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# Focusing on Conceptual Validity: A Response

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## Introduction

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In 2011, a paper I wrote with my colleagues Michael Baker and Philippa Howden-Chapman was published in this journal – entitled *The ETHOS Definition and Classification of Homelessness: An Analysis* (hereafter referred to as ‘the 2011 paper’). Three authors responded – Bill Edgar (2012), Ingrid Sahlin (2012), and Nan Roman (2012); I am grateful for their thoughtful critiques. The aim of this article is to comment on the three responses, with the aim of moving the discussion further forward.

References to definition and measurement issues are ubiquitous in the homelessness literature, but relatively few authors have sought to conceptually define the phenomenon. In the early 1990s, Cordray and Pion explained, “it is impossible to make meaningful decisions about whom to count as homeless and how to derive that estimate without a firm grasp of the concept that one intends to measure” (1991, p.591). Yet, these authors avoided the task of developing a robust concept of homelessness, instead simply recommending clear articulation of whatever is measured as homelessness.

This type of shortcut has persisted, with a number of definitions in the literature reflecting popular perceptions, or defaulting to what is already measured (e.g. Rossi and Wright, 1987; Peressini *et al*, 1996; Springer, 2000; Tipple and Speak, 2006). Many definitions comprise lists or ‘continuums’ of living situations with no explanation of the defining characteristics these situations have in common (e.g. Springer, 2000; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2008). Debates about definitions of homelessness have tended to focus on specific living situations (often framed as ‘broad’ versus ‘narrow’ definitions), without reference to clear

theoretical rationale. Detailed conceptual models<sup>1</sup> are rare, and classifications of homelessness demonstrably derived from systematic, exhaustive application of such conceptual models are rarer still, even among recently-published approaches; e.g. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 2012. In-depth, critical analyses of existing approaches are limited. In sum, the field has seen a proliferation of definitions and classifications of homelessness, but a relative lack of engagement with ideas of conceptual validity or international standardisation.

The ETHOS approach to defining and classifying homelessness is unique for being prominent, explicitly conceptual, and developed for application across international borders (within the European Union). This made it an ideal candidate for examination against the standard criteria for conceptual validity, as outlined in the 2011 paper. In this present paper, the responses to the 2011 paper are considered within the following structure. First, Edgar's, Sahlin's and Roman's criticisms of the 2011 paper are discussed in six sections: scope and appropriateness; arbitrary threshold; no circumstances criterion; weak construct validity; non-exhaustiveness; and reference period inconsistency. Next, Sahlin's concept of 'problematic housing situations' is examined, a concept proposed in response to the 2011 paper. Finally, refinements to the 2011 paper's concept of homelessness are summarised, and conclusions drawn.

## **Responses Relating to the Scope and Appropriateness of the 2011 Paper's Analysis**

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Roman and Sahlin criticised the 2011 paper for failing to examine two topics that were expressly outside its scope: operational definitions of homelessness; and housing exclusion. Roman argued that: "A definition must contain data elements that can be collected in the real world" (2012, p.237). This is true for operational definitions, but the 2011 paper focused on conceptualisation: "[W]e focus only on conceptualisation, but stress that a valid concept of homelessness is the basis of a meaningful case definition and should guide the development of data collection" (Amore *et al*, 2011, pp.23-24). Regarding housing exclusion, both Roman and Sahlin pointed out that this conceptual category was missing from the classification of homelessness proposed in the 2011 paper. However, the 2011 paper focused solely on the definition and classification of homelessness. Housing exclusion is a concept related to, but distinct from, homelessness.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Conceptual model' and 'conceptual definition' are synonymous, as are 'typology' and 'classification' – these terms are used interchangeably in both the 2011 paper and this one.

Edgar questioned the appropriateness of the 2011 paper's critique. He framed the analysis as "the *sensu strictu* interpretation of statisticians" (2012, p.224, original emphasis), suggesting that a 'strict' (or rigorous) definition of homelessness does not meet "the needs of professionals involved in policy development, evaluation and implementation" (2012, p.224). As a matter of note, none of the authors of the 2011 paper are statisticians. More importantly, a conceptual definition of homelessness (or any phenomenon) must be strict, because that is the definition of 'definition': "Stating exactly what a thing is, or what a word means" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013). If we are not strict when we define homelessness, then we are being sloppy, and: "[I]f a sloppy inquiry is as acceptable as a careful one... then there is no need to inquire – we might as well accept, without further fuss, any old view that tickles our fancy" (Philips, 1990, p.43). There exists an intellectual responsibility for rigorous and sound conceptualisation. This is important for valid measurement of a population, but also for policy development, service delivery, evaluation of interventions, and other research.

