

Chapter Three: Stratification and Subjectivity: A Theoretical Model for Understanding Homelessness and Its Experience

Homelessness and residential instability, when viewed within the larger social and economic stratification processes operating in the housing and labor economies, can be understood as products of the dynamic structuring of the population within a class hierarchy. These stratification pressures are mediated in the basic social and material conditions of life, such as where one lives (if one has a place to live), where one works (if one is able to find work), how much money one gets paid for one's labor, and what purchasing power one has (spending and consuming) in the consumer markets of our society. It is these more immediate experiences of stratification that will be explored in this study of how people become homeless in the context of work, family and social relations. This chapter, therefore, will outline a theoretical model that links the broader social and economic processes explored in the last chapter with the daily circumstances of persons who become homeless, and who are acting and choosing within that framework of their local experience.

The connecting theoretical formulation that will be applied in this chapter is known as the "social selection hypothesis." Borrowed from the literature on social class and mental illness, the idea of a "social selection" process has developed as a theoretical accounting for the concentration of the mentally ill in the lowest social class. This

particular theoretical formulation was chosen because it attends to the stratifying processes that produce varying institutional locations for different subgroups in the population (the discriminatory dynamics of our political economy), *and* because it also takes account of how individuals - their traits and choices - play a role in shaping one's social location and the experience of culture. Hence, this chapter will first begin with a brief summary of the social selection process as it has been described in the literature. Then, the development of homelessness in Philadelphia will be formulated in the terms suggested by the social selection hypothesis, with particular attention to trying to understand the personal experience of stratification, and how personal traits and choices influence one's social location.

The Social Selection Process

Larger historical, social and economic dynamics are not mere abstractions. The force of the social and economic structure in history, and the disciplines which it imposes, are directly experienced in the rituals of everyday life. Routines associated with work, community and family, typically comprise the fabric of daily existence, and as such, are the principle locations in which men and women experience the structuring conditions of the social and economic order. Labor and housing, as shown in the last chapter, are among the primary mediators of the economy to social groups. Consequently, any theory that tries to account for the marginalization of people in our society, such as that which happens when people become homeless, must recognize the importance of the social structure, but not simply in its abstract forms. The social structure must also be recognized for its influence on the more mundane experiences that link individuals, families, neighborhoods and communities, and as that critical framework within which social relationships must strategically negotiate the implications of adaption, maladaption, and resistance on the part of the individuals and

groups whose activity comprise those social relations. It is that interface and interplay that will be considered here as the "social selection process."

Social Class and Mental Illness

As originally formulated, the social selection hypothesis was intended to reconcile a debate over the origins of the disproportionate concentration of mental illness among the poor. The reductionist perspective, which has come to be known as the "drift theory," suggests that this concentration of mental illness among the poor is the result of downward economic and social "drift" on the part of mentally ill people. Drift advocates usually believe that mental illness is organic in origin, and that the poverty of the mentally ill is a result of their detachment from society and/or their social incompetence. Alternatively, the social stress perspective, which is better known as the "social causation theory," explains this concentration of mental illness among the poor as a result of the stressful conditions of poverty. As suggested by its name, the social causation theory assumes that mental illness is primarily environmental in origin, and that the poverty of the mentally ill is prior to their mental disability. Critical of both models as simplistic and one-dimensional, the social selection hypothesis offers a far more complex and dynamic understanding of the distributional pressures operating in the economy and within psychiatric treatment that create and reinforce devalued social and economic statuses for the poor and the mentally disabled. Moreover, it is an appealing alternative to the "drift" and "causation" theories of mental illness among the poor because it avoids many of the unresolved issues of that debate.

First of all, the social selection hypothesis is not a theory on the origin of mental illness, and does not embrace a particular etiological position on the origin of mental illness - accepting the role of both environmental and organic factors. Secondly, the social selection hypothesis avoids pitting "drift" advocates against "poor life conditions

as causative" advocates, by emphasizing that the foremost source of concentrations of mental illness among the poor is the distributional pressures in the economy and the society as a whole that create devalued statuses for certain persons, including the mentally ill and the impoverished, and that those devalued statuses both thwart mobility, and reinforce the disabling aspects of mental illness, poverty, and non-mobility.

