their homelessness (McNaughton-Nicholls 2009). In writing about how homelessness has been conceptualized, Neale (1997) and Gowan (2010) divided agency-related explanations for homelessness into older explanations which emphasized personal accountability for homelessness, and later explanations which emphasized individual risk factors. In these later explanations, the agency of young people is limited to how they negotiate risk factors and how their choices interact with homelessness (Farrugia and Gerrard 2016; Pleace 2016; Barker 2016). Building upon the later ways of understanding the agency of people experiencing homelessness, researchers (not all of whom are critical realists) have looked at how people have used their agency to establish and maintain personal identities (e.g. McNaughton-Nicholls 2009; C. Parsell and Parsell 2012), and how agency influences the relationship between a precipitant and an event (e.g. Allen 2000). As noted by Hastings (2020), Archer's morphogenetic approach allows us to conceptualize agency as the way that people act with respect to their goals and concerns in life, and as what mediates the influence of a precipitant upon an event. Young people's agency is initially conditioned by the structures or context they are in, but they will creatively act to maintain or alter these circumstances they are in.

Complex Causality

A major consequence of a critical realist view of homelessness amongst young people is that we need to think of what causes them to exit homelessness in terms of the activity of structures and causal mechanisms, only some of which enable this to occur. A consequence of the stratification of mechanisms and of emergence is that events occur in an 'open complex system' where there is not a one-to-one relationship between structures and mechanisms (as causes), and events (as effects) meaning that what we observe may be co-determined by multiple mechanisms (Byrne 2011; Lawson 1997; Sayer 2000). There may be different outcomes even when the same cause is present depending upon the conditions under which the cause is active, such as mechanisms operating at a psychological level affecting the relationship between 'bad housing' and poor health in the case of "Mary" in Allen (2000), or imperfect associations reported between various factors and exiting homelessness, meaning that not all young people exposed to a particular condition experienced the same outcome. These associations between some characteristic and exiting homelessness may indicate the presence of underlying mechanisms which require explanation as to 'what is it about this characteristic or relationship which enables young people to exit homelessness?' (Lawson 1997; Fletcher 2017). Conversely, the same outcome could arise from multiple causes as seen in Batterham's (2019) review of the causes of homelessness, in which case the outcome is 'over-determined': there are more causes than are necessary to lead to the outcome (Sayer 2010). For our enhanced understanding of young people exiting homelessness and maintaining housing, we will take housing to be a necessary but insufficient cause for exiting homelessness with other mechanisms operating to enable or constrain young people.

Abduction and Retroduction

The complex causality of homelessness has implications for the way that we make inferences or develop explanations for what enables young people to exit homelessness. There are four modes of inference, or methods of drawing conclusions, which can be applied to the gathered data: deduction, induction, abduction, and retroduction (Danermark et al. 2002; Lawson 1997). Deduction and induction are often considered in contrast with each other and have been well described elsewhere. Deduction and induction alone are unable to explain social processes (Danermark et al. 2002) because both forms of inference only re-describe the process of young people exiting homelessness in terms of what has been observed. Critical realism uses abduction and retroduction to focus upon developing explanations for what underlies observable phenomena (Lawson 1997). Abduction and retroduction are two separate processes (Danermark et al. 2002) with slightly different aims regarding the way that we develop knowledge of what enables young people to exit homelessness. Abduction involves applying new theoretical concepts to what we observe of young people exiting homelessness in order to redescribe and reconceptualize the phenomenon in terms of this new theoretical perspective. Retroduction is a creative process which aims to postulate and describe the underlying mechanisms which must be operating in order for young people to exit homelessness; in other words, to identify the necessary conditions which make exiting homelessness and maintaining stable housing possible.

Interdisciplinarity

As a consequence of stratification and emergence (Bhaskar et al. 2017; Danermark 2019; Elder-Vass 2005), and the transitive nature of our knowledge (Koutsouris 2010), we will need to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to understanding what enables young people to exit homelessness. A critical realist approach to interdisciplinarity rejects the idea that we can develop a unified single theory of how mechanisms operate across different levels as a form of reductionism: an attempt to explain mechanisms at one layer in terms relevant to another layer which is seen as more fundamental. Instead, the aim is to utilise knowledge obtained about mechanisms at each relevant layer and integrate this knowledge in a way that the outcome is emergent from the original understandings (Danermark 2002, 2019; Bhaskar and Danermark 2006). An example of emergent knowledge arising from an interdisciplinary perspective can be seen in the interactionist approach outlined earlier. Despite some well-founded critiques by Fitzpatrick (2005), Neale (1997), Pleace (2016), and Somerville (2013) (amongst others), early attempts to integrate 'individual' and 'structural' understandings of homelessness present us with an example of emergent knowledge that would not have otherwise been possible had an interdisciplinary perspective not been taken. Both 'individual' and 'structural' explanations for homelessness were criticised for neglecting potential causes of homelessness identified by the other explanation, and each explanation individually could not articulate how its causes led to homelessness. An integration of these explanations ('the new orthodoxy' which was mentioned earlier) postulated that adverse structural causes create the conditions in which homelessness can occur and that individual causes determine the likelihood of people becoming homeless (Pleace 2016; Somerville 2013). While the 'new orthodoxy' has been

criticised by many authors, its explanation for the causes of homelessness is emergent from solely individual or structural causes. It represents an attempt to improve our understandings of the causes of homelessness away from "the presence of these causes leads to homelessness" towards "the interaction between these causes leads to homelessness, and here is how they may interact." As an emergent phenomenon, homelessness cannot be studied at, nor reduced to understandings arising from, a single layer of mechanisms.

