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<th>Sharam, Andrea; Hulse, Kath</th>
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Understanding the nexus between poverty and homelessness: relational poverty analysis of families experiencing homelessness in Australia

Abstract

This article aims to improve understanding of the nexus between poverty and homelessness, with a particular focus on families with children. It draws on relational poverty analysis which analyses the processes, structures and social relations which create and sustain poverty. The article is based on a longitudinal and qualitative study of Australian families with children during and after periods of homelessness, which found that the families experienced not only a lack of material resources but also the social and other processes that impoverish, exclude and disempower, including exposure to violence, lack of family and institutional support, and pressure to relinquish children. The participants had a strong social identity as families and actively resisted the marginalisation and individuation processes they encountered. The article argues that conceptualising homelessness as a process of ‘destitution’ can provide a theoretical basis for understanding the relationship between poverty and homelessness which to date remains remarkably unexplored.

Keywords: homelessness, poverty, destitution, families, relational poverty analysis

1. Introduction

Much of the international literature on homelessness refers to poverty in one way or another. Most commonly, poverty has been characterised as a so-called ‘structural’ factor in explanations of homelessness, referring to attempts to locate the causes of homelessness in broad economic and social structures such as housing market failure, adverse labour market conditions and a retreat from provision of income support by the state (Neale 1997; Fitzpatrick 2005; Parsell and Marston 2012). This is often contrasted with the ‘individual’ causes of homelessness such as mental health issues and substance abuse (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008; Fitzpatrick, Johnsen, and White 2011). In what has been termed the ‘new orthodoxy’ (Pleace 2000), these two sets of factors are said to be inter-related in that some population groups are more vulnerable to structural changes than others (such as ‘marginal workers’ or those who are the target of ‘welfare reform’) and some individuals are particularly ‘at risk’ of homelessness due to personal factors, attributes or behaviours (Fitzpatrick, Johnsen and White 2011).

The new orthodoxy has been criticised as being under theorised and ‘essentially pragmatic rather than theoretically robust’ (Fitzpatrick 2005, 3). Other criticisms have included a lack of specificity of
the factors associated with homelessness and inappropriate understanding of causation (Somerville 2013, 5-6). It is often not clear how these various factors relate together or to broader explanatory frameworks (Fitzpatrick 2005; McNaughton Nicholls 2009; Somerville 2013). A variety of theoretical and philosophical perspectives have been suggested to improve this situation. Neale (1997) suggests these might include feminist perspectives, poststructuralism, postmodernism, Giddens’ structuration theory, and Habermas’ critical theory. Other authors have raised a number of additional perspectives such as critical realism (Fitzpatrick 2005); Foucault’s ideas about discursive formation and power (Horsell 2006) and governmentality (Parker and Fopp 2004); and ‘cultural’ approaches which consider the ways in which homelessness is constructed and experienced (Somerville 1992, 2013).

This article focuses on one aspect of these broader debates, the often cited association between homelessness and poverty, particularly in relation to experiences of homelessness of families with children. Whilst there are different emphases in research in different countries (Fitzpatrick and Christian 2006; Shinn 2007), the international literature suggests that families who become homeless, when compared to other groups of homeless people, have lower levels of substance abuse and mental health problems, are homeless for shorter periods, engage in strategies to empower themselves and are more likely to be in employment and less likely to engage in anti-social behaviour (Fitzpatrick and Christian 2006).

Although poverty and domestic violence are widely cited as primary causes of homelessness for families (eg Netto, Pawson, and Sharp 2009), the relationship between poverty, violence and homelessness more generally appears under-developed. A decade ago, Anderson and Christian (2003, 107) found that ‘theories of poverty’ are not directly linked to ‘theories of homelessness’. Since then, there have been a number of attempts to hypothesise the linkages between homelessness and poverty in a more theoretically informed way. For example, Fitzpatrick (2005: 13), in exploring a critical realist approach to homelessness, observes that poverty is not a ‘necessary condition’ for homelessness since most but not all homeless people are poor but it can be one of a series of causal factors which relate to each other in sometimes complex ways. As an illustration, the relationship between poverty and domestic violence is said to be ‘externally’ related in that one can exist without the other and either could be hypothesised to result in homelessness independently of the other. However, poverty can ‘contingently’ impact on domestic violence making it more likely and the reverse is also possible. When found in combination, they may increase the probability of homelessness. The key question is ‘what is it about poverty that could cause homelessness’ (Fitzpatrick 2005, 14). Somerville (2013) argues that this approach takes us no further than positing poverty as the primary risk factor for homelessness whilst other factors are
secondary. He argues that homelessness is multi-dimensional and includes both 'real' material circumstances and the narratives that people have about their lives (Somerville 2013, 16).