Thirdly, the social selection hypothesis does not necessarily view people who are both mentally ill and poor either as passive victims of social and economic circumstances (the social causation theory), or as merely "defective" persons who can't handle the demands of social life (the drift theory), but recognizes that people are actors within dynamic social and economic environments, which are very likely to be environments of restricted choice and varying degrees of social support. The social selection hypothesis was first proposed by Dunham (1959) in the following form:

Certain persons because of their age, sex, personality traits, intelligence, emotional instability, psychotic proneness, are selected for certain positions in occupational groups, city areas, marital status categories, institutions and the like in contrast to other positions in these structures as the social system moves through time. The process may be either active or passive as far as the person is concerned and through it one can account for significant differences in the rate of mental illness (Dunham, 1959; p. 247).

In a twist on the debate, Dunham has introduced, first, the notion that a "selection" process exists; second, the importance of personal (or group) traits - such as age, sex, personality traits, psychotic proneness (one could add here the characteristics of race, class or sexual preference) - that are engaged by this selection process and by which it discriminates among and between persons and groups; third, the fact that the selection process works by "selecting" people for concrete social locations in various social and

economic institutions, such as one's marital status, one's geographic location - like urban versus suburban areas, one's occupational grouping - like the low-waged service sector versus the higher paying managerial, professional and technical class, or one's housing situation - like public housing, crowded housing, parental housing, segregated housing, suburban housing, or group quarters, including penal and psychiatric institutions; fourth, the acknowledgement that the selection process happens within a dynamic social framework, as the social and economic system moves and changes through time; and fifth, respect for the fact that the selection process is either active or passive (perhaps both) as far as the person is concerned, and that the person's subjective experience and decision-making are not theoretically irrelevant. In this far more complex theoretical formulation, Dunham has gone beyond the static, one-dimensional models of both the "drift" and the "social causation" theorists, and has incorporated many of the multiple factors that are likely to mingle and interact to produce the concentration of mental illness among the lowest social class.

Supportive evidence for the validity of this "social selection hypothesis" comes from diverse sources in the study of mental health, including the literatures on social class, labelling, stigma, social support, and differential psychiatric treatment and diagnosis by race, gender and class. For example, Hollingshead and Redlich (1958) found very significant class differences in every stage of the psychiatric treatment process: referral, diagnosis, treatment, and resources for post-treatment periods. It was the *class* differences of pathways in treatment which accounted for the disproportionate numbers of poor "in treatment" in New Haven, Connecticut.

Another aspect of the selection process was confirmed by Turner and Wagonfeld (1967), who found that the stunted mobility of pre-schizophrenic individuals accounted for the concentration of schizophrenics among the poor, with the majority of

schizophrenics neither being from the lowest social class originally, nor falling down the social scale after the onset of disorder. Hence it was the failure of pre-schizophrenic people to rise in the social scale *prior* to the onset of their mental disability that accounted for their concentration among the poor, suggesting both the effects of unemployment and underemployment on mental health, and the effects of social judgements (selections) in the labor economy on the social status of the pre-schizoid.

Also interpretable within a "selection" framework, Wheaton (1978) found that three different geographic populations showed three different patterns linking mental disability and socioeconomic status across time. Wheaton's findings suggest the importance of the differential abilities of those geographic communities, by socioeconomic status, to handle the intensification of the labor market brought on by different patterns of economic development, and the resulting influence of different economic development on the distribution of mental illness and the social mobility of the mentally ill in each area.

Turner and Gartrell (1980) also provide evidence for a social selection process when looking for a pattern among marital status, social class, work performance and time spent in the psychiatric hospital. The authors successfully enter "competence" - derived from the unexplained variance in a measure of mobility - as the critical variable for clarifying the interpretive controversy; however, the authors unfortunately interpret "competence" primarily as an individual trait. The social selection interpretation would recognize its individual manifestation, but would also emphasize how standards of competence and normality are influenced by distributional pressures that operate in society and the economy, and how those standards of competence and normality are potentially reinforced within psychiatry and psychiatric treatment.

In a review of the literature on social class and mental illness, Liem and Liem (1978) also discuss the social selection process and emphasize the importance of changing definitions of mental illness and competence across time. From this perspective, changing economic conditions influence judgements of employability and normality, and have a subsequent effect on social and institutional location:

The more basic, underlying problem of establishing a relation (between lower social status and mental illness) is complicated by the possibility that psychological impairment in many instances is not solely an objective condition of the individual. For example, when the economy is into a growth phase and in need of increasing labor power, the criteria by which the individual's fitness for work is judged are not necessarily the same as those during an economic recession. Given that impairment can only be defined in relation to some performance criteria, its existence in degree and type depends heavily on the exigencies of performance settings which shape the momentary expectations and demands by which performance is judged (Liem & Liem, 1978; p. 145).