As discussed in the 2011 paper, the ETHOS typology of homelessness is promoted and perceived as being derived from a robust conceptual definition. Culhane and Byrne (2010) for example, commented that the classification is "thoroughly well conceptualized" (p.9). ETHOS is recommended as the "common framework definition of homelessness at EU level" (European Consensus Conference on Homelessness, 2010, p.10), and it is being "used already in a number of countries to adjust or refine national definitions of homelessness" (Busch-Geertsema, 2010, p.34). The intention of ETHOS, according the Edgar, is to "provid[e] a robust conceptual model" (2012, p.224). For all of these reasons, there is no doubt that carefully scrutinising the conceptual rigour of ETHOS was appropriate and necessary.

Edgar implied that the established standards for conceptual definitions and classifications (as described in the 2011 paper) do not apply to ETHOS because "ETHOS was developed in the context of the complexity and diversity of the European Union" (2012, p.224). However, a theory should be expected to meet the usual standards, wherever it is developed.

Edgar also confused the conceptualisation of homelessness proposed in the 2011 paper with another approach developed in New Zealand, published by Statistics New Zealand (2009). This confusion is understandable, but the approaches are quite different, and Statistics New Zealand's concept is irrelevant to the 2011 paper. However, it is worth noting that Edgar considered Statistics New Zealand's definition of homelessness, and concluded, "our intention of providing a robust conceptual model that would allow adaptation to local circumstance has been vindicated by the NZ experience" (2012, p.224). There are two problems with this argument. Firstly though the Statistics New Zealand's approach is ostensibly "based upon...

ETHOS" (2009, p.4), the definition and classification do not actually correspond with the ETHOS conceptual model (see discussion in Amore *et al*, 2013). Secondly a model being cited or even applied by a statistical office or any other agency is not, in itself, evidence that the model is conceptually robust.

Roman framed the ETHOS typology as a menu of categories, rather than a conceptual guide: "... nations can choose what category or categories of homelessness [from the ETHOS typology] they wish to define and measure, and have this measurement be understandable, comparable, and reliable internationally" (2012, p.236). Nations choosing whatever categories they wish to recognise as homelessness is at odds with the notion of a conceptual definition and classification. A conceptual approach is designed to produce standardised measures, with different nations applying the same conceptual criteria to their respective populations. The populations identified as homeless will vary, but the reasons they qualify as homeless will be consistent. If the ETHOS typology is perceived and used as a menu, and nations simply choose a variety of categories to measure as homelessness, their respective measures will not be comparable. Roman also argued that: "A definition must be consistent over time so that change can be measured" (2012, p.237). This is true to a certain extent – a definition should be applied consistently over time, but it should also be conceptually valid, and conceptual validity takes precedence. If temporal consistency took precedence over conceptual validity, then we should still be defining a homeless person as being a vagrant, hobo, or tramp.

## **Responses Relating to the 2011 Paper's 'Arbitrary Threshold' Criticism of ETHOS**

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The first criticism of ETHOS in the 2011 paper was that the threshold between homelessness and housing exclusion in the conceptual model seems to be arbitrary. The 2011 paper questioned why people excluded from both the physical and social domains are not regarded as homeless in the ETHOS conceptual model, but people excluded from the legal and social domains are. Underlying this critique was the observation that the categories classified as 'homelessness' represent exclusion from two or more 'domains of home'. We therefore assumed that the principle for defining homelessness was (or should be) 'exclusion from multiple domains'. This understanding also underpinned the model of homelessness proposed in the 2011 paper, but this should have been made explicit, as Roman rightly pointed out. A reader should not have to guess the rationale underlying a conceptual model – it should be clearly stated. Both the 2011 paper and ETHOS fail this basic test.

My position is that homelessness pertains to severe housing deprivation, which reflects popular understanding of the issue and that of many practitioners and scholars. Springer, for example, framed homelessness as “the bottom end of the spectrum of housing situations” (2000, p.476) and Rossi *et al* (1987) asserted: “In a fundamental sense, a definition of homelessness is, ipso facto, a statement as to what should constitute the *floor* of housing adequacy below which no member of society should be permitted to fall” (p.1336, emphasis added).

I argue that homelessness pertains to living situations that fail to meet a minimum adequacy standard for housing – that is, severely inadequate housing. An ‘intersection’ or ‘exclusion from multiple domains’ approach fits with such a construction, and is consistent with other measures of deprivation, such as Eurostat’s ‘severe material deprivation’ measure; Eurostat, 2012.