Whilst poverty looms large in explanations of the causes of homelessness, within the poverty literature, homelessness is generally portrayed as only one of many indicators of poverty and disadvantage. There is a voluminous literature on theories of poverty which indicates that conceptualisations of poverty have changed over time (reviewed recently by Green 2007; Misturelli and Heffernan 2008; Vu 2010), moving from single-dimensional measures of poverty based on income - first 'absolute' poverty and then 'relative' poverty - to deprivation, a normative approach based on community standards (Townsend 1979). Poverty in this reading is defined not only in terms of a lack of sufficient resources to meet basic needs, but rather as lacking the resources required to be able to participate in the lifestyle and consumption patterns enjoyed by others (Saunders 2011). In contrast to theories that emphasise 'the means of living', Sen's much-discussed capabilities approach focusses on 'the actual opportunities a person has' with poverty being 'both variable and deeply contingent on the characteristics of the respective people and the environment in which they live – both natural and social' (Sen 2009, 253-254) thus highlighting, inter alia, the importance of social relations. More recently, other multi-dimensional concepts such as 'social exclusion' have been deployed to try and capture not only the multiple dimensions of poverty (economic, social, political and cultural) but an understanding of inequality as dynamic, not static, and focusing attention on the processes that cause inequality and people's actions although the concept of social exclusion has been highly contested (eg Arthurson and Jacobs 2004; Levitas 2005). The 'new' poverty approach (Leisering and Walker 1998) which sees poverty as a dynamic process is viewed by Clapham (2008, 89) as resonating with the dynamic pathways approach to homelessness, necessitating life histories and biographical methods to understand homelessness in this broader context.

The aim of this article is to contribute to these debates by drawing on recent developments in theorising poverty as a means of understanding the experiences of homeless families. In particular, we investigate relational poverty analysis (Mosse 2010; Lawson 2012) and, more specifically, the work of Devereux (2003), Green and Hulme (2005), Harriss-White (2005), and Green (2007, 2009). This approach has the potential to reveal the processes through which people experience poverty and homelessness, including their personal agency in the face of broader structural factors.

The article proceeds as follows. After discussing relational poverty analysis, it introduces a longitudinal and qualitative study of families with children who experienced homelessness in Australia, The Families on the Edge project. The subsequent sections discuss some of the main themes from this research: loss or denial of 'assets' and processes of impoverishment,
marginalisation through violence and institutional pressures; and homelessness as individuation involving relinquishment of, or fear of relinquishment of, children. The final substantive section discusses forms of resistance to impoverishment and marginalisation based on a strong social identity as families. The article concludes with a reflection on the implications of the approach in understanding the nexus between poverty and homelessness.

2. Relational poverty analysis and destitution

Whilst poverty has been the focus of a number of disciplines (Vu 2010), relational poverty analysis is a new anthropological approach to the study of deprivation and inequality which sees persistent poverty and inequality 'as the consequence of historically developed economic and political relations' reflecting the effects of social categorisation and identity (Mosse 2010, 1156-1157). It takes ‘the categories through which people think their worlds and act upon them as the starting point for an analysis of the significance of social practice’ (Green 2007, 1115). As such poverty is seen as the 'outcome of a system of social relationships' and not merely the 'effect of deprivation of income or entitlements' (Green 2009, 310), opening up theoretical frameworks beyond those based on socio-economic position of ‘poor people’ (based on income and assets; labour market status, and education and skills) to encompass the ways in which other people construct homelessness and act towards homeless people.