There are many other studies, though not reported here, on the stigma associated with mental illness, and the effects of social stress on social supports, that could be read as fitting within a social selection interpretation. Standards of normality in psychiatry and the economy are brought to bear on mentally ill persons' social and economic well-being, as well as their self-perceptions. Ideologies around the treatment of mental illness, and the dispensation of public assistance furthermore reinforce the devalued status of the disabled person in society, by enforcing limitations in access to both income and housing, hence further influencing the social and institutional location of the disabled. Compounding the onset of mental health problems, many people of low income do not have adequate social support networks, as both poverty and psychological distress

can limit the potential buffering aspects of social support networks.

In conclusion, it is evident from a variety of sources that a complex and dynamic social selection process is working throughout many aspects of the social and economic system to produce the marginal status of the poor and the mentally ill. And a similar processing will now be posited with respect to the development of the homeless problem in the city of Philadelphia. However, it should be noted that the piece of this "selection" process for which there is the least amount of research, and which shall consequently receive additional attention in this chapter, is the critical aspect of active decision-making and personal choice by individuals within the contexts determined by their social location. However, the social selection process as hypothesized by Dunham explicitly suggests its relevance, and many of these other studies more indirectly suggest its relevance. Because of its importance in the present study on homelessness, it shall receive special consideration in the remainder of this chapter.

The Social Selection Processes of Homelessness

The social selection hypothesis is potentially valuable in understanding homelessness, because the process that produces concentrations of different groups of people in homelessness may not be much different than the process that produces other forms of socioeconomic marginality, like the concentrations of the mentally ill in poverty. Indeed, the two areas probably overlap. First consider that the social selection process happens in the framework of a dynamic society and economy, in which conditions change across time, by factors like geographic location and trends in economic development. Hence, as has occurred in the development of the housing and income crisis of the city of Philadelphia, city residents have been selected for a disproportionate suffering of the effects of deindustrialization and the crisis in housing finance over people in the suburbs, because of their geographic location, their diminishing supply of

jobs and income, their lack of political clout, and their lack of preparedness for technological change - stemming from further inequalities in the education and training systems of the area. Such a dynamic system, given the current development boom and "labor shortage" of cities like Philadelphia, is very likely to increase concentrations of poverty, as increasing differentiation among the population through a tighter, more information-intensive labor market, and through the two-tiered wage structure of the services industries, is going to allow some to move up, while those whose labor is less valued, those who are less prepared, and those who are less judged as employable in that labor market, will concentrate further on the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy.

Secondly, this dynamic, social selection process operates in a discriminatory fashion, by selecting persons on the basis of group membership and individual characteristics. For example, the process operates by racial and economic status, as in the case of Philadelphia, where patterns of residential segregation and discriminatory mortgage lending privilege white families over black, and wealthier families over poorer, in the availability of both "affordable" housing and conventional mortgages. The geographic distribution of jobs and industrial development have followed a similar pattern whereby whites and suburban residents have gained jobs and income, while blacks and urban residents have lost jobs and income. Moreover, other institutional patterns of discrimination help drive the social selection process, as in the case of occupational segregation found in the growth industries of Philadelphia. Particular occupations having a certain racial and gender make-up are compensated differently financially in relationship to that make-up. The social selection process requires social judgements for access to housing and work by other personal and group characteristics as well, such as one's social "competence," disability, "marital" status, personality

traits, age, and psychotic proneness, or even, perhaps, by features of one's biographical history, such as having had previous institutional experiences like jail, drug treatment, or psychiatric treatment. In making such judgements, the rationalities of the labor economy and the housing economy produce an extruded or devalued status for those persons who do not always fit within the productive framework of the capital economy, or who are judged as not worthy to fit within that framework, especially when there is heightened competition and less room to accommodate them.

Thirdly, given that the social selection process occurs within this dynamic, discriminatory framework that accommodates to the rationalities of the existing labor and housing economies, on the basis of social judgements and salient characteristics such as race and gender, people's basic quality of life can be determined. People can be denied housing and income, or because of their diminished choices, socially and economically, they may be segregated into marginal or overcrowded housing, denied opportunities for appropriate drug treatment programming, segregated into housing in which they may not wish to reside, or into housing that may be vulnerable to risks for homelessness. For example, the growing concentration of young adult black men and women living with parents, and in segregated public housing, and in group quarters, and in subfamilies, represents a social selection for that group into more marginal housing situations, where the risks for homelessness are more concentrated, or more likely to develop.

