



Governmentality and Social Problems Construction Applied to Homelessness

Kristen Ann Desjarlais-deKlerk

Department of Sociology, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada

This paper examines Calgary's Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness through two different theoretical frameworks: governmentality and social problems construction. The Ten Year Plan implicitly constructs homelessness as a social problem, yet throughout the document readers can find strategic, rather than implicit reasons for this construction. Using Calgary's Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness, this paper compares and contrasts the two frameworks of governmentality and social problems construction while also examining the ways in which each can be applied to homelessness and homelessness research. While governmentality provides a vehicle to understand why homelessness is framed as a problem, social problems construction becomes of primary interest when examining and studying ten year plans.

KEYWORDS: Governmentality; Social Problems Construction; Homelessness; Policy

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Homelessness is considered to be a predominant “social problem” throughout much of Canada, drawing many cities to enact plans to end long-term poverty. Homelessness itself has been defined in many ways and explored through many lenses. However, in this paper, homelessness refers to a social status whereby individuals cannot secure adequate, long-term, sustainable housing, causing them to rough sleep, sleep in motor vehicles, or reside long-term in homeless shelters. *Calgary's Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness* [1] was presented to the province of Alberta as a strategy to meet the needs of homeless Calgaryans with the ultimate goal of ending homelessness in Calgary. The document itself was developed to address and end the problem of homelessness, and it is publicly available through the Calgary Homeless Foundation's Website. Consequently, the plan has garnered the attention of policymakers and funders alike, such that The Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF), one of the major proponents of the Ten Year Plan, has been

given the authority to allocate funds and determine which projects do and do not fall within the scope of the Ten Year Plan. In fact, the discourse of the Plan has become so powerful that social service agencies and institutions have adapted their institutional language to mirror it, thereby maximizing the funding and resources available to them.

The paper begins by exploring two distinct theoretical perspectives, namely governmentality and social problems construction, and how each may apply to homelessness intervention programs. Following this, it considers the claims made in *Calgary's Ten Year Plan* to better understand how the Plan problematizes homelessness, and finishes by suggesting ways to consolidate governmentality and social constructionist perspectives.

Theoretical Considerations

Both governmentality and social problems construction can be useful when examining homelessness as a social problem and analyzing *Calgary's Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness* [1]. Theoretically speaking, governmentality and social problems construction taken together may further understandings of governmental neoliberal agendas. That is, understanding governmental

Correspondence: kdesjarl@ucalgary.ca

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techniques of both creating and perpetuating neoliberal rhetoric can be academically productive. Governmentality offers reasons for lines of arguments, particularly in cutting costs in neoliberal agendas while social problems construction argues that individuals can exercise agency as they construct realities.

Governmentality involves what is understood as a “rationality of government” [2: 3] rather than government itself. It should be noted that:

A rationality of government will thus mean a way or system of thinking about the nature of the practice of government (who can govern; what governing is; what or who is governed), capable of making some form of that activity thinkable and practicable both to its practitioners and to those upon whom it was practised [2:3].

Foucault argued governmentality to be the rational element of governance, or the organized practices in which subjects are governed [6]. Governmentality specifically refers to the technologies of governance [3], yet, governmentality is not only a taking up of the culture, but also an internal self-policing. Individuals are socialized in specific ways, and in turn, this socialization can create an internal policing of the self. Governmentality is therefore more than government rule. In fact, governmentality draws on governments to create the best citizens to meet social demands.

Enactments of power enable governments to have greater influence. For example, through disciplinary power [4], the self recognizes the possibility of always being watched by an unknown watcher. As a result, an unsettled internalization of enforced governmental control transpires. The postmodern person lives in a “[society] of control” whereby subjects are “[affiliated]... into a whole variety of practices in which the modulation of conduct according to certain norms is, as it were, designed in” [5: 325]. In basic socialization and enacted disciplinary power, the governing structure gains from citizens’ alignment with governing practices and social norms that are often taken as natural and, therefore, unquestionable. Throughout the course of an individual’s lifetime, various governing bodies mold personal conduct, aiming to align the individual to governing policies, structures, and motives. Individuals internalize the governing principles and come to self-regulate their behaviour.

Further, in self-policed states, people are socialized to police themselves, trapping them within their *own* consciousness of responsibility, aware that they could undergo a form of policing and be

stripped of their entire identity if they make an error in judgment. Self-policing diminishes the role of agency as people become pawns of power and are subjectified to it rather than objectified by it. Governmental power reverberates within their own sub-consciousness, leaving the individual only latently aware of its existence. Essentially, governmental power stifles the agency of the individual; without awareness, the individual becomes unable to act against it.

