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# The Logos of ETHOS

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Ingrid Sahlin

University of Gothenburg, Sweden

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## Introduction

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In a thorough and compelling analysis of the ETHOS typology of homelessness, Amore, Baker and Howden-Chapman (2011) scrutinise and suggest revisions of the ETHOS model of homelessness and housing exclusion. They identify problems with firstly the conceptual model and, secondly its relation to the typology of homeless subgroups that it covers (or should cover), and suggest instead a modified approach, where homelessness is defined as a living situation characterised by exclusion from two of the three domains (the physical, legal and social domain). I will comment on their criticism and their suggested solution in this order, and conclude with suggesting a second alternative, which is a return to the basic ideas – the logos – of the ETHOS concept.

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## ETHOS Conceptual Logic and the Threshold between Homelessness and Housing Exclusion

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Amore *et al.* accept the conceptual basis of ETHOS – i.e., that an adequate home includes a physical, a legal and a social domain. However, they question the logic behind the divisions between the four main conceptual categories (roofless, houseless, insecure housing and inadequate housing), especially the fact that the first two of these are defined ‘homelessness’, while the latter two fall under ‘housing exclusion’.

I agree with the authors that the line drawn between ‘homeless’ and ‘housing exclusion’ in the ETHOS typology is not convincing and that people living in uninhabitable dwellings, as well as those who share accommodation with friends and relatives, should be counted as homeless, and not only as living in a situation of housing exclusion. However, since those who are roofless or houseless are indeed

subject to housing exclusion, I would propose that no such general line be drawn at all between the different conceptual categories, but not at the cost of excluding the situations currently defined as housing exclusion in ETHOS' (see below).

In principle, I also agree with Amore *et al.* that it is problematic to include 'risk of homelessness' in a typology of homelessness and housing exclusion. On the other hand, many situations involving such risks are actually identical to being excluded from the legal domain. A house of excellent standard and with space for privacy and a social life that is borrowed or squatted in would still not be an adequate home, because its residents cannot trust that they can remain there, and those facing eviction or repossession no longer have legal tenure. Accordingly, insecure housing equals exclusion from the legal domain, and is an important element in homelessness *per se*, and not only a risk for future 'real' homelessness.

### **ETHOS' Classes or Operational Categories in Relation to the Conceptual Model**

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The second major criticism made by Amore *et al.* concerns ETHOS' "failure to take account of why people are in a living situation that is inadequate for permanent habitation" (p. 25). The authors note that 'lack of housing' is used in the ETHOS typology only to differentiate homeless people staying in hospitals and prisons, or with relatives and friends, from those with access to housing of their own, but suggest that this criterion be spelled out in the conceptual framework and not only in the operational categories. For example, tourists sleeping in tents should not be counted as homeless if they have homes to return to after their vacation. This is reasonable.

However, the discussion on the need for such a 'circumstances criterion' is quite at odds with the authors' claim that only the immediate living situation should be considered. In the section on reference period consistency, it is argued that people who are in institutions due to a lack of housing should *not* be counted as homeless at all, since this would be "based on the subjective assessment of what a person's housing situation *may be in the future* (...). If a person is usually homeless but is in hospital at the time for enumeration, they should not be counted as homeless" (p. 30, emphasis in the original text). To me, this is a highly questionable conclusion for three reasons.

First, a hospital or a prison is certainly not a place where a person may enjoy any dimension of a home, whether physical, legal or social, and, second, a strict look at only the immediate situation would lead to exactly the situation that the authors want to avoid through making 'lack of housing' a general circumstances criterion. Third, and maybe most importantly in this context, a future perspective is always

involved in the concept of (in)secure housing and, hence, in the issue of legal tenure. Put differently, the legal domain necessarily implies a control over the future housing situation, which people staying temporarily in hostels (or with friends or in boarding houses) lack. On the other hand, I think the authors do have a point in not including people who *used to* be homeless, such as the operational category ‘people receiving long-term support (due to homelessness)’ in ETHOS. Formerly homeless people should not be included unless their current living situation is inadequate – for example, if they do not have legal tenure or access to a social domain.

The authors also find in the ETHOS typology – but not in the conceptual model – a ‘targeting’ criterion, which differentiates accommodation for homeless people or immigrants from similar kinds of accommodation that do not explicitly target these groups, such as boarding houses and youth hostels. I think this is a good point, but I’m not convinced by the suggestion to include the targeting criterion in the conceptual model (see below). Rather, targeting criteria risk consolidating existing local policies, instead of inspiring their contestation. For instance, if homeless hostels reject undocumented migrants or teenagers, these groups will remain unacknowledged as homeless.

