Applying an intersectional framework to Homelessness

1. Introduction

A theoretical framework offers a lens through which to examine a particular research topic. It informs the type of questions posed and methodological design of the research project. In this paper, I am interested in how applying an intersectional framework can help us when researching homelessness. I will begin by explaining how I understand intersectionality, before providing a broad overview of homelessness. Lastly, I will look at how intersectionality could be applied to homelessness research.

2. Intersectional frameworks

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimerlee Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1991), has it's routes in black feminism, and is a tool for examining and highlighting the experience of those with multiple, overlapping (and often oppressed) characteristics ((Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016). Efforts that focus on just one form of oppression, such as sexism, or racism, will fail to make visible the discrimination faced by those with multiple oppressed characteristics. For example, in their 1977 collective statement, the Combahee River collective describe how neither feminism, nor black liberation movements in the 60's and 70's adequately accounted for their experiences, and oppressions as homosexual, black women (Taylor, 2017). Feminism, in their experience, suffered "racism and elitism" (Taylor, 2017, pg.16), whilst the liberation movement suffered sexism. Illustrative of this latter point, a black nationalist pamphlet from the 1970's cited in the Combahee River Collective Statement makes the overtly sexist statement: "The value of men and women can be seen as in the value of gold and silver – they are not equal". (Taylor, 2017). Anti- racism, or anti-sexism, then, taken in isolation, did not expose the prejudices faced by the black women who formed the Combahee River Collective.

Whilst the unique discrimination faced by black women had long been present, and highlighted by black feminists, it was Kimberlee Crenshaw who

developed intersectionality as a way of framing the multiple, overlapping and compounded nature of those facing multiple (intersecting) disadvantage due to their oppressed characteristics.(Crenshaw, 1991).

A need for such an approach is further illustrated by Crenshaw (2016) when describing a failed legal claim against an American car company whose practices prevented black women from gaining access to employment. To the judge, the company was not racist, because it employed black men (to do the shop floor jobs, that women were not allowed to do), and it was not sexist because it employed women (to do secretarial work, that black people were not allowed to do). On this premise, the judge deemed there was no claim to discrimination. Looking at the issue through just an anti-racist or feminist gaze failed to account for the unique, compounded discrimination faced by black women. As Hill Collins and Bilge (2016) put it: " black women's specific issues remained subordinated within each movement, because no social movement by itself would, not could address the entirety of discriminations they faced". (Colins and Bilge, 2016, p.3)

In her 2016 Ted Talk, Crenshaw highlights the benefits of using an intersectional framework when looking at social issues:
> "when facts do not fit with the available frames, people have a difficult time incorporating these facts into their way of thinking… without frames that allow us to see how social problems affect all members of a targeted group, many will fall through the cracks …when you can't see a problem, you can't solve it". (Crenshaw, 2016)

Crensaw's quote highlights key characteristics of intersectional approaches, firstly, a desire to address inequalities and achieve social justice (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016), but crucially in addition to this, it conveys that to achieve social justice we must be able to understand, conceptualise and communicate the issues faced by the multiply marginalised; something that using intersectionality as an analytical tool allows us to do.

Other key features that Hill Collins and Binge argue to be key features when applying an intersectional framework are: power relations, relationality, social

context and complexity. ((Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016). Hill Collins and Bilge (2016) describe the domains of power seen within intersectional analysis as interpersonal (i.e power imbalance in everyday social relations), disciplinary(i.e exclusionary organisational culture/norms), cultural, structural.

3. Homelessness

Homelessness is a prevalent and growing social ill worthy of research. In this part of this paper I will outline what homelessness is and why it requires our attention. In the final part of the paper I will discuss the benefits of using an intersectional lens when looking at homelessness.

The legal definition of homelessness encapsulates various circumstances where an individual or household does not have a home that they are legally entitled to occupy, or that it is reasonable for them to remain in. This can include those wishing to escape a home where they are the victim of violence or abuse, those residing in hostels or temporary accommodation, living in a caravan where there is no land on which the owner has a right to moor it. At its most visible, homelessness can present itself as rough sleeping.(Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2024). Not all people experiencing homelessness recognise themselves as homeless/seek support and not all homelessness is captured in local authority statistics, making understanding the true scale of homelessness in the UK difficult to fully account for (ONS, 2023). Nethertheless, evidence shows that homelessness is a prevalent, growing, harmful issue in England, and is therefore a subject worthy of research.

Homelessness is prevalent and growing issue in England. In 2022/23 English Local Authorities assessed 298,430 households as being homeless or at risk of homelessness within the next 56 days, an increase of 7% on 2021/22 (Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2023), and in October 2023 the Local Government Association revealed that the number of homeless households living in temporary accommodation had risen 89% in

the last decade, with numbers now at the highest since records began (Local Government Association, 2023).

Homelessness is harmful to those that experience it. An All Party Parliamentary Group into Temporary Accommodation found that conditions within temporary accommodation are frequently inadequate with health risks posed by issues such as overcrowding, damp and mould. (APPG, 2023). People who experience homelessness are 3 times more likely to be admitted to A&E than the general population (Homeless Link, 2022) and those that experience rough sleeping are 17 times more likely to experience violence (Crisis, 2024).

According to the UK government, the main 'reasons' or homelessness approaches in England are end of private rented sector tenancy, family or friends no longer being able or willing to accommodate or domestic violence. (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2014). Some caution should be exercised when thinking about these so-called reasons. These reasons are pre-determined drop downs that have been devised by those in power/government departments, that homeless applicants have to shape their personal narratives into. A significant category, accounting for many approaches is 'other'. Furthermore, these categories speak little to underlying inequalities/power imbalances and structural issues that enable homelessness, such as a vast under-supply of affordable housing. Accordingly, I would say these 'reasons' may be better thought of as triggers, but nether-the less they offer helpful ifn starting points for delving deeper. In section 4 of this paper I will take 2 of these main triggers for homelessness; family/friend evictions and domestic abuse and look at how an intersectional framework could be applied to understanding these aspects of homelessness.

4. How Intersectionality could offer insight into homelessness

Through taking an intersectional approach to the oppression that is homelessness we can garner new insights into how it is experienced from an intragroup perspective. Like Crenshaw, who asserts that intersectionality is not the only way to understand, interpret and explain our social world (1991), I

too do not claim that an intersectional lens is sufficient to fully explain homelessness. However, it does allow us to unmask multiple overlapping and compounding oppressions that may otherwise go unexposed.

Take domestic abuse, which as described above, is a key trigger for homeless approaches to English Local authorities. Focussing just on women, or just on men who experience this could fail to take account of obstacles faced by those who are women, but are also trans. Socially and structurally, domestic abuse can be experienced differently by trans women than non trans women. For example, a form of control a trans woman may face at home is the withholding of (or threat of withholding) hormone treatment, with the associated physiological impact and psychological distress of oppressing their very identity as a woman. This type of interpersonal abuse /power play would be unique to the trans woman experience.

Outside the home, structural and disciplinary power may hold back routes out of homelessness and abuse for trans women. For example, if someone approaches a council as homeless due to domestic abuse, the council is required by law to only place the individual into 'safe accommodation' spaces – not places like B&B (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2024). This comes from a place of trying to keep those who experience abuse safe – but in practice, there is little bricks and mortar 'safe accommodation' spaces that exist for trans women across the country. Women's Aid provide the majority of council commissioned domestic abuse provision in the country (mcadmin 2022) and a statement by them highlights the fact that they prioritise non trans women above trans women : 'The provision of single-sex domestic abuse services is a founding principle of Women's Aid, and we will defend it…some members conclude that it is not appropriate to include trans women (including those with a gender recognition certificate) in women-only shared spaces. We support their right to make this assessment'(mcadmin, 2022). Whilst Women's Aid also state that they are committed to increasing provision of services for all survivors of abuse, given that they run the majority of refuge space and openly consent to the exclusion of trans women from their refuges if an individual provider so wishes, the

extent to which the system is consistently representing/providing/ensuring safe spaces for trans women fleeing domestic abuse is questionable. If there is nowhere to flee to, or trans women do not feel like they will be supported if they ask for help, then they may be, or feel, trapped into being homeless as home (homeless because as described in section 3 above, it is not reasonable for them to continue living there). The sorts of research questions an intersectional framework may give us here could be:

- How do trans women fleeing domestic abuse experience local government homelessness support?
- What impact does inconsistent policy/messaging around refuge access have on trans women's willingness to make a homeless application or contact domestic abuse charities so that they can flee domestic abuse?
- To what extent does safe accommodation in Essex (or another region) meet the needs of trans women fleeing abuse?
- What impact does national and local government's approach to commissioning refuge space have on trans women's ability to flee abuse/access safe accommodation?

