Public libraries and difficulties with targeting the homeless

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to consider the potential for public library policies that specifically target “the homeless” to undermine their own objectives, and seeks to suggest alternative approaches to extend inclusion and ensure that all demographics are served equally.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper was written for a satellite meeting of the 78th IFLA Congress entitled “The Homeless and the Libraries – the Right to Information and Knowledge For All”. Drawing on previous research detailed in Muggleton, and Muggleton and Ruthven, the author presents a discursive perspective on the impact that assumptions about homelessness might have for policymaking.

Findings – Extant prejudices and the tendency to create a homeless “other” mean that policies specifically addressing the homeless have the potential to accentuate difference and patronise and alienate the intended beneficiaries of these policies. Moreover, political opposition to more inclusive, accommodating policymaking makes it important to reject assumptions and prejudices that weaken one’s own position. Grounding policymaking in the empirical experience of homeless library users is argued to be the most effective way to extend inclusion, and also avoid false dichotomies and the perpetuation of prejudice.

Originality/value – Insights into unconscious assumptions gathered from previous research have been applied to the conceptualisation and implementation of public library policy. The arguments presented in the paper will hopefully be of use both for developing effective policies and for defending policies relating to homeless library users.

Keywords Homelessness, Public libraries, Social inclusion, Prejudice, Information provision, Discourse analysis

Paper type Viewpoint

[...] if I meet someone new I don’t automatically say oh, I’m homeless or I stay in a hostel or whatever. I get them to know me first before telling them stuff like that, because in the past it has caused, I wouldn’t necessarily say conflict, but it’s just caused problems (Quoted in Muggleton, 2010, pp. 51-52).

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1. Introduction
In the conduct of any academic study, there is always a tendency to simplify reality for the purposes of analysis. Whether giving primacy to social class, nationality, religion, or cultural inheritance, commonalities within this grouping are stressed, while individuality and exceptional behaviour are considered as aberrations or of secondary importance. While much of this may be justified and is often necessary to draw any kind of conclusion, there is also a danger that such categorisations become reified and are no longer questioned or even seen. This can be particularly problematic if a category of analysis has not been sufficiently interrogated and tested to consider how valid it is, or how far it is applicable. Furthermore, such difficulties may be especially pertinent to homelessness given that the kind of life experience evoked by this term is often very far removed from the everyday reality for researchers, and may therefore add an extra layer of abstraction. Depending on how it is defined, homelessness can of course present a particular set of circumstances and difficulties, but, as this essay will argue, it is often not as significant in determining behaviour or self-perception as widespread conceptions of “the homeless” might suggest.

Although such concerns may appear excessively theoretical, if those responsible for public libraries and their policies are to enhance provision for marginalised and underrepresented groups effectively, it is imperative that they first address various definitional issues concerning such groups. This will enable them to institute policies that have a solid and unambiguous basis, rather than relying on vague assumptions and social prejudices that will likely lead to poorly executed solutions for ill-defined problems. This paper will therefore focus on definitional challenges surrounding homelessness, and consider the possible repercussions of adopting a simplified and facile conception of “the homeless”. First, consideration will be given to the heterogeneous nature of those who are defined as homeless and the difficulties this presents for solutions that target “homeless people” as a coherent group. Furthermore, it is argued that this diversity renders many commonplace attitudes and preconceptions essentially prejudicial, and argues that a shift in discourse is necessary to help break down negative stereotypes. Second, and following on from the previous discussion, the consequences of conceiving of a group of library users in essentially negative terms are considered in terms of the reaction to policymaking from both potential library users and those working within public libraries. Finally, assistance that public libraries can offer in relation to needs extending from the particular circumstances of homelessness will be considered, with an emphasis on the practical experiences of homeless participants interviewed during the conduct of previous research (Muggleton, 2010; Muggleton and Ruthven, 2012).

2. Definitions

2.1 Defining homelessness
If the subject ever comes up in everyday conversation, discussing the homeless is unlikely to cause difficulties of comprehension. Taking it at face value, the term is fairly self-explanatory: someone who is homeless is someone who does not have a home. Moreover, people will often have a fairly ready image in their mind when they hear about a homeless person, probably consisting of a person sleeping on the streets. However, as the definitions set out below hopefully illustrate, it is far too easy to oversimplify what is meant by “the homeless”.
While some may feel that such concerns qualify as pseudo-academic pedantry, the task of defining homelessness more accurately takes on much greater significance when one considers the often negative connotations of an oversimplified conception of homelessness. It may subvert prevailing notions that rejoice in, or indeed decry, the dominance of political correctness to state it, but there nonetheless remain robust prejudices against people who are thought of as “homeless people”. These can range from superficial assumptions about personal hygiene or appearance; to assumptions about physical and mental health issues such as addictions; or even to assumptions about morality and ethics associated with mendicancy or theft. It may be true that various factors lead to a higher incidence of some of these issues among those categorised as homeless (LaGory et al., 2001; Ensign and Bell, 2004; Barry et al., 2002, p. 146), but given that such issues are certainly not inevitable or universal, i.e. A (homelessness) does not necessarily equal B (e.g. mental health issues) – then such assumptions need to be recognised as prejudices rather than considered as anything more credible.

The impact of such prejudice is apparent in sociological literature that addresses the affective responses among individuals who are in a homeless situation. Considering how individuals in this situation tended to construct and present their identity, Snow and Anderson (1987) found a wide variety of possible approaches, but all of these illustrated significant awareness of how other people were likely to perceive and judge those who are homeless. Järvinen (2003) found similar evidence among people who had immigrated to Denmark and who were homeless; these individuals were also trying to negotiate prejudices made about them owing to their status as “foreigners”.

During the course of my own research (Muggleton, 2010; Muggleton and Ruthven, 2012), participants also made a number of statements, including the quotation at the beginning of this paper, which illustrate this point. The following responses were given when discussing social stigma and being made to feel uncomfortable in certain situations:

Oh, definitely; not so much [in] libraries but in shops and cafes and that, definitely [...] you feel as though [people are] looking down their nose at you just because you’re walking about with your big rucksack and maybe your sleeping bag and they automatically think [that] because you’re homeless you’re up to something, you’re going to steal from them or you’re up to something bad (Quoted in Muggleton, 2010, p. 50; Muggleton and Ruthven, 2012, p. 230).

[...] if you take advantage of [free facilities] you can stay clean every day, shave, and you don’t look homeless; then everybody treats you like normal. [...] it’s all about mental attitude: do you think of yourself as a homeless person. If you start behaving like a homeless person and not shaving, not taking care of yourself, people will start seeing you like that and then they’ll behave [towards] you differently. If you don’t behave like that and you try not to look like that, then people will just deal with you as normal, which is the thing that a certain group of people in the other room are probably not aware of (Quoted in Muggleton, 2010, p. 51).

These responses were indicative of a wider awareness among participants that they would face prejudicial attitudes if other people thought of them as “a homeless person” (Muggleton, 2010, pp. 50-52; Muggleton and Ruthven, 2012, p. 230). Cumulatively, then, facile discussions about homelessness can clearly be seen to have a significant impact on the people who are purportedly being discussed. However, a formal definition of homelessness reveals a more nuanced picture of what this term should actually connote.

When offering definitions of homelessness, a number of studies in the library and information science literature (Hersberger, 2005, p. 199; Le Dantec and Edwards, 2008,
pp. 627-628; Woelfer and Hendry, 2009, p. 2301) cite the Stewart B. McKinney Act, 42 U.S.C. §11301, et seq., which states that:

[... ] the term “homeless” or “homeless individual or homeless person” [ ... ] includes –

(1) an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and
(2) an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is –

(A) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);
(B) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or
(C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (Office of the Law Revision Counsel, 2009, Sec. 11302).

The official US governmental definition of homelessness, therefore, includes not just those who are sleeping on the streets, but also those who are temporarily accommodated under various circumstances. Looking back at the earlier discussion, then, this is already likely to upset a number of assumptions and expectations regarding homelessness. Furthermore, although it is probably problematic from a statistical, governmental perspective and therefore not included in the above definition, Cronley et al. (2009, p. 483) also logically include individuals staying in hotels and motels, and those who are temporarily staying with friends or family, as constituting part of the homeless population. This again widens out the number of people who, if this label is applied descriptively and neutrally, are homeless, but who may not feature in prejudicial or pejorative ideas about homelessness.

2.2 Who are the homeless?

In light of the previous discussion, it should come as no surprise that those termed homeless make up a very diverse grouping (Hersberger, 2005, p. 199). This diversity extends to educational attainment and mental health (LaGory et al., 2001, p. 637; Sumerlin and Bundrick, 1997, p. 1307), which again underlines the problematic nature of many assumptions. Admittedly, some social groups may be over-represented among homeless populations; single men are often less likely to receive the same degree of sympathy as homeless families (Sumerlin and Bundrick, 1997, p. 1309) and may therefore face additional difficulties in escaping homelessness, while immigrants may face additional discrimination in welfare provision or the housing market (Järvinen, 2003, p. 220). However, it is important to reiterate extant variations, particularly since these can impact upon how homelessness is experienced by an individual; higher levels of education can lower life satisfaction since people may be more sensitive to their problems (LaGory et al., 2001, p. 637), while ethnicity and gender can impact how homelessness is experienced and how challenges need to be negotiated (Sumerlin and Bundrick, 1997, pp. 1308-1309).

It is also important to be mindful of the fact that a person’s experience of homelessness will be heavily influenced by the initial reason or reasons for them becoming homeless, as well as by the duration of their homelessness (Muggleton, 2010, pp. 38-39). For example, someone who has no history of homelessness but simultaneously faces redundancy and the expiration of a housing lease, and who then manages to secure housing in a relatively short space of time, will be in a very different position to someone who has been homeless for an extended period of time, perhaps owing to a drug or alcohol dependency or
other mental health issues. Not only do such conditions alter the material circumstances and difficulties of homelessness for people, but they are also often apparent in self-perception and people’s attitudes towards their situation (Muggleton, 2010; Muggleton and Ruthven, 2012).

The resultant picture of who “the homeless” are is therefore highly complicated and nuanced. Indeed, if one accepts the preceding discussion, it is necessary to question whether the term is meaningful enough to have much practical usage when considering library policy; being termed homeless does not in itself denote age, sex, ethnicity, educational background, class, mental health status, or even a complete picture of housing status. Therefore, to draw conclusions about a person’s identity, physical needs, emotional needs, or other aspects of their life which are pertinent to library provision based upon their homeless status is often at best misplaced, and at worst completely prejudicial. This is not to suggest that there are no common difficulties for those who are facing homelessness, or that there is nothing that public libraries can do in response to such difficulties. It is, however, intended to stress that many factors other than homelessness are important in influencing who a person is, and what their needs actually are, and that considering a potential library user primarily as a “homeless person” is both erroneous and potentially damaging.

3. Practical implications
Up to this point, this paper has focused on what may be considered an essentially theoretical discussion. However, how a problem is framed is integral to the solutions that are likely to be presented, and in this sense the line between theory and practice can often be blurred. If one accepts the main points of the preceding discussion, i.e. that homelessness carries pejorative connotations, is often poorly and hastily defined, and that ideas about homeless people are often both excessively simplistic and prejudicial, then it is not hard to see how apparently theoretical concerns will impact upon lived experience in the form of attitudes and subsequent behaviour. The rest of this paper will discuss various facets of how ideas about homelessness can inform and influence practice in public libraries, beginning with how unseen assumptions may influence and subsequently hinder well-intentioned initiatives.

3.1 Categorisation and the creation of “otherness”
When organising information, overlapping categories and alternative ways of classification will often present themselves to a librarian. For example, in British history, numerical centuries, such as the nineteenth-century (1800-1899), compete with delineations by events or the reign of monarchs, such as the long nineteenth-century (1789-1914) or the Victorian Era (1837-1901). Furthermore, running in parallel to this temporal division, there are also potential divisions according to the approach of a given work, such as whether it is primarily social, political or economic. Producing a taxonomy from these competing ways of dividing information that is both consistent and contextually useful requires a number of judgements to be made and is one of the primary tasks facing a librarian. However, ultimately these categories can always be undone and reconstructed if this will better serve the intended purpose; information does not have an essential order that should always be adhered to regardless of the situation.
Similarly, when one applies broad categories in order to conceive of library users and their needs, these should not be considered as immutable truths integral to the people in question, but rather as expedients to serve a practical purpose. It follows that such categories should also be jettisoned if they are no longer useful, or obscure their intended purpose. Thinking in terms of “homeless library users” is undoubtedly often well-intentioned; it follows that policies will be conceived and designed with the objective of engaging with and better addressing the difficulties facing this group. However, this necessarily assumes that there are identifiable characteristics and a coherence to “the homeless”, which, as this paper has argued, is very problematic from a number of different perspectives.

Admittedly, and as stated earlier, for a number of reasons there is often a higher incidence of certain issues, such as health issues (Ensign and Bell, 2004; Barry et al., 2002, p. 146) or literacy issues (Warnes et al., 2003, p. 35), among homeless people when compared to the general population. Therefore, it could be argued that, provided such characteristics are established through credible research rather than simply through prejudice, positive efforts can be made to address these issues for homeless people. However, it is important to consider whether framing such initiatives in terms of homelessness is actually helpful or necessary. Taking literacy issues as an obvious example of an area that public libraries could address, one would have to question whether classes to improve literacy that were addressed solely to homeless library users would actually be of additional benefit to anyone when compared to literacy classes that were aimed at a general audience, homeless or otherwise.

It may seem that this last point is not of great significance because the adverse effects of initiatives that specifically target homeless people are unclear. Furthermore, deliberately engaging with homeless people and highlighting their needs may be considered as a potential benefit. However, there is a significant risk that, by developing initiatives specifically targeting homeless people, a dichotomy develops whereby homeless library users are perceived as distinct from non-homeless library users. Madden (2003) has highlighted the problems of considering the homeless as an exoticised “other” when conducting academic studies, and it is clear that, far from having a positive effect, this dichotomy and perception of “otherness” would adversely affect both efforts at engagement and the individuals towards whom these efforts are directed.

Hodgetts et al. (2008) have examined how occupying public spaces, such as public libraries, allows homeless people to undermine exclusionary practices and perceptions of “otherness”, thereby reducing marginalisation and allowing them to feel part of mainstream society. However, significantly, they also found that homeless men are often highly aware of negative social perceptions of them and are subsequently very careful to avoid being identified as an “other” in certain situations (Hodgetts et al., 2008, pp. 941-942, 947). Therefore, to use the earlier example, the creation of a literacy class specifically for homeless people is, first, unlikely to attract people who are aware of prejudice and not necessarily keen to identify themselves as homeless (Snow and Anderson, 1987; Järvinen, 2003). Second, it would exclude non-homeless people who may benefit from the class and consequently miss an opportunity to create a common forum and break down barriers between these people and homeless participants. Finally, it could easily reproduce and reify the idea of “the other”, especially if there is an implied identification of illiteracy with homelessness.
3.2 Reductionism and underestimating people

This last point follows on from a theme that has been stressed throughout this paper; namely, that there is a tendency to draw wider conclusions about an individual based on their homeless status. This may lead policy-makers to underestimate the abilities of potential library users if these users are characterised primarily in terms of homelessness. For example, my own research found, contrary to initial expectations, that participants were generally able to access mainstream sources of information without much trouble (Muggleton, 2010; Muggleton and Ruthven, 2012). Although there was a potential bias in the research towards more confident individuals (Muggleton, 2010, pp. 43-44; Muggleton and Ruthven, 2012, p. 227), the conclusions were consistent with other research which stresses the resourcefulness that is necessary to negotiate homelessness (Sumerlin, 1996, pp. 885, 889). Furthermore, the point is that variations between homeless individuals certainly do exist, and that conflating issues such as illiteracy or learning difficulties with homelessness has the potential to underestimate a person’s capabilities. Indeed, the variation in capabilities that was evident in my research (Muggleton, 2010, pp. 47-49; Muggleton and Ruthven, 2012, p. 229) highlights the need to address the difficulties associated with homelessness at an individual level rather than considering these as consistent and unchanging across homeless populations.

An excessively simplistic perspective in this regard is likely to lead to ineffective solutions not only for the reasons detailed above with respect to “otherness”, but also because they will address themselves only to one section of the homeless population. Moreover, there is significant potential to patronise and alienate people with overly simplistic or prejudicial attitudes, even if they would otherwise benefit from the initiatives in question. In the context of others’ potential assumptions and lowered self-esteem, it is often important for people who have become homeless to upset the expectations that people make about them (Muggleton, 2010, pp. 66-67). This allows people to retain a sense of identity that is independent of social prejudice and defined on their own terms. Similarly, maintaining a connection to one’s life prior to becoming homeless is often very important for self-esteem and self-perception (Hodgetts et al., 2008, pp. 944-945; Muggleton, 2010, pp. 52-53; Muggleton and Ruthven, 2012, p. 230). Public libraries and access to information can play an important role in upsetting expectations, such as through the pursuit of education and knowledge, and in maintaining connections to previous circumstances, such as through occupation of public spaces as discussed above, or through communication with family and old friends via the internet. It is therefore very important that benefits derived in this regard are not undermined, either by emphasising someone’s homeless status, or by setting up unconsciously patronising classes for “people like them”.

4. Political implications

So far this essay has mainly focused on the problematic effects that initiatives targeting “the homeless” may have for the intended beneficiaries of such initiatives and, to a lesser extent, the attitudes that such initiatives may engender in the people responsible for running them. However, given that there are always competing priorities for library resources, it is equally important to consider the implications that this may have when presenting arguments for new proposals. Given the negative connotations and prejudicial attitudes associated with homelessness, initiatives that explicitly target the homeless may create unnecessary obstacles for themselves in some contexts.
This may sound excessively defeatist, pessimistic, or even prejudiced against the homeless; this is certainly not the intention, particularly in terms of the latter. The point is that, whether it is acknowledged or not, prejudicial attitudes are extremely widespread and the library and information profession is definitely not immune. Indeed, such attitudes are exemplified in an editorial entitled “What a library is not”, published in *Library Journal* in November 2002. In the article, Blaise Cronin, then Professor of Information Science at Indiana University, Bloomington, argued that concerns over social inclusion had led to overly permissive policies and effectively undermined the legitimate role of public libraries as places of learning. Among the things that he stated that libraries were not was “a refuge for the homeless”, and lauded a policy restricting what patrons could bring into the library – bedrolls, big boxes or bulky bags were to be forbidden – as “good old-fashioned common sense” (Cronin, 2002, p. 46). While his argument is presented in a strident and persuasive way, appealing to the entirely reasonable and democratic idea that the behaviours of a minority should not have a disproportionate impact upon the majority, it has a number of serious flaws in its reasoning and its basic suppositions.

Hersberger (2005, pp. 200-201) has highlighted the inconsistencies and inherent prejudice in Cronin’s position; if rules against those who are not using the library within very narrow behavioural constraints are applied evenly, then groups other than the homeless, including toddlers, will also have to be classed as “problem patrons” and prevented from using libraries. Indeed, if someone had been shopping and wanted to pick up a book on their way past, they would also have to be prevented from entering the library due to the bulky bags in their possession. More fundamentally, as this paper has argued, equating homelessness with certain behaviours or personality traits is often extremely misguided and based simply on prejudice rather than reality. As well as presenting problems in principle, this would also make enforceability very problematic since people who are identified as “homeless” users to be ejected may simply be people who place little stock in their appearance, while people who are perceived to be “normal”, legitimate users may in fact be homeless people who are adept at maintaining their appearance in spite of their circumstances. Homelessness is limited in what it actually describes and it is therefore impossible to determine, particularly at a glance, whether someone is homeless unless they have explicitly told you so. Envisaging how the proposed policies would work in practice highlights the superficiality of the general attitude underlying Cronin’s article.

However, despite the major flaws in arguments against the legitimacy of homeless people making use of library facilities, it also seems wholly unnecessary to enter into a nuanced and potentially politically difficult argument every time a new policy is suggested. The profound problem with Cronin’s argument is that excluding the homeless is inherently flawed, both logically and practically, if one employs the term “homeless” correctly, i.e. in a neutral and limited way. As argued above, well-meaning attempts to target “the homeless” will be similarly flawed because homelessness does not necessarily denote behaviour or issues that libraries can address. Therefore, as two sides of the same coin, trying to deliver library services to “the homeless” may not only fail to produce positive outcomes by investing homelessness with additional unwarranted meaning, but may also play into the hands of potential political opponents by defining the debate in terms that appear to validate their flawed position.
5. What libraries can do

The above is certainly not intended to encourage an attitude of complacency, or justify abandonment of the responsibility of public libraries to serve all communities and demographics equitably and according to need. Indeed, this responsibility makes it imperative that public libraries direct significant efforts towards the most marginalised groups in society, which obviously includes those who are homeless. However, such efforts must be undertaken in ways that advance inclusion rather than accentuate difference, and should be humble in their awareness of extant realities, potential difficulties, and limitations. An important part of this is to make sure that policy-makers do not underestimate or patronise people by aiming for stridently ambitious goals or by assuming that people will necessarily benefit from, or are always in need of, particular “help”.

A good starting point to extend inclusion, then, is to consider, first, how homeless individuals make use of public libraries already, and, second, what obstacles, if any, they encounter when trying to do this. Contrary to the beliefs of Cronin and others like him, homeless people tend to use public libraries in much the same way as anyone else. Indeed, Hodgetts et al. (2008, pp. 941-944) have argued that homeless people are often more aware of expected behavioural norms in libraries than others since it presents an opportunity to blend in and, subsequently, they do not want to draw attention to themselves or be asked to leave. The stakes are also often higher in this regard for homeless individuals because they lack other options; even where people do have accommodation, they may not want to spend much time there. As one participant in my study explained, everyday relaxation and leisure time was made difficult by his surroundings:

Even if there was something good on [TV], just because of the place you were in, you’re not happy being there; you feel as if you always want to be on the move and doing something else (Quoted in Muggleton, 2010, p. 64).

A public library can therefore serve an important function simply as somewhere to be, particularly since it is safe and warm.

However, presenting libraries as an important refuge in a purely physical sense would be to merely repeat Cronin’s argument, albeit in a more approving tone, and seriously underestimate the role that they can play in individuals’ lives. In addition to the sense of belonging associated with a “legitimate” public space discussed above, libraries are also a significant source of mainstream information, whether in the shape of books, newspapers or the internet. As discussed in Muggleton (2010) and Muggleton and Ruthven (2012), this information, and these information sources, fulfil a number of important roles for people dealing with homelessness, such as links to life prior to homelessness, subject matter for everyday conversations, escapism from everyday realities, or even just as a way to pass the time.

This suggests that simply through the same non-discriminatory provision of resources that is at the heart of public libraries’ mission, libraries will fulfil a number of significant functions in relation to homeless individuals. However, even in this regard there are often necessary steps to take to ensure that provision is actually non-discriminatory. For example, a 2009 study into Welsh public libraries suggested that registration requirements may often need to be relaxed or altered, and efforts made to ensure that staff are universally welcoming, so that homeless individuals are able to make use of library facilities without difficulty or discomfort (Harris and Simon, 2009, p. 26).
Similarly, adopting a more relaxed attitude towards behaviours such as sleeping, provided they are not impacting upon other library users, may provide a more congenial atmosphere generally. A short sleep may be of particular assistance to those who are homeless since, as was related to me by a participant during my research (Muggleton, 2010, p. 73), finding somewhere to sleep without getting moved on is one of the most challenging aspects of homelessness. This is not to argue that public libraries should become surrogate homeless shelters; in fact, the same participant singled out a particular bookshop, which obviously has a commercial imperative in addition to the issues facing public libraries, as a place where a more relaxed attitude prevailed. This suggests that, contrary to what alarmists may predict, similar policies could be instituted without a holistic subversion of the role of the library.

Indeed, far from subverting the role of the library, the policies suggested in this paper are essentially attempts to ensure that public libraries are fulfilling their duties to those most in need of their services. In line with this, wider efforts to improve functional literacy and ICT literacy should also engage with marginalised communities, including the homeless. As discussed previously, doing this in an explicit or heavy-handed manner may work against its own goals in a number of ways, so a considered approach is certainly necessary. However, simply by ensuring that the availability of these services is widely known, by sending publicity materials to homeless service agencies for example, may have a positive effect and avoids many of the issues discussed previously; individuals would be free to pursue these opportunities if they chose to do so, and would not be entering into the situation as “a homeless person”.

Another area where working with homeless service agencies may be fruitful is in trying to provide practical information that is useful to those who are homeless. Again, this does not need to be explicitly labelled as “information for the homeless”, but could be presented in the context of wider public information displays. This would allow people to make use of this information without being forced to identify themselves as homeless. In fact, much of this information, such as the places and times that one can get a free meal, might also be of use to people who are not homeless. By avoiding the use of labels and categories, approaches such as these do not acknowledge the fundamental differentiation and “othering” of the homeless that is apparent in wider society. Individual examples of this may seem like a drop in the ocean, particularly since this attitude signals a radical shift in relation to prevailing social attitudes and norms. However, if one really wants libraries to engage with those at the margins of society, any opportunity to subvert rather than reinforce the idea of the homeless “other”, even if it seems completely insignificant, should be considered as a step in the right direction.

6. Conclusion
Socially marginalised people, such as those who are homeless, should be at the heart of public libraries’ mission to expand access to information and advance social inclusion. However, direct attempts to target marginalised groups, and even conceptualising of such groups, can have a number of negative effects that are contrary to the intentions behind these efforts. In identifying “the homeless” as a group whose needs should be addressed, there is an implicit assumption that people who fit this category will have certain characteristics and, consequently, identifiable needs. While these characteristics and needs may be interpreted in a limited and realistic way, there is always a tendency for such groupings to take on additional unwarranted meanings, particularly once they
are considered in concrete terms, such as target demographics for library services, rather than as abstractions. This tendency may be particularly true of “the homeless” as a category of analysis, since homelessness is often alien to the experience of researchers and policy-makers, meaning that assumptions and common prejudices fill in the gaps in experiential knowledge. Addressing efforts towards “the homeless”, then, will likely serve to legitimise various false assumptions and reify perceptions that “the homeless” are a distinct group, separated from other “normal” library users.

Initiatives arising from this kind of thinking are unlikely to be effective given that they are based on misconceptions. Indeed, any attempt to assist homeless people holistically as a coherent group will be problematic given the diversity of people who fall into this category. Moreover, this diversity is not simply a diversity of needs, but also a diversity of capabilities and aptitudes. There is always a danger of underestimating people and ignoring individuals’ agency when one thinks in terms of groups, particularly in terms of groups that need to be “helped”, and thinking in terms of “the homeless” is an archetypical example in this regard. As well as leading to ineffective and potentially patronising solutions, grouping people in this way forces individuals thus identified to label themselves in a way that they may not relate to if they wish to make use of the services being offered. Furthermore, it accepts the mistaken suppositions of those who wish to demonise these individuals based on their putative membership of this group.

In order to move beyond this divisive thinking, it is necessary to locate efforts to include marginalised individuals firmly within the context of core library goals and initiatives, rather than considering these efforts as something distinctive or separate. For example, as a matter of course, publicity should be directed towards marginalised individuals and groups, making sure that it is distributed to places that people are likely to see it, in the same way that it is directed towards anyone else. By simply ensuring that marginalised individuals are included in the everyday activities and routine of the library, their presence will take on the attitude and appearance of the ordinary rather than the extraordinary, both for these individuals and for the people around them. This may seem like a modest goal, but if social barriers could be thus dissolved, even if only within the confines of the public library, it would be no small achievement.

References


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Thomas H. Muggleton currently lives in Glasgow. He gained his MSc in Information and Library Studies from the University of Strathclyde in September 2010, and was subsequently awarded the LIRG Student Award for best dissertation in 2011. A shortened version of his dissertation, entitled “Homelessness and access to the informational mainstream”, was published in the *Journal of Documentation* (Vol. 68 No. 2) in 2012. Thomas H. Muggleton can be contacted at: tmuggleton@hotmail.co.uk

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