However, there is another circumstance criterion that I think is important to take into account, namely the size and internal relations of a household. It makes sense to consider these aspects in judging the adequacy of the physical domain, and they have implications also for the legal and social domains. Although the authors indicate a similar reasoning when they include ‘sharing accommodation’ as a distinct homeless category in their revised typology, they have excluded people being threatened with violence in their homes, as well as those living in circumstances of overcrowding. Both of these categories are (and should in my opinion remain) included in the ETHOS typology and qualify as homelessness.

A third criticism put forward by Amore *et al.* is that the operational categories in ETHOS are mutually exclusive but not exhaustive. This is true, but operational categories can hardly cover all relevant housing situations in all countries all of the time. Rather, they should be understood as suggested concrete applications of the conceptual categories. ETHOS has been tried and tested in thorough discussions between the coordinators of the European Observatory of Homelessness, its national correspondents from EU member countries, and with the staff and members of FEANTSA. Like other, similar typologies, it is the result of a compromise between considerations of logical accuracy, and its adequacy for policies and counting in a great number of countries. None of these countries could make use of it without adapting it to its own context.

## The Alternative Approach of Amore *et al*

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In trying to resolve the problems they have identified, the authors stick with the ETHOS principle that homelessness is defined as a living situation where two of the three domains are missing. Their proposed modified typology comprises four broad homelessness categories: without accommodation, temporary accommodation, sharing accommodation and uninhabitable accommodation. However, housing exclusion, where only one domain is missing, is not included.

Two necessary conditions for being considered homeless are stipulated, each with one principal exception: 1) living in an inadequate place of habitation (unless these places are institutions, which are “culturally recognised exceptions’ to the minimum adequacy standard”), and 2) lacking access to adequate housing (except for people staying in accommodation targeting homeless people) (p. 32).

An initial question here is whether the first condition is necessary, given the second one, in which it is implied. Put differently, you can hardly live in adequate housing unless you have access to it. I have already dealt with, and questioned, the exception that people in institutions should not be counted as homeless. A third comment concerns the exception to the category ‘lacking access to adequate housing’, which implies that accommodation for homeless people is actually adequate housing. The basic problem is that Amore *et al.*, on the one hand, define adequate housing as comprising all three domains, but, on the other hand, define homelessness as being excluded from two of them. They then have no concept for the situation where only one domain is missing: it is neither adequate housing nor homelessness. In addition, this exception threatens to obscure the grounds on which somebody is being defined as homeless, and the modified approach risks falling into the same trap as the one they identified in ETHOS: the living situation becomes defined by the residents’ former status as homeless (as defined by the providers of accommodation), rather than by its qualities.

The great improvement in the revised typology is that people living in uninhabitable places or sharing accommodation are included as homeless (they are only counted under ‘housing exclusion’ in ETHOS). However, other important categories in the ETHOS typology are completely left out. Above all, the authors neglect the important conceptual category of ‘insecure housing’, even though it is implicitly included in the category ‘temporary accommodation’. This is always insecure, but the authors include here only collective housing, whereas insecure housing situations in physically adequate homes – such as staying temporarily without tenure in a borrowed or squatted flat, living under special terms such as sobriety conditions, living in a rental flat having been served with an eviction order, or living with parents or partners who threaten ejection – are all excluded from the typology.

My main objection, however, is that the authors fail to adhere to the logical requirement that they identify as the reason for altering the ‘homeless’ category in the first place. Their primary criticism of ETHOS is that two of the four intersections, which are defined by exclusion from two (or three) domains, are not included in the ETHOS homeless category. I agree that exclusion from the physical and the social domain (intersection 4) should be included, thereby defining as homeless those staying in uninhabitable housing, but this also applies to overcrowding, which is left out in the suggested modified typology. The household members in an overcrowded home are unlikely ever to be alone in a room or in control over its visitors, and, hence, can neither meet with friends nor enjoy privacy in their home, i.e., they lack a social domain; sharing a room with many others is not physically adequate either. Living in an overcrowded situation should therefore be included in a homeless typology. A final remark is that Amore *et al.* themselves find in the end that intersection 3 – exclusion from the physical and the legal domain, but not from the social one – is inapplicable in New Zealand, where it is subsumed by the first intersection (without accommodation or ‘roofless’), in the same way as it was subsumed by the ETHOS constructors in Europe.

## Unpacking the Domains

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In Table 2 in Amore *et al.*, ‘without accommodation’ (like the ‘roofless’ category in ETHOS) is characterised by exclusion from all three domains, and ‘uninhabitable housing’ by exclusion from the physical and social domains, while all kinds of temporary accommodation and sharing accommodation have the same exclusion make up, where the legal and social domains are missing. However, an important function of a conceptual model is that it helps identifying possible subgroups or situations that are not already recognized, as (in this case) homeless people or being subject to housing exclusion. This is why I want to suggest a third version, which takes all logical combinations of missed or available ETHOS domains into account.

