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'Housing first' and the changing terrains of homeless governance

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Abstract: Over the last fifteen years, programs based on ‘housing first’ models have swept to prominence as solutions to homelessness. Such programs serve a small subset of the overall homeless population, namely the ‘chronically’ homeless, offering direct access to permanent housing with comprehensive and flexible support services attached. Hailed as socially progressive responses to homelessness—based on their opposition to traditional emphases on client passivity, sobriety and moralised deservingness—the popularity of housing first models has often depended on congruence with wider projects of welfare retrenchment and fiscal austerity. Despite the rapid globalisation and high public profile of housing first ideas, they have been largely overlooked in geographical accounts of homeless governance. In response, this article discusses the growing importance and influence of housing first ideas, before looking to contemporary debates on homeless governance for interpretive insights. Informed by these debates, we sketch conceptual areas to which future research on housing first models and programs might attend: first, to their ambivalent politics and, second, to the processes and practices of translation that are central to their implementation and political consequence. Moving beyond questions of operational efficacy, efficiency and fidelity, we call for critical but constructive accounts focused on the constitutive relations between housing first ideas and governance transformations at and across a range of scales and sites.

Keywords: housing first; chronic homelessness; homelessness; policy; governance.

Introduction

In what seems like no time at all, the notion of ‘ending homelessness’ has gone from politically unthinkable to politically mainstream. Throughout the western world, it is not surprising to hear mayors and governors, premiers and prime ministers, pledge to end homelessness (Evans 2015). To make good on such promises, existing policy approaches are being questioned, modified, strengthened or dispensed with, and spaces are being created for new or previously overlooked solutions to capture the limelight. Among the new ones, none have received more attention than ‘housing first’. Programs using housing first models have expanded remarkably over the last fifteen years, and near exponentially over the last five. Housing first programs address a relatively small subset of the overall homeless population: the so-called chronically homeless. Seen as the

'hardest to house', this group comprises people who have experienced long periods of homelessness and who have complex support needs. In contrast to traditional 'treatment first' systems of homeless service provision, which often emphasise client passivity, sobriety and moralised deservingness, housing first models are premised on placing clients directly into permanent housing and providing them access to comprehensive, client-directed support services (Tsemberis 2010).

Housing first ideas have shown a remarkable adaptive capacity. In ideological terms, they have thrived in the normally foreboding, if highly variable, waters of economic and social conservatism. Yet while the popularity of housing first ideas has often depended on congruence with wider projects of welfare retrenchment and fiscal austerity, they advance a range of explicitly progressive objectives in the areas of housing and health (Stanhope & Dunn 2011). In geographical terms, housing first discourses—and the more specific program interventions based on housing first 'models'—have been equally adaptive. In the United States (U.S.), housing first ideas have been a prominent part of the national homelessness agenda since the early 2000s when President Bush re-established the Interagency Council on Homelessness. With the Interagency Council's push for city and state jurisdictions to develop *10-year Plans to End Homelessness*, strengthened under the Obama administration, housing first models became government sanctioned best practice (Willse 2010). In Canada, the Harper government allocated C\$110m in 2008 for a housing first demonstration project covering five cities (Goering et al. 2011). The project involved the largest random control trial of its kind, incorporating 2500 homeless clients. In 2011, the European Commission provided its support for a two-year project called *Housing First Europe*, which included funded test sites in Amsterdam, Budapest, Copenhagen, Glasgow and Lisbon, as well as unfunded peer sites in Dublin, Gent, Gothenburg, Helsinki and Vienna (Busch-Geertsema 2013). Meanwhile, in Australia, Finland, France and Sweden, national initiatives have facilitated a plethora of local experiments with housing first ideas over the last decade (Tainio & Fredriksson 2009; Houard 2011; Johnson et al. 2012; Knutagård & Kristiansen 2013).

Responding to this rapid uptake, there is a steadily growing body of applied research investigating the efficacy, efficiency and fidelity of housing first models in different local, regional and national contexts (see Atherton & McNaughton Nicholls 2008; Tsai et al. 2010; Goering et al. 2011; McNaughton Nicholls & Atherton 2011; Pleace 2011; Busch-Geertsema 2012; Johnsen 2012; Johnson et al. 2012; Greenwood et al. 2013). As central contributors to previous rounds of debate on homeless governance, one might expect critical geographers to be exploring housing first models and programs with some urgency. Yet, to date, such engagements have been spectral at best. Surveying the housing first literature, Raitakari and Juhila (2015) found 184 studies published between 1990 and 2014, classifying just six of them ‘critical social science’. By their estimation, such research, which “questions and deconstructs our common ways of thinking and acting”, is “at the margin” of the housing first literature (p. 171). Within geography, housing first ideas tend to be remarked upon only in passing, as either an interesting counterpoint to managerial and punitive policy orthodoxies (Mitchell 2011) or as part of the discursive context for certain other governmental interventions (Del Casino & Jocoy 2008; Klodawsky 2009; Evans 2012, 2015; Sparks 2012; von Mahs 2011b). Although these allied accounts are highly valuable, our understanding of the histories and geographies that shape and reflect housing first itself remains weak.

