The ETHOS Definition and Classification of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion

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Background

The ETHOS definition of homelessness and housing exclusion was developed by the European Observatory on Homelessness, initially, to allow members of the Observatory to collate statistics on homelessness in a more consistent manner across Europe (Edgar *et al*., 2004). The operational model was developed in the context of European Commission funded research, which examined the measurement of homelessness in Europe (Edgar *et al*., 2007). Both documents need to be read to understand the context and development of the definition. The MPHASIS project (MPHASIS, 2009), funded by the European Commission, examined the robustness of the ETHOS definition and methods of measuring homelessness in 20 European member states through discussion with key stakeholders in those countries.

A key purpose of a theory is to generate scientific debate and generate innovation in ideas. The article by Amore *et al*. (2011) offers some useful insights into the debate on the meaning of homelessness and housing exclusion, and the significant issues that need to be addressed in accurately measuring it in a manner that can lead to effective evidence-based policies. Their insights are important and can hopefully inform the development and evolution of ETHOS as an empirical and policy tool. ETHOS was developed in the European context and was not designed as a universal model. However, it is testament to the usefulness of the conceptual model that New Zealand has used the ETHOS typology, with some adaptation to local circumstances, as the basis for its official definition of homelessness. It is therefore pertinent to remind readers of the context in which ETHOS was developed.

Development of ETHOS

The enlargement of the European Union following the Lisbon Treaty (in 2000) placed the right of access to decent and affordable housing firmly in the policy arena for (what became) the 27 member states. The challenge was to provide a definition of homelessness and housing exclusion that could address the diversity of experience, governance and policy frameworks to allow national governments and the European Commission to monitor progress in this vital social policy arena. The challenge was, in my view, fourfold. First, the majority of member states either did not recognise homelessness as a policy issue or only understood it as street homelessness – a broader definition was essential. Second, given the diversity of housing market systems and welfare regimes (Edgar *et al*., 2002), it was important to posit a definition in the housing context and, in so doing, to recognise the dynamic nature of the issue. Third, cultural, policy and linguistic diversity meant that a definition had to be conceptually robust while allowing adaptation of classification and typology. Fourth, the drive towards evidence-based policies needed to recognise the weak structures of data collection at official level in many member states and, thus, the approach to definition and data collection should build on both civil society and state structures.

The European Observatory on Homelessness worked with the FEANTSA membership of national homelessness agencies. The *real politik* of the situation was to provide a definition that was more broadly based than street homelessness, but could be accepted as more than a lobbying tool of the homeless sector. FEANTSA already had a fourfold definition of homelessness – homelessness, houselessness, inadequate housing and insecure housing. Some member organisations had been involved in building definitions in their country (most notably in North-Rhine Westphalia and in Finland). Developing an ETHOS definition had to be sensitive to this circumstance.
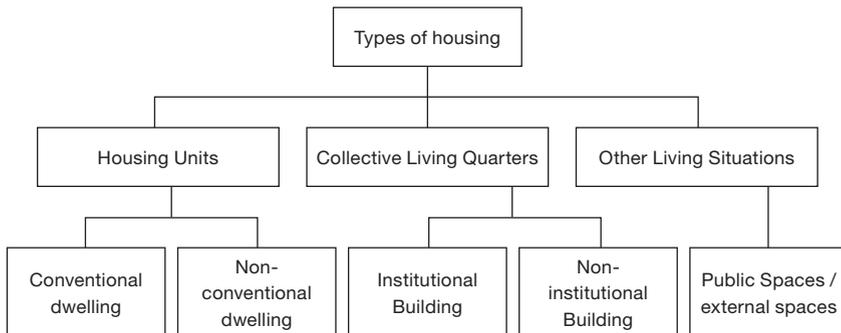
The Search for a Conceptual Model

In the search for a conceptual model, it was important to build on what was there, to develop a conceptual model that could straddle the diversity that is Europe, and to establish an operational definition within this model that could be adaptable to local / national circumstances or sensitivities. The author's experience of research in Scotland, which defined tenancy rights in supported accommodation (Edgar and Mina-Coull, 1999), suggested that the legal basis for habitation of a structure or building for residential purposes can be reduced to four main concepts, which underpin a residential contract (Edgar *et al.*, 2007). This gave the basis for the three

conceptual domains – physical, legal and social. The fourth concept, the time dimension, which is present in establishing a tenancy contract, becomes relevant in the operational definition of homelessness. We return to this below.

The Criticism of the ETHOS Model

Amore *et al*. focus on three 'differences in conceptualisation' of the ETHOS model. First, they argue that the model should only relate to people who are living in inadequate situations due to lack of access to adequate housing. In fact, the development of ETHOS was undertaken in the context of the EU social inclusion strategy that was launched by the European Council of Lisbon in 2000. Within this framework, common objectives were agreed on by all EU countries to stimulate coordinated national policy developments in this area. These common objectives included promoting access to housing and preventing homelessness. Hence, the understanding of homelessness as a lack of access to housing underpins the whole development of the model (and follows the publication of a key book on the subject: Edgar *et al*., 2002). Edgar *et al*. (2007), in developing 'ETHOS light', draw upon the UNECE/EUROSTAT report (2006) to consider the relationship between population and living quarters as "those housing types which are the usual residences of one or more persons" (para. 590). The report recommends a simple three-fold definition of conventional dwellings, other housing units and collective living quarters. Homeless people can be found in all three categories. Edgar *et al*. (2007) specify the different forms of living situation.

Figure 1. Types of Housing Unit and Living Situation

Source: Adapted from UNECE/EUROSTAT (2005) Chart 4, p.123 (cited in Edgar *et al*., 2007)

Second, Amore *et al.* argue that there is an "arbitrary threshold between homeless-
ness and housing exclusion"(p.25). With regard to Categories 3 and 4 in the ETHOS
model, this was indeed the subject of extensive debate within the FEANTSA
membership and the European Observatory. In one view, people living in dwellings
that are determined, by national standards, as unfit for habitation should be
regarded as homeless. However, in some countries a high percentage of dwellings
are officially unfit for habitation.

Third, they argue that there is an inconsistent application of the three domains of
home. This argument relates to the second. Clearly, across Europe there are many
households living in dwellings that are defined by national standards as unfit for
habitation but where family life continues and people at least have access to private
space for normal conjugal relations. This is the case both in relation to the physical
standard of the dwelling and the overcrowding standard. Elsewhere, the author has
discussed the issues of defining adequacy of housing and the concept of housing
exclusion and housing deprivation (Edgar *et al.*, 2007; Frazer *et al.*, 2010). The
ETHOS model can be employed to determine both the physical standard of the
dwelling and the social dimension – i.e. overcrowding.

Amore *et al.* argue, in reference to the operational model of ETHOS, that there is an
inconsistent use of 'reference periods'. The specific operational categories (e.g. due
to be released from prison within 3 months with no home to go to) were derived after
a review of existing European practice (this example is used in Finland and other
countries). The category of young people leaving care is included, since this is a major
issue in homelessness, especially in the new member states. Observatory members
in the Czech Republic asked for the inclusion of this category following a year-long
EU funded study using ETHOS in that country. They refer specifically to category 5
(accommodation for immigrants) and category 7 (supported accommodation for
homeless people), and claim that these populations are not part of the homeless
population. This is to misunderstand the European context of ETHOS, where different
forms of provision exist for homeless people, and Housing First options are manifest
in diverse accommodation forms (see Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007).

Their criticism of different reference periods is valid if one is considering ETHOS
from the standpoint of a statistician. A statistician is concerned to ensure, as Amore
et al. state, that "a person must be actually homeless at the time of enumeration to
be counted as homeless" (p. 30). However, ETHOS is intended as a policy tool, and
since homeless policy should be concerned with prevention as well as alleviation,
there is a requirement to monitor those who are at risk of homelessness and those
who have been re-housed due to homelessness (i.e. under Housing First or
supported housing initiatives). Furthermore, in developing ETHOS, the authors were
concerned to develop a mechanism that would allow some harmonisation of

continuous recording systems in use in homeless hostels, supported housing and related situations. The FEANTSA data collection group has reviewed and provided guidance to its members on the development of data collection systems, and ETHOS categories provide an important aspect of that work (see Edgar *et al.*, 2007). The Feantsa Data Collection Working Group are currently working on providing further guidance on this aspect.

With regard to the privacy criterion of the social domain, Amore *et al*. make a valid argument. The notion of the privacy criterion is intended to capture the situations of people in collective living quarters. However, the authors' claim that the typology is a non-exhaustive classification reveals a lack of understanding of the issues involved in developing a typology for 27 member states, which have diverse structures of collective living situations and homeless infrastructures. The situation of homelessness and institutional living are clearly different for the three categories – penal institutions, hospital institutions and children's institutions. Amore *et al*. (p.30) do not appear to see the distinction: "if no housing has been organised for a person in an institution to be discharged to, then it is entirely appropriate for them to remain in the institution until it is" (p.3). Clearly, prisoners cannot be kept in prison for this reason, and neither can children who reach the age of maturity be kept in a children's home. With regard to hospitals, there is, again, diversity between types of hospital in relation to discharge regulations (and this varies both within and between countries).

Equally, they appear to be unaware of the work of the Observatory members over several years that examines linguistic differences in an attempt to harmonise terminology (see, for example, Edgar, 2009). Hence, the use of terms such as 'temporary accommodation' and 'transitional supported accommodation' are translated into national contexts in a way that reflects the national realities. The ETHOS typology has been translated into all major European languages. Despite this effort, it remains a difficult task to draw clear comparisons between different forms of accommodation, and especially collective living situations. Indeed some forms of accommodation exist in only one or two countries (for example, the Danish 'skaeve huse' or the French 'baile glissant' and 'foyers'). Indeed, we would argue that a key driver for the development of the ETHOS model was to allow national adaptation of the categories to fit local policy circumstances. Hence, even if it had been possible to develop an exhaustive typology in the diversity that is Europe, it would not have been a sensible approach.

Conclusions and Future Development

Amore *et al.* claim that the New Zealand definition is significantly different to ETHOS, something that was necessary largely due to the perceived conceptual weaknesses of ETHOS. In fact, the NZ statistical office website states that "[t]he definition is based on the concepts of the ETHOS typology, a framework used by European statistical offices. Following consultation, the ETHOS categories have been narrowed down and adapted for the New Zealand environment". It appears, then, that our intention of providing a robust conceptual model that would allow adaptation to local circumstance has been vindicated by the NZ experience.

Their views, especially in relation to the reference periods and the privacy criterion, reveal a tension between the *sensu strictu* interpretation of statisticians, who are used to dealing with point-in-time surveys based on representative sampling, and the needs of professionals involved in policy development, evaluation and implementation. There remains work to be undertaken to ensure that continuous recording systems employ consistent classifications and systems. In this regard, ETHOS is an important tool. The Data Collection Working Group in FEANTSA continues to work on this issue, but perhaps there is insufficient academic review being undertaken. The time dimension is not well resolved in the ETHOS model, but it allows the local adaptation of practice to modify categories, particularly in relation to different forms of collective living situations.

ETHOS was developed in the context of the complexity and diversity of the European Union – a situation that Amore *et al*. do little to acknowledge; certainly, if the approach developed in the model is to be applied more universally, then some of their arguments do need to be addressed. As the MPHASIS project revealed, even where the approach developed by ETHOS is widely adopted, there remain serious issues related to the governance of data collection, and the integration of survey methods and continuous recording methods of data collection.

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