



Homelessness, Social Work, Social Policy and the Print Media in Australian Cities

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Abstract

Homelessness is a significant social problem worldwide. This paper describes an Australian study that examined print media representations of homelessness and social work, social policy and social work responses to homelessness in three Australian cities. The research included a content analysis of seven Australian newspapers and semi-structured interviews with 39 social workers employed in the field of homelessness in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. The detailed results of these studies have been published separately elsewhere. This paper reports on how discourses in the print media, social policy and social work practice co-exist in constructing homelessness as a particular social problem, influencing social work responses to homelessness. The research found that individualism is central to many dominant discourses evident in the print media, social policy and social work practice, and that social work is practiced within unequal power relations embedded in organisational contexts.

Introduction

Authors such as Blasi (1990, 207) have long argued that homelessness research needs to be broadened to include research questions about how images of homelessness are communicated through the mass media and come to be accepted by the public as 'the truth'. The media is central to setting the public policy agenda and to politicising 'social problems' such as homelessness (Mendes 2003; Zufferey and Chung 2006). Meaning-making in social policy and the print media is a contested, political and negotiated process (Dalton, Draper, Weeks and Wiseman 1996; Putnis 2001). However, many authors have found that the print media also serves to reinforce dominant and unequal power relations in regards gender, class and race (Jamrozik and Nocella 1998; Reekie 1996; Van Dijk 1991). In relation to constructions of homelessness in the print media, international and national research has found that newspapers and public representations of homelessness are strongly influenced by conservative welfare reform agendas that emphasise individual responsibility, construct deserving and undeserving dichotomies based on victim-criminal discourses and tend to be silent around structural causes of homelessness (Dluhy 1990; De Goede 1996; Huckin 2002; Hutson and Liddiard 1994; Neale 1997; Zufferey and Chung 2006). Rosenthal (2000, 111-113) notes three dominant constructions of homeless people, 'slackers' (the undeserving who are incompetent because of their own fault), 'lackers' (those who are incompetent through no fault of their own and deserve aid or charity) and 'unwilling victims' (those affected by circumstances beyond their control).

According to Drake (2001, 7-13) social policy in Western democracies is premised on values of equality of opportunity, justice, rights and needs, diversity, difference and citizenship. However, recent welfare policy reforms in Australia such as 'welfare to work' have been

particularly criticised for further disadvantaging welfare recipients such as single parent families (Mckenzie and Cook 2007; Patrick, Cook and Taket 2007). The concept of social exclusion/inclusion, which informs major policy initiatives of New Labor Governments in Australia and Britain has also been criticised for being rhetorical and obscuring structural contexts and the subjectivities or lived experience of those labelled homeless (Horsell 2006, 213). Contemporary policy shifts from a 'welfare state' to a 'workfare state' and concepts of 'active citizenship' assume that all citizens will 'grasp every opportunity', be competitive, independent, self responsible, hardworking and morally autonomous individuals (Jordan 2004, 9; Jordan 2001; McDonald and Marston 2002). Homeless people who are unable to access the resources necessary for 'full participation' in society are defined as excluded citizens and are deemed to be lacking in these characteristics of citizenship (Horsell 2006).

The changing nature of social work service delivery in the context of Australian welfare reforms and managerialism has been well documented and the current policy emphasis on welfare to work has been found to limit the discretion of front line workers (Jamrozik 2005; Lonne, McDonald and Fox 2004; McDonald and Marston 2006; McDonald and Marston 2002; Melville and McDonald 2006). The social work research component of this larger study examined how social workers described the changing conditions and constraints on their practice in the field of homelessness and also found that welfare reforms and managerialist approaches in organisations constrained social work service delivery (Zufferey, forthcoming). This research is new and significant because the relationships between constructions of homelessness and social work in the print media, social policy and social work practice had not previously been studied.

Methods

This study was conducted as a doctoral thesis and aimed to examine how public discourses, socio-political and organisational contexts shaped social work practice in the field of homelessness. The broad research questions were: How are homelessness and social work constructed in the print media, social policy and social work practice? How do dominant representations and constructions of homelessness and social work shape social policy and social work service provision to the homeless?

A quantitative content analysis of 1477 articles about homelessness between 2000 and 2003 in seven Australian newspapers (*The Sunday Mail* and *The Advertiser* in South Australia, *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* in Melbourne, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Daily Telegraph* in Sydney and *The Australian*) was conducted. This was followed by a qualitative analysis of semi structured interviews with social workers in 2003 to 2004 employed in policy and direct service delivery in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. Social workers were invited via telephone and email to participate in interviews about what shaped their practice in the area of homelessness. After a thematic analysis of interview data was conducted, a broader discourse analysis of how social work, social policy and the print media interrelated was undertaken.

This discourse analysis was influenced by Foucault's work on power/ knowledge and focused on what the discourses are and how subjects (such as social workers) constitute themselves (Gubrium and Holstein 2000, 494). A theme can be defined as a meaningful 'essence' that runs through the data (Morse 2008). A discourse refers to how we make meaning and construct our world through language and it is assumed that discourses shape and constitute actions and actions shape and constitute discourses in a dialectical process (Fook 2002).

Results and Discussion

In short, the print media informed political and policy debates about homelessness by reproducing deserving and undeserving dichotomies in various forms (such as victims-criminals or slackers-lackers as noted by Rosenthal 2000), debating responsibility issues for homelessness (such as 'who is to blame?'), examining the coalescence and conflict between business and charity discourses and advocating for the removal of visible homeless people such as rough sleepers in 'cleaning the streets' discourses (Zufferey and Chung 2006, 36). Service providers were constructed in the print media as 'experts' (for example, researchers) or 'saints', who were often characterised according to charity discourses in non government organisations.

Social workers interviewed discussed broader practice-theory tensions in their work related to professional and personal concerns about social control, social care and social change but they were all critical of stereotypical media constructions of homelessness and service provision. In regards to how the media influenced their practice, social workers employed in the policy area noted that the political process can be very closely linked to the media but those in direct service provision stated that the media had little relevance to their work, indicating that the power of media influence is mediated through policy making processes.

Further questions

Very little research exists in Australia about how homelessness is represented as a significant social problem attributed to individual characteristics and responsibilities. The diverse voices of people affected by homelessness and the impact of the contemporary discourse of individualism on people experiencing homelessness need further exploration (see Zufferey and Kerr 2004). As well, the relevance of this study to international policy and practice responses to homelessness could also be examined in further research.

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