This article brings housing first ideas into a more explicit form of conversation with critical studies of homeless governance, a field in which geographers have made substantial contributions. The underlying assumption of this article is that housing first debates will benefit from the constructive engagement of critical scholars and, likewise, that debates among critical scholars concerning welfare and governance broadly, or homelessness policy and services specifically, will benefit from having a firmer grasp on the ways in which housing first ideas are transforming the terrains of homeless governance. To begin, we outline what ‘housing first’ has come to mean in the contemporary context and discuss its growing importance and influence within the domains of homelessness policy and services. To situate these developments, the section that follows looks to contemporary debates on homeless governance within geography and related fields for interpretive insights. Informed by these debates, we sketch conceptual areas to which future research on housing first models and programs might attend: first, to their

ambivalent politics and, second, to the processes and practices of translation that are central to their implementation and political consequence. In the conclusion, we argue that while applied questions relating to the operation of housing first programs are clearly important and deserving of attention, there is a pressing need for critical analyses that move beyond those questions. We see particular value to be added in critical but constructive accounts focused on the constitutive relations between housing first ideas and governance transformations at and across a range of scales and sites.

The emergence and character of ‘housing first’

In the discursive zone of homeless governance, the term housing first is used in a range of ways. Housing first is at once a philosophy and a social movement; it is a policy approach and a style of service delivery; it refers to a precise model with specific features and a family of loosely related models. As with so many policy ideas, the origin of housing first is neither clear nor singular. This is partly because its basic premise—the provision of permanent housing—has long been a component of the response to homelessness in certain places. In the United Kingdom (U.K.) and Australia, for instance, priority access schemes have, for some time, been placing homeless or formerly homeless persons into permanent social housing. In such places, the relatively recent arrival of formalised housing first models has left some service providers bemused—for them they were ‘doing it already’ (Johnsen & Teixeira 2012; see also Johnson et al. 2012). Isolating an ideational moment of inception is made doubly problematic given that housing first, despite the name, is not simply about the provision of housing. As a philosophy and formalised model, it is composed of various other policy ideas, approaches and discourses—including supportive housing, harm reduction and assertive community treatment, to name a few—each of which have their own histories and geographies. As such, the term housing first demarcates an evolving constellation of ideas, examples and beliefs institutionalised at multiple scales and connected through dynamic networks. Rather than resembling a stable and pristine model, housing first is better understood as what Peck and Theodore (2015) would call an adaptive yet striated ‘policy field’.

Although this field has become increasingly congested as housing first ideas claim new territories, there remain powerful nodes of authority. Chief among them is Pathways to Housing (or 'Pathways'), a New York City organisation considered to have invented housing first, as it is understood and practiced today. While similar programs, such as Beyond Shelter in Los Angeles, practiced a housing-led approach concurrently with Pathways—if not slightly before (NAEH 2006)—the latter is generally viewed as the 'authentic' housing first model. Founded by psychologist Sam Tsemberis in the early 1990s, Pathways serves people with severe mental illness who have experienced long-term homelessness by placing them into permanent 'scattered site' rental housing "as quickly as possible with on-going, flexible and individual support as long as it is needed, but on a voluntary basis" (Busch-Geertsema 2013, p. 4). The Pathways housing first model is based on the belief that housing is a human right and that the provision of housing should not depend on a person's compliance with behavioural rules and obligations beyond those applying to regular housing tenants (Stefanic & Tsemberis 2007).

Tsemberis (2010) explains the Pathways housing first model as having four key elements: consumer choice; separation of housing and treatment; a recovery orientation; and community integration. First, in accordance with the consumer choice element, clients are not required to reduce or abstain from using alcohol or other drugs, but are 'assertively' offered a comprehensive range of support services (including peer support, counselling and withdrawal treatment, for example). Clients also choose furnishings for their rented apartment and determine when meetings with Pathways staff take place. Second, housing services and treatment services are separated, administratively and in some cases organisationally, to ensure that engagement with treatment does not impact on a client's tenancy. Third, directed by the client's aspirations and goals, the recovery orientation of Pathways staff involves "offering choices, encouraging self-directed care, and conveying a message of belief that recovery is possible and inevitable" (Tsemberis 2010, p. 47). Finally, in terms of community integration, clients are provided self-contained units in private apartment buildings, with the units rented directly from a private landlord or sublet through a lease held by Pathways. This final element is intended to reinforce clients' identities as regular tenants, reduce stigma and avoid adverse outcomes associated with

institutional care environments. The scattered site approach used by Pathways dictates that the number of managed units per building remains below a 20% threshold (US ICH n.d. a).

The recent and rapid globalisation of housing first has involved a reshaping of local and national understandings of homelessness and a repurposing of the policies and programs that seek to address it. In the U.S., housing first is so dramatically different to treatment system orthodoxy that it is said to constitute a ‘paradigm shift’; in other countries the change is more slight, entailing a ‘drift’ toward housing first principles (Pleace 2011; Johnson et al. 2012). And as housing first models have been embedded into new contexts, they too have changed. Despite the Pathways model being widely referred to as *the* housing first model, in practice there are innumerable variations. Johnson et al. (2012, p. 14) rightly observe that while many programs “identify and espouse a commitment to practicing Housing First ... very few services are delivered in the same way as the Pathways to Housing model”. Local and national differences in political ideology, welfare payments, health and social service systems, and practitioner cultures have meant there are many housing first models in existence, some of which bear little resemblance to the Pathways model.

