The politics of homelessness in the Australian print media

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Abstract:
The media plays an important role in politicising social problems such as homelessness. This paper argues that political debates and media representations of homelessness frame options available to policy makers and social work practitioners and shape policy and practice responses to homelessness. Positive and compassionate representations of homelessness can influence the development of respectful and inclusive policy and practice approaches to homelessness. However, dominant representations of homelessness in the print media that individualise social problems also reinforce deep-seated community values that maintain unequal power and gender relations and transcend political changes in society.

Keywords: homelessness, print media, politics

Introduction
This paper explores how homelessness is represented in the print media, within the contemporary Australian socio-political context. The media is central to setting the public policy agenda and to politicising ‘social problems’ such as homelessness (Mendes 2003; Zufferey 2009; Zufferey and Chung 2006, Zufferey 2008b). 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’. This paper examines in depth a newspaper article written by the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd titled: ‘Homelessness affects normal, decent people’ in the Sunday Telegraph, the highest selling Australian newspaper (Australian Press Council (APC), 2008). This analysis discusses how compassionate, individualising and
normalising discourses constitute representations of homelessness in politics, policy responses and selected newspaper texts.

**Research context**

This study of print media representations of homelessness is theoretically influenced by social constructionism, which focuses on the social construction of reality and how language and discourses in the print media shape realities (Berger and Luckman 1966; Burr 1995). Representations of homelessness in the Australian print media are constituted by the sociopolitical discourses and ideologies that emerge from the current political agendas, policy rhetoric and service responses to homelessness (Zufferey 2009; Zufferey and Chung 2006, Zufferey 2008b). As noted by O’Shaughnessy and Stadler (2005) discourse and ideology are central to studies of the media. A discourse is historically and culturally embedded practice and refers to how we make meaning and construct our world through language (Fook 2002). A range of discourses (or ways of thinking) are bought together to make sense of particular areas (O’Shaughnessy and Stadler 2005:189), such as homelessness.

The discourse analysis was influenced by Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis, which examines the contradictory features in text as well as the relationship between discourse practice (text production and interpretation) and socio-political contexts (Fairclough 1995: 98). Fairclough (1995: 97) argues that discourse is a language text as well as a practice embedded within socio-cultural contexts that function at individual, institutional and societal levels. For example, a marital relationship is an interaction between individuals in that particular relationship, relationships within the family institution and the gender relations of a wider society (Fairclough 1995:97). This article particularly focuses on contradictory features in newspaper texts using Carol Bacchi’s (2009) policy analysis framework, to emphasise how certain discourses are contested but also obscure and make invisible diverse perspectives on homelessness, such as the voices of service users and people affected by homelessness.

The study was also influenced by Foucault’s work on power/ knowledge, which focuses on the ‘normalising gaze’; how power informs knowledge (for example, politicians are powerful leaders and mediators of public opinion and can influence knowledge production in the area of homelessness) and how subjects constitute themselves within these discourses, such as how homeless people represent themselves in relation to media discourses (Gubrium and
Holstein 2000: 494; Hodgetts et al. 2009). It is assumed that discourses shape and constitute actions and actions shape and constitute discourses in a dialectical process (Fook 2002).

In previous research on social work responses to homelessness, Zufferey (2007) found that media attention to a social problem will invoke a political response. For example, one policy worker clearly articulated how service funding was influenced by media attention:

The bad news stuff…you will get a fast ‘we need a briefing on this and what are we going to do about this?’ and you need to get it back up…not to change policy but…I have seen ministers allocate funds on that basis though…it does still happen but I think they [politicians] are better at using the media than being used by them (government policy worker, in Zufferey 2007:264; Zufferey 2008b).

This research participant’s impression was that politicians have become more ‘politically savvy’ and can ‘use’ the media for their own purposes.

**Politics, the print media and homelessness**

After 11 years of the Howard Liberal government, the Rudd Labor Government was elected in 2007 on a social justice platform of fairness, security, sustainability, opportunity, compassion, human rights, responsibility, community, democracy and freedom (Australian Labor 2009). The new government immediately began work on addressing important social issues such as homelessness through a social inclusion agenda, which included principles of reducing disadvantage, increasing participation, building partnerships and evidence based policy (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2009). The White Paper ‘The Road Home’ was released in 2008 and an annual progress report ‘Along the Road Home’ (2009) was also recently released, outlining initiatives funded by the government and achievements. The White Paper stated that the Australian Government aims to intervene early and prevent homelessness; improve crisis services; create exit points to secure longer term housing and stop the cycle of homelessness (Commonwealth of Australia 2009). This concern to improve policy and practice responses to homelessness was conveyed to the public through the media, including the print media.

In 2008 Rudd published the following newspaper article:
1. ‘A few days after last year's election, I asked all MPs to visit homeless shelters in their local suburb or town and find out about Australia's growing crisis of homelessness.

2. For me, what has been shocking about those visits is just who you find in homeless shelters: real people, who have had real families and real jobs, but who have often been hit by one or two catastrophic events that have thrown their lives into chaos. Typically, they are ordinary, decent Australians -- the sort of people you might meet at a barbecue in your neighbour's backyard. It makes you realise that with a bad turn of luck and no one to turn to, anyone at all could find themselves living on the streets.

3. For a nation as wealthy as Australia, it is not acceptable that every year more Australians are becoming homeless. Behind those numbers are thousands of stories of personal tragedy, domestic violence and abuse, mental illness, alcohol and drug addiction and more. There are no easy solutions. But as a compassionate nation, we should not tolerate having thousands of kids growing up in homeless families.

4. We need to get a better understanding of the problem and find new solutions. Government alone cannot solve the problem. Nor can business, the churches, or charities by themselves. We all need to work more effectively together, as well as working with homeless people to help themselves.’ (‘Homelessness affects normal, decent people’, *Sunday Telegraph*, February 3, 2008, Author: Prime Minister Kevin Rudd)

This is a complex message. Carol Bacchi’s (2009) policy analysis framework is useful to examine how homelessness has emerged as an important social and political problem in Australia and how it is represented in the above newspaper article. The questions used to analyse the article using Bacchi’s (2009: 2) framework are:

- What is the problem of homelessness represented to be in this newspaper article?
- What assumptions underlie this representation of the problem of homelessness?
- How has this representation of the problem come about, what are the origins and history of homelessness in Australia?
- What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? What are the gaps and silences?
What effects are produced by this representation of the problem, such as on people experiencing homelessness?

How/where has this representation been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?

A number of discourses intersect in this article and the discourses of compassion (‘as a compassionate nation’), individualism and normality (‘homelessness affects ordinary, decent… people’) are strong.

What is the problem of homelessness represented to be?

All policies are ‘problematising activities’ and therefore contain implicit and explicit problems representations (Bacchi 2009:2). This ‘problematising’ is evident in representations of homelessness in the above newspaper article. Firstly, the article reports on an action being taken, that the newly elected government ministers were asked by their leader Kevin Rudd to find out about homelessness, displaying a top down leadership approach to addressing homelessness. ‘Homeless people’ are then constructed as ‘real people, who have had real families and real jobs…ordinary decent Australians- the sort of people you might meet at a barbecue in your neighbour's backyard… anyone at all could find themselves living on the streets.’ So, the ‘problem’ of homelessness can affect ‘real’, ‘ordinary’ and ‘decent’ people and homelessness can happen to all of us ‘Australians’ with a bit of ‘bad luck’ and ‘no-one to turn to’.

What assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?

Bacchi (2009:7-9) notes that dominant binaries, key concepts and constructed categories are central to how problems are represented. Whilst this article is a plea to all ‘ordinary Australian citizens’ to show compassion for the homeless because homelessness could happen to them, homeless people are spoken about in relation to the concept of ‘normality’ using the binary of normal/deviant (albeit on the side of ‘normal’ rather than deviant). Thus, a ‘normalising’ concept is evident, in the form of homeless people being ‘decent’ and normal people.

Individualism permeates print media representations of homelessness as well as policy and practice responses to homelessness (Zufferey 2007). The discourse of individualism is a result of the ideology of individualism in Western societies, which emphasises personal rights, freedom and equality over collective ones (O’Shaughnessy and Stadler 2005: 21). This
individualist ideology constructs homelessness as a problem caused by and affecting vulnerable or blameworthy individuals, which includes dominant themes related to the categorising of the deserving and undeserving homeless.

Normalising discourses evoke ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomies, such as emphasising differences between the homeless/housed, with homeless people often being represented as the ‘Other’ in need of the ‘expert’ intervention of service providers. Service providers are constructed as ‘experts’ and ‘saints’ charged with the responsibility of returning ‘the homeless’ back to ‘normality’ (Zufferey and Chung 2006; Zufferey 2007).

Compassionate, charitable discourses can be individualist and normalising but also focus on community and individual responsibilities for addressing homelessness. Berlant (2004:1) notes that ‘there is nothing clear about compassion except that it implies social relation between spectators and sufferers, with the emphasis on the spectator’s experience of feeling compassionate and its subsequent relation to material practice’, which in the context of homelessness relates to the giving of charity. Previous research has found that charitable and compassionate discourses are particularly evident in newspaper articles about non-government services or charities that respond to homelessness (Zufferey and Chung 2006).

How have representations of the problem of homelessness come about?

Furthermore, representations of the social problem of homelessness are dominated by ‘people categories’ such as ‘the homeless’ and ‘youth’ (Bacchi 2009: 9), who are then ascribed totalising identities such as ‘lackers, slackers or unwilling victims’ (Rosenthal 2000:118). Rudd’s print media article argues that people are homeless because of ‘personal tragedies’, such as experiencing domestic violence, abuse, mental illness and drug and alcohol addiction. Homelessness is deemed unacceptable in our ‘compassionate nation’ but the individualist concept of ‘personal tragedy’ constructs homeless people as ‘unwilling victims’, implying that they are deserving of the services being provided by the new government (Rosenthal 2000). A particular emphasis is placed on those categories of homelessness traditionally defined as ‘deserving’, such as vulnerable ‘kids’ in homeless families: ‘we should not tolerate having thousands of kids growing up in homeless families’.

In Australia, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), which had been in operation since 1985, was replaced in 2009 by the National Affordable Housing Agreement
Since its inception SAAP has prioritised emergency services for ‘deserving’ categories of homeless people such as ‘youth’. In 2006-7, services to young people (36% of agencies) received the largest proportion of SAAP funding, seconded by services provided to women escaping domestic violence (24% of agencies) (AIHW 2008: 8).

What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? What are the gaps and silences?

The construction of domestic violence as a ‘personal tragedy’ reinforces deep-seated community values that maintain unequal gender and power relations. The perpetrators of violence are invisible and community ‘attitudes within the context of familial, organisational, community and social norms which support violence against women’ are left unquestioned (Pease and Flood 2008:547).

Furthermore, the article is written for ‘us’ the ‘ordinary citizen’, it does not make visible the diverse experiences and definitions of homelessness, from the perspectives of people affected by homelessness. The voices of the least powerful such as service users or women escaping domestic violence are often invisible in representations of homelessness in the print media or are (re-) constructed for particular political purposes (Zufferey 2009; Zufferey and Kerr 2004).

What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?

Bacchi (2009: 15) identifies three interconnecting effects of particular representations of social problems, namely discursive effects (for example, what limits are imposed on what can be thought of and said about homelessness); subjectification effects (for example, how the subjectivities of people experiencing homelessness are constituted in the discourse) and the impact on the lived experiences of people subjected to the discourse. Media coverage of social issues such as homelessness fixes homeless and housed identities and depicts homeless people as ‘one-dimensional bearers of social disadvantage whose problems are to be explained, prevented and cured by charitable organisations, health professionals and government’ (Hodgett et al. 2009: 498).