As described in section 2, family or friends no longer being able or willing to accommodate is also a top reason/trigger for homelessness approaches to local authorities in England. An intersectional framework here may look at youth homelessness amongst 16/17 year olds and whether this is experienced differently when different layers of protected characteristics are added.

The Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities(2018) and the Department of Education (2018) require that if a 16/17 year old approaches a local authority as homeless, the authority must place the young person in age appropriate accommodation provision, oppose to a mixed age homeless hostel or bed and breakfast aimed at adults, meanwhile the Children's Commissioner for England highlights that "Family based care, such as foster care is the most supportive environment for children" (Children's

commissioner, 2023, p.49). Whilst foster care placements are seen as preferable for young people experiencing homelessness, research conducted by the Children's Commissioner(2023) showed that there is a shortage of placements and just 2% of homeless 16/17 year olds are placed in foster care.

Whilst many young homeless people will be impacted by a lack of foster homes, focussing on this issue in generic terms would risk masking inequalities faced by, for example, those from minority ethnic and religious groups. An intersectional lens to researching youth homelessness may encourage us to look at whether subgroups face unique barriers and harms (and therefore allow opportunity for intervention/social justice).

Taking BAME communities; There is a national shortage of foster carers from BAME communities (BBC, 2020). Further, it is said that being placed with a foster family with the same cultural or ethnic background is positive for young people's wellbeing and identity (Barnardos, 2024). A BBC interview with 18 year old Shaz, a British Asian Muslim who spent time in care illustrates the harms of not recognising cultural needs when placing BAME young people: "It felt like there was something wrong with me…the colour I was…I felt like I didn't belong and that I had to be white, I had to look a certain way. In quite a lot of circumstances they would give me pork…but then I wouldn't eat it and I would explain to them...but then I would get into arguments about it when it felt like, well, you can't just force feed me" (BBC, 2020). Without understanding the ethnic, cultural and religious needs of BAME young people placed, a carer could inadvertently cause harms to the young person who will already have undergone traumas that led to their homelessness. In summary, if young BAME people find themselves homeless and would benefit most from a placement with adults who share ethnic/cultural/religions backgrounds, but there is a national shortage of foster carers from BAME backgrounds, we may infer that BAME people could be disproportionately negatively impacted (or traumatised) from their experience of youth homelessness/their housing placement. An intersectional lens on youth homelessness might encourage us to frame a research around the following sorts of questions:

- What are the barriers to fostering amongst those from black and minority ethnic groups?
- What impact does the shortage of BAME foster placements have on the wellbeing and sense of identity for homeless 16/17 year olds from BAME backgrounds in England?

Other intersectional approaches to researching homelessness arising from family/friend evictions could include looking at whether youth homelessness is experienced more frequently amongst those who are LGBTQ+, and if so, what LGBTQ+ young people with experience of homelessness think would or could have helped in preventing their homelessness. According to LGBTQ+ Youth homelessness Charity AKT, 24% of homeless young people are LGBTQ+ and 77% believe that coming out is what led to their homelessness(*akt*, 2024). Accordingly, focussing just on youth homelessness/parental evictions as a 'reason' for youth homelessness without digging deeper into power relations at an intersectional level could risk overlooking the prejudices that enable it, or harms caused once experiencing it.

Once again, further intersections with race and religion may exist for young homeless LGBTQ+ people, if/where parents choose to interpret that a religious doctrine views homosexuality as a sin. If we further add in other characteristics such as disability or pregnancy, we may see further issues, for example, once again, interpersonal, disciplinary and cultural attitudes towards sex out of wedlock, or structural issues with finding suitable housing placements that meet physical and psychological needs of those who fall into multiple minority groups.

