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# Constructing a Policy Field Aimed at Homelessness: How Epistemic Communities Shape Discourse

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the formation of the discourse that structures policies aimed at reducing homelessness in Norway. It discusses how experts interacting within epistemic communities contribute to the shaping of discourse, and how research is used to constitute the interpretation of the situation as homeless. The findings indicate that the discourse of homelessness has developed within an epistemic community, acknowledging a naturalistic definition and a structural explanation of homelessness, a community in which both researchers and policy makers have participated. The discourse is also marked by the dominant influence of international research on homelessness, rather than a focus on the local situation of people experiencing homelessness in Norway. This raises the question of whether research has mainly been used symbolically in the formative period of the policy field, strengthening the position of housing in social policies, rather than investigating the challenges of persons experiencing homelessness.

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## Introduction

<sup>1</sup>Homelessness has been a theme on the policy agenda in Norway since the late 1990s. The discourse that structures this policy field was shaped by policy makers and researchers, establishing infrastructure and vocabulary to address the situation of persons experiencing homelessness. The use of research in this process makes the policy field an example of knowledge-based policies, an explicit commitment by governments that has steadily increased in the UK, the US and the EU since the late 1990s (Cartwright, Goldfinch, and Horvick 2007, 2–5), as well as in Norway (Holst 2017). Methods known from research, such as gathering, systemizing and analyzing data, contributes to the perception that governments are rational and committed to the knowledge-based policy paradigm (Pielke 2007, 22; Boswell 2009). However, several studies in the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) tradition have explored how the discourse in which a researcher is embedded influences the construction of categories in the research process and limits which information to consider valuable (Latour and Woolgar 1986; Fleck 1979). This view contrasts with the perception of scientific work as pure and objective (Kitcher 2011, 30). Research commissioned by policy makers contains yet other influencing elements.

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Commissioned research projects evolve through a process of interaction between researchers and in-government experts, influencing both the research process and the use of research. The possibility to establish knowledge structures for interpreting a phenomenon conveys great power to those who interact in the production and use of knowledge in policy making, favouring the perspective held by the community within which they interact.

The definition in the first survey of homelessness (Ulfrstad 1997) marks the starting point in developing a policy field addressing homelessness in Norway. The field appears as established with the white paper *About Housing Policies* (no.2 2003–2004) and the following national strategy launched in 2005 to fight homelessness. The construction of this policy field altered institutional arrangements by assigning to the housing sector the responsibility for easing the situation of persons who were formerly attended to by the health and welfare sector. Additionally, it introduced homelessness as a new category for classificatory purposes. According to Brint (1990), altering of institutional arrangements and introduction of new categories is what makes a policy field substantively significant and worthy of critical examination. However, the construction of this policy field is rarely, if ever, discussed. Studies addressing homelessness in Norway after 2005, with few exceptions, have generated knowledge building on the discourse established in 1996–2004/5. Studies have mainly been undertaken by researchers affiliated with housing research, and no studies have so far addressed the homelessness policy discourse. Two summaries of research addressing the broader category of the disadvantaged in the Norwegian housing market<sup>2</sup> in the period 1991–2015 emphasize these shortcomings. Hellevik and Norvik (2004, 28) finds the research too isolated from neighbouring fields, Sørvoll and Aarset (2015,157) argues that “the absence of an explicit critical discussion of the research field is striking”. Considering homelessness, the situation seems similar elsewhere in Europe, with the exception of Britain, where several researchers have addressed the construction of homelessness (e.g. Pleace and Quilgars 2003; Jacobs, Kemeny, and Manzi 1999; Somerville 2013).

The lack of critical examination has inspired the historical-sociological exploration discussed in this paper. The aim is to de-ontologize the discourse circulating in the discursive field by questioning its terms and categories, hopefully contributing to a discussion of the knowledge that structures the policy field. I also wish to contribute to a general awareness of and reflexivity towards knowledge-based policies, the influence of epistemological perspectives, and the power and responsibility that come with producing and governing knowledge (Sending 2015). The paper builds on discourse analyses of official documents and research between 1996 and 2005, given the importance of this period in shaping the discourse on homelessness. The analyses are guided by research questions addressing the central elements of this policy field, and how research, experts and epistemic communities have contributed to its development. The theoretical framework that has inspired the analyses represents the SSK tradition. From this viewpoint, it appears that knowledge addressing homelessness from epistemic perspectives that are not structured around the role of housing has been ignored. The most salient void is the lack of knowledge embedded in drug-abuse and mental-health discourse. Additionally, it seems that international research on homelessness has been paid greater attention than knowledge obtained from the Norwegian context. This gives grounds for questioning whether the interaction within this policy field has contributed to the endarkenment,

rather than the enlightenment (Weiss 1979), of the experience of homelessness, affecting policies and measures aimed to ease the lives of those who lack secure housing.

The next two sections of this paper outline theories considering the role of experts and epistemic communities in policy making, as well as how knowledge and research can serve different purposes. The fourth section covers the methodology, followed by the presentation and discussion of the findings in the fifth section. The paper closes by a discussion and conclusions offering some critical reflections on the role of research in policy making.

## Experts and Epistemic Communities

Commitment to knowledge-based policies entails a relation between science and decision making, and consequently, between researchers and policy makers. Both groups may be considered experts. Researchers by representing knowledge produced by individuals and institutions with recognized research qualifications (Boswell 2009), and in-government experts by virtue of their knowledge-based authority (Brint 1990, 364). Different roles are available in this relationship. Pielke (2007) summarizes four idealized roles of the researcher, ranging from dissociated, the *pure scientist*, to the closely involved *issue advocate*. The *issue advocate* focuses on the research implications for a policy issue and is connected to a network or a group that seeks to influence policy. Participation in decision-making processes and active engagement with decision makers become important activities for the issue advocate. For the in-government expert, the available roles and influence depend on the policy issue. When less politicized and lacking pressure from the policy target group, there are possibilities for experts to obtain authority and make decisions based on more technocratic grounds, such as available research (Boswell 2009, 70–78). Brint (1990) uses the term *extensive mandates* to describe experts' authoritative position in decision-making.

Interaction and communication between researchers and policy makers are complex and gradually emerge over time, creating a backdrop of ideas and orientations that may be turned into policy problems (Boswell 2009, 36) and new research projects. Interaction is accommodated through networks of experts, generally expected to articulate cause-and-effect relations of complex problems and guide states in identifying their interests and proposing policies. Haas (1992) labels such networks *epistemic communities*, conceptualizing how a shared perspective on knowledge a mutual epistemic perception affects the interpretations of the persons engaged in a network. The power of epistemic communities lies in their claim to possess the knowledge required to interpret a situation or a challenge; this knowledge is what legitimizes their activities. Their perspective influences what policy alternatives are introduced and how national and international coalitions in support of the policies are constructed, as networks are connected across borders through epistemic perspectives. International coalitions accommodate locally constructed knowledge, such as scientific terms, categories and causal explanations, for widespread distribution, gaining hold in contexts that differ from where they were developed (Shapin 1995, 304–308). In policy areas rendered less politically important, as is the case of homelessness in Norway, epistemic communities have great opportunities to exert influence at various stages of the policy-making process (Haas 1992; Christensen, Newberry, and Potter 2018). An epistemic community growing out of housing and building research can be expected to share views

that favour knowledge of material, observable phenomena. A community's epistemological perspective and interpretative frame serve as barriers to other communities, limit influence from other discursive fields and result in communities' highly selective perception of their environments (Boswell 2009, 39,45). How researchers and in-government experts engage in the relation between science and decision-making, as well as the interpretative frame represented in the epistemic community in which they are engaged, becomes highly relevant to how a phenomenon and the pertaining policy field are constructed. A community embedded in knowledge that prioritizes the lack of material resources risks ignoring knowledge about health and social factors (among others) and hinders concepts and theoretical perspectives generated within other epistemic perspectives that may contribute to the *enlightenment* (Weiss 1979) of the issue at hand from entering the policy-making process.

### Manifestation of Research and Its Use in Policy-making

Commitment to knowledge-based policies grants research an important position, useful for several purposes. Research is usually thought of as problem solving, offering solutions to a recognized policy issue (Weiss 1979). Problem solving is usually also the explicit purpose when research is commissioned by policy makers, reducing uncertainty in decision-making. Research as problem solving reflects an instrumentalist perspective, where organizations are expected to be concerned with maximizing output to secure support. However, the use of research may also serve symbolic purposes by *legitimizing* or *substantiating* an organization and its assignment. If an organization operates in an unstable field and if its environment attaches value to expertise, the use of research can serve other or more purposes than problem solving (Boswell 2009). The use of research can secure an organization's legitimacy by showing its capacity to produce and apply knowledge, resembling what Weiss (1979) labels a *tactical model*. The fact that research is undertaken proves government agencies' responsiveness; at the same time commissioning research works as a way of securing academic support (Weiss 1979, 429). Use of research can also contribute as substantiating for a policy field if there is a need to secure support for a course of action or the credibility of preferred policies. This is observed when there are conflicting preferences about possible future political action (Boswell 2009).

Whether the use of research is problem solving or symbolic, most research used in policy-making is commissioned by policy makers. Salter (1988) labelled science used for the purpose of policy making *mandated science*, reflecting how the mandate of commissioned science is entrenched in the needs of policy makers rather than science. A pressure is placed on scientists to reach conclusions that enable the construction of public policy or government regulations, the pressure is reflected in the activities and interpretations of scientists. Nonetheless, mandated science is justified by referring to an image of the *ideal science* (Salter 1988) that is value free, where conclusions are drawn independently of the intended use. It relies on a belief in scientific methods that produce credible results through public, transparent activities, with open debates, peer reviews and academic publications. This image of the ideal science could be claimed to justify the whole knowledge-based policy discourse; referring to this ideal is an effective argument of persuasion in policy making that is seldom questioned. However, mandated science does not live up to the image of ideal science; criteria external to the science process

influence the research. Mandated science is guided by political values, the intended use frames the project from start, and it results in reports evaluated by its commissioners rather than in peer-reviewed academic publications (Salter 1988, 1–4).

The concept of *epistemic community* provides a theoretical frame for interpreting how interactions between and among researchers and in-government experts have shaped policy field addressing homelessness. Ideal-type positions available for these actors, such as issue advocates and experts with extended mandates, and the above-described concepts that show how research may serve various purposes, contribute to an enhanced awareness of the power available within communities or networks to influence policies. This framework, combined with the analytical strategy described in the next section, is applied in the following exploration and discussion of policies aimed at homelessness in Norway.

### **Analytical Strategy, Materials and Methods**

This paper builds on discourse analyses of official text documents addressing homelessness in Norway in the period 1996–2005. The materials are selected was made by historically tracing the policy development through documents from the national and lower level government, and the research sources that are referred to. The official documents include white papers, official Norwegian reports,<sup>3</sup> directives and guides, and minutes from seminars held over the period. These sources are the results of the interactions among the social actors shaping the discourse of that time– in-government experts within ministry and directorates, and researchers.

Discourse is here interpreted as systems of meaning production that fix meaning and enable us to make sense of the world (Dunn and Neumann 2016). The discourse analyses are inspired by the analytical framework from the Sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD). SKAD addresses discourse as what structures text and talk, but also takes into account the social actors' agency, as they draw on available rules and resources through a discursive structuration (Keller 2011, 2013, Keller, Hornige, and Schünemann 2018). SKAD provides a broad collection of analytical concepts; the ones used here are *phenomenal structure* and *interpretative frame*. Phenomenal structure addresses how the phenomenon of homelessness and its solutions are structured in a discourse. Secondary analytical concepts applied to identify significant structuring elements are the use of argumentative and evaluative statements, classifications, explanation of causal relations, and how these are linked to responsibilities and courses of action. The use of Hyper Research software has enabled a thorough review of what structural elements are the most salient in each document and across documents. Further, the concept of interpretative frame addresses how the identified elements of discourse are embedded in neighbouring discursive fields that have existed prior to and parallel with the discourse shaped around homelessness. Social actors interpret the policy problem at hand according to the discourse in which they are embedded. From this follows a distinct way of perceiving, structuring and classifying a phenomenon. To identify what interpretative frames the structuring elements of the discourse represented, the identified elements were traced back to policy documents of pertaining fields. Since this study aims to explore both the discourse and how the use of research and epistemic communities contributed to this discourse, identifying important sources of discourse production was the next step. I identified sources referred to in the

official documents, as well as the sources upon which they built their arguments, and analysed how they contributed to the identified discourse.

This study also conducted interviews with six actors who played key roles in shaping the policy discourse of the studied period, some of them still active in the policy field (at the time of writing). The interview material represents a retrospective perspective; for this reason, it is not analyzed in line with the textual material, which represents the discourse of the studied period. However, the interviews provided vital contextual information for interpreting and analyzing the textual material, as well as a general understanding of the development within the period. My analyses and interpretations are influenced by these interviews, intentional or not. Additionally, several of the descriptions in the empirical section, considering who did what and the sequence of events, co knowledge obtained from the interviews. The informants also pointed me to available textual sources not mentioned elsewhere, such as minutes from seminars.

## Exploring the Construction of Homelessness in Norwegian Policies

### *Constructing a Category and a Housing Problem*

The starting point and the main structural element of the policy field aimed at homelessness is the definition formulated for the first survey of homelessness in Norway:

A homeless person is defined as one who does not own or rent a housing unit and are left with coincidental or temporary housing arrangements, who temporarily stay with close relatives, friends or acquaintances, or is under the care of the correctional services or an institution, due for release within two months. People without arranged accommodation for the next night are also considered homeless (Ulfrstad 1997, 15).

The definition constructs homelessness as a naturalistic, rather than a social concept, by focusing on the materialistic lack of housing.<sup>4</sup> Homelessness is connected to an interpretative frame of housing as a physical dwelling and to an epistemic community that favours positivist, empirical knowledge. According to Bevir and Kedar (2008, 509–510), a naturalistic definition may generate “law like generalizations endowed with explanatory power”, but such atomization of concepts hinders the possibility of more holistic explanations. Reducing the experience of homelessness to the lack of physical housing may also be interpreted as an example of epistemic drift, as described by Elzinga (1997). Epistemic drift is identified when changes in knowledge occur, where long-known complex phenomena are reduced to empirically observable phenomena, caused by the need for research to achieve validation by external factors such as policy makers. The definition created a discursive rupture by reframing the situation of persons experiencing homelessness within a discourse dominated by materialistic elements. Persons sleeping rough had been thematized in both research and policies for several decades (see e.g. Ramsøy et al. 1971), although from discursive fields of health, criminology and social policies. The Norwegian definition of homelessness of 1997 may consequently be interpreted as reducing a complex phenomenon to a “brick- and mortar problem”, as Kemeny (1992) argued was found generally in housing research.

*The survey of homelessness* (Ulfrstad 1997) was initiated by The Norwegian Institute of Building Research and financed by the ministries responsible for health, social care, housing and work. The aim was to produce a knowledge base for a governmental effort

to reduce homelessness. The definition of homelessness was constructed, and citizens experiencing homelessness according to the definition were counted. Following the 1997 survey, the *Equitable Redistribution White Paper* (ERWP) of 1998 put homelessness on the policy agenda. The researcher responsible for the survey was engaged by the government to write the sections addressing homelessness, the discourse in the ERWP is to a certain extent a continuation of the discourse shaped in the survey. The text in the ERWP also builds on the then on-going research project, later published in *The support system aimed at homeless persons* (Ulfrstad 1999), where a service sector addressing homelessness is constructed and evaluated.

The support system, that is the theme of this study, is a construct on our part. There is no support system aimed at homeless in Norwegian municipalities in the sense of one responsible organization, or an organized coordination of relevant measures and institutions (Ulfrstad 1999, 3)

A central argument in that project, pursued in the ERWP, was that the service sector's lack of attention to the housing problems of those without housing arrangements caused homelessness when combined with housing shortage. The lack of attention was explained by two factors: the common belief the service sector that drug use and/or mental health issues were the causes of homelessness, and the lack of competence and coordination in the municipalities responsible for providing services (Ulfrstad 1999, 12). I interpret this as an active statement that dismantles the discourse structuring experienced homelessness dominating at that time. The interpretative frames of health, justice and social policies are rejected, while that of housing is introduced as the main structuring element. The absence of physical housing, a structural problem, now explains why some individuals had severe challenges in managing their everyday life, such as difficulties in obtaining/keeping a job, mental illness and drug use. Consequently, the solution is housing, as opposed to treatment or increased income, and the responsibility for solving the situation is linked to the sector governing housing policies. Furthermore, the construction and evaluation of a support system aimed at homeless persons substantiate the discourse where the lack of housing structures the phenomenon of experienced homelessness. No municipal unit or system had the responsibility according to the category of homelessness at that time; thus, the report placed the responsibility of service provision within non-existent municipal units. The term *unorganized* is frequently used to describe this service system, and a lack of competence in housing issues is identified. The project concluded that, "we have not had any national policy aimed at homelessness, and thus no national strategies to house the homeless" (Ulfrstad 1999, 116). Given that both homelessness and a policy field addressing the phenomenon are constructs made within the research project, this seems to be a self-evident conclusion.

However, despite what I interpret as an active engagement to communicate structuring elements embedded in a housing discourse, the ERWP discourse at times diverges from such a phenomenal structure. Elements representing other interpretative schemes, mainly linked to drug use, mental illness and poverty circulate in the text, contributing to a discourse where several interpretive frames are represented. Health-related issues are acknowledged as causing the need for comprehensive care and a customized housing situation, and the term *complex situation* is used to describe the life of those experiencing homelessness.



For homeless people who have additional difficulties such as mental disorders or substance abuse, the social service must assess the level of function of the homeless in relation to housing or independent living skills. Many people may need a more comprehensive assistance package, where housing is included as part of a larger interdisciplinary 'aid package' (ERWP 1998, 237).

*Independent living skills*<sup>5</sup> comprise a central classification, defined by Brodtkorp (2001) as belonging to an interpretative frame of health services. Using this classification shifts the causal explanation from structural factors, such as available housing, to individual living skills that involves psychological and social aspects of keeping a home. Persons who lack the skills needed to master independent living shall receive compensating services; thus, the classification activates the responsibility of health and social services. The ERWP's recommended course of action is to address homelessness through the development of housing units according to a "staircase model".<sup>6</sup> The staircase model accommodates not only the structural element of availability of housing units but also the individual element where independent living skills need to evolve gradually.

A model that is used in most Swedish municipalities is the staircase model. In this model each step is a step in a progression towards own housing. The steps are legally regulated so that one can enter with sanctions. The stairs may for instance start with moving out of hospices or other low threshold services, the further progression goes through various training and transitional housing. Social services are connected to the housing unit, the right to privacy, control, security of tenancy increase for each step, so does the housing standard (ERWP 1998, 259)

The quote also illustrates how the shaping of a knowledge structure was inspired by Nordic and European research on homelessness. The researchers responsible for the above-mentioned reports, as well as for the text in the ERWP, were involved in a building research institute and connected to other housing researchers through networks. The idea to thematize homelessness as a housing policy issue developed through interactions in these networks. Examples of this is how the definition is an almost exact copy of the one used in Sweden (Ulfrstad 1997, 11), and that the emphasis on housing structures and availability, rather than individual resources, echoes the research and policy found in Britain at that time (Pleace and Quilgars 2003; Jacobs, Kemeny, and Manzi 1999). Interactions within networks, such as *Feantsa*<sup>7</sup> and *The Nordic Network for Research on Homelessness*, significantly contributed to the development of a knowledge platform. In-government experts were also invited to seminars within the frames of these networks, accommodating interactions and further diffusion of international research and knowledge. Thus, core elements structuring homelessness in the ERWP entered the discourse through interactions and inspirations that were found internationally.

Although the discourse structuring homelessness in the ERWP seems to balance several interpretative frames, the text addressing homelessness has no references to the knowledge obtained from outside the housing research networks. The sources that provide knowledge of homelessness in Norway are based on data materials from the survey and interviews with municipal employees. There are no references to sources exploring the causes of homelessness nor to data obtained from interviews or contacts with persons experiencing homelessness. Elsewhere in the ERWP, two other cited studies<sup>8</sup> investigate the housing situation of drug users and their experience with the lack of stable housing. These studies are based on a rich amount of data, including both surveys and

qualitative interviews, providing knowledge of the situations of persons experiencing homelessness in the Norwegian context. However, these studies are embedded in an interpretative frame of drug and health research, and it seems that this knowledge has not entered the discourse on homelessness. This may have been caused by epistemic networks' failure to acknowledge this as relevant to the material lack of housing, or the boundaries of such networks have caused the lack of attention to knowledge from other interpretative frames.

### ***Developing and Implementing Knowledge Structure***

The ERWP was followed by the development of organizational infrastructure; the government-led *Project Homeless* was established in 2001. Norway's major municipalities were invited to participate in what was described as a project aimed at developing and implementing knowledge, models and methods for fighting homelessness in Norway.<sup>9</sup> A way of securing the implementation of knowledge, in addition to the development of practice, was the establishment of educational programmes, available for municipal employees.

The evaluation of Project Homeless was an important initiative to secure further knowledge-based policies and practice. The four-year project period resulted in four evaluation reports,<sup>10</sup> the evaluations were all conducted by researchers at the Norwegian Building Research Institute. Project Homeless pursued the ERWP. The naturalistic interpretative frame of a housing discourse was dominant, but other interpretative frames also affected the discourse, as indicated by the terms used in the project description addressing the situation of persons experiencing homelessness, such as *level of function* and *assistance needs*. The municipalities were expected to develop housing solutions that accommodated the staircase model. This presence of several interpretative frames in Project Homeless seemed to have created the opportunity for the municipalities to approach the issue of homelessness according to their interpretation of the phenomenon; housing solutions were mainly developed within the health and welfare sector. The evaluators questioned this and were explicit in their interpretation of homelessness as a housing issue (Hansen, Dyb, and Holm 2002, 15–16). I interpret this as interpretation battles between the municipalities and the evaluators, concerning the categories *homeless vs. drug-user*, and whether the solution was a *staircase model* or a *normalization model*. A normalization model downplays more individual aspects of experienced homelessness and expects everyone to benefit from obtaining ordinary, scattered housing (Harvey 1998).<sup>11</sup> The first evaluation report recommended abandoning the staircase model (Hansen, Dyb, and Holm 2002, 16). This immediately affected Project Homeless, whose revised description (2002) recommended the normalization model, with reference to the evaluation.

The dichotomies of drug user versus homeless and staircase model versus normalization model find problems and solutions in individuals or structures, respectively. The interpretative frame of drug use has more of an individual focus, resembling the evaluation of independent living skills found in the staircase model. The definition of homelessness and the normalization model find the cause and the solution in structures as they focus on the availability of housing. The evaluators emphasized the need to address the problem of homelessness as a housing availability problem all throughout the evaluation

period and questioned whether the municipalities involved in Project Homeless had an exaggerated focus on the individual approach embedded in a drug-abuse perspective (Dyb 2003b, 53). In the last evaluation report, Project Homeless was described as a “housing-led” strategy. The move away from the staircase model to a normalization model was evaluated as vital for the project's development (Dyb 2005, 8–13); “Project Homeless became a housing project” (Dyb 2005, 9). The staircase and normalization models were developed within a discourse embedded in housing research and were structured around the role of housing. Other models that aimed to address the situation of persons experiencing homelessness were neither discussed in the ERWP nor in the evaluation of Project Homeless. In the project serving as the ERWP's knowledge base, a sub-project (Brodtkorp 2001) suggested using a resource-converter model to understand and address homelessness. The model embodies an individual who controls the resources, such as education, health or social competence, that may be invested in daily life arenas and converted to activities that produce returns. The returns can then be reinvested. The resources controlled by the persons experiencing homelessness often yield few returns in mainstream society. This causes the need to strengthen individual resources in parallel with securing access to housing, if adequate living conditions constitute the objective (Brodtkorp 2001, 26–8, 87–9). In addressing both individual resources and structural conditions the resource-converter model avoids the dichotomy of the staircase model versus the normalization model. There are neither references to this sub-project based on the knowledge of homelessness in Norway, nor discussions of the suggested model. The recommendation to pursue the normalization model in the evaluation are, on the other hand, referred to as informed by Swedish and other European research on homelessness (Dyb 2003a, 10–11). There are several examples of how international knowledge transfer was accommodated, among them seminars that gathered researchers and in-government experts. However, the only research presented from a Norwegian context was from the researchers conducting the evaluation, and the reports from the seminars<sup>12</sup> show how international influences were accommodated within the frames of an epistemic network.

The evaluation further emphasizes an insufficient level of knowledge in the municipal service sector. Evaluative statements, such as “The municipalities have to a limited degree services aimed at helping homeless persons to acquire housing” and “There are indications that the service sector has contributed to a further marginalization of the group” (Dyb 2003b, 47) appear as arguments in favour of establishing a housing-oriented practice. From a discursive field of homelessness, the lack of competence might seem like a reasonable conclusion. Brodtkorp (2001, 83) interprets this differently, finding several sectors with services addressing the needs of the homeless, including their housing situation; however, cooperation among sectors should be improved. This shows how the evaluation of the competence level may vary according to the interpretative frame and whether the construction “a sector for services aimed at the homeless” is accepted or rejected. The evaluation concludes that Project Homeless had contributed to a move within the service sector, exemplified in statements such as “An important contribution of Project Homeless seems to be a new approach to the group of drug abusers, where control is replaced with help and care” (Dyb 2003b, 56). This conclusion seems like an exaggerated effect, if viewed from the interpretative frame of health and drug use. Harm reduction has been recognized in drug policies since 1997, an approach

that accepts the need for help and care, rather than control and punishment, to minimize harm (Johansen and Myhre 2004).

Parallel to Project Homeless, a committee reporting on housing policies was appointed. This resulted in the NOU 2002:2 *Housing Markets and Policy*, followed by the white paper *About Housing Policy* (no. 23 2003–2004). The white paper builds on the committee's recommendations, as well as the evaluation of Project Homeless, and declares that the government aims to fight homelessness through a national strategy. The strategy's main objectives and performance measures considered the housing unit, the government emphasized a structural approach to homelessness (Mld.St. 23 2003–2004, 43), and the housing sector proclaimed responsibility for the strategy. The move from the ERWP discourse which contained elements from several discursive fields, to a discourse dominated by housing and a structural approach, fits the naturalistic definition from 1997. Thus, in the policy papers of 2004 the discourse and the policy field appear consolidated, establishing homelessness as a housing issue that is best solved within the housing sector.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The definition of homelessness serves as the starting point for the development of the discourse and a policy field. However, even though the definition was naturalistic, the discourse at that time was more balanced. The ERWP communicated a discourse where the experience of homelessness was recognized as a complex situation, rather than the “brick-and-mortar” challenge (Kemeny 1992) that the naturalistic definition prepared for. The term *independent living skills* and the *staircase model* are examples of how the discourse deviated from the naturalistic definition, pointing to the individual's needs and abilities beyond housing, thereby connecting the responsibility for solving homelessness to other sectors. This may be interpreted as the first effort to create a more integrated discourse and understanding of homelessness that activate the responsibility of a broad range of actors or as a sign of an interpretative battle waged around the shaping of discourse. However, during the period of Project Homeless and the parallel committee work that addressed housing policies, the discourse appeared to have moved closer to the naturalistic definition. The term *independent living skills* was abandoned and even banned from the discourse; the normalization model replaced the staircase model. The shift weakened individual agency, and the construction of homelessness as a complex phenomenon. The need for services was acknowledged, but the main solution and responsibility were ascribed the housing sector.

The gradual change and consolidation of homelessness as a housing issue may be interpreted as an example of epistemic drift (Elzinga 1997), whereby the complex situation of persons experiencing homelessness is reduced to a housing issue. Following Bevir and Kedar's (2008, 512) argument, the definition of homelessness does not qualify as a social science concept because it, “(..) characteristically has to refer to objects that are constituted in part by meanings or beliefs”. The meaningfulness of social action, for example how a lack of trust in society affects the actions of those who have experienced long-term homelessness, must be integrated into strategies of explanations or concept formation to qualify as a social science concept. Barnes (1984, 205) argues that changes in knowledge and use are connected to specific collective goals and interests. I interpret the construction of a naturalistic classification of homelessness as a way of positioning housing in social policies, thereby creating a role for housing policies that exceeds securing a well-

functioning housing market. Homelessness was not on the agenda of housing policies prior to Project Homeless. The application of research in this process raises the question of whether the use served symbolic purposes, rather than problem solving, to legitimize the housing sector's role in social policies. The interaction of in-government experts and researchers within an epistemic community established a discourse corresponding to the naturalistic definition of 1996, and the policies to reduce homelessness became housing-led. The actors within the epistemic community also had the power to influence and establish infrastructure to ensure the discourse's circulation, affecting the situation of persons experiencing homelessness by constructing a recommended repertoire for action to end homelessness.

The shaping of discourse structuring homelessness, as it developed in the text documents, occurred without reference to the knowledge of experienced homelessness in Norway. Nevertheless, the policy field developed in close relation with research and researchers. Its point of departure was a research project, with a definition coined by the research team. Project Homeless was evaluated throughout the period, and seminars to accommodate expert interactions were arranged. Why this effort to obtain a knowledge base did not result in better knowledge of experienced homelessness, may be explained by the role of epistemic community. Knowledge developed within other interpretative frames existed but was not utilized. Differing epistemological perspectives, and the conviction that naturalistic frames of housing constitute the only possible topic to gain knowledge about, may have caused this ignorance. Homelessness understood solely within the interpretative frame of housing, by actors connected through epistemic communities, will produce knowledge that reflects that interpretative frame. Conclusions that the lack of attention to the housing need causes homelessness or that the services aimed at the homeless are unorganized, are examples of how the construction of terms and categories embedded in a specific discourse feeds back into the evaluation of the categorized phenomenon (Barnes 1984, 205).

The epistemic community may also have contributed to the transfer of knowledge obtained internationally within concurrent epistemic perspective, and made it seem relevant and even more useful than knowledge from the Norwegian context. The policy to reduce homelessness is repeatedly described as informed by studies from other countries. This knowledge has subsequently influenced the research in Norway, the researchers' recommendations and the construction of the policy field. The knowledge has materialized in models and dispositifs guiding practice, influencing the lives of persons experiencing homelessness. The Norwegian welfare state model, a liberalized housing market, and the characteristics of the homeless population in Norway should generate awareness and caution when adopting empirically based knowledge from other contexts. Moreover, the international research cited in the analyzed texts represents the empirical branch of homelessness research. Contributions that question this one-dimensional approach to homelessness (see e.g. Jacobs, Kemeny, and Manzi 1999) seem to have been ignored.

It appears that in-government experts have had an extensive mandate in developing this policy field. The fact that persons experiencing homelessness constitute a group with limited resources to exercise political pressure may have enabled this. Additionally, the policy field of housing received limited attention from politicians, as housing in the 1980s became regulated by the market (Sørvoll 2011), which helped enable an extensive. The

researchers seem mainly to have taken the role of issue advocates (Pielke 2007), engaging with policy makers, arguing to establish policies to reduce homelessness and imploring that these policies be housing led. The researchers' support of the normalization model as a solution to homelessness in the evaluation of Project Homeless serves as an example. This appears as an effort to establish the discourse of homelessness within the housing sector, considering both knowledge production and governing. Embracing the normalization model, where "normal" housing is perceived as the solution to a complex life situation, moves the discourse away from the interpretative frames of health and welfare and from interpretations that consider individual agency.

The combination of issue advocate and in-government experts with an extensive mandate to apply knowledge and transfer it to dispositifs and the organizational structure is a powerful mix. The concept of epistemic community unfolds and makes possible an interpretation of policy making as a process where in-government experts and researchers interact within the same discursive and epistemic frame. Such a model influences knowledge accumulation. The research cited in the policy papers is, with few exceptions, mandated, affected by the roles of in-government experts and validated by criteria external to the sphere of science. Gundersen (2018) raises the question of whether researchers who are mainly preoccupied with mandated science should be understood as experts rather than scientists. This is also reflected by Jasanoff (1990, 228): "The experts are painfully aware that what they are doing is not science in any ordinary sense, but a hybrid activity that combines elements of scientific evidence and reasoning with large doses of social and political judgement". Mandated science is an important part of the knowledge-based policy regime. However, interactions within an epistemic community result in an interactive model, where the researchers also influence the mandate of the commissioned research. In this case, sources providing knowledge on experienced homelessness in Norway, from interpretative frames of drug use and poverty, were ignored. Research strengthening the housing perspective, rather than exploring homelessness, was included. The experts exercised their power, intentionally or unintentionally, to steer the knowledge production and policy making in a direction heavily influenced by an epistemic community. This may have contributed to the "endarkening" (Weiss 1979) of the understanding of experienced homelessness in Norway, rather than to its enlightening.

Policies aimed at homelessness in Norway is (at the time of this writing) framed by the more general strategy Housing for Welfare (2014–2020), whose significant elements are the definition of homelessness and a housing-led approach. Few studies have addressed homelessness from perspectives other than the established discourse or attempted a reflexive take on the established knowledge structure. There is a lack of knowledge about the experienced lives of the homeless or the pathways of homelessness (described in Clapham 2018; Somerville 2013). The definition of homelessness is a central force that provides a practical advantage to methodological strategies, such as counting the number of persons lacking physical housing, and a causal explanation where the lack of housing is the cause of all ills. Stated differently, obtaining housing is defined as the solution to all problems. The definition shapes the discourse in this policy field and prevents interpretive frames other than those belonging to an epistemic community embedded in a housing discourse to enlighten the situation. Gaining a proper understanding of the situation as homeless requires formulating concepts that are objects of

validation by social science rather than policy needs, preferably in dialogue with the studied social actors.

## Notes

1. From the Greek *episteme* (knowledge).
2. Homelessness is a theme within the broader frames of disadvantaged in the Housing market.
3. Official Norwegian reports are the result of working groups constituted by Government.
4. To reflect the materialistic definition, and the Norwegian term *bostedsløs*, a more accurate English expression would be *without access to housing*. The term *homeless* is established in the English literature, also when describing the Norwegian situation, and was therefore used.
5. *Boevne* in Norwegian.
6. At that time described in Harvey (1998), as one out of three constructed ideal types developed in the context of Scotland, the two others being a *chain* and *normalization model*.
7. European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless.
8. Lauritzen et al. (1997) and Rossow, Skretting, and Amundsen (1998).
9. See for example Project Report by the Norwegian State Housing Bank 2001–2004.
10. Hansen, Dyb, and Holm (2002), Dyb (2003a, 2003b, 2005).
11. This expectation makes the model similar to Housing First (HF) as developed by Pathways to Housing (see e.g. Tsemberis 2010). They differ in that HF is an integrated program addressing several other issues than the housing situation, such as employment, health etc.
12. Referred to in *Bostadsløshet som problem och politik* (2002) and *Bostedsløshet I Norden* (2003).

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