Padgett, D.K., Henwood, B.F.
and Tsemberis, S.J. (2016)

Housing First: Ending Homelessness, Transforming Systems, and Changing Lives

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Panacea against Futility?
Between System Change and a Shop-Window Strategy

The new book by Deborah Padgett, Benjamin Henwood and Sam Tsemberis, *Housing First*, is a must read for several reasons. I will, in this very short review, focus on three of the reasons this book is worth reading. I will also bring up one critique, one dilemma and one challenge. In my opinion, one of the most important reasons to read it is that it truly takes a position regarding the importance of listening to the people that have had a lived experience of homelessness (see especially chapters five and six). The starting point in the book is that if you ask the people that are affected by homelessness services about their experiences, you must be ready to accept the answer. Psychologist Dr. Sam Tsemberis did just that, and the answer that the homeless people gave was that they needed a place to live – a home, or as one homeless respondent, Alfred, puts it: "It was the only place that I ever had that was mine. That had my name on it […] It was home" (p.81). The role of peer-support will probably be one of the most important areas of future research, as it seems to have very positive effects. Peer-support, or involving people with lived experience, has always been a key component of the work done by the organization Pathways to Housing.

Having conducted research on homelessness myself, you often get the feeling of kicking in open doors. We come up with the same results again and again – that a house, a home is the key solution to end homelessness. For some reason, it comes as a surprise that homeless people share the same basic needs as any other human being. In a way, you get the feeling that people think that homeless people are different than us. One of the main causes of people ending up in homelessness is that they are poor. Unfortunately, this fact is often neglected. Instead, individual problems are brought to the fore, like addiction or mental health issues. Research from Australia has shown that there is a very high risk that people who become homeless will end up with addiction and mental health problems because of homelessness (cf. Johnson and Chamberlain, 2008). Prevention is a must.

The second reason that this book is worth reading is that it gives us the story of how Housing First started and how it has spread through different states and cities in America and Canada, different cities and countries in Europe, and to Australia. It is an amazing story with remarkable results. And the story is told both by the very people that started the original programme and those who have conducted several of the important studies over the years. In that way, this is the story about Housing First by the book. However, if you are looking for a more detailed description about what Housing First is and how the different core principles are applied in practice, you should also read the Housing First manual (Tsemberis 2015; it has just been reprinted in an updated version). The key story is that there are two different models: 'continuum of care' or the treatment-first model, and Housing First. In the treatment-first model, housing is a goal and the client can reach the goal by proving himself housing ready. Research has shown that uncertainty is a constant problem in this model (p.74). It is often the case that the client does not know when he or she will be able to progress to the next step, and there is also uncertainty around what one must do to progress. For many clients, the continuum of care model leads to an institutional loop (Knutagård, 2009) or, as the authors write, "a cruel and costly circle of futility" (p.8). In the Housing First model, housing is a means – a precondition that will enable the individual to deal with any other problem that he or she might have. The two different models can be seen as competing institutional logics. Housing First is described as a paradigm shift. In many ways, treatment first is still the dominant model in many parts of the world, and from this perspective it is difficult to see Housing First as a paradigm shift. On the other hand, Housing First has initiated a mind-shift that, in its consequences, could result in a paradigm shift. Today, the models live side by side and their respective logics could, in one way, be described as incommensurable. Four components of Housing First are: (1) consumer choice; (2) community-based mobile support services; (3) permanent scatter-site housing; and (4) harm reduction (p.3). It is worth mentioning two points that have been demonstrated in resent research. First, research has shown that it is almost impossible to know beforehand if a client will succeed or not. This means that the client you believe – as a professional social worker – will succeed might fail and the client that you do not have any hope for is the one that will become another one of Housing First success stories. Secondly, research has pointed out that social workers that work in treatment-first programmes work less with treatment since they have to find housing for their clients. On the other hand, Housing First support workers work a lot more with treatment and other support services, since the housing situation for the client is already sorted out.

The historical background also covers three key movements. The first is that homelessness organisations started to be given extended missions; the second, that advocacy became connected with action; and the third, that a business model

approach was introduced. In other words, homelessness services have evolved from charities to social movements to business models. Today we can also see a growing number of so-called 'hybrid' organizations, which have been successful in sustaining capital through contracts, low-interest loans, wealthy donors and so on. There are some key elements that seem to have opened the window of opportunity for the Pathways to Housing model to spread both nationally and internationally. I will only mention three of them here. The first example is Kuhn and Culhane's article from 1998, which shows that about 10 percent of the homelessness population use 50 percent of all the shelter nights. This finding showed that if you could target the 10 percent – the so-called chronically homeless – society could halve the costs of homeless accommodation. The second example is the very special court case that indirectly helped to spread the model of scattered-site apartments: the Olmstead decision from 1999. The third was Malcolm Gladwell's essay from 2006 on 'Million Dollar Murray'. The focus of the article was on the costs of homelessness and it used Housing First as an example of how public money could be saved.

Another great benefit of this book (my third reason to recommend reading it) is that it also applies a theoretical understanding of Housing First. Previous research has focused on 'the facts', looking at housing retention rates (80% plus) and how the use of drugs changes over time (even though Housing First was not designed to end addiction), and the sort of fidelity the different programmes have. Happily, in this book a more theoretical position is taken. One of the theoretical concepts introduced in relation to Housing First is 'institutional entrepreneur'. This is a suitable concept to be used, but it is in many ways used as a concept for individual actors that change institutions or try to change systems. Connecting institutional entrepreneurship with individuals is probably connected to the importance of individual change agents and the focus on individual actors in America. In the book, we get to meet institutional entrepreneurs like Sam Tsemberis, Roseanne Haggerty and Philip Mangano (p.46). From a theoretical perspective, the concept of institutional entrepreneurs is often used to describe a group of actors that manage to change institutions over time. Even though a lot of attention is given to individual agents of change, the book also brings forward the importance of other type of change agents, such as changes to an Act, the section 8 programme or the founding of Common Ground. There are also structural constraints that hinder the choice of Housing First over the Staircase model.

One critique that I have of the book is the difficulty of giving a more specific account of the diffusion of Housing First in the European context, and the lack of a more sensitive description of the very different welfare regimes, welfare states or welfare markets in Europe. By making the section about the European case a bit compressed, the discussion doesn't quite do justice to the complexity of the reality – for example, in the Nordic countries. While one of the key challenges is, of course,

that research produced in languages other than English is difficult to access, the focus on research in the English language nonetheless becomes very evident and, more specifically, the book tends to focus on an American knowledge-base. Some crucial research findings from other countries get lost in translation.

Sometimes it might be more relevant to analyse the similarities and differences of cities rather than countries. The local scale has gained traction in social policy, since some aspects of macro-level comparisons of welfare regimes do not make sense in today's world, where several different strategies can be adopted in different regions or municipalities within a welfare state.

The book brings many advantages and is, in many ways, a must read in order to understand the birth, evolution and dissemination of Housing First, from the original Pathways to Housing model to the different variations of the model that we can see popping up in many different countries around the world.

One dilemma that comes to my mind when reading this book is the dissonance between evidence-based research, robust results and fidelity on the one hand and contextual or local adaptations on the other. We do know that the context is of great importance, but at the same time we argue about the idea of fidelity. Fortunately, the book gives us a great starting point for addressing the challenges for future homelessness research, where questions about both fidelity and local adaptation have their place.

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› **References**

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