Alternatively, we could look at the potential for intersectional analysis to look at those who hold the power. We might here want to examine the demographics of the landlords, the developers/housebuilders, the MP's, the banks, who control the rental housing market, and associated planning/housing policy. Here we might ask: What are the demographics of

those who shape and control the rental market in England, and what role do they believe they could play in preventing low-income families from living in temporary accommodation?

5. Conclusion

We have seen that an intersectional approach provides opportunity to highlight an inequality that may otherwise be masked by isolating out characteristics such as age, race, religion, sexuality, or gender alone. We have seen that through taking an intersectional approach to the social ill that is homelessness, we are given an additional, analytic tool for delving deeper into homelessness triggers, and responses, thereby providing opportunities for better understanding. Intersectionality is not the only way to examine homelessness but is an imperative tool to include. Without using intersectionality to unmask compounded inequalities, we heighten the possibility of continued oppression of a secondary/further characteristics amongst those experiencing homelessness, and thus limit opportunities to understand, educate and respond.

References

Local Government Association (2023) *£1.74 billion spent supporting 104,000 households in temporary accommodation* Available at: https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/ps174-billion-spent-supporting-104000-households-temporary-accommodation (Accessed: 14 April 2024).

AKT(2024).*AKT* Available at: https://www.akt.org.uk/ (Accessed: 20 May 2024).

APPG (2023) *'Call for evidence findings: summary, analysis of themes and call to action - Households in Temporary Accommodation APPG' https://householdsintemporaryaccommodation.co.uk/.* Available at: https://householdsintemporaryaccommodation.co.uk/reports/call-for-evidence-findings-summary-analysis-of-themes-and-call-to-action/ (Accessed: 20 May 2024).

BBC (2020), *BAME foster care shortage in two-thirds of English Councils.* Available at BAME foster care shortage in two-thirds of English councils - BBC News (Accessed 20/05/2024)

Crenshaw, K. (1991) 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), pp. 1241–1299. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2024) 'Homelessness code of guidance for local authorities'. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-code-of-guidance-for-local-authorities (Accessed: 19 May 2024).

Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Department for Education (2018) Prevention of homelessness and provision of accommodation for 16 and 17 year old yound people who may be homeless and/or require accommodation. Available at: [Provision of accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds who may be homeless and/or require accommodation - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)](https://www.gov.uk) (Accessed 20/05/2024)

ONS (2023) *'Hidden' homelessness in the UK: evidence review - Office for National Statistics.* Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/housing/articles/hiddenhomelessnessintheukevidencereview/2023-03-29 (Accessed: 21 April 2024).

Hill Collins, P. and Bilge, S. (2016) *Intersectionality.* Cambridge: Polity Press. Available at: https://www-vlebooks-com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/Product/Index/1180675? (Accessed: 31 March 2024).

Crisis (2024) *Homelessness: Causes, Types and Facts* Available at: https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/about-homelessness/ (Accessed: 14 April 2024).

mcadmin (2022) *Women's Aid: Single sex services statement*, *Women's Aid.* Available at: https://www.womensaid.org.uk/womens-aid-single-sex-services-statement/ (Accessed: 18 April 2024).

Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2023) *Statutory homelessness in England: financial year 2022-23.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statutory-homelessness-in-england-financial-year-2022-23/statutory-homelessness-in-england-financial-year-2022-23 (Accessed: 14 April 2024).

Taylor, K.-Y. (2017) *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective.* Chicago, Ill: Haymarket Books.

Homeless Link (2022) *Unhealthy State of Homelessness 2022: Findings from the Homeless Health Needs Audit* Available at: https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/unhealthy-state-of-homelessness-2022-findings-from-the-homeless-health-needs-audit/ (Accessed: 16 April 2024).

Mark: 74

This is excellent work. You have a very clear and engaging writing style. You have given a very lucid overview of intersectionality. I like the level of detail that you go into into some concrete detail about Crenshaw's work. You highlight some key insights from Collins and Bilge but these are passed over very quickly. Likewise your overview of homelessness does a good job of identifying how conventional language and categories may obscure more than they reveal.

Your application of the framework to the issue is very insightful and engaging to read. I think you could have strengthened this further by returning to the intersectionality literature to deepen the analysis with insights or concepts from the literature.

Overall, very well done!