If we apply the framework of governmentality to homelessness, we see that homelessness becomes problematic to many structures of governmental control, disciplinary power, and even biopower. Capitalist consumer attitudes cannot easily be instilled within individuals who have no means of consuming. Additionally, as someone who has nothing, the homeless individual can be seen as someone who did not successfully navigate their personal risks, ultimately causing themselves to become homeless [5]. Finally, homeless individuals are difficult to count and therefore difficult to regulate as a population [6]. In fact, entire policy research initiatives have been created to find methods for identifying and counting the homeless. In many ways the homeless person is a stranger in society living outside the range and scope of most governing technologies [7]. The homeless individual is removed from the general populace as an obvious outsider to the rights and privileges of the *housed*, yet the homeless individual remains subject to the panopticon¹ and other technologies of governance [4].

Consequently, homeless shelters have processes in place to exercise governmental control over their clients, and they often use disciplinary power to create order. Rules within the shelters maintain certain levels of control over the subjective population. In order to access basic human services like food, clothing, and shelter, residents must meet certain conditions which vary from shelter to shelter. Governmental control is enacted as the homeless clients internalize the shelter rules [8]. The rules are known and subjectified with the awareness that someone watches for such rule-breaking within the shelter. The consequences for such rule-breaking persuades clients to align their behavior with shelter principles. In many ways, the clients then learn to police themselves.

Governmentality and self-governance are highly congruent with current neoliberal ideology.

¹ A panopticon is a structure where observers can observe others without them knowing if they are being watched at that exact moment [15]. For example, security cameras concealed in shaded bubbles could face any direction. Customers know they may be watched, but do not know for certain if they are.

Generally speaking, neoliberalism refers to moves away from Keynesian welfare politics to ones that favour the free-market economy [9]. Under neoliberal policy, governments rely more on privatized businesses rather than government welfare programs. Similarly, social assistance programs have become less government-centered and more citizen-centered, such that the citizens' role in resolving social problems becomes more important. While neoliberalism can make government smaller, governance remains strong [10, 11, 12]. In fact, neoliberalism encourages individuals and groups to live with a form of market governance. In essence, the discourse of the free market economy extends beyond economics to individuals who see themselves as free and "active subjects responsible for enhancing their own well-being," [9:15]. In governmental societies, individuals internalize the free market and come to understand their own lives according to the rules of the free market economy.

Free-market individuals, fully cognizant of their own role and responsibility in their circumstances, could easily blame crime, health conditions, or poverty, as responsible for their circumstances. Neoliberal discourse suggests that each individual must take responsibility for the situation in which s/he finds him/herself, and is thus responsabilizing. Individuals are seen as having responsibility for themselves and cannot easily blame outside forces for their conduct. Yet, rather counter intuitively, in a post-welfare-state, nonprofit organizations, not governmental ones, require already-responsibilized citizens to respond to calls for funding and voluntary participation. That is, citizens assume responsibility for themselves within neoliberal societies. In summary, neoliberal discourse, governmentality, and general understandings of responsabilization stand in opposition to voluntarism, donations, and general goodwill towards others. Why help someone who created their own circumstances? Therefore, claims-making, or the ways in which so-called "truths"² can be declared, becomes particularly important in such a world. How can claims be made to mobilize people in an increasingly individualized society? And perhaps more importantly, how can victim-blaming be avoided while simultaneously giving average citizens reasons to mobilize against poverty, or more specifically, homelessness?

Social problems construction, claims-making, language, and the ten year plan.

² Social problems cannot be defined objectively. Rather, problems are created through a process of claims creation that enables individuals to rework a grievance as a problem. Claims-making is important insofar as it mobilizes others against assumed social problems.

According to Spector and Kitsuse, "social problems are constructed by members of a society who attempt to call attention to situations they find repugnant and who try to mobilize the institutions to do something about them" [13:78]. Social problems do not merely exist. Rather, individuals make claims to construct social phenomena as problems. Within the Ten Year Plan [1] a number of claims utilize rhetoric that problematizes homelessness and the homeless themselves. It calls institutional attention to homelessness in Calgary in an effort to eliminate the assumed problem from the city. Yet according to the Letter from the Chair [1: 2]:

...this is not a plan that expects government to shoulder the full burden. It's a community call to action that will require the good faith efforts of all levels of government, the private sector, the non-profit and faith community and the public, working together toward an end to homelessness [1: 2].