Assuming an ‘exclusion from multiple domains’ rule applies to the ETHOS model, the 2011 paper questioned why people are only regarded as homeless if the two domains they are excluded from are legal and social. This means people living in other situations of ‘exclusion from multiple domains’ are excluded from the homeless population – such as a person living in a legally tenured house that lacks sanitary facilities, due to a lack of access to more-adequate housing. The 2011 paper argued that living in such housing, due to a lack of better options, represents exclusion from ETHOS’ physical and social domains. The physical inadequacy of such housing relates to the lack of sanitary facilities, and the social domain relates to being able to maintain privacy, which is seriously compromised if sanitary facilities are lacking.

In reference to the above example, Edgar argued that people living in housing that is severely physically inadequate should not qualify as homeless, because “in some countries a high percentage of dwellings are officially unfit for habitation” (2012, p.222). I would argue that the predicted prevalence of a housing problem is irrelevant to deciding whether or not it qualifies, conceptually, as a category of homelessness. According to Edgar’s argument, a high percentage of a population living rough would be cause to exclude people living rough from the homeless population.

### **Responses Relating to the 2011 Paper’s ‘No Circumstances Criterion’ Criticism of ETHOS**

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The second criticism of the ETHOS in the 2011 paper was that the conceptual model lacks a clear ‘circumstances’ criterion. Admittedly, this argument was not as clear as it should have been. ‘Circumstances’ is a poor descriptor of the criterion in question – ‘a lack of access to minimally adequate housing’ would be more precise.

The 2011 paper also argued that homelessness relates to living in severely inadequate housing *and* lacking access to minimally adequate housing. The connector 'and' was erroneous. Rather, homelessness should be understood as relating to living in severely inadequate housing *due to* a lack of access to minimally adequate housing. To illustrate: a person in prison is living in severely inadequate housing – they are excluded from ETHOS' social and legal domains *and* they lack access to other, more-adequate housing. Indeed, prohibiting access to more-adequate housing is a core function of prison. However, a person in prison is not living in severely inadequate housing *due to* a lack of access to minimally adequate housing; rather, they are living in such housing because they are incarcerated. Therefore, they should not be considered homeless. In the same way, a person living in a tent should only qualify as homeless if they are living in the tent *due to* a lack of access to minimally adequate housing. This kind of 'enforced lack' (Mack and Lansley, 1985) criterion is standard in concepts of poverty and deprivation, and homelessness is generally considered to be a form of deprivation.

Edgar refuted the 2011 paper's 'no circumstances criterion' criticism, arguing that: "Lack of access to housing underpins the whole development of the [ETHOS] model" (2012, p.221). However, if something is a defining criterion, it should be clearly stated in the conceptual definition, not implied. As mentioned in the 2011 paper, this clarity is important to ensure due attention is paid to each criterion when developing operational definitions. Operationalisation of 'lack of access' is given little attention in the literature, compared with discussion of which housing types should be included in classifications of homelessness. However, the issue of operationalising 'lack of access to minimally adequate housing' has not been ignored entirely. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011), for example, explained why using 'no place of usual residence' as the sole proxy for 'lack of access to minimally adequate housing' is inappropriate. This occurs in a number of operational definition, such as ETHOS Light (Edgar et al, 2007) and Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2008). Further work is needed in this area.

### **Responses Relating to the 2011 Paper's 'Weak Construct Validity' Criticism of ETHOS**

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The third criticism of ETHOS in the 2011 paper was that the typology has weak construct validity because it does not reflect the conceptual model it is ostensibly derived from. One of the examples used in the 2011 paper was institutions targeted at homeless people or immigrants. The paper pointed out that while residents of these institutions are classified as homeless in ETHOS, residents of other types of institutions are excluded from the homeless population, even though they meet the criteria for homelessness set out in the ETHOS definition. Edgar seems to have

misinterpreted the critique, stating that the 2011 paper “refer[s] specifically to category 5 (accommodation for immigrants)... and claim[s] th[is] population is not part of the homeless population” (p.222). Rather, the argument made in the 2011 paper was that the ETHOS conceptual model does not adequately explain why some categories are ruled in, and other categories are ruled out, of the classification of homelessness.

### **Responses Relating to the 2011 Paper’s ‘Non-Exhaustive’ Criticism of ETHOS**

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The fourth criticism of ETHOS in the 2011 paper was that the typology of homelessness is not exhaustive. A typology must be exhaustive, by definition (Hoffman and Chamie, 1999). Edgar and Sahlin both seem to have misinterpreted this argument. Edgar argued, “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” (2012, p.223); and Sahlin, while agreeing that the ETHOS typology is not exhaustive, argued, “... but operational categories can hardly cover all relevant housing situations in all countries all of the time” (2012, p.229). The ‘non-exhaustive’ criticism of the ETHOS classification was not a call for finer differentiation of the housing types covered, but a criticism that there are no conceptual categories for some people who qualify as homeless according to the ETHOS conceptual model.