As a consequence of a morphogenetic approach to understanding the agency of young people (specifically, the way that the effects of pre-existing structures are mediated through young people's reflexive agency) an interdisciplinary approach needs to incorporate lived experience. In viewing agency as a separate layer, incorporating lived experience as a discipline in its own right becomes necessary in order to allow researchers to understand people's 'reasons as causes' (e.g. Archer et al. 1998; Bhaskar 2016; Koutsouris 2010; Lawson 1997). The work of McNaughton (2008), particularly the concept of edgework, exemplifies how young people's seemingly counter-intuitive actions can actually be the outcome of their reasoned approach to their circumstances. Additionally, the perspectives of young people with a lived experience of homelessness can provide more theoretically robust and practically relevant explanations by critiquing understandings of relevant concepts and ensuring that knowledge can be practically applied (e.g. Gillard et al. 2012; Roper, Grey, and Cadogan 2018). Lawson (1999) has argued that, similar to feminist perspectives on the standpoints of marginalized groups (Satsangi 2013), the way we conceptualize a phenomenon will depend heavily upon the researchers' interests and understandings. For example, the focus of housing research to date has included value-laden assumptions about young people experiencing homelessness as being "vulnerable" and "at-risk", and unable to articulate what supports they require resulting in a lack of their input into research and policy (e.g. Farrugia 2016; Kuskoff 2018). For this reason, young peoples' lived experience brings a unique way of understanding exiting homelessness, particularly around instances when certain factors *are not* associated with exiting homelessness. The agency of young people cannot be adequately understood unless their perspectives inform the research process.

Role of absence

The final facet of critical realism that we will want to highlight in explaining what enables young people to exit homelessness is the role of "absence". Investigating the role of absences becomes necessary because of the consequences of the divide between the transitive and intransitive dimensions outlined by Al-Amoudi and Willmott (2011) and Go (2018) (reference and referent). We will refer to absences and demonstrate how they have real causal powers which tend to affect a young person's capacity to exit homelessness (Norrie 2010). We may refer to absences as being a cause which tends to enable, or prevent, young people from exiting homelessness. Alternatively, we may also investigate the mechanisms which are operating when a young person exits homelessness in the absence of a characteristic or condition which normally tends to enable them to do so. This is not a case of hedging our bets because, like Mingers and Standing (2017), we do not expect the absence of a characteristic or condition to be simply the opposite of its presence.

For example, substance use may tend to prevent young people from exiting homelessness because it maintains connections within communities experiencing homelessness (e.g. Karabanow 2008), but these connections could continue in the absence of substance use. Similarly, absence of substance use may enable young people to exit homelessness because they have greater financial resources to pay for housing, but the presence of substance use does not necessarily entail decreased financial resources, particularly if the substances are not paid for financially. Investigating absences allows us to take a more nuanced approach to explaining what tends to enable young people to exit homelessness and maintain housing because absence as a cause (e.g. lack of family support) or outcomes occurring in the absence of usual conditions (e.g. using substances and exiting homelessness) are not simply the opposite of the presence of a particular condition or characteristic.

Utility of a Critical Realist Approach

We hope to be able to develop a framework for understanding what enables young people to exit homelessness and maintain housing. Building upon empiricist frameworks which provide a list of characteristics, interpretivist frameworks which explore meanings and understandings, or interactionist frameworks which explore how structural and individual factors interact, Critical Realism offers a way of developing new insights. What we hope to develop in later work is a more robust explanatory framework in which exiting homelessness is understood in terms of the underlying mechanisms which interact with each other to lead to this outcome. This framework will also acknowledge that the way homelessness is conceptualised and that the absence, as well as the presence, of characteristics or processes associated with homelessness has real impacts upon young people. It will be developed through an interdisciplinary process, including the contribution of those with lived experience, which aims to articulate what must be occurring, rather than articulating what is observed, for young people to exit homelessness and maintain housing.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper we have argued that critical realism offers a number of advantages when attempting to understand what enables young people to exit homelessness and maintain stable housing. We have put forward this critical realist approach to understanding what enables young people to exit homelessness, building upon the work by Allen (2000), Fitzpatrick (2005), McNaughton-Nicholls (e.g. 2009), and Hastings (2020). What has driven this approach is the need to provide a framework in which multidisciplinary empirical and theoretical insights can be brought together in a way that is primarily explanatory rather than descriptive. Critical realism aims to answer the question: "what must be necessary for a particular phenomenon to occur?" Or in terms of young people exiting homelessness: "what are the necessary mechanisms that enable young people to exit homelessness and maintain stable housing?" Our proposed approach provides the framework for answering this question by building upon the existing body of knowledge of what is associated with young people exiting homelessness.

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