The text admonishes *all* people to mobilize, by drawing on neoliberal discourse of responsabilization. In this text, the Chair, Stephen Snyder, urges the reader to take action, thereby responsabilizing all Calgarians for this assumed problem. He calls each Calgarian to action, asserting that each needs to share the "burden" to put an "end to homelessness" [1:2]. In fact, the explicit goal of the document is to mobilize the public at all levels against this supposed problem. In this, the Ten Year Plan beckons the reader to complete work of the imagination [14], recognize their own role and livelihood as *housed* people, and create social change.

From the beginning, this document employs various tactics to draw attention to why homelessness is negative for all individual Calgarians and the city as a whole. Motifs [15] are used throughout to connect to various facets of the supposed problem. Even within the *Introduction*, phrases like "[An extreme rise in homelessness] would be a moral and social catastrophe with serious economic implications," "rising to the challenge," "Calgary is at a turning point in history," "moral obligation," and "worthy goal" [1: 3] are all "thematic elements and figures of speech that encapsulate or highlight some aspect of a social problem" [15: 47]. Through metaphors, the Calgary Committee to End Homelessness (CCTEH) portrays homelessness as more than an individual phenomenon, and the language implies an appeal to common sense: homelessness is already defined as

a problem. From the outset, the document assumes that no one wishes to be homeless, a very neoliberal notion which aligns with free market ideology [9]. The appeal is so subtle that any counterclaims would require a kind of undoing of this silent appeal to the natural state of the world, thereby presuming homelessness itself to be unnatural. Further, the argument in the Plan's *Introduction* does not follow any single stream. The first paragraph asserts that growing homelessness ("as many as 15,000 people homeless on our streets on any given day" [1:3]) "would be a moral and social catastrophe with serious economic implications" [1:3]. The text then proceeds to explicate the economic costs of homelessness without actually addressing the supposed "moral and social" implications, even though the text asserts these exist. Without further evidence, the words "moral and social" act as assumptions that set the stage for the rest of the argument. Here, the document attempts to problematize homelessness for the reader, thereby appealing to the neoliberal ideology already referenced. Morally and socially, according to the text, society is presumably responsible for street life and cannot allow it to happen. The morality of living on the street is assumed to be unnatural and this claim remains unquestioned, therefore removing the necessity of evidence. Further, the document employs a civic style of claims-making [15] where the homeless individual does not present as a citizen "ought" to. Socially constructed images of homelessness depict someone that is unshowered, unshaven, and uncouth, particularly through the photographs presented in the document. Ironically, the photographs simultaneously propagate (*e.g.* through a single depiction of a homeless man) and quell (*e.g.* through images of homeless children) stereotyped notions of homelessness.

Within this morally and socially reprehensible behaviour lays a key governmental, neoliberal assumption: the governing structures imply inherent differences between homeless and *housed* Calgarians. In this way:

... pauperism appears immediately as "unnatural" as well as antisocial, a deformity which insinuates itself into that natural order which the discourse of political economy, the discourse on wealth, purported to establish [16: 159].

Procacci [16] states that while poverty is a given in all societies, pauperism, and similarly homelessness, is a devolved form of poverty, symptomizing state failure in caring and meeting citizens' needs. But in neoliberal societies the state has managed to pass

this responsibility to privatized social service agencies instead [9]. Furthermore, current social discourse aligns with that of the wealthy classes. In this, the homeless already have less power than those constructing the document. Here, an ethic of consumption [5] fails to bridge social life between the haves and the have-nots. The have-nots are less constrained by the fewer materials with which they live, and, are therefore freer. Business owners deny the legitimacy of the pauper's lifestyle and negate the paupers' independence, assuming that all people wish to be housed, yet:

...the refusal of organic ties of subordination, as of all other restraints implemented through contractual exchange, illustrates the difficulty of using need as the structuring element of a new social cohesion, spanning and uniting all ranks of the population in a hierarchically constituted chain, [16: 161].

By ignoring contractual ties, the homeless individual stays away from the purview of the government. Many homeless men and women do not even possess government issued identification, and while this prevents them from accessing resources [5] and from freely engaging in various social activities, it hampers governmental control and the power of governmental technologies over their lives. Someone may continue to watch them in their activities, often within the shelter system itself, but shifting beneath the radar of the panopticon is simpler without the "restraints implemented through contractual exchange" [16: 161].