### **Responses Relating to the 2011 Paper’s ‘Reference Period Inconsistency’ Criticism of ETHOS**

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The fifth criticism of ETHOS in the 2011 paper was that inconsistent reference periods are applied in the typology. Specifically, this criticism referred to ETHOS labelling people at risk of homelessness and people who are formerly homeless as ‘homeless’: “While we agree that these populations (at risk of homelessness and formerly homeless people) are relevant to homelessness policy and should be monitored, we think it is necessary to distinguish them clearly, rather than conflate them with the homeless population” (Amore *et al*, 2011, p.30).

Regarding ETHOS misclassifying people ‘due to be released from institutions with no home to go to’ as homeless, the 2011 paper argued: “If no housing has been organised for a person in an institution to be discharged to, then it is appropriate for them to remain in the institution until it is” (Amore *et al*, 2011, p.30). As rightly pointed out by Edgar, this was a weak argument. In the case of prisons, for example, it is clearly inappropriate for people to be held past their date of release due to a lack of housing to be released to.

However, the broader argument stands – ‘at risk’ and ‘formerly homeless’ populations are not homeless, and should be clearly distinguished. The logic is plain. The 2011 paper stressed that this argument does not imply these populations are not relevant to homelessness policy, nor that they should not be monitored. Edgar argued: “Since homeless[ness] 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” (2012, p.222). I agree – but a group does not have to be called ‘homeless’ to be monitored or to be included in homelessness policy. It is possible (and valid) to define people at risk of homelessness as ‘at risk of homelessness’ and people formerly homeless as ‘formerly homeless’ and still make clear that they are important populations for policy and measurement. Moreover, clearly distinguishing these populations is useful for policymakers, because they require different types of policy interventions.

In response to the 2011 paper’s criticism of ETHOS misclassifying people ‘due to be released from institutions with no home to go to’ as homeless, Sahlin argued: “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” (2012, p.228). I agree that hospitals and prisons do not satisfy the legal and social domains – that is, their residents lack security of tenure (legal domain) and they lack privacy, as compared with a conventional dwelling (social domain). However, following Edgar’s (2012) confirmation of ETHOS’ implied ‘enforced lack’ criterion, a person should only be regarded as homeless if they are living in such housing *due to* a lack of access to minimally adequate housing. On this view, a person living in an institution (of any kind) should only be classified as homeless if the living conditions in the institution exclude them from the legal and social domains *and* if they are living there due to a lack of access to minimally adequate housing. The example of prison was discussed earlier. To give another example, if a person is in hospital because they require hospital-level care, they are not homeless. However, if a person has to remain in hospital due to lack of access to minimally adequate housing, rather than a need for continuing hospital-level treatment or other social reasons, they are homeless. These stipulations may seem overly detailed, but that is the purpose of a conceptual definition – to explain exactly what is ruled in and what is ruled out, and why.

### **Sahlin’s Concept of ‘Problematic Housing Situations’**

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In her response to the 2011 paper, Sahlin made a valuable contribution to the field by introducing a new conceptualisation of ‘problematic housing situations’. This new concept was intended to overcome the perceived conceptual shortfalls of both ETHOS and the approach proposed in the 2011 paper. I will not provide a thorough analysis here, but make two brief observations. Firstly Sahlin’s classifi-



ation aims to be exhaustive – “tak[ing] all logical combinations of missed or available ETHOS domains into account” (2012, p.231). However, it is missing one combination: social domain missing, physical and legal domains available (for example, inadequate privacy in physically and legally adequate housing). Secondly Sahlin argued that space (or ‘room’) is a criterion of both the physical and social domains. This may explain the missing combination in Sahlin’s classification: if housing fails to provide enough space, it will always fail to satisfy both the physical and social domains. However, spatial adequacy is primarily a social phenomenon, not a physical feature of housing. A dwelling without sanitary facilities, for example, can be said to be physically inadequate, regardless of who lives there. However, whether a dwelling provides adequate space is dependent upon how the dwelling is used – that is, how many people are living in it, the composition of the household, and how the rooms are used. For example, a house that provides more than enough space for one person may not provide adequate space for 20 people, but physically, the house is unchanged.