Indeed, such housing patterns accompanied by declining opportunities for employment in above-poverty-paying occupations, could be seen as representing a social selection to a certain "marital" status as well, as young minority adults face a thwarting of independent household formation.

Fourthly, according to Dunham's formulation of the social selection hypothesis, people are not necessarily passive in the face of social selection processes produced by

changes such as the decentralization of the geographic economy, the transformation of the labor market to its low-waged service orientation, the inhibition of housing alternatives, or the inability to pursue personal goals and objectives. People sometimes respond to these circumstances in active ways, but not always in ways that are judged positively. People may react by becoming involved in crime networks, or in the penalties and rewards of illicit drug capitalism. Denied the opportunity to experience power in their own lives, people may seek to exercise power in their domestic surroundings, where patterns of abuse may develop, or by stealing, or taking drugs. In such cases, the risks for homelessness grow, as the selections that have brought people to these points of decision, may now subject them to the more painful extrusion forces from their own networks of family and friends. Without the disciplines imposed by work routines and family responsibilities, individuals may begin to rebel against the environments in which they must live out their unfulfillment. Judgements of competence or ability to stay in a given household situation, may now be made by friends, family or partners, leaving a person with even fewer alternatives and social supports, and potentially no alternatives but homelessness.

Of course, it is possible that no active choices by marginalized people will lead to their extrusion by family and friends, but that family and friends will be motivated by their own decisions. In such cases, disabled or unemployed people are particularly vulnerable to homelessness if they are dependent on the cooperation and acceptance of others for their housing and income needs. In some cases, it may be the drug problems or abusive actions of those who control the housing situation of others, that may lead to residential instability and homelessness for those others.

But not all decisions and choices reflect the "deviance" or "resistance" of people in marginal housing situations. Some people may choose to act in the face of their

circumstances in ways that are judged more "positively," for example, by attempting to improve their individual chances in the housing and labor markets, or by making advances out of marginal situations. Along with individual strategies that lead some to homelessness and others away from it, collective strategies for dealing with the pressures of residential instability may be pursued, as in the case of people organizing into grassroots organizations to resist and transform the political economy surrounding the housing and income crisis. Indeed, a wide range of personal and collective choice is likely to occur at those points to which people have been "selected," and when those choices or behaviors are unacceptable to others, further extrusion into homelessness, or even imprisonment may result.

Finally, the sources of the extrusion and selection processes resulting in homelessness, criminal deviance, drug abuse, poverty and mental illness, are potentially masked by ideologies that develop around the institutions which arise to contain those who are extruded, or not judged as competent or deserving within the housing and labor economies. Segregated in jails, mental hospitals and homeless shelters, and denied access to things like drug treatment programs, such people may be forced to re-enact their devalued positions, either in the caged confines of a prison cell, or in the daily subsistence regimens of shelter life. Meanwhile, the existence of such institutions may serve a misleading symbolic function to the public, for example, when shelters are viewed as charitable, kind responses on the part of authorities and others to the plight of otherwise "helpless misfits."

Conclusion

This review of the social selection hypothesis, and its application to the area of homelessness, was intended to connect the larger structuring forces of the political economy with the structuring of inequality in the life conditions of those people

concentrated among Philadelphia's homeless. Moreover, as a theoretical consideration of how people become homeless, it was intended to account for the disproportionate concentration of blacks, women, and young adults among the homeless, as well as people who are disabled, or who have criminal histories, drug problems or problems with their families. While not explaining or excusing homelessness because of the potential interaction of personal issues with the development of homelessness, this section may help to build an understanding of how such concentrations of personal and social characteristics are influenced by distributive pressures in the social order, and how those selections both produce marginalization and influence the development of "deviance" that can result in further marginalization.

This chapter also hopefully provided an awareness that the process of becoming homeless is, in fact, a "process." While individuals are located differently in the social structure on the basis of a number of selection pressures in our culture and economy, the social selection process is one of active movement. And that active movement is not only the result of changing social and economic conditions, but also of personal choice and decision within the framework imposed by social position. It is undoubtedly the case that in the study of homelessness to follow, that individuals will have arrived to their current state through a combination of social structural limits on social position, and intentional, responsive behaviors on the part of the people involved. The following study will hopefully provide an opportunity to consider more fully the major consistencies and patterns of responding that are engendered by the social and economic constraints in which people who are homeless find themselves.