Housing first, therefore, has the characteristics of a mutative and ‘vehicular’ idea (McLennan 2004): it is a malleable, somewhat fuzzy construct around which diverse actors convene to advance their interests and agendas. Despite their malleability and diversity, housing first models are similar insofar as they are distinguished from traditional systems of homeless services, which are guided by ‘treatment first’ or treatment-led models. In the U.S., for example, this is referred to as the ‘continuum of care’ approach, while elsewhere the terms ‘linear’, ‘staircase’ and ‘step-wise’ are common. Treatment first models specify that clients must progress through a series of distinct, time-limited residential and treatment environments before being deemed ‘housing ready’. With clinical stabilisation installed as the initial and necessary goal, a client’s successful progression is usually dependant on maintaining sobriety and adhering to precise treatment schedules. In contrast to treatment first models, which leverage the possibility of permanent housing to encourage compliance with treatment and behaviour requirements, housing first

philosophy dictates that permanent housing be placed at the beginning of the recovery process (Johnson et al. 2012; Padgett 2013).

Governing homelessness

Not unlike the trajectory of housing first ideas, the last decade has seen considerable growth in research on the geographies of homelessness (see DeVerteuil et al. 2009; Cloke et al. 2010; Mitchell 2011). This work is concerned with the socio-spatial dimensions of homelessness, both in relation to its experience and, more often, its regulation through policies and programs. Strongly influenced by experiences in U.S. cities, geographical understandings of homelessness policy are generally funnelled through a “broader critique of urban neoliberalism” (Laurenson & Collins 2007, p. 665), reflecting the widespread influence of neoliberal explanatory frameworks within the discipline (England & Ward 2007; Peck 2013). A characteristic feature of the literature has thus been its focus on homelessness in relation to political and institutional transformations at multiple scales, particularly those related to urban entrepreneurial governance and national political-economic restructuring. Building on influential theorisations of ‘carceral’ (Davis 1990), ‘revanchist’ (Smith 1998) and ‘post-justice’ cities (Mitchell 2001), much of the geographical literature views the homeless as being caught between an urban ‘rock’ and a national ‘hard place’. At the urban scale, accounts confirm the escalation of initiatives that seek to disrupt and punish activities associated with the homeless through the imposition of civil and criminal sanctions. In the context of entrepreneurial governance projects centring on inter-urban competitiveness and particular notions of cleanliness, safety, vibrancy and innovation, the visibly homeless are framed as flagrant transgressors of the urban social order. At the national scale, the ‘malign neglect’ (Wolch & Dear 1993) of an increasingly threadbare welfare state is shown either to be warehousing people in precarious, inadequate accommodation or pushing them onto the streets, where they are prone to an array of punitive measures.

More recently, however, this authoritative theoretical imaginary has been called into question. Without intending to diminish the importance of studies focused on the punitive regulation of homelessness, several scholars have questioned the *cumulative* impact of such studies on understandings of homeless governance. On the one hand, as Johnson and Fitzpatrick (2010, p.

1704) note, there is an emergent “discomfort with the assumption implicit in many existing academic narratives that responses to homelessness have been uniformly hostile”. On the other, empirical examples drawn from countries including New Zealand (Laurenson & Collins 2006, 2007), the U.K. (Cloke et al. 2010) and Canada (Klodawsky 2009; Evans 2012) have cast doubt over the transferability of dominant theoretical templates inspired by U.S. experiences. Accordingly, an appetite has emerged for accounts of the ‘messy middle ground’ (May & Cloke 2014): the vast space between relentlessly hostile scenarios and the equally problematic notion of a purely supportive and compassionate approach to homelessness (see also DeVerteuil et al. 2009; Murphy 2009; Sparks 2012).

As part of this effort, May and Cloke (2014, p.916) call for the inclusion of “a rather different mode of academic attentiveness”, one that resists suturing homeless governance logics and outcomes to the actualisation of neoliberal hegemony. The justification for such an approach is both empirical and theoretical. Empirically, some have warned of the geographical literature’s creeping estrangement from real-world circumstances. For instance, DeVerteuil et al. (2009, p. 646) highlight the “growing multiplicity of homeless geographies in recent years under policies that are better understood as multifaceted and ambivalent rather than only punitive”. In recognition of this multiplicity, studies have begun to focus on previously under-represented regulatory sites and mechanisms, including alcohol management programs (Evans 2012), homeless shelters (DeVerteuil 2006), recovery houses (Fairbanks 2009) and drop-in centres (Cloke et al. 2010), which operate variously, though not exclusively, through registers of care, support and compassion. In theoretical terms, due to reliance on macro-institutional analyses—particularly those which draw heavily on readings of official documents and media articles—the geographical literature has tended to downplay the less-than-straightforward practice of formulating and implementing policy. In doing so, accounts have been too quick to downplay the work of bureaucrats, service providers, clients and other actors, whose actions and ethics incorporate sometimes contradictory combinations of coercion and care, punishment and support (Johnsen & Fitzpatrick 2010; DeVerteuil 2014).

