EMERALD CRITICAL STUDIES IN INCLUSION, PRACTICE, AND IMPACT

THE UNDESERVING POLISH MIGRANTS

HOMELESS IN A PLACE CALLED HOME

MAGDALENA BRZESKA

THE UNDESERVING POLISH MIGRANTS

EMERALD CRITICAL STUDIES IN INCLUSION, PRACTICE, AND IMPACT

Series Editors: Paul Ian Campbell and Natalie Darko

Emerald Critical Studies in Inclusion, Practice, and Impact fills the current lacuna of research informed and evaluated guidance in relation to inclusion in areas such as education, industry and communities, by providing a collection of critical case studies which provides new critical insights into equity and inequity. Importantly, the book provides a repository for case studies which provide explicit guidance for leaders, practitioners and policymakers interested in making their own sectors and practice more inclusive. In particular, *Emerald Critical Studies in Inclusion, Practice, and Impact* opens critical, theoretical and empirically informed debate around effective and measurable frameworks for change, what change in contemporary practices look like, and how to better ensure inclusion works equitably and for the target audience.

Forthcoming Titles

Unmasking DEI: New Frameworks for Confronting Anti-Black Racism in the Black Atlantic by Christopher Stuart Taylor

THE UNDESERVING POLISH MIGRANTS

Homeless in a Place Called Home

BY

MAGDALENA BRZESKA
De Montfort University, UK

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2025

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83549-137-9 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83549-136-2 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83549-138-6 (Epub)

For Leon, my son – may you always have a safe place to call home and a world that welcomes you with kindness. I hope that one day, you will look at this work and be proud of your mummy, knowing she tried to make a difference.

And for all the homeless people in the United Kingdom, may society finally recognise that everyone deserves a place to call home (and that bureaucracy should come with free coffee and fewer headaches).

This page intentionally left blank

CONTENTS

This page intentionally left blank

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would not exist without the wisdom, patience and occasional tough love of many people – so if you're reading this, you probably deserve some credit. First, a huge thank you to my colleagues who endured my endless questions, rambling emails and occasional existential crises about this project. Your advice was (mostly) taken, and any remaining mistakes are entirely my own stubborn fault.

To the participants who shared their stories with me, thank you for your honesty and resilience and for not running away when I asked far too many questions. Your voices shaped this work, and I hope I've done them justice.

Lastly, to my friends and family – especially my son and partner – I appreciate your unwavering support, willingness to listen to my academic rants and patience when I mysteriously vanished into writing mode.

This page intentionally left blank

1

INTRODUCTION

ABSTRACT

Home is more than just a physical place as it holds deep emotional meaning and reflects personal identity and connections to people and places. The phrases 'Home is where the heart is' *and* 'Show me your home, and I will tell you who you are' capture *how home embodies emotional attachment and a sense of belonging. For many individuals, the places they live become symbols of comfort, security and stability, influencing their sense of self and shaping their future expectations. The emotional bonds people form with their homes contribute significantly to their well-being and satisfaction, making home a central part of their identity. However, for some individuals, particularly homeless migrants with limited access to social services, establishing these home-making connections is challenging. The lack of stability and support systems can make it difficult to develop the sense of belonging and emotional security that a home provides.*

This chapter will explore the existing literature on the concepts of home, identity and belonging, highlighting how these ideas are understood in the context of marginalised groups, especially homeless migrants. It will examine the factors contributing to creating a sense of home, including autonomy, control and social connections. This chapter will also outline the research methods employed in this project, focusing on ethnography and qualitative data collection and analysis approaches. It finishes with a discussion of the methodological considerations taken.

Keywords: Identity; belonging; home; homelessness; qualitative methods; ethnography

'Home is where the heart is'. *'Show me your home, and I will tell you who you really are'*. These well-known expressions exemplify that home means much more than just a house as it connects to ideas of the self, belonging and familiarity. It is no secret that individuals develop strong emotional attachments to the places where they live. This attachment results in greater satisfaction with their home and expectations of future stability in that place. These feelings transcend attachments to other people in the area and represent a genuine affection for the physical location; the passage of time strengthens our attachment to the places we live. Because our physical surroundings play an important role in creating a sense of meaning and organisation in our lives, it is not surprising that our sense of the place we live is closely tied to our sense of who we are. For instance, in *The Wizard of Oz,* Dorothy realises that *'there's no place like home',* a realisation that signifies her growth and understanding of the value of the familiar, the comfort of loved ones and the importance of appreciating what she once took for granted. Thus, the word 'home' connotes more than just a house, and the lack of it may have severe consequences for the self and community attachment. The absence of such a foundation can have profound social and psychological consequences. Thus, this book examines the experiences of homeless Polish migrants who arrived in the United Kingdom seeking a new home and economic stability but instead found themselves facing significant hardships. However, these raise important questions that form the central focus of this book:

- How do homeless Polish people understand their sense of home, identity and belonging?
- How do social inclusion rules impact a person's place in a social group?
- Who belongs to the superior 'us-better' group and is positioned in the inferior 'them-other' group within homeless communities?
- How do these social hierarchies affect the Polish homeless population's perceptions of home, identity and belonging in Britain?
- How do Polish homeless people navigate and respond to their inferior status within the homeless sector?

