

Foucault, social policy and homelessness

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Abstract

Foucault's work provides fertile ground for an analysis of areas of significant concern to students of social policy through his development of the ideas of discourse, power/knowledge, surveillance and the metaphor of the panopticon. His development of these concepts allows an insight into the function of policy not always apparent in traditional policy analysis. In this paper the author explores why these concepts are pertinent to understanding how homeless populations are constructed as objects of policy, particularly with respect to contemporary discourses of inclusion and exclusion. The author argues that the use of these ideas challenges some of the less obvious assumptions permeating current developments in policy and service provision to people experiencing homelessness, while also enabling an ability to respond more contextually to shifting frameworks of power.

In the context of market globalisation and the consequent restructuring of welfare states in the industrialised West, the project of social inclusion has assumed a predominant position in attempting to conserve some of the values and aspirations of social democracy within an environment in which many of its classical objectives, some would argue, have ceased to be viable or politically realisable. Social inclusion is a policy and programmatic response to what has been conceptualised in the last 30 years as social exclusion. In Australia and internationally homelessness has been identified as both a core outcome and cause of social exclusion.

I hope to demonstrate in the time available the benefits of a Foucauldian perspective on current social exclusion/inclusion initiatives particularly with respect to homelessness. Such a perspective on the concepts of social exclusion and social inclusion highlights the role of policy makers among others in defining 'problem populations' as a function of maintaining existing political and social relationships.

Within the stakeholder society (Macantyre 1999) and the adoption of principles of mutual obligation and active participation, contemporary discourses of exclusion/inclusion take on a particular potency. Exclusion is seen to be a particular property of populations who both symbolically and physically have no stake in society and pose threats to hegemonic principles of independence. In Britain such dependencies have been addressed by programs that 'assume citizens must exercise personal responsibility by taking up opportunities at school and in the labour market' (Crowther 2002, p. 204). Similarly in Australia school retention and labour market participation are seen as critical in addressing homelessness, while the space occupied by the excluded (predominately those not disciplined by the demands of the labour market), are seen to be in need of containment and control. Within professional discourses that force the division between those excluded and included the practice of welfare thus easily becomes a site of conflict and resistance.

Central to an appreciation of Foucault's thinking is the concept of discourse. While Foucault admitted that his use of the term varied over the course of his life, a Foucauldian understanding of discourse approximates to a framework of meaning that is historically produced in a particular culture at a particular time (Foucault 1969, p. 209). In most senses of the term discourses refer to a set of meanings and representations that produce a particular

version of events; the important point here being that some discourses can be used to limit other ways of thinking about the same phenomena thus limiting the boundaries of knowledge possibilities.

Foucault argued that there are several elements to the formation of discourse: discourses are formed by specific rules that make it possible for some statements, but not others, to be made at particular times, places and institutional locations (Fairclough 1992, p. 40; Foucault 1976, p. 52). Discourses allow the privileging of some ideas at the expense of others although there may be several discourses operating at the same time. An example would be the extent to which the possibilities and circumstances available for policy writers' articulation of 'the problem of homelessness' outweighs the voice of others.

Secondly and following from the first, discourses and power are intimately connected (Foucault 1976, p. 97). Within the context of this paper this has significant implications with respect to the disciplinary power exercised over homeless people by policy professionals.

The third element of discourses according to Foucault are that they are multiple, contradictory and can vary from context to context (Foucault 1976, p. 102). For instance there are a range of discourses about addressing homelessness that are both continuous with, but also radically different from, fifty or one hundred years ago. It is in the practical effects of discourse that their boundaries are understood. For example in discourses about exclusion that are aimed to promote inclusivity, exclusive practices may in fact be promoted. While there is not time or space to elaborate on this here I would argue that there are a number of discourses about definitions, causation, counting and responding to homelessness evident in recent 'social inclusion initiatives' that frame contemporary homelessness through the lens of normative views ideas about participation in mainstream society; hence initiatives are directed towards moving people into the paid labour market and goals of independent living preferably in the private market.

A second critical concept of Foucault's pertinent to the theme of this presentation is his understanding of power/knowledge. In *Discipline and punishment* (1979) and the *History of sexuality* (1976), Foucault establishes a case for the inextricable association of networks of power with knowledge formation.

Within a particular discourse, Foucault argued, the power/knowledge constitutes socially constructed categories. Within welfare and health discourses for instance individuals are cases with an accompanying case history. A case approach enables comparison with others against what is constituted as normative. Individuals are thus open to surveillance, which is both norm referenced and deficit driven, in that the aim is to restore a person to 'normalcy'. Furlong (2001) provides an interpretation of how case management in what was the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), although ostensibly aimed to support clients in attempts to achieve a level of independent living skills, was embedded in assumptions about control, surveillance, containment, independence and self-determination. Although there was some sense of the importance of subjectivity acknowledged in the SAAP definition of homelessness, policy, programs and service delivery were and continue to be predicated upon mainstream housing practices as being the norm against which homelessness is defined (Chamberlain & Johnson 2001).