Relational poverty analysis is particularly interested in the process of destitution. Poverty is not merely a static state in which a person lacks the essential resources and material objects that sustain a human being. Rather it is a dynamic social process through which people gain, lose and re-gain access to essential resources and material objects. Relational poverty analysis highlights that this access is mediated by acquisition of, or loss or denial of ‘assets’. Assets include capital and labour, formal legal entitlements and customary rights. Importantly, it also includes social constructions that create differences in status and, often, hierarchies. The capacity to hold an asset is frequently reliant on a pre-existing status such as gender. Assets can be converted into material possessions via markets and exchange frameworks (Green 2009: 315-6). For those living in poverty, access to assets is often mediated by assessment of ‘deservedness’. In Australia notions of deservedness and conditionality are embedded in the welfare system, with government transfers to groups such as sole parents and people with disabilities highly scrutinised (Mendes 2009). Relational poverty analysis highlights the changes to social relations that facilitate a critical loss of assets that not only pushes people below an accepted minimal standard of material consumption but also undermines their social relationships and disempowers them (Harriss-White 2005, Green 2009).

A discussion of destitution as an end state (analogous to absolute poverty) is not considered to be
applicable to non-Indigenous Australia (Callender, Schofield, and Shrestha, 2012), or indeed to most developed countries, but ideas about destitution as a process provide a means of exploring changes in social relationships associated with poverty and homelessness. The processes of destitution are contingent on numerous actors and circumstances so their effects may only be partial. This recognises that the chronically ‘poor’ are by no means passive subjects and exercise personal agency, resisting damaging changes in status and loss of assets.

An important element of these processes, as argued by Harriss-White (2005), is the individuation resulting from the loss of key social relations. This could be seen as particularly important for families with children for whom the care relationship is the key social relation, reflecting Lister’s (2003) ‘ethic of care’ and ‘family’ as their key social identity.

‘[D]estitution is conceived as an individual phenomenon because, by the time a person is destitute and has practically no economic resources, they are the individuated remnants of a collapsed household’ (Harriss-White 2005, 883).

Individuation involves relinquishment of children by their parents/carers but is also a more complex process in which family groups are not supported and/or rejected by their extended families and friends and by the wider community as a result of their homelessness when in other situations, such as natural disasters, such groups are offered emotional and practical support. Marginalisation and individuation can be achieved through harmful activities such as violence (inter-personal, communal or state), coercion, intimidation, harassment, exploitation, humiliation, hostility, cruelty and vilification. When socially sanctioned, that is: ‘governed by social norms’ and ‘mediated through a range of social institutions’ (Harriss-White 2005, 883), such activities generate social exclusion (Green 2009, 311). Such socially sanctioned harm can alternatively be understood as ‘abjection’ (Kristeva 1982).

Destitution can therefore be understood as the outcome of a downward shift in the social order, in which assets are lost, withdrawn or denied; and in which social connections and obligations are weakened or voided. This deterioration in the social and economic position of the poor is regarded as a consequence of the actions of the non-poor who derive benefits from these changes (Green and Hulme 2005; Harriss-White 2005; and Green 2009). In relation to housing, ‘gentrification’ of a neighbourhood and displacement of poorer residents is a prime example.

The originality of the relational poverty analysis is in describing the combination of the processes of impoverishment, marginalisation and disempowerment which, left unchecked or unable to be resisted, will result in a loss of assets and destitution. Relational poverty analysis has been used predominately to re-examine poverty in developing countries although Green (2009) and Green and Hulme (2005) argue it is also applicable to developed countries. These authors remind us that
the welfare systems of developed countries are relatively recent and are not fixed and that there may be a downward shift in entitlement to assets and changing social relationships which indicate processes of destitution. The rest of the paper deploys this type of analysis as a means of understanding family homelessness as an experience of poverty in one developed country, Australia.

3. The ‘Families on the Edge’ Project

In the Australian system, there is no statutory right for homeless people or families to be assisted, as in the UK, and no homelessness shelters for families, as in the US. Australian federal and state governments fund not-for-profit organisations to provide a network of specialist homelessness services that can offer support, referral and, in some cases, direct access to crisis accommodation and, subsequently, time-limited (12 weeks) ‘transitional’ housing in order to re-establish their lives prior to moving into longer term housing.

Homeless families with children have emerged as a newly recognised ‘cohort’ of homeless people in Australia, joining an increasing number of already recognised homeless groups such as single older people and youth (Australian Government 2008). Homelessness in Australia is typically viewed as resulting from the particular circumstances, characteristics and behaviours of people who become homeless as well as arising from low income, financial stress, unaffordable housing and other factors which are often seen as indicators of poverty. However, families’ ‘pathways’ into homelessness centre on housing crisis (associated with financial stress) and family breakdown (with and without domestic violence) and the duration of homelessness for families is shorter than for other population groups (Chamberlain and Johnson 2011).