These questions shape the parameters of this book. Focused on exploring the experiences of homeless Polish migrants living in the United Kingdom, this book is an essential resource for understanding the complexities of homelessness among Polish migrants. It engages with various multidisciplinary debates related to identity, belonging, homelessness, home and social

exclusion, providing a nuanced exploration of how these themes intersect. In doing so, this book sheds light on their unique challenges and connects to broader discussions on social equity and inclusion. It aims to inspire readers to employ their 'sociological imagination' to grasp the intricate dynamics at play in these experiences and the broader societal context that influences them. If you find this topic compelling, I invite you to continue reading!

The main aim of this book is to understand how the 'established' – who might be thought of as 'us' (people with power and superior position within the society) and the 'outsiders', who are 'them' (the other with inferior and marginalised positions) help us to understand the Polish homeless sense of the self and collective belonging, and how this inferior position influences the level of support available for the group. This classification relies heavily on individual flaws, such as low language ability and collective flaws relating to the superiority of one group over the other, providing a base for self-and-collective, ultimately affecting home choices available to the individual. Consequently, this monograph traces how Polish individuals situate themselves in relation to the contemporary discourse around homelessness and growing hostility within social support discourse. Accordingly, the Polish homeless community often experience marginalisation, social exclusion and low self-esteem while simultaneously trying to preserve positive selfhood, some group belonging connections and home-making practices. It is worth noting that while I acknowledge the importance of the immigration discussion, this is only explicitly discussed in the final policy chapter.

The issue of homelessness among Polish nationals in Britain is an area of study that has been neglected, and the recent media rhetoric has highlighted an urgency for action, particularly as many migrants face barriers, such as the 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) condition, which prevents them from accessing mainstream welfare benefits. Moreover, broader discussions in UK media emphasise an 'emergency' in the homelessness system itself. Charities like *Crisis* and the *Museum of Homelessness* warn of a *'hidden homelessness'* crisis, where many individuals – including a significant number of migrants – are living in precarious conditions, such as overcrowded or temporary accommodations, rather than on the streets (Big Issue, 2024; COMPAS, 2024). This lack of visibility means that true homelessness figures, particularly among migrant communities, may be underreported, making the crisis more difficult to address comprehensively.

There is a substantial body of sociology and psychology work on the homeless in the United Kingdom that explores the various roles that a home fulfils in people's lives. Beyond being a physical shelter, a home is recognised as a secure place of safety (Mack, 1993), an emotional refuge providing comfort

and stability (Moore, 2000), a foundation for self-recognition and identity (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2003, 2006; Cuba & Hummon, 1993; Dovey, 1985; Heidegger, 1962; Relph, 1976) and a space where belonging and social connections are cultivated (Dupuis & Thorns, 1996; Hagerty et al., 1992). For homeless migrants, creating a sense of home can be particularly challenging as it involves not only developing a personal feeling of belonging but also gaining recognition and acceptance from the wider community. However, the ability to exercise control and independence over the environment – a key aspect of feeling at home (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Mallett, 2004; Rapport & Dawson, 1998) – can often be challenging for migrant groups. This power imbalance, shaped by broader social and structural forces, became embedded in daily interactions, deepening migrants' experiences of marginalisation and exclusion in spaces meant to provide support (Sizemore & Milner, 2004). Therefore, addressing homelessness among migrants necessitates a consideration of the sociopolitical context, which fosters group threats and invokes discriminatory attitudes, thereby affecting the well-being of marginalised individuals. Home, in this regard, is not merely a physical space but a sociocultural construct shaped by various contextual factors, creating tensions between private and public domains and between familiarity and danger (Dovey, 1985).