In his analysis of discursive frameworks Foucault provides an understanding of the ways in which power and knowledge are intertwined; no form of knowledge emerges independently of complex networks of power and the exercise of power produces certain types of knowledge (Foucault 1976, pp. 94–96). Foucault's assertions about the way discourses are the site at which power and knowledge intersect are significant in terms of social policy analysis in allowing an understanding of the way in which power and knowledge are manufactured by experts in society, while also providing an understanding of power wherein subjects are both the targets of power and its articulation. For Foucault power constitutes all social relations, power is exercised not possessed and where there is power there is also the possibility of resistance. Foucault's view of power points to numerous points of resistance, a view that stands distinct from one that views the state as the sole source of power that needs to be overthrown. Homeless people's occupation of public space in squats, parklands and the street and their voice when recognised can be reframed from this perspective as acts of resistance (Beck & Fraser 2001, p. 17; Watson 2000, p. 169).

The centrality of the relationship between power and knowledge is critical in understanding how power/knowledge can be used to structure the fields of possibility in policy development and service delivery to 'homeless people'. Claims to knowledge by exponents of dominant academic, policy and service delivery discourses are claims to power. To utilise a

Foucauldian connection of power makes visible how fundamental cultural codes in the form of discourses impose order.

Power as a limitation to possibilities also has important implications for an understanding of truths. According to Foucault truth as defined by dominant discursive structures results in power: 'We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth' (Foucault 1980, p. 93).

Individuals working within dominant discourses are more likely to be able to ask the questions, give answers and recognise truth. Truth according to this view then becomes a function of discourse and dominant discourses figure in the development of social truths. Given this, the case could be argued that the 'truths' espoused about homelessness, premised as they are on a variety of causal and maintained stories, are in fact constructed and maintained by varying interest groups that have the power to define the problem of homelessness (e.g. as exemplified in the use of 'objective' definitions of homelessness along culturally normative terms).

Foucault's insight that there is an intimate connection between power and knowledge has particular relevance for the development of social policy in that it makes transparent the notion that all fields of knowledge are fields of power and opens the way for analysing professional discourse as an exercise in power. Different discourses about homelessness create particular notions of homelessness and differentiate spatial hierarchies wherein homeless bodies are seen as a challenge to routine assumption around 'normal daily living.'

In *Discipline and society* (1979) Foucault described Bentham's idea of the panopticon as an architectural design that facilitated the increased level of surveillance and observation of prisoners in the nineteenth century. Foucault identified a disciplinary drive in contemporary society, which he argued is embedded in panoptic techniques of scrutiny, and surveillance whose gaze is analytical, judgemental and continuous (1979, p. 125), the end point of which is normalising judgement.

Within the context of homelessness this metaphor provides an alternate perspective through which to understand the construction of homeless clients as a highly ritualised use of power

that identifies, classifies, categorises and subjects individuals to increasing levels of surveillance at both the level of policy development and service delivery. Some examples of this are the increasing use and sophistication of quantitative data collection techniques for the derivation of knowledge about homelessness in Australia and the adoption of a case management process as the means of exiting individuals out of homelessness. Both are ways whereby clients can be assessed and objectified to series of measurements and problems. From these identified problems planning interventions can be developed and evaluated in terms of their effectiveness in returning individuals to 'normality'. The surveillance that the client undergoes informs a web of documentation and a discourse that objectifies and in many cases increases the gaze of the expert on the lives of individuals.

Other developments in the area of policy and practice in homelessness provide a further case in point. Homelessness is increasingly categorised as a complex problem, the complexity being attributed to clients, not the systems they have to access. Such complexity results in the need for specialisation wherein experts justify their existence by the benefits their services can offer. While some discourses around homelessness address the confluence of circumstances that contribute to the formation of the homeless person as object, most concern the management and surveillance of the 'homeless' populations in the form of data collection, instalment of programs of rehabilitation/support and the promotion of normative behaviours around independence. A Foucauldian perspective offers the possibility of asking who benefits from these discourses.

There are limitations in utilising a Foucauldian perspective in the area of social policy and homelessness, not the least of which are questions of recognition and redistributive justice. However the benefits accrue to the tools of interrogation, particularly with respect to discourse, power and critical views of the state and government. In sum, through a Foucauldian lens, what initially might appear to be benign policy may well have conflicting effects; attention to discourse alerts us to the way in which subjects are constructed in policy documents, while a focus on power and resistance gives agency to people who are otherwise constructed in grand narratives as powerless.

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