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## In Search of Transformative Practice: Outreach Work Tactics for Perpetuating Symbolic Boundaries [AQ2](#)

**