The aim of the Families on the Edge project was to extend understanding of families’ experiences of, and reflections on, periods of homelessness. This is in contrast to much of the Australian literature on family homelessness which focuses on definitions and measurement, identification of causes and ‘risk factors’, and pathways into and out of homelessness, as well as the effectiveness or otherwise of services (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1992; Mallett, et al. 2010; Chamberlain and Johnson 2011), although there are some notable exceptions which utilise other approaches (McCaughey 1991; Bartholomew 1999; Walsh 2003; Parker and Fopp 2004; Hulse and Kolar 2009).

Families were defined as at least one adult with dependent children. The research took place in the State of Victoria (one of six States in Australia’s federal system) and followed 57 families, who self-identified as homeless, over a period of 12-18 months between 2009 and 2011. 152 in-depth interviews were conducted over three waves of interviews, at six monthly intervals, and included 14 interviews with adolescent children, with a final retention rate of almost 70 per cent. Families were
recruited through a range of sources including community organisations, motels and police stations. When first interviewed the families were living in diverse arrangements. 23 were in types of crisis accommodation that ranged from squatting to motels, rooming houses to sharing overcrowded accommodation with family of origin. 19 were in transitional or temporary accommodation which was time limited; and 11 were in what appeared at face value to be longer-term housing but who still considered themselves to be homeless. By wave three only five were in crisis accommodation, 13 in transitional/long-term housing and 23 in long-term housing.

The predominant family type was single parent families, comprising forty single mothers and six single fathers, as well as nine couple families, one grandmother-headed family and one carer with an aged parent and teenage brother. Research participants included 10 migrant families, all but one of whom came from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background, seven CALD families who were not first generation migrants, and Six Indigenous families. The research participants reflect the profile of family homelessness in Australia, which primarily involves women and children. It is also largely a suburban and regional phenomenon rather than an inner city one, reflecting the displacement of low-income families from inner suburbs due to gentrification (Wulff and Lobo 2009).

The interviews provided insights not only into the families’ material circumstances but also changes in social relations, their responses to their situation and the actions of others. They provided a rich source of material on how they understood and negotiated rights and responsibilities, their contact with family and friends, social participation and feelings of belonging. The 152 interview transcripts were coded progressively in a number of cycles using NVivo software. The coded data were analysed to enable a thorough understanding of each case and subsequently a thorough comparison of cases (Flick 2002), in both cases across the three waves of interviews. This process identified patterns in the data and enabled key themes to be identified which were the subjects of a number of source documents, with detailed references back to original transcripts (an audit trail).

The overall findings of the research have been presented elsewhere, richly illustrated by the interview data (Authors 2013). In this article, the emphasis is on exploring the link between poverty and homelessness from a theoretical perspective, using the framework of relational poverty analysis, through further interrogation of some of the main themes which emerged from the detailed analysis.

4. Destitution: assets and impoverishment

*Loss or denial of assets*

The families in the research were dependent on government transfers for their income. Many had
been dependent on these payments prior to their homelessness and took entitlement to them for granted. Disregarding why the families lost their previous housing, they understood their homelessness as the inability to find low-rent housing. Most of the families had lived in the private rental sector throughout much their adult lives but when they sought rental housing again, they found that their market position had changed as overall housing supply tightened and rents increased from the mid-2000s (NHSC 2013). Real estate agents and private landlords screened them out as higher risk tenants than those in paid work and on higher incomes. Further, the purchasing power of their government transfers, and in particular the specific payment made by the federal government to assist with their private rental costs (Rent Assistance) did not keep pace with these increases in rents (Colic-Peisker, Ong, and McMurray 2010). Low rent private housing could be regarded as an asset lost to lower income families.

Few families had families of origin or friends that could support them to any significant extent, or if they had this initially, relationships were often fractured as a result of their homelessness. The families initially believed they had an entitlement to social housing, reflecting an understanding that families with children could access this type of housing. However, they found it difficult to access social housing (comprising 5 per cent of all dwellings in Australia) due to declining government investment in the sector, and which over the past 15 years has been allocated mainly to people with multiple and complex needs, many of whom are single. Many of the families approached homelessness services seeking crisis accommodation which is tightly rationed due to service funding levels. Generally, the families found that they were not regarded as ‘high need’ by homelessness agencies unless they were going to be sleeping on the streets the night they presented. They were initially shocked by the requirement that children should face rooflessness before being eligible for help, believing children had a right to avoid homelessness.