In this way, the risk gaze⁵ [5] remains on the homeless individual as someone who could, potentially, harm the general public. While there is a "personal responsibility for avoiding and managing risk" [17: 5] within contemporary neoliberal discourse [18] homelessness has been problematized as a risk to all levels of society. The Plan constructs homelessness as a dangerous practice on Calgary's streets that diminishes the city's economic capacity. While neoliberal discourse suggests that homeless individuals are responsible for their own circumstances [18], all citizens of Calgary have been given the responsibility of solving the problem as it, presumably, directly affects their personal livelihood through the sweeping economic impact.

⁵ The risk gaze refers to a form of control designed to minimize risks [5, 17]. The risk gaze is a package of assessments to understand who or what presents the most risk to societies. When the risk gaze moves towards the self, it may result in highly modulated self-behaviour.

The notion that counter claims can even be made is itself a form of resistance. Counter claims push against the status quo and aim to speak to some aspect of social life, thereby transforming others' understandings of the world and reconstructing social reality. Different kinds of claims create different reconstructions and, therefore, different forms of resistance. Obvious claims--those made by dominant groups--blatantly draw others into this newly constructed reality while quieter claims, those from the underside [19], operate as quiet resistances against dominant perceptions of social reality.

While the CCTEH makes claims to combat the "rampant" homelessness within Calgary, homeless individuals themselves can, and do, make claims. Homeless individuals often resist depoliticized talk and find strategic methods to have their issues addressed as, "all talk involves struggles over meaning, then instead of a division between political and nonpolitical talk, we must posit a continuum, at one end of which are claims-making activities that are easily readable as such, and at the other, those which are marginalized" [19: 167]. Homeless individuals utilize quiet, and sometimes silent, resistance against the constraints and rules of society. Their lifestyle itself is a quiet claim from the underside. In fact, some homeless individuals choose to be homeless; they recognize the controls in their lives and opt for existence apart from the influence and scope of obvious governmental control. While there are numerous shelter options within most cities, some homeless people continue to choose rough sleeping arrangements outside in parks, under bridges, or along streets. For these individuals, opting for these rough conditions may serve as an objection to shelter operations, their sleeping conditions (*i.e.* many people in one room can interrupt ones' sleep cycle), or the ways in which clients are treated within shelters themselves. The objections transpire by election or in this case, non-election, and chosen disengagement from shelter communities. .

Substance usage may also be another form of quiet protest. Substance abuse is particularly prevalent among homeless populations, a fact often cited by critics as to why homelessness must be ended [20]. Yet, substance usage may be more than just an addiction. The marginalized in society do not always have the luxury of making outright claims. If they did, these claims could be met with adverse results for their personal livelihoods [19], particularly as dominant groups produce counter claims of their own. Therefore, homeless individuals may be forced to rely on quiet protests such as substance usage as a means of sharing their claims.

Agency and the Individual--Victims and Villains

The assertion that the streets belong to all Calgarians or are "our streets" [1: 3] reflects a responsabilization of the common citizen [8, 5]. Consistently, the document asserts that these streets belong to "us"--the dangerous collective pronoun [21] draws the reader into the solution to this apparent problem, yet little responsibility within the document is given to the homeless individual. The CCTEH does not outright blame its "victims" but rather, moves responsibility to the reader.

The primary victim identified by the CCTEH is that of the homeless individual caught within the reins of street life, desperate to move away from the "dangerous street" [22] into a "safe home" [22]. The streets themselves are problematized as a place of extreme danger. It is on the streets that certain avenues, communities, and areas become constructed as particular places of danger within which the homeless individual lives.

While the CCTEH aims to end homelessness, The Plan constructs the homeless individual as a hero caught in the wrong circumstances at the wrong time. Throughout the document it presents a section labeled "Voices of the Homeless" that includes quotes presumably from homeless individuals. It should be noted, however, that several of these are from service providers rather than homeless individuals themselves, and the rest are from homeless children. By utilizing quotations from children, an underlying assumption and unspoken claim accompanies: no child should be homeless. Appealing to the idea that children are inherently different from adults [19], the claim appeals to emotion. While, as previously stated, homelessness is considered morally reprehensible because the homeless individual does not present as a refined citizen, the CCTEH unravels the notion that homelessness only encapsulates the life of the unkempt homeless man. Quotations from children attempt to shift this notion of the homeless individual, yet the morality of homelessness does not change, particularly through children's assertions. When asked what being a homeless child feels like, one eight-year old boy is quoted as saying, "It feels like you're in hell and you're dirty" [1: 12]. The child is not being fostered within a "safe" home; instead, the streets, or more likely, a shelter, house his life. The child literally had no control over his life on the street. Presumably, his caregivers found themselves in a tenuous situation whereby they lost (or never had) their home. At eight years old, he is too young to legally work, wholly incapable of claiming independence from his caregiver and their precarious situation. The child

