

Homelessness and mass cultures: a challenge for inclusion.

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Abstract: Homelessness is a complex phenomenon that intertwines a dimension of housing deprivation with one of social distress¹. Through a review of the existing literature, this article analyses its multidimensionality and multifaceted nature, with particular attention to Italian studies of the pedagogy of marginality¹. In particular, it highlights how the phenomenon, precisely because of its multifaceted nature, requires systemic, intersectional, and multidisciplinary interpretations; any investigation that does not consider this multifaceted nature risks providing incomplete interpretations and furthering dynamics of exclusion¹. In parallel, the contribution examines the role of mass culture in shaping public perception of social phenomena – including homelessness – and the risks of simplification and homogenisation to which it can potentially and uncritically lead². In conclusion, it suggests the opportunity for pedagogical sciences, precisely in taking up the challenge of complexity raised by homelessness, to adopt sensitivities typical of the Capability Approach, with particular reference to the concept of human dignity, that is, the right of each individual, in their uniqueness, to a dignified life, determined not only by the absence of material deprivation but also by the possibility of developing their potential and pursuing a meaningful life.

Keywords: homelessness; mass culture; Capability Approach.



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1. Introduction

Homelessness represents one of the most complex and urgent challenges of contemporary societies (UN General Assembly, 2023). It is not simply the lack of housing, but a condition that intertwines housing deprivation, social distress, exclusion, and marginality. The phenomenon is characterised by a difficulty in univocal definition and measurement, due to its multifaceted, processual, and multidimensional nature. Research on homelessness is therefore strongly multidisciplinary, including studies from various scientific fields such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics, medicine, urban planning, and, not least, pedagogy.

Mass cultures, with their pervasiveness and influence, play a significant role in shaping public perception of social phenomena, including homelessness. Media, cinema, social media and other forms of mass communication can contribute to stereotyping or, conversely, to raising awareness and promoting the inclusion of homeless people. This article aims to explore the complexity of the phenomenon of homelessness, its relationship with mass cultures, and the potential of a pedagogical investigation that, embracing the sensibilities and instances of the Human Development Approach or Capability Approach (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993; Nussbaum,

2011), is able to read social inclusion/exclusion, also in the dynamics of homelessness, through the concepts of capabilities, freedom of well-being, and freedom of agency, protected from the risk of generalisations and "univocal" interpretations potentially generated by the drifts of mass culture.

2. Materials and Methods

This contribution is informed by a comprehensive review of the pertinent scientific literature, encompassing both international and national studies, with a particular emphasis on pedagogical insights concerning homelessness. The review incorporates a wide range of sources, including scientific articles, books, research reports, and policy documents from national and international organisations dealing with severe adult marginality. The theoretical framework underpinning this study stems from the pedagogy of marginality, adult distress, fragility, studies on poverty and social exclusion, and the Capability Approach.

3. Results

3.1. *The Complexity of Homelessness*

International and European studies on homelessness highlight a consolidated tradition of multidisciplinary research and targeted policies, recognizing the phenomenon as a serious form of extreme poverty. In the United States, the term "homeless" emerged in the 1980s to denounce the increase in street poverty. In Europe, research began a decade later, in parallel with the increased visibility of homeless people. A recurring theme in scientific literature is the difficulty of univocally defining homelessness, given its complexity and processuality (Consoli & Meo, 2020). FE-ANTSA (European Federation of Organisations Working with the Homeless) proposed the ETHOS (European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion) typology in 2005, identifying three areas of the concept of "home": physical, social, and legal. Despite this classification, the definition remains open, with a growing consensus that the polysemy of the concept itself contributes to the construction of the problem. The scientific debate has focused on the aetiology of homelessness, initially attributed to personal problems or structural factors, and then to consider the interdependence between personal and socio-economic factors (Tosi Cambini, 2009).

More recent research focuses on the risk factors, life trajectories, and subjective experiences of the homeless, highlighting a complex phenomenon with variable entry and exit dynamics. In Italy, the first studies on homelessness in the 1990s interpreted the phenomenon as extreme poverty and marginalisation, in line with the renewed attention to the issue of poverty promoted by the Gorrieri Commission Report. Subsequent studies have considered homelessness as a form of extreme poverty that compromises autonomy and social recognition, leading to disaffiliation and social exclusion (Castel, 1991). In the 2000s, lifestyles, survival strategies, and subcultures of homeless people were further explored. The economic crisis of 2007 led to renewed attention to homelessness, also due to its increase in Italian cities and specific policy interventions (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2015).

The most recent Italian research adopts the category of "vulnerability" to analyse homelessness, highlighting how changes in the labour market, welfare policies, and demographic structure expose individuals and families to new risks of extreme poverty. From this perspective, new studies examine homelessness through the practices

of social work, organisational cultures, and the relationships between professionals and users. Fio.PSD (Italian Federation of Organisations Working for Homeless People) promotes an interpretation of homelessness as a "public problem" (Blumer, 1971), produced by a process of social construction that implies the emergence of the problem, its legitimisation, and the mobilisation of resources. The most recent research considers the influence of the family and community dimension in the life stories of homeless people (Zenarolla, 2020).

3.2. Pedagogical Approaches to Homelessness

The phenomenon of homelessness has been mainly studied by the pedagogy of marginality and deviance, adult distress, and fragility. Reading homelessness within this epistemological framework entails, first of all, a specific positioning of the phenomenon, according to which the experience of homelessness, like any experience of distress, marginality, suffering, or boundaries, represents an opportunity (for formative implications) and not only a risk, a problem (Gramigna, Righetti, 2006).

Homelessness is also seen as a social experience of suffering and marginalisation, not only individual, caused by the failure of the relational context to consider the distress. Consequently, addressing marginalisation requires an intervention that closely links action on the individual and on the social context (Lizzola & Tarchini, 2006; Gnocchi, 2009).

Moreover, the pedagogical literature on homelessness emphasises the need to address the phenomenon through the category of existential meaning, i.e. through the re-elaboration of the life experience of homeless people, according to the particular existential meaning they attribute to it (Lizzola, 2009).

The life stories of homeless people are often described as "stories or biographies of abandonment" (Invernizzi, 2005), characterised by the loss of existential and relational skills and the lack of trust necessary to build autonomy. It is therefore necessary to patiently reweave these stories to grasp their meaning. This process of revisiting the past, both cognitively and emotionally, is fundamental to allow the person to open up to a new biographical path, although it may cause further suffering due to the confrontation with the unelaborated biographical fractures. This unresolved suffering represents one of the main obstacles to the educational relationship of accompaniment.

Hence, there are many thematic cores deposited by pedagogical studies relating to homelessness - the research and documentation on good practices, planning, and experiences conducted by various socio-educational services, both nationally and internationally, in the sector would deserve a separate in-depth study.

3.3 Mass Cultures and the Risk of "Mainstreaming"

Today's mass culture, permeated by interconnected communication tools and the speed of information dissemination, paradoxically, can overshadow the depth and extent of complex phenomena such as homelessness.

This risk potentially lies in the following mechanisms. First of all, mass culture can lead to the simplification of complex realities: the media tend to reduce multifaceted issues into easily digestible narratives, losing essential details (Codeluppi, 2023). In the case of the biographies of homeless people, this can translate into the

production of generic stories that strip away individual experiences and social implications.

This tendency can in turn lead to a reinforcement of stereotypes: the mass media, even unintentionally, can contribute to consolidating existing stereotypes, leading to a distorted perception by the public (Di Bari, 2021) - and to further marginalisation, in the case of homeless people. In this way, standardised narratives tend to neglect the uniqueness of the backgrounds and personal stories that shape individual experiences, even of those who live "on the street", thus leading to the loss of cultural and personal nuances.

Finally, the rapid dissemination of information can lead to a homogenisation of discourse and stifle discussions that could lead to innovative solutions.

Ultimately, mass culture, while offering opportunities for connection and information, presents the risk of flattening the complexity of social realities, reducing the capacity for understanding and action towards phenomena such as homelessness

4. Discussion

How, then, can scientific readings of the phenomenon of homelessness be conducted in a manner that is capable of addressing the challenge posed by the complexity of the phenomenon itself, whilst also demonstrating a sufficient degree of respect for the multiple identities and dynamics that are inherent to homelessness?

It is believed that the instances of the Capability Approach can, in this sense, be well suited to the challenge that homelessness poses to the pedagogical sciences. Martha Nussbaum's "Capability Approach" (2011), is distinguished by its emphasis on individual capabilities and human well-being as fundamental criteria for assessing social and economic progress. This approach is based on the idea that societies are just to the extent that they guarantee each individual access to a set of fundamental capabilities, which Nussbaum has identified in a list of ten central capabilities, including life, health, education, and political participation.

A qualifying element of Nussbaum's approach is the importance attributed to human dignity. Nussbaum argues that every individual has the right to a dignified life, which implies not only the absence of material deprivation but also the possibility of developing their potential and pursuing a meaningful life. This concept of dignity is closely linked to her critique of traditional theories of justice, which often overlook the emotional and relational dimensions of human life. Furthermore, Nussbaum's approach is distinguished by its practical application in various contexts, such as health, education, and women's rights. For example, the author has explored how capabilities can be used to improve health policies and to ensure that women have access to the resources necessary to realise their potential. This holistic approach invites a profound reflection on what it means to live a good life and how institutions can facilitate or hinder this process. In summary, Nussbaum's human development approach is characterised by its attention to individual capabilities, human dignity, practical application in social contexts, and its ethical basis, offering a complex and integrated framework for understanding and promoting human well-being.

Applied to the context of homelessness, both in the field of pedagogical research and in the field of educational practices, this approach can therefore promote multiple desirable gains, both theoretical and operational, such as the recognition of the complexity and multidimensionality of the phenomenon, protected from simplifications and stereotypes; focus on personal stories, life paths, and subjective experiences

of homeless people, through the valorisation of their identity and uniqueness; the promotion of the active participation of homeless people in decision-making processes, and the recognition of their role as active agents of change; supporting the development of individual capabilities, through the offer of training, work, and social inclusion opportunities, with particular attention to educational poverty; the creation of welcoming and inclusive contexts, in which homeless people feel respected and valued, in which life stories are recognised as resources and opportunities.

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