When first interviewed (wave one) the families struggled with how they were treated. The entitlement they thought existed proved to be illusory. The rationale for, and systems for delivery of, assistance were not transparent; and the parents considered that workers’ perceptions of their deservedness often determined the quality of service. Nevertheless the families quickly adopted an instrumentalist approach to getting what they needed from homelessness services. Just as the families understood their homelessness as resulting from the loss of their traditional access to low-income private rental housing they saw the inability of homelessness services to provide accommodation as responsible for maintaining their homelessness; assistance (as they initially envisaged it) was an asset denied to them.

**Impoverishment**

Almost all of those interviewed came from circumstances in which low-income was the norm.
Whilst families in all walks of life may experience life disruptions, including family breakdown and the effects of domestic violence, the families in this study did not have the financial resources to deal with a crisis, or ongoing difficulties, in their lives. Many of the families ultimately got some assistance from homelessness services with the cost of motels and rooming houses. However, living in this type of accommodation was expensive and incurred additional costs such as buying takeaway food and using commercial laundries. Some families camped out or slept in cars when there were no funds to pay for shelter. A few families sought emergency relief from welfare agencies to supplement their income and some sought free meals, scavenged from charity bins, sold or pawned possessions. Some took on debt and in rare cases committed theft or fraud.

There were significant costs associated with repeated moving. Possessions often ended up spread around friends, family and commercial storage facilities and were often relinquished, lost or stolen. Commercial storage was expensive and sometimes families forfeited goods when they could no longer pay the fees. Sometimes friends would not give things back. Each move often resulted in a further shedding of possessions, as well as a loss of social relationships.

The experience of living in crisis accommodation left many heavily indebted. Very few were able to work during this time as they were focused on caring for their children and finding somewhere to live, so were reliant on welfare payments. Many relied on credit during this period, which involved taking out unsecured loans (from family or commercial lenders), or becoming indebted to providers of services including utilities, car mechanics, storage providers and child care centres. Some of these loans carried a heavy cost penalty and, if they were unable to maintain repayments, they were pursued by debt collectors with the threat of having remaining belongings seized. Debt also meant losing future income as repayments took a significant proportion of their benefits or wages. While the ability to access credit enabled the families to have somewhere to live and feed their families, it often had a significant and negative effect on their ability to re-establish their lives to an adequate standard of living once their housing circumstances improved. The need to replace essential goods created a considerable financial burden when resettlement occurred. Further, they found that the consequences of debt were not considered by government and homelessness services in assessing their risk of homelessness or their capacity to re-enter the private rental housing market.

For the most part, the families reported what could be described as ‘disciplined’ approaches to expenditure and paying down debt. Central to this was a determination to prioritise housing costs and never to become homeless again. The need for financial prudence however was tempered by the parent/s’ desire for their children to be able to socialise and to participate in school activities, such as excursions. Sometimes, they took on debt to make sure that their children could continue to be part of the mainstream. The consequences were for some families, attempting to remain part
of the mainstream, contributed to their ongoing financial crisis.

The research highlighted that, although income poverty was a contributory cause of homelessness, for many of the families the financial impacts of homelessness were cumulative and inhibited recovery from financial crisis even where their housing circumstances had improved. Put simply, whilst their situation in relation to housing improved, their experience of poverty did not. More families accessed emergency relief payments from welfare agencies in the third wave of the research than in wave one.

5. Marginalisation

Violence

A significant finding of the research was the prevalence of violence and other harmful behaviour. Although domestic violence had been the reason why a third of the families had left their home, reinforcing other Australian research (eg Tually et al. 2008), none of the families reported domestic violence occurring during the course of the research. Once homeless however other people subjected them to sexual and physical assault, coercion, intimidation, harassment, exploitation, humiliation, hostility, vilification and cruelty. Whilst studies of family homelessness in the US have highlighted the pernicious effects on parents and children of exposure to violence (Annoshian 2005; Swick 2008), this has been associated with living in homelessness shelters which are not found in Australia. Explanations for the pervasiveness of violence experienced by the families during their homelessness cannot be found in reference to general levels of violence in the Australian community (Davis and Dossetor 2010). Although long-term single homeless people in Australia are known to experience high levels of inter-personal violence (Murray 2011) there is limited research which raises the possibility of violence or other harms being perpetuated by other types of actors. Violence was in some cases predatory and, in others, opportunistic. In one case male rooming house operators entered showers to commit sexual assault. One women-only accommodation service was run by a sex offender who used the opportunities such a facility presented. Another housed sex offenders and both male residents and the male operator preyed on the families. In another case a homeless man, a convicted rapist, offered a ‘doubling up’ arrangement to a woman who he then sexually assaulted.