The only exception to this rule would be a very small dwelling – one with all basic amenities, but too small for one person to lie down in. In this case, the dwelling would qualify as physically inadequate due to spatial inadequacy. Here, spatial inadequacy is a physical characteristic of the house – it does not matter who is living in it, the amount of space will always be inadequate. Sahlin does not mention this scenario, nor does it appear in ETHOS – likely because it is so implausible.

Putting this exception aside, spatial inadequacy is primarily a social phenomenon. In crowded housing, residents do not have enough space because of the number of other people in the dwelling. My position is that the physical domain should be understood as pertaining to structural aspects of housing, such as sanitary facilities, or the existence of a roof. This echoes the approach taken by the authors of ETHOS (Edgar *et al*, 2004), as well as Statistics New Zealand (2009) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012). On this view, the combination missing from Sahlin’s classification – social domain missing, physical and legal domains available – is theoretically possible, and this is where household crowding should fit. Residents of crowded houses have inadequate space by definition, and thus their living situation fails to satisfy the “room for social interaction” (2012, p.231) criterion of Sahlin’s social domain. Of course, crowded housing may also be physically inadequate (e.g. lacking a functioning toilet), and residents may lack security of tenure, but these are not features of crowded housing per se.

This argument also explains why crowded houses did not appear in the classification of homelessness proposed in the 2011 paper. The rule for inclusion in that classification was that a living situation must be lacking in at least two of the three domains. Crowded housing is only lacking in the social domain, thus residents of crowded houses do not qualify as homeless.

## Refining the Definition and Classification of Homelessness

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The definition and classification of homelessness proposed in the 2011 paper contained errors, which were usefully highlighted by Edgar, Sahlin, and Roman. After carefully considering these faults, my revised position is that homelessness should be defined as:

1. Living in severely inadequate housing (that is, housing that does not meet the minimum adequacy standard, with the minimum adequacy standard defined as satisfying two or more of the three core domains of housing adequacy); *due to*
2. A lack of access to minimally adequate housing.

The concept can also be described more succinctly as either 'severe housing deprivation' or 'lack of access to minimally adequate housing'. There are no exceptions to either of the two stated criteria. This means I no longer subscribe to Chamberlain and MacKenzie's (1992) notion of 'culturally recognised exceptions', which also features in the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (2012) definition of homelessness. A comprehensive discussion of this refined approach is outside the scope of this paper, but is covered in a forthcoming doctoral thesis (Amore, forthcoming).

## Conclusion

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The 2011 paper examined ETHOS, arguably the most prominent definition and classification of homelessness in recent years. The 2011 paper outlined a number of conceptual criticisms, and Edgar's, Sahlin's, and Roman's responses each contributed to a valuable discussion about conceptualising homelessness. Some instances of misinterpretation were evident in the responses, so this present paper has attempted to clarify the arguments. Some of the responses speak to an idea that ETHOS should not be held to the standards for conceptual definitions and classifications, but no convincing argument for such an exemption has been made.

As for the concept of homelessness proposed in the 2011 paper, the three responses highlighted two faulty arguments, which are remedied in this present paper: the two broad conceptual criteria of homelessness should be joined by the conjunction 'due to' rather than 'and'; and these criteria should be applied consist-

ently to all living situations, with no ‘culturally recognised exceptions’. The amendments have been outlined here, but a comprehensive exposition of my approach to defining and classifying homelessness will be published elsewhere (Amore, forthcoming). This approach has been applied to produce national severe housing deprivation statistics for New Zealand (Amore *et al*, 2013).

In her response, Sahlin proposed a new classification of ‘problematic housing situations’, which was framed as a return of the basic ideas, or logos, of the ETHOS concept. This classification deserves further consideration. It is important to note that Sahlin’s approach dissolves the theoretical threshold between severe housing deprivation (homelessness) and other types of housing deprivation, which raises the question of whether there is any value in such a threshold. Conceptualised as severe housing deprivation, I would argue that homelessness is worth defining and measuring as a distinct concept, just like other concepts of severe material deprivation. Sahlin’s framework also gives rise to more fundamental questions about ETHOS, such as: Why are there only three ‘domains of home’? And why are these three domains social, legal, and physical? Why is cost, for example, not considered a domain of home, when highly unaffordable housing is widely regarded as inadequate?

Defining and measuring homelessness are fundamental issues in our field. New and existing approaches should be appraised against established standards for conceptual validity, and their various strengths and weaknesses compared and discussed. If an internationally standardised measure of homelessness is to become a reality (which is a worthy aim), we need to continue to work toward identifying and applying the most valid concept of homelessness.

## Acknowledgements

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I thank Michael Baker, Philippa Howden-Chapman, and Esther Woodbury for their invaluable contributions to this present paper, and to the papers it builds upon.

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