In homeless studies, the terms 'home' and 'homelessness' are not just simple descriptions of where someone lives; they both represent complex and changing experiences and identities. 'Home' is not just a physical place, as the idea of homelessness shapes its meaning; homelessness helps define what home is, creating a dynamic relationship between the two. From a phenomenological perspective, being at home is a natural and often unnoticed state, while being homeless highlights a sense of absence, difference and being the other compared to society's usual standards. The question 'What is home?' elicits diverse interpretations across disciplinary boundaries, with varying definitions emerging from psychological, sociological and environmental perspectives (Benjamin, 1995; Lawrence, 1995; Rapoport, 1995). The complexity of these definitions is further illustrated by linguistic variations, such as the German 'heimat' (collective belonging) versus 'heim' (individual significance) (Benveniste, 1973). Similarly, the Polish word 'dom', akin to the English 'home', encompasses a range of contextual meanings, from a physical dwelling to familial connections (Kubacka, 2017).

Homelessness, on the other hand, is a multifaceted issue encompassing various forms of housing instability. It includes individuals without a fixed, regular and adequate night-time residence, those living in temporary accommodations, and those forced to sleep in places not meant for human habitation (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). Homelessness is not just a

condition but a social construct (an idea or concept created and defined by society through collective agreement – Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Giddens, 2013), influenced by economic, political and social factors (Snow & Anderson, 1993). Socially constructed categories of belonging and exclusion shape the experience of homelessness.

Thus, the sociopolitical context significantly influences what is considered acceptable, normative and deviant within a society, shaping individuals' experiences of discrimination and social exclusion. In the United Kingdom, this dynamic is evident in the ways in which various sociopolitical trends intersect and contribute to increased vulnerability among marginalised groups, particularly in relation to homelessness. Recent austerity measures, for example, have led to cuts in social services, welfare benefits and housing support, exacerbating poverty and leaving more people at risk of homelessness (Crisis, 2020). Housing shortages, exacerbated by government policies prioritising private-sector housing development, have compounded this crisis, making affordable housing increasingly scarce (Shelter, 2021). Furthermore, the United Kingdom's changing relationship with the European Union, notably following Brexit, has intensified feelings of insecurity, particularly among migrant populations who face heightened discrimination and reduced access to services (European Commission, 2021). As migration flows have increased, mainly from Eastern Europe, the integration of migrant groups into the housing market has become increasingly strained, with many migrants finding themselves excluded from social support systems and more vulnerable to homelessness (Dustmann & Frattini, 2014).

These interwoven factors not only contribute to the rise in homelessness but also affect how different groups are positioned within society. Social exclusion is often magnified for those who are perceived as 'other' – whether due to ethnicity, immigration status or socio-economic standing – leading to increased vulnerability to discrimination (Lister, 2011). Moreover, political rhetoric surrounding issues like immigration has contributed to a public discourse that stigmatises migrants, portraying them as undeserving or as a threat to national resources (Ford, 2018). This environment fosters social exclusion, particularly for those facing structural inequalities. Therefore, the sociopolitical landscape in the United Kingdom plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and vulnerability faced by those at risk of homelessness. The East Midlands serves as a case study for examining these dynamics, representing typical and atypical elements of the national homelessness landscape. This region reflects the broader issues facing the United Kingdom while showcasing unique local challenges.

HOME, IDENTITY AND BELONGING

The concept of home, as a social and emotional construct, is deeply intertwined with identity and belonging. In contemporary society, individuals navigate both pre-existing social structures and exert agency to redefine spaces in ways that reflect their own identities (May, 2013). This dynamic process suggests that home cannot simply be defined by physical space but must also account for the emotional and cultural ties individuals form within these spaces. Identity plays a crucial role in this understanding, as it is integral to determining one's place in society. The sociological discourse surrounding identity has long acknowledged its fluidity and complexity, particularly in the context of 'new times' where individuals are faced with multiple choices and the need to constantly renegotiate their selves (Beck, 1992; De Fina, 2007; Giddens, 1991). As Hall (1992) contends, identity is not fixed but is constantly shifting, reflecting the contradictions inherent in self-definition: '*Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so our identifications are constantly being shifted about*' (p. 277).

Furthermore, identity is now understood as something *'one does'* rather than *'has'*, reflecting the profound social structure changes in recent decades. Historically, identity was shaped by strong, class-based and regionally specific communities that directed individuals' life trajectories. Within these communities, a sense of self was constructed through occupation and work-related cultures, influencing how people defined their societal roles (Bauman, 1988). In modern times, Bauman (1988) argues that identity construction is a temporal process intricately linked to past, present and future experiences. For example, in relation to gender or race, Bauman's (1988) argument suggests that our identities in these areas are also fluid and shaped by historical, social and cultural contexts. For example, the experiences of gender and race are often deeply influenced by past societal norms and historical events (such as gender roles or racial inequalities) while also being continuously shaped by current experiences (such as social movements, activism or discrimination) and future aspirations (such as changing societal views on gender or race). This temporal process acknowledges that gender and racial identities are not only constructed individually but also in response to broader societal shifts, meaning they can evolve and change over time.