is a victim to his circumstances regardless of his caregivers' decisions, and he is powerless to change his lot in life, which creates an emotional image in the reader of the homeless child as a victim. Homeless children gain particular pity within the Ten Year Plan. Yet even in this, the document provides a misconception. While the document frequently quotes children, children only account for a small percentage of the known homeless population -- less than ten percent of the known homeless population when including all minors [1:19], some of which are likely runaways.

"The 'Risk, Trigger, Trap' road to homelessness" also provides the homeless individual with circumstantial contributors to his or her condition as homeless [1: 20], therefore securing his or her status as victim within his or her own state of homelessness. This theory of homelessness suggests that there are certain risk factors (*e.g.* poverty, physical disability, childhood physical abuse, living in a foster home, family conflict, lack of support, and lack of education) that when combined with triggering events (*e.g.* financial crisis, moving for economic or social opportunity, health crisis, family conflict, landlord/roommate conflict, addiction, mental illness, and crime) make an individual susceptible to homelessness. Furthermore, the CCTEH asserts that individuals should be permitted easy exits from homelessness lest they become chronically homeless, and therefore, trapped within their homeless state. This trap consists of public system barriers that make street exits more difficult; for example, multiple jurisdictions whereby different levels of government have control over funding, addiction and mental illness, and insufficient income for rent and damage deposits. Additionally, the chronically homeless often have poor or no credit history which limits their housing options. Labeling such circumstances a "trap" utilizes a motif-metaphor that paints the homeless individual as a victim.

The risk gaze [5] therefore moves from the homeless individual as a threat to society and applies to the reader themselves: anyone could become homeless. CCTEH attempts to transform the identity of the homeless individual to build empathy and draw the reader's attention to the homeless person's humanity and their inherent connection to the *housed*. While the primal demarcation [14] between the *housed* and *homeless* continues, the lines between them soften, thereby imploring the housed reader to believe they too could become a "victim" of homelessness. This, in essence, internalizes the risk gaze. The self is capable of entering into homelessness against the sheer will of its consciousness. Within this risk gaze, the individual

becomes further responsabilized, recognizing they must mitigate their own risks should they wish to stay in the dominant group—the *housed*. In this, the document asks the housed a series of implicit, never outright, questions: Would you want to be homeless? Would you want to leave the dominant group and enter the subordinated one? Would you like to be in the minority? The 'Risk, Trigger, Trap' route demonstrates how homelessness could just "happen" to anyone. It acknowledges certain personal risks and asserts the homeless individual's failure to successfully navigate those risks. Further, the notion that an individual gets trapped, as previously stated, implies there is no way out of this minority group without the aid of the majority.

Conclusion

Governmentality and social problems construction often seem to be at odds. These two distinct theoretical perspectives, however, can be used together to shed light on the ways in which dominant groups create, maintain, and construct realities that perpetuate their power. This paper has aimed to consolidate these two theories to better understand how powerful groups create and work-up social problems in neoliberal societies where individuals are becoming increasingly responsible for themselves. Appeals to the dominant class give rise to seemingly natural claims that cannot easily be refuted.

In conclusion, social problems construction and claims-making can help deconstruct arguments in policy documents. That said, governmental control often insights claims from the upper echelons, thereby bringing homeless individuals under the purview of subjectified power relations internalized through responsabilization tactics that transpire within resocialization or reaffiliation programs. Depoliticized claims-making from homeless individuals is quashed by governmental powers through illegalization of such claims, like illicit drug usage. Claims themselves are forms of agency, but their motivations can stem from places of governmental power. The businessmen who created and enacted *Calgary's Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness*, through imagination and rhetoric, drew a fundamental distinction between the *housed* and the *homeless*, thereby drawing attention to means and ways to reaffiliate the homeless "victim" through the narrative contained therein [14]. In essence, while governmentality leaves little room for agency, claim-making is agency enacted.

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