Violence often occurred because of the lack of control of the families over their living environment. Rooms without locks enabled others to enter rooms without consent, resulting in intimidation and property theft. Life in crisis accommodation also meant exposure to drug and alcohol abuse, serious assaults, and on one occasion, a police raid. Domestic violence amongst other residents was frightening and re-traumatised those who had previously experienced domestic violence. Families were also frightened by mentally unwell residents. Ironically, domestic violence refuges
were not necessarily safe with reports of other residents and sometimes staff engaging in intimidation and bullying. Moreover, living in what appeared to be more permanent types of housing did not necessarily end exposure to violence. For example, two families placed into social housing after long periods of homelessness had violent, harassing neighbours but were unable to transfer to safer accommodation.

Private landlords were also sometimes responsible for significant levels of harm. This included brutal evictions that involved public displays of power, sometimes involving police, in which the families were locked out of their home and their possessions either physically denied to them or dumped in the street where they were stolen, trashed, or removed by street cleaners. On one occasion such action was accompanied by vigilante attacks by neighbours.

The families were concerned that complaints made to police about violent incidents were not taken seriously and some of those in transitional and public housing felt victimised by their housing managers. Private renters who attempted to advocate for their needs feared eviction and some had experienced ‘blacklisting’ by agents, a common sanction which made it very difficult to access other rental housing.

Relational poverty analysis views physical violence and other intimidatory behaviour as not merely harmful to the individual victim but damaging to the social relations that support that individual (Mosse 2010). For the families, violence almost inevitably meant moving again which further destabilised and impoverished them. Such harm can be seen as socially sanctioned such as when police fail to act on complaints of assault and harassment. The actions of perpetrators of violence against the families can be regarded as socially sanctioned harm because the families’ vulnerability was more than lack of physical security; they had literally become ‘fair game’. By becoming homeless the families moved outside of society where the normal codes of behaviour (common decency) were often absent or weak. In this way we can understand 'home' not only as a physical shelter but as a moral one. This moral shelter can, in relational poverty analysis terms, be regarded as another asset that the families lost. As most of the families comprised women and children, this part of the process of destitution can be understood as a gendered experience of poverty and homelessness.

Institutional pressures

Few of the families felt they were generally treated with dignity and respect and the families were conscious of the marginalising effect of their treatment by welfare and homelessness services. The families often felt that their status as a family was not recognised. Families clashed with services where services' requirements for assistance or compliance conflicted with the parent's perception of the needs of their children. Service provision rules often did not appear rational to
families, with parents often feeling undermined by conditions attached to obtaining assistance. Commonly families were required to travel long distances on public transport at un-family friendly times in order to get paperwork, and to comply with requirements to inspect private rental properties.

Sometimes families hosted other homeless families and individuals when they found temporary or permanent accommodation. But these informal ‘doubling up’ arrangements which built on existing social relations created difficulties for both parties (see also Offer 2012) as they were grounds for immediate eviction of both families. Yet, in other cases transitional housing managers placed young single mothers in shared living arrangements with other young mothers who were drug addicts whose boyfriends were dealers. These types of actions may be perceived as careless or ignorant of the circumstances of families but in some situations policies could be cruel or callous in their application, a problem identified as institutional ‘systems abuse’ by Bartholomew (1999). Formal crisis centres provide 13 nights of accommodation, and although families may stay longer, they are required to sleep elsewhere on the 14th night as any two weeks’ residence brings the providers under the State’s Residential Tenancies Act. Similarly providers of transitional housing, who offer up to 12 weeks accommodation, served ‘notices to vacate’ the day the families move in. Many families were permitted to extend their ‘lease’ but in other cases families were soon evicted into very precarious housing circumstances and became homeless again.