Toward a critical understanding of housing first

Building on these trajectories within the literature, what interpretive cues might we take for understanding housing first? At least two jump to the fore. The first relates to the politics of homeless governance. In assessing the ambivalent, differentiated and messy politics implicated in the governance of homelessness, the geographical literature encourages a somewhat agnostic approach to the political-ideological underpinning of housing first. As with any object of governmental intervention, homelessness is acted upon through an array of political projects with distinct, but often overlapping, aims, methods and ethical stances. Some projects are strongly institutionalised, and therefore privileged; others less so. This general outlook suggests that the circulation and implementation of housing first ideas, like other policy initiatives, rests on an ability to navigate and negotiate ‘hybrid’ governance environments (Larner 2000; McGuirk 2005). Such environments are historically and geographically differentiated, bringing together remnant, hegemonic and emergent political projects with varied philosophies and agendas.

In appreciating the necessarily political nature of homeless governance, critical scholars must consider both the ends achieved by implementing certain policy ideas and—equally important—the means by which those ideas are articulated and actualised. This leads to the second interpretive cue offered by the geographical literature: a focus on process and practice. Reflecting a widespread turn toward ‘process geographies’ in studies of policy and governance (see, for example, Larner 2011; Peck & Theodore 2012), increasing emphasis is being placed on “*how* government gets done” (McCann 2008, p. 887, original emphasis). Most accounts of homeless governance tend to focus on the ends achieved by certain policies—such as local patterns of displacement, containment and warehousing—without a nuanced understanding of the conditions and actions that enable, constrain and prevent the implementation of those very policies (some exceptions include Murphy 2009; Evans 2012; Sparks 2012; Wells 2014). This has left important questions relating to the ‘how’ of policy formation significantly understudied. In the remainder of this section, we elaborate on these interpretive cues, first, by discussing the nascent political contours of housing first initiatives in the context of homeless governance, before highlighting the role of translation in the process and practice of circulating and implementing housing first ideas.

The ambivalent politics of housing first

According to the depictions provided by political leaders, practitioners and the media, housing first programs are thought to provide the socially progressive antidote to the ‘old ways’ of addressing homelessness. In a real and material sense, there is truth to this. A growing number of evaluations demonstrate that housing first programs are providing highly vulnerable people with immediate access to permanent accommodation without the onerous, moralising conditions that have been favoured in the past. Perhaps most importantly, these programs appear to be having positive impacts on the clients involved. Critical scholars need not be shy in acknowledging the promise and effectiveness of housing first, especially given the removed cynicism that more practice-focused scholars have detected in critical accounts (for discussion, see Padgett 2013).

By the same token, however, there are reasons to question the representation of housing first programs as unambiguously socially progressive, especially when positioned within the broader context of homeless governance. The experience of New York City serves as a pertinent example. Under the mayoralty of Michael Bloomberg (2002–13), unprecedented investments were made into housing first programs to reduce chronic homelessness. With a commitment to ending chronic homelessness in 10 years, in June 2004 the mayor’s office released *Uniting for Solutions Beyond Shelter: The Action Plan for New York City*. The *Action Plan* highlighted the ‘problem’ of chronic homelessness and aligned it with the ‘solution’ of housing first, stating:

The national conversation is shifting from “managing” to “ending” homelessness, especially chronic homelessness. ... Many [street homeless] individuals, especially those who are chronically street homeless, believe that remaining outside makes more sense than entering the shelter system as it now exists. Some acknowledge that they cannot maintain sobriety or comply with program requirements. Others resist the structure and order that communal shelter life requires. ... The initiatives in this [plan] build on best practices, such as the coordination and expansion of outreach and drop-in center services. They expand “housing first” options and low-threshold shelter – permanent and transitional housing models that first focus on moving people from the streets and incorporating progressive

services overtime. ... In the last decade, tremendous progress has been made in reducing the number of individuals living on the streets, yet street homelessness remains a fixture of city life. The knowledge and skills to end it exist. What's needed now is the commitment of resources and the political will to make it happen. (NYC Mayor's Office 2004, pp. 5-7)

In line with the *Action Plan's* focus on chronic street homelessness, in 2005, Mayor Bloomberg pledged U.S.\$1 billion to build and renovate an estimated 9,000 units of supportive housing for people with mental illness and other groups at risk of homelessness. By 2013, street homelessness had decreased by 28% from 2005 levels (Saul 2014, n.p.). Yet, precisely as in-roads were being made into reducing chronic homelessness, the much larger population of 'non-chronic' or 'ordinary' homeless people were experiencing something quite different. In the wake of the *Action Plan*, the Bloomberg administration tightened shelter access rules, ended preferential placement into public housing for the homeless and, after state-based funding was discontinued, removed rental subsidies for people exiting shelters, noting that the subsidy program promoted passivity over 'client responsibility' (Carrier 2015, n.p.). From 2002 to 2013, the overall homeless population grew by 71% (Saul 2014, n.p.). Despite the highly publicised successes in reducing chronic homelessness, many were left to notice that, in raw numbers, the number of homeless overall had risen to a height not seen since the Great Depression (Frazier 2013).

From the New York City example, it is clear that the relationships between housing first ideas and the political-ideological conditions that enable their implementation are far from simple. In large part, this is due to the fact that housing first programs are not hermetically separate from wider political projects and transformations. Their roles and effects, like those of all policy interventions, cannot be fully understood by program-level evaluations quantifying inputs, outputs and outcomes. Instead, housing first models, programs, and the debates in which they are implicated, are engaged in interactive and constitutive relationships with broader landscapes of homeless governance characterised multiple, divergent and contradictory trajectories. As the geographical literature insists, these landscapes are diverse but contoured, characterised by particular institutional environments, ideological predilections and situational contingencies. This

hybridised, varied and indeterminate context informs what some have described as the ‘curious’ political contours of housing first (Stanhope & Dunn 2012). While far from stable, the politics of housing first has tended to meld explicit social progressivism with a bundle of attributes commonly associated with (urban) neoliberalisation. As Table 1 summarises and later discussion will make clear, housing first programs impose minimal behavioural conditions and offer permanent, not time-limited, housing—things commonly seen as progressive. Yet, on a broader level, they align with common features and preferences of (urban) neoliberalisation projects, some of which include: (1) a discursive and material emphasis on individual pathologies (i.e. mental illness, addiction, physical impairment) over structural causes of homelessness, (2) the premising of intervention based on the fiscal savings thought to result from addressing a ‘high cost’ sub-group of the homeless population, and (3) the realisation of ‘clean and safe’ streets by removing a small but highly visible type of homeless person and their behaviours from public view.

Table 1: The emergent political contours of housing first

Socially progressive tendencies	Neoliberal tendencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Aimed at the acutely vulnerable ● Permanent housing, not time-limited ● Long-term, client directed support ● Minimal behavioural conditions ● Opposed to moralised deservingness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Limited to small subset of overall homeless population ● Fiscal-economic justification for intervention ● Alignment with street clearance objectives ● Emphasis on individual pathologies over structural causes

In discussing the politics of housing first, it is useful to distinguish the functioning of individual programs from the constitutive relations that exist between those programs and the dynamic terrains of homeless governance. At the level of individual programs, the intent of housing first ideas tends to reflect socially progressive ideals. While it is true that housing first programs act on the individual pathologies of an acutely vulnerable population of chronically homeless people—a characteristic likely to invite scepticism and perhaps suspicion on the part of critical and radical

scholars who habitually focus on structural determinants—clinicians and housing first advocates point out that such clients would not be capable of taking advantage of structural remedies (if provided) without those pathologies being addressed. It is also worth remembering that, unlike traditional approaches, such programs address individual pathologies by providing *permanent housing* and *long-term support* with *minimal conditions*. Of course, whether or not individual housing first programs make good on their socially progressive rhetoric is an important question that demands both applied and critical examination.

Beyond program-level experiences, housing first discourses and approaches are involved in reconstituting homeless governance and reshaping understandings of homeless subjectivity. As Klodawsky (2009, p. 593) makes clear, debates over housing first versus treatment first approaches “are not innocent differences of opinion about what works best in helping chronically homeless people to improve their lives”. With this framing in mind, it must be emphasised that housing first programs target a small group of ‘ungovernables’—the chronically homeless—by virtue of their being unresponsive to existing treatment first approaches aimed at producing self-reliant subjects. Crucially, the prospect of receiving permanent housing is extended only to homeless clients who are profoundly incapable of navigating the preponderant landscape of managerialist and punitive responses to homelessness. As one U.S. official remarked in Sparks’ (2012, p. 1511) study of King County’s *10-year Plan to End Homelessness*, without a person having a drug addiction or mental illness, ‘there is no reason to be homeless’. Here the chronically homeless subject serves to constitute the non-chronic homeless majority “as self-sufficient and capable of caring for themselves” (Del Casino & Jocoy 2008, p. 195). Such scenarios emphasise the need to be sceptical about celebratory claims regarding housing first ideas having ‘revolutionised’ the way homelessness is addressed. As Mitchell (2011, p. 949) notes, housing first ideas may serve to distract attention from the ‘supermajority’ of people who remain homeless not because of their inability to navigate traditional treatment regimens, as with chronically homeless clients, but because of structural injustices built into housing and labour markets (see also Willse 2010; Pleace 2011; Johnson et al. 2012).

Responding to the significant ambivalence and ambiguity surrounding housing first, we suggest that it is too simplistic to interpret the roll-out of housing first, both locally and internationally, as being reducible to the imperatives of neoliberalisation. This is not to suggest it is unrelated, of course. For example, insofar as housing first initiatives play the part of fiscally-conservative street clearance programs for an otherwise ungovernable population, they can easily *align* with logics of neoliberal crisis management and entrepreneurial city-making (MacLeod & Jones 2011). Researchers should be alert to the ‘structural kinship’ (Hopper 2012, p. 462) between housing first initiatives and the goals of politically expedient efforts to remove homeless people from the public gaze. It is also conceivable that a focus on chronic homelessness may provide political cover for disinvestment in services like shelters, which remain important to the much larger population of ‘ordinary’, less visible homeless (Stanhope & Dunn 2012, p. 280). Yet it is important to note that while these scenarios are possible, they are not inevitable. They should not be presumed. In Australia, for instance, the arrival of housing first ideas coincided with significant federal investment in social housing and large increases in funding for homeless services (Parsell et al. 2013). As Klodawsky (2009, p. 605) points out, housing first programs can serve a ‘countervailing’ role in relation to neoliberalisation projects, just as they can serve a ‘flanking’ role—from experiences to date, an essential allegiance to either seems unlikely.