However, this is complex because comments from people experiencing homelessness in the print media can resist normalising and ‘othering’ practices, such as:
“I think, my God, we're not monkeys in a zoo,” Kris says. "This is real, this is real life. A lot of people can go home and lock themselves up and not think about it ... but I can observe life here. That's life, mate. That's surviving for a lot of us.” (‘This tram stop is the only homeless shelter Kris wants’, The Age, December 24, 2008)

Nonetheless, a study conducted by Hodgetts et al. (2009:497) in London found that whilst homeless people emphasised aspects of their lives that were not present in media portrayals, they also represented themselves ‘through common media storylines’, invoking a normalising discourse. Therefore, Hodgetts et al. (2009:499) concluded that ‘groups who are marginalised cannot simply locate themselves within their own discourses’, for they are also social actors within a particular socio-cultural context.

*How/where has this representation been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?*

Fairclough (2000: vii) argues that New Labour politics in Britain involves governing ‘media spin’, which constantly monitors and manipulates how social issues are presented in the media using ‘managed language’. This tendency to manage language in relation to traditional values of decency, compassion and toughness (Fairclough 2000: viii) is also evident in Rudd’s newspaper article on homelessness. In this newspaper article, it is clear that the ‘Rudd government’ view homelessness as a ‘problem’, aim to find out about homelessness, to ‘fix’ the problem and focus on new solutions: ‘we need to get a better understanding of the problem and find new solutions’. Rudd argues that one solution to addressing homelessness is to ‘work more effectively together’ to care for homeless people, as in: ‘government alone cannot solve the problem. Nor can business, the churches, or charities by themselves. We all need to work more effectively together’. This evokes a community responsibility to ‘work together’, which also relies on homeless peoples’ individual responsibility and self determination (‘as well as working with homeless people to help themselves’). This message thus balances government, community and individual responsibilities. However, it makes no comment on structural inequalities in contemporary society, such as limited access to affordable permanent housing for people living in poverty and on power inequalities related to gender, class, race, sexuality, ability and age.
In response to the Labor Government’s initiatives, Tony Abbott (the then Opposition spokesman on families) wrote an article titled: ‘Miracles no drama for our super PM’ (The Australian, Dec 23, 2008). He said:

‘My problem is the implicit assertion that government can change human nature and that there’s no problem well-intentioned activists and lots of taxpayer money can’t solve. It’s not the measures that grate but the insinuation that no one has taken homelessness seriously before and that the world really has changed now that truly compassionate people are finally in charge’


In this article Abbott comments on the emerging ‘compassionate’ discourse in Labor politics, disrupting the myth of compassion being promoted. Unlike Rudd’s article that constructs homeless people as ‘real’, ‘ordinary’ and ‘decent’, Abbott’s article connects homelessness to ‘human nature’. However, both Rudd and Abbott still construct homelessness as an individualist problem, not a structural issue related to for example a lack of appropriate housing.

**Conclusion**

Meaning-making in social policy and the print media is a contested, political and negotiated process (Dalton, Draper, Weeks and Wiseman 1996; Putnis 2001). Politics and the media are closely connected and policy making processes are mediated by sociopolitical contexts and media representations of social problems.

The discourses of homelessness in Australian print media articles are influenced by powerful individuals such as politicians, who, whilst aiming to influence societal change, are themselves also constrained and constructed by wider social institutions such as the political and media producing systems. Thus, positive media and political discourses such as ‘compassion’ can influence the development of respectful and inclusive community attitudes and service approaches to homelessness. However, individualist and normalising representations of ‘homeless people’ in the print media also reinforce cultural values that maintain unequal power relations and transcend political changes in society.
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