Institutional pressures also resulted in a double ‘Catch 22’ situation. If a parent living in transitional housing with their children got a job, either their rent was increased (being based on a percentage of income) making it difficult for the families to improve their financial situation or they were evicted irrespective of whether their income could sustain a private rental tenancy. This occurred on top of another ‘Catch 22’ whereby if the families found employment (even on a very temporary basis), their income support payments reduced substantially with every dollar earned over a low threshold. Yet almost none of the families had skills that could attract a wage high enough to lift them out of poverty, even if affordable child care was available. In such circumstances, some reported working without declaring the income to the income support agency (Centrelink), which is a risky strategy, since ‘welfare fraud’ is vigorously prosecuted (Walsh and Marston 2010).

6. The ‘collapsed family’: individuation

Socially sanctioned harm is regarded by relational poverty analysis as a means by which an asset, such as familial relationships, can be rendered void. All the families in the research stated they prioritised the maintenance of the conditions of ‘home’ and the social relations of family. Most understood that if they did not do this, there was potential for intervention by the state child
In order to provide safety and/or stability for children, parents from 14 families voluntarily relinquished children into the informal care of others. While these parents did not always have choice about separation they did, in a sense, mostly choose the terms of their loss rather than permitting circumstances to disempower them totally. Mostly the children went to ex-partners, with the risk that the other parent would seek majority care of the children, which some subsequently did.

Threats of involuntary relinquishment of children came from ex-partners and families of origin, who appeared willing to use the state child protection system to gain primary care of children for themselves. While threatened, involuntary relinquishment in these circumstances did not occur. Threats rarely came directly from the state. Only one parent was subject to mandatory reporting by a prescribed agency which could not then substantiate its claim. Fear of losing children was used by neighbours, accommodation providers, and homelessness services to achieve compliant behaviour or, it appears in some cases, to frighten or intimidate. Sometimes parents complied with these threats in order to avoid the potential for an investigation by the child protection services.

Children relinquished voluntarily on a longer-term basis went to ex-partners and parents rarely relinquished all their children. When they did relinquish all children it was only for very short periods. Relinquishment was a risk and it added to the trauma of homelessness. The decision to separate from children was not always within their control but when it was, it was usually done in the hope that it was temporary, and that separation would be less harmful than remaining together. The breaking up of the family was done, paradoxically, in order to preserve it. None of the parents said they relinquished children to improve the family's financial situation.

Brown (2006) and Johnson and Sullivan (2008) argue forcible removal of children is traumatic but also note that poverty as the underlying cause tends to be ignored. Separation from a child in such circumstances can be regarded as a socially sanctioned harm. Poverty is often viewed as income poverty and exclusion from the mainstream, but the Families on the Edge research suggests poverty is also a process in which conditions for key social relations providing care are undermined, and individuation facilitated. Yet the pressures for individuation were, for the most part, strongly resisted.

7. Resistance

The agency of ‘the poor’ is a key element of relational poverty analysis. Over three waves of interviews, the families in the study made practical short and long-term decisions to stabilise their situation and to create conditions in the future that would mean they would never be homeless again. These included taking on debt, accessing motels and rooming houses, providing items that
permitted their children to remain in the mainstream (eg computers), and for, some, taking up training and education opportunities. In the latter they were supported by public policies aimed at moving them from welfare into work.

An important finding of the research is the extent to which the families had a strong social identity as family. At the beginning of the research, they referred to themselves as 'mainstream families' in opposition to 'bad' homeless people who had problems with substance abuse or were refugees and who the families perceived as receiving assistance when they did not (Spinney and Nethery 2012). The families referred to themselves as 'homeless', a fact that enabled them to access housing assistance. A small number of families talked about feeling stigma but a surprising finding was their broad politicisation resulting from being 'rejected' by a range of people including friends and families and homelessness services. In reflecting on their homelessness at the end of the research, there was consensus that everyone should have a home and they no longer distinguished between types of homeless people. They claimed entitlement to an asset by appealing to social solidarity.

The basis for this claim of social solidarity has its roots in the Australian idea of 'a fair go', an expression of social solidarity in the collective belief held by most Australians that every person is entitled to fair treatment by others. The context of the first wave of interviews was the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria in which 173 people died and over 2,000 homes were destroyed. In the early interviews this emergency, and the community response, figured quite strongly. The families felt a part of the community; they empathised with the victims and took pride in the wider community coming to the aid of those affected. Families also talked about donating money to the bushfire relief appeals. Some of the families likened their own situation to that of the bushfire victims but came to realise that their emergency was not going to be treated in the same way. Their beliefs about 'a fair go' took a battering but there remained a very real attachment to the ideal of egalitarianism with the families at wave 3 consciously identifying with other marginalised groups and the 'little people'.