This all underlines the complex but crucial task of analysing the relationships between micro (program-level) experiences and meso (policy-level) or macro (socio-economic regulation-level) transformations as part structured, part contingent and, above all, mutually constitutive. In simpler terms, the challenge for critical scholars is to appreciate the micro-politics associated with programmatic features and outcomes, without losing sight of the meso- and macro-political transformations in which housing first ideas are positioned and enrolled. This emphasises the need to understand the ambivalent political contours of housing first and its relationship to changing terrains of homeless governance. Answering the messy ‘why’ questions surrounding the rise of housing first initiatives will depend on a number of ‘how’ questions relating to their formulation and implementation. How did chronic homelessness become a recognised ‘problem’ to be acted on? How did housing first become the solution? How were housing first ideas interpreted and adapted in the context of local cultures, politics, institutions and contingencies?

How has the implementation of housing first initiatives influenced broader systems of housing and social service provision? While there are potentially many ways to address these ‘how’ questions, in the following we offer an approach that understands policy as enacted through processes and practices of *translation*.

Enacting policy, translating housing first

Introduced by Callon (1984), and developed over the last three decades (Latour 1987; Law and Hassard 1999), translation is a constructive tool for tracing the micro-practices and politics of policy-in-the-making (Lendvai and Stubbs 2007). Translation theory invites geographers to approach ‘policy’ as a heterogeneous assemblage of actors (in this theoretical register, the term ‘actor’ often applies to texts, people, buildings, organisations, institutions, etc.) each with their own capacities, roles and interests but nonetheless enjoined together by mediators that induce the linkages necessary for assemblages to cohere (Prince 2010). As long as this mediation occurs and assemblages remain stable, the spaces they inaugurate, and the activities they make possible, endure.

The concept of translation has found growing application in critical policy studies (Lendvai and Stubbs 2007). Geographers in particular have been drawn to translation theory’s emphasis on fluidity, hybridity and transformation (Prince 2010; McFarlane 2011; Müller 2015). In their analysis of transnational policy development, Peck and Theodore (2015) employ translation to describe how the local adoption of global policy models increasingly involves the insertion of extra-local mediators that radically refashion local policy landscapes. By focusing attention on the way in which hybridised policy meanings are forged through these complex local interactions, a translation framework produces contextually rooted understandings of policy-in-the-making. To say a policy assemblage, such as housing first, has been ‘translated’ in Vancouver, Cleveland or Melbourne, is to reference the reshuffling of relations among actors, both local and extra-local, as well as the modification of housing first models as they are adapted to local circumstances.

The formation of local housing first assemblages in specific locales and their connection to a broader ‘global assemblage’ (Prince 2014b) no doubt reflects multiple instances and forms of

translation. One type of translation in particular is difficult to overlook: mediation by calculative practices. In geography, both quantitative procedures such as counting and qualitative procedures such as ranking and ordering (both of which can be considered as forms of calculation) have received critical scrutiny (see Crampton & Elden 2006). These calculative practices have also been of particular interest to geographers interested in policy development, where the proliferation of calculative practices is widely seen as a reflection of the shifting status of expertise in practices of governing (see McCann 2008; Prince 2010; Prince 2014a). The implementation of housing first policies and programs, while dependent on the social recognition of chronically homeless subjects, is also influenced by a series of techniques that calculate and catalogue those subjects. By making complex problems such as homelessness legible, these calculative practices make homelessness amenable to governmental intervention (Scott 1998).

Four calculative practices—counting, costing, targeting and evaluation—have been integral to the translation of housing first policy (Stanhope and Dunn 2011). First, the translation of housing first has been informed by a growing awareness of ‘chronic homelessness,’ an awareness that has itself been mediated by the practice of *counting and statistically characterising homeless populations*. One widely employed tool for this type of characterisation are ‘street counts’ involving coordinated searches to enumerate and sometimes interview the street homeless population in a given area (Jocoy 2013). These basic enumerative practices have evolved into more rigorous statistical descriptions. From the 1990s, when the first quantitative longitudinal studies were conducted on patterns of homeless shelter use in the U.S. (Culhane & Kuhn 1998; Kuhn & Culhane 1998), researchers began to think of there being three groups of homeless shelter users. The first were ‘transitionally homeless people’, who stayed for a short period in the shelter system and were unlikely to return. The second were ‘episodically homeless people’, who used the shelter system on multiple occasions and had low-level support needs. The final group were ‘over-utilisers’, people who have since become known as chronically homeless. Kuhn and Culhane (1998) showed that while over-utilisers were only 11% of total shelter users, their long and repeated shelter stays meant they used 50% of available beds annually. Subsequent studies found that this small group were heavy users of public services more broadly, including emergency services,

acute hospital care, police and the criminal justice system (Culhane et al. 2002; see also DeVerteuil 2003, for a geographical account of clients cycling through homelessness services).

Second, the translation of housing first has been mediated by a range of cost-studies that have *quantified the annual cost associated with the chronically homeless*, estimating an annual cost per person in the tens of thousands of dollars (for reviews of the cost-study literature, see Berry et al. 2003; Zaretsky et al. 2008). In 2006, *The New Yorker* magazine thrust chronic homelessness to the forefront of the public imagination with an article by Malcolm Gladwell. Drawing on the cost-study literature and the story of a homeless man dubbed ‘Million-dollar Murray’, he argued that governments should prioritise interventions addressing the relatively small number of chronically homeless people because of the system-wide costs associated with inadequate, managerial responses (Gladwell 2006). This new-found economic imperative, as Willse (2010, p. 169) puts it, “laid the track across which chronic homelessness travelled from academia to government [and] to service organisations”. This view is perhaps epitomised in the comments of Phillip Mangano, former CEO of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness, who noted that “cost benefit analysis may be the new compassion” (cited in Mitchell 2011, p. 950). In contrast to many welfare initiatives, based on “disciplining the individual human subject”, Willse (2010, p. 158) argues that chronic homelessness programs like housing first “arise out of economic analyses of population dynamics”.

Third, the translation of housing first has been mediated by calculative practices that facilitate the *targeting of chronically homeless clients*. A fundamental step in the housing first model is determining which individuals in the homeless population meet program eligibility requirements and who among this sub-population has the highest needs. Eligibility requirements are now standardised in many jurisdictions. For example, the Government of Canada’s *Homeless Partnering Strategy* requires that the chronically homeless be prioritised in federally supported housing first programs. Here the chronically homeless are defined as, “individuals, often with disabling conditions (e.g. chronic physical or mental illness, substance abuse problems), who are currently homeless and have been homeless for six months or more in the past year (i.e. have spent more than 180 nights in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation)” (Government of Canada n.d.). This process of

prioritisation is mediated by a number of other calculative practices, ranging from assessing the chronicity of an individual's homelessness to assessing the severity of their need for immediate housing to assessing their ability to live independently. A number of technical tools and instruments have been developed in this regard (Aubrey et al. 2015). For example, the Vulnerability Index, a quantitative measure based on self-reported health information from street homeless people, is used to prioritise individuals for housing first interventions on the basis of their morbidity and mortality risk profile (US ICH n.d. b).

Finally, the translation of the housing first approach has been mediated by calculative practices applied to *evaluate the effectiveness of housing first programs*. For the Pathways model in particular, a series of rigorous program evaluations, including randomised trials, have earned it considerable notoriety (Tsemberis 2004; Padgett et al. 2006; Stefanic & Tsemberis 2007). Through these evaluations, Pathways have demonstrated that direct access to permanent housing and comprehensive support—even for clients with very high support needs—yields better housing retention outcomes than those receiving the existing response, and the same, if not better, outcomes for problematic substance use, illicit drug use, mental health and social integration (Atherton & McNaughton Nicholls 2008; Pleace 2011; Johnson 2012). These widely cited and influential program evaluations have lent the Pathways model—and housing first ideas more generally—the “imprimatur of scientific support” (Kertesz et al. 2009, p. 497) and with it considerable authority as an effective, evidence-based response to homelessness.

Two important points can be drawn from the account of translation depicted above. First, constituted by calculative practices, the translation of housing first has depended upon the circulation and management of technical expertise. None of this calculative activity would be possible if it were not for a rapidly globalising network of policy gurus, academic researchers, consultants, peak bodies and think tanks, not to mention enterprising local service organisations, all of whom populate the housing first policy field. These mediators have been instrumental in the formation of housing first assemblages. Among the most globally prolific have been policy boosters such as Phillip Mangano and Sam Tsemberis. Today they are accompanied by a plethora of calculative researchers, consultants and analysts now integral to the governance of

homelessness. Given its association with objectivity and truth, this calculative expertise has, not surprisingly, engendered political agency in a policy climate dominated by evidence-based norms (Stanhope & Dunn 2011).

Second, the rendering of chronic homelessness as calculable has contributed to the accelerating mobility of housing first. Recent research on policy mobilities within geography has questioned simplistic and sometimes celebratory accounts of travelling ‘best practices’ to highlight the role mobile policies play in the global-relational constitution of place and territory (McCann & Ward 2011; Peck 2011; Temenos & McCann 2013). This interest is beginning to be reflected within the geographical homelessness literature, with more attention being given to the relationships between mobile policy knowledge and the governance of homelessness (Mitchell 2011; von Mahs 2011a, DeVerteuil 2014, May & Cloke 2014). In the case of housing first, calculative reasoning not only makes the messy world more legible, it also makes programs in different locales comparable. The proliferation of equivalent ‘points of reference’ (McCann 2011) has not only facilitated extra-local policy learning (McFarlane 2011; Ward 2011), it has also helped to institute a ‘fast policy regime’ (Peck & Theodore 2015) characterised by matter-of-fact borrowing, accelerated development and implementation, and expanded investments in housing first evaluation around the world.

Considering the enactment of housing first as a process of translation opens multiple avenues for further inquiry. First, the relation between calculative expertise, housing first implementation and the politics of homelessness invites further scrutiny. If housing first is rapidly becoming a ‘best practice’ for governing homelessness, has the politics of homelessness correspondingly been re-framed solely in terms of a politics of the calculable? While it is tempting to conjure an image of the politics of homelessness as colonised by a calculative logic (Evans 2015), geographers such as Russell Prince (2014a, 2014b) have correctly pointed out that reducing this governance to a regime of calculation conceals the complexity surrounding the production of political agency. Prince (2014a, 2014b) has demonstrated how calculative expertise emerges through the relational work of experts and the social relations within which they are embedded. Attending to this relational work would deepen understandings of the calculative turn in homeless governance.

Second, while the mobility of the housing first model may be accelerating, a trend no doubt bolstered by transnational circuits of expertise, making housing first work at the local level is a messy, complex local affair. Moreover, despite echoing calls for policy fidelity, housing first programs display a remarkable degree of variation. This variation and its relationship to the mobility of housing first invite further examination. As May and Cloke (2014, p. 897) identify, the mobility of policy ideas is “by no means always smooth or consistent”, not least because local circumstances and contextual differences continue to matter a great deal. Along these lines, many have noted the extent to which the housing first model pioneered by Pathways to Housing has been interpreted and translated to suit local demands, political constraints and institutional differences. “Despite the apparent simplicity of the term”, Johnson et al. (2012, p. 5) point out that “what constitutes a Housing First approach has become increasingly unclear”. Others have noted a tendency for organisations to ‘rechristen’ services as using a housing first approach despite bearing little resemblance to the original model (Johnsen & Teixeira 2012, p. 190; see also Busch-Geertsema 2013, p. 18). Less opportunistically, however, there are cases where elements associated with the original model sit awkwardly with certain places and these elements are carefully translated to suit local circumstances. In France, the economic arguments around housing first’s implementation are far less prominent and have been replaced to some extent with a focus on housing rights (Houard 2011). In the U.K., the original model’s emphasis on harm reduction has been lessened to align with a national drug use strategy (Pleace 2011). This proliferation of approaches also stems from the many different sites of teaching and learning that inform the translation of housing first ideas. While New York City, and the U.S. more broadly, remain key sites for the production of knowledge about housing first, other places are beginning to inspire and influence. In Sweden, early engagements with housing first ideas came from Hanover rather than New York City (Knutagård & Kristiansen 2013); in France, the experience of Finland was influential (Houard 2011). There are, then, many different tracks of engagement and circuits of knowledge that can inform the mobilisation of housing first ideas.

Finally, this section, in its focus on technical expertise, has detailed one mode of translation: calculative practices. The enactment of housing first has likely involved many other types of

translation. Hence, an important avenue of inquiry might explore what other modes of translation buttress housing first assemblages and how these translation processes shift or modify the governance of homelessness. For example, while calculative practices have certainly facilitated the enactment of housing first programs, so have the practices of care that traditionally structure the homelessness services sector. For example, Michele Lancione (2014a, 2014b, 2014c) has drawn attention to the translation of different assemblages of care that give rise to particular experiences of homelessness. Attending to these modes of translation and others would further deepen understandings of the enactment of housing first.

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to open up lines of engagement between critical social scientists and housing first ideas. Whether in the elastic form of public, political and professional discourses, or in the codified form of policy settings or program models, 'housing first' has become a 'provocative regulatory signifier' (to borrow a phrase from Peck 2001, p. 1). As a regulatory signifier, housing first is far more than a series of quantified inputs, outputs and outcomes, and its consequence exceeds a series of program-level adventures in innovative social service provision. Our basic contention is that homelessness is acted upon by a multitude of overlapping political projects. These projects blend together, forming hybrid terrains of governance. Deciphering such terrains means examining how the ambivalent politics of homelessness is produced through the enactment of policies and programs at the local level *and* through evolving extra-local networks and influences. The 'curious' political contours of housing first (Stanhope & Dunn 2012), what we have described as the melding of social progressivism with attributes commonly associated with (urban) neoliberalisation, reflects the engagement of housing first models, programs and debates with particular institutional environments, ideological predilections and situational contingencies. Here we see the mediation of these 'messy' terrains by calculative practices and expertise as undeniably important. Practices linked to counting, costing, and targeting the homeless and, subsequently, evaluating housing first programs, render homelessness calculable. In doing so, these practices make homelessness legible and amenable to a range of political projects.

What critical social scientists can add to both applied and conceptual literatures on homelessness is an ability to make sense of the interactive and mutually constitutive relations between housing first discourses, policies and programs and broader transformations to local, national and global terrains of homeless governance. However, beyond the realm of homelessness research, such accounts can add to larger literatures and debates on welfare, policy and governance in a number of ways. Given the invention of new, 'chronically' homeless subjects, this might involve analysing the ways in which housing first policies and programs are implicated in the reapportionment of social rights and responsibilities and thus the reconstitution of citizen-state relations. Given the trans-local and trans-national mobility of housing first ideas, this might also involve exploring the changing sites and spaces of political authority, and the changing scalar and networked character of contemporary policy-making and governance capability. In these ways, geographers and other critical social scientists can offer constructively *deconstructive* accounts, clarifying the relations between housing first ideas and contemporary governance transformations.

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