This ongoing process of identity work is unstable and fragile as individuals continue to shape their sense of self throughout their lives. Identity markers such as *'father'*, *'homeless'*, *'migrant'* or *'unemployed'* are shorthand representations of one's self-concept, rooted in past and present social realities. In this context, questions like *'Who am I?'* involve acknowledging the past, while

'How should I live?' reflect present practices that define one's place in the world. The future-oriented question, *'Who do I want to become?'* speaks to the aspirational nature of identity in a world of constant change. This understanding of identity construction as fluid and dynamic is crucial when examining marginalised populations, particularly those experiencing homelessness. Negative stereotypes, such as depicting homeless individuals as dirty, loud or drunk, perpetuate harmful assumptions that dehumanise and stigmatise them (Beresford, 1979; Hodgetts et al., 2006). These negative stereotypes shape how the public perceives homeless people and can influence how they are treated within support systems, limiting their opportunities for meaningful connections and autonomy.

Cooley's (1922) *'looking glass self'* theory suggests that we form our identity based on how others see us. For homeless individuals, these negative stereotypes can lead to feelings of shame and isolation, shaping their self-perception. According to Rapport and Dawson (1998), when homeless people are denied control over their environment, they struggle to create a sense of home. This lack of autonomy and the stigma they face prevent them from developing a positive self-identity and deepen their exclusion from society.

Das et al. (2008) expand this discussion by introducing the concept of *'multiple domesticities'*, which challenges traditional notions of home as a fixed, physical space tied to conventional family structures. Instead, they argue for a broader understanding of home shaped by diverse social interactions and power dynamics. This perspective is particularly relevant to homeless individuals, who, despite being excluded from traditional domestic spaces, often create a sense of home through relational ties, resistance and strategic adaptation to non-domestic spaces. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlights this complexity, with studies showing that individuals experiencing homelessness engage in active home-making practices even in challenging circumstances (Lenhard et al., 2022). Therefore, home is better understood as a relational and dynamic concept shaped by emotional, social and cultural ties rather than a static physical entity.

UNDERSTANDING BELONGING

Belonging is crucial in creating and re-creating a home, encapsulating the sense that individuals matter individually and collectively. It is a complex and multifaceted concept, often discussed in relation to its opposite, *'not belonging'*

(Southerton, 2002). At its core, belonging relates to one's recognition within a social and cultural context, where individuals feel valued and integrated into the fabric of society. Maslow (1954) suggests that the need to belong is a fundamental human requirement, essential for personal well-being, while Hagerty et al. (1992) define belonging as the *'experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that people feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment'* (p. 173). This notion of belonging extends beyond social relationships to include environmental contexts, both natural and cultural and is divided into two key dimensions: *'valued involvement',* which involves feelings of being valued, accepted and needed, and *'fit',* which denotes an individual's sense of compatibility with their surrounding environment (Ross, 2002). Belonging is closely linked to social integration, which is the process of newcomers becoming part of a community's social, cultural and institutional systems while keeping their own cultural identity (Frideres, 2008, p. 80). Successful integration depends on both how often and how meaningful interactions are between migrants and the local population. Positive social support and strong connections are vital for emotional and social well-being, but loneliness, isolation and negative social experiences can prevent personal growth and progress (DeWall & Baumeister, 2006; Fontana, 2003; Singh & Misra, 2009).

This challenge ties closely to the idea of happiness, which is a key part of well-being. While Rogers (1959) suggests that people naturally strive for their goals, Stevens (1992) emphasises the importance of coping skills in staying open to life's challenges. Even in difficult situations, as Sumerlin (1995, 1996) found, homeless individuals often develop strategies to survive and maintain some sense of stability. Happiness, as studied in sociology, reflects how people feel about their own lives. It is more than a passing emotion – it is a lasting sense of satisfaction that also serves as a marker of progress in society (Veenhoven, 2008). By examining social systems, economic conditions and cultural norms, sociologists explore how external environments affect personal happiness. Veenhoven's (2008) work highlights the value of comparing cultures and tracking changes over time to understand this complex relationship. These studies help us learn how to create conditions that lead to happier societies.

Huot et al. (2014) explore the sense of belonging among French-speaking visible minority immigrants in London, Ontario, in the context of official bilingualism and multiculturalism. Through interviews with participants, the study revealed that social integration challenges, such as discrimination and racism, significantly influenced their sense of belonging. Huot et al. (2014) argue that the development of a personal sense of place-belongingness is