The families themselves resisted marginalisation by insisting that if families were homeless in Australia (and they were only too aware of the number of other families and others who were homeless) then homelessness was a mainstream issue. By wave 3 some parents and adolescent children, were actively engaged in community action to raise awareness of the issue, not just for themselves but to help others. Others were training for work or had obtained work that specifically addressed homelessness and other disadvantage. Destitution as a process of individuation was countered by collective identification and action.

A second line of resistance is also evident. Despite the often very deep trauma and self-esteem
issues which were identified by those interviewed, many parents and some of the children had developed skills through therapeutic counselling to help them understand when and where they are responsible for their situation. Some talked about taking responsibility for how their own behaviours had contributed to their homelessness. They could nevertheless differentiate between the failure to sustain a tenancy (through financial mis-management) and the failure to secure a new one because of discrimination. They understood that the rental market had changed. The parents saw their role as fighting for their children, and this meant being a good role model and not being a 'loser'. They believed children had rights, and that their children required justice.

8. Conclusion

This paper has investigated the dynamic relationship between poverty and homelessness using insights generated by an anthropological approach, relational poverty analysis. This type of analysis has primarily been used in third world countries, and its emphasis on the processes that lead to destitution may not at first glance resonate with conditions in developed countries such as Australia. Homelessness, particularly for families with children, in developed countries has been seen variously as an issue of relative poverty, deprivation and social exclusion. The Families on the Edge research indicates that these concepts are insufficient to explain and understand the experiences of poverty of the families over the period of the research. Many of these families reached a level of impoverishment from which it was difficult to recover.

Even though all the families were in receipt of government transfers which could be regarded as an asset, experience of homelessness dispossessed the families, through high costs associated with living in crisis accommodation and frequent moving, and through taking on unsecured debt. Although their housing circumstances improved over the three waves, the degree of their financial impoverishment worsened due to the cumulative effect of their experiences. Put simply, poverty was more entrenched and longer lasting than periods of homelessness. The families’ financial problems however did not stem simply from lack of money; violence and intimidation frequently meant the need to move, which not only incurred expenses but also meant that parents redoubled their effort at keeping their children in the mainstream, frequently taking on debt to achieve this.

The research found that for the families, homelessness can be understood in terms of non-exclusive access and control over physical space and the inability to maintain the social relations that constitute family life. ‘Home’, on the other hand, provided security from external threats, and enabled the daily routines of care, and the relationships of care to be supported (Somerville 1992). What the research has added is an understanding that ‘home’ is not only an asset which can be lost but also a social construction reflecting a set of social obligations that legitimise and protect ‘housed’ families; that is home provides ‘moral shelter’. When the homeless families lost the moral
shelter of home, the resulting trauma was regarded by parents as an impairment which put the care of their children at risk. When violence or other social harm was perpetrated against a homeless child, the parent(s) felt they had failed in their role of protector and carer.

Relational poverty analysis allows us to understand that the families did not ‘fall’ into poverty or destitution as a result of clearly identifiable ‘causes’, rather they experienced a process in which they were propelled downwards, in terms of a shift in assets, and outwards in terms of belonging to the mainstream, but it was a process they emphatically resisted because of their care responsibilities. Poverty and homelessness did not, in themselves, affect their self-identification as mainstream families but the families considered that others that they came into contact with viewed them as being ‘on the outside’ rather than part of the mainstream. Relational poverty analysis envisages a dynamic process which reflects not just material struggle but the effects on social relationships and on belonging. The Families on the Edge findings have added an understanding that other people act in ways that indicate some degree of licence to exploit and sometimes to be violent towards families who are homeless, particularly female-headed families. Relational poverty analysis provides a conceptual link between violence, individuation and homelessness. Unlike much other research, it does not focus exclusively on people experiencing poverty but also considers the role of other people and institutions in ensuring and perpetuating poverty, including as suggested by Somerville (2013) the role of the ‘homelessness industry’. It enables an understanding not only of how homelessness is experienced by some families as a manifestation of extreme poverty, but also of why these families continue to be poor and homeless.

References
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