Starting from the conceptual model, it is essential to recognise that each domain, first, is relatively autonomous from the others, and secondly, has (at least) two aspects:

- physical (standards, i.e., sanitary facilities and heating, and space)
- social (privacy, and room for social interaction)
- legal (externally, with respect to owners/landlords, and internally, based on the individual’s relationship to the household member that holds the legal tenure)

Thirdly, these aspects are also dimensions, which means that exclusion from a certain domain/aspect is often a matter of degrees and that a host of different combinations are logically possible. Fourthly, and finally, some of these dimensions

are also related to the size of the household and its internal relations. This is why a household of seven in a particular flat may imply exclusion from the physical and social domain, and an abused woman, whose husband is the sole contractor of their flat, may be excluded from the social and legal domain, even though the formal tenure and flat would constitute an adequate home for a single person.

## The Logos of ETHOS (Modified)

However, a conceptual model should only outline and possibly name the logical possibilities that it implies, and not go into all of the operational, contextual details. Below I have tried to list and (re-)name the general combinations. Each domain is regarded as a variable (or several variables), and 'missing' implies inadequate, and does not necessary imply that there is, for example, no physical domain whatsoever.

PROBLEMATIC HOUSING SITUATIONS	PHYSICAL DOMAIN	SOCIAL DOMAIN	LEGAL DOMAIN
A. WITHOUT ACCOMMODATION (ROOFLESS)	missing	missing	missing
B. INSECURE HOUSING = physically adequate but no legal tenure.			
i) socially inadequate (e.g., temporary collective accommodation, shared accommodation)	<i>(available)</i>	missing	missing
ii) socially inadequate (e.g., flats that are borrowed or rented with special contracts)	<i>(available)</i>	<i>(available)</i>	missing
C. INADEQUATE HOUSING = legal tenure of a physically inadequate home.			
i) socially inadequate (e.g., a shed or a tent, OR a house insufficient for its residents and with no social space due to overcrowding)	missing	missing	<i>(available)</i>
ii) socially adequate (e.g., a cottage without water and electricity but still with room for a social life)	missing	<i>(available)</i>	<i>(available)</i>
D. INSECURE AND INADEQUATE = no legal tenure and physically inadequate. Rare but not wholly inapplicable (e.g. like C (ii) but involving squatting)	missing	<i>(available)</i>	missing

The remaining situation is having access to all three domains, and this is, according to the ETHOS definition, what is needed for a home. All other possible combinations of missing/available domains are covered in the matrix. As Amore *et al.*, as well as Edgar *et al.* (2007) have already stated, the last kind of housing situation (D, i.e., intersection 3) will collapse into the first situation (A) if the social domain is also missing. However, it is not logically contradictory to imagine access to a social domain in a physically and legally inadequate situation, as long as the domains are seen as (composite) dimensions rather than absolute and fixed qualities. For instance, an illegally constructed or squatted shed or cottage without heating or a bathroom could still provide a social domain in terms of privacy and/or space for social interaction (D); if it is privately owned it would instead fit with C(ii).

Whether a housing situation is 'insecure' or 'inadequate' depends, respectively, on whether it is the legal or the physical domain that is absent. In both cases, a social domain may or may not be available. Like Amore *et al.*, I think this domain is in need of elaboration, but unlike them, I find it useful for thinking about what homelessness implies, especially if one tries to unpack the domains. For example, physically inadequate housing in terms of bad quality or standards does not necessarily exclude a social domain, but in terms of there being insufficient space for the household member(s) living there, it probably will: overcrowding (always) and sharing accommodation (mostly) imply exclusion from the privacy aspect of the social domain.

Importantly, in this matrix, which is an attempt to demonstrate the original logos of ETHOS, there is no distinction between situations characterised by exclusion from two domains and those missing only one of them, and no attempt to separate homelessness from housing exclusion. As far as I remember, one purpose of ETHOS was to avoid policy quarrels over what homelessness is, and therefore to avoid that concept. Recognizing that exclusion is a matter of degrees, one can easily think of situations where severe exclusion from one domain would be just as bad a situation as one characterised by more moderate exclusion from two domains. In addition, 'homeless' is already defined and translated differently in different countries. Hence, which of these situations, and which relative degree of exclusion from each domain that should be labelled 'homelessness' in policies and counts designed by the state, cities or NGOs will always be a political, as well as practical (and perhaps economic) matter and will always be contested. However, by returning to the original idea of the three domains of a home, it is indeed possible to compare problematic housing situations over time, between cities and the countryside, and across countries and regions, and to contest, question and develop homeless and housing policies.

**› References**

Amore, K., Baker, M. and Howden-Chapman, P. (2011) The ETHOS Definition and Classification of Homelessness: An Analysis, *European Journal of Homelessness* 5(2) pp.19-37.

Edgar, W., Harrison, M., Watson, P. and Busch-Geertsema, V. (2007) *Measurement of Homelessness at European Union Level* (Brussels: European Commission (DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities).