Relationships, social capital and homelessness

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Introduction

- Definition and role of ‘the family’ that emerged from my research with homeless young people.

- Family as social capital
- Relationships as social capital
  - What does this mean?
  - How can it be helpful?
Relationships, Homelessness and social capital

- Youth worker
- Researcher: ethnography of homeless young people in Canberra, ACT
  - Surveys
  - Interviews
  - Focus groups
  - Genealogies
  - Life histories
  - Participant observation
Causes of youth homelessness

Homelessness is both an *outcome* of risk factors and disadvantages and *exacerbates* disadvantage and risks.

Homelessness associated with a multitude of issues:
- Family conflict/breakdown
- Abuse
- Neglect
- Poverty
- Alcohol and other drugs (AOD)
- Mental health issues
Conditions of youth homelessness

Homeless young people as a case study on a continuum or spectrum of disadvantage.

- Unstable, insecure, uncertain conditions of existence.
- **LACK CAPITAL** – valued resources of all forms (social, economic, cultural)
  - Social: people as support (family)
  - Economic: money and material resources
  - Cultural capital
• “Like, I even look at you and wonder if you are going to rip me off. Like I know you’re not but I feel the fear and wonder if I should protect myself. You know? Just hit you or stab you.”

• “I fucking hate him for that. I wish I could see him and bash the shit out of him.”

• “But I wish I could see him. You know? I miss him.”
The role and experience of ‘the family’

- Homeless young people relate to ‘the family’ on two different levels.
  - the family is a set of people and relationships with whom they interact.
  - the family is a cultural norm, a set of expectations, hopes and normative prescriptions.
- the expectations and hopes emerging from the ideal or cultural norm of the family haunts many homeless youth who are acutely aware of this ideal of the family due to its marked absence.
**What is social capital?**

Signals the importance of participation in groups, sociality, family and relationships in the analysis of culture and society.

The value of other people and social ties as a resource.

 Been linked to a range of positive outcomes.

Can be traded or lead to the accumulation of other valued resources.

Not the same as ‘relationships’ or ‘connections’
The family as social capital

• Bedrock of social capital (family capital).

• Foundation of all other forms of social capital.

• Model or template of relationships and expectations.

• Not all families function as a form of support.

• For a family to be a form of social capital they must fulfil three criteria.
Three components of social capital

• (1) CONTACT: having a social network or relationships with people;

• (2) CAPACITY: the volume of capital (economic, cultural and social) that is possessed by those to whom one is connected; and,

• (3) TRUST: norms of trust, reciprocity and obligation.

• This a heuristic or conceptual division.
• Infinite number of variations.
Having contact

- If a young person has no family, then self-evidently their family does not function as social capital.
- Separation from family is often closely related to the third criteria (norms of trust) as young people can become disconnected from their family due to family conflict and lack of trust.
- (e.g. Christine)
Access to valued resources

- Some families lack the capacity for support:
  - AOD,
  - mental health
  - disability
  - poverty
  - Cultural (e.g. Culture of Poverty)
- (e.g. Tim)
Norms of trust and reciprocity

- The majority of homeless young people in this study did have contact with or know how to contact their families.
- For some of the research participants, the neglect or abuse that has contributed to their homelessness is strikingly evident.
- At other times, it is difficult at first glance to see what has led to a lack of trust between the family and a particular young person.
- (e.g. Luke and Jess.)
The value of others

- We do not just value people as a means to another end, as a resource.
- We value people and company in its own right.
- There is often a resilient connect to the family as both set of people and an idea.
How can this help us?

• Examining the lives of young people – risk factors.
• Examining our relationships with our clients.
• Examining the lives of our clients:
  • CONTACT
  • CAPACITY
  • TRUST

• Expectations and hopes are often unspoken.
• (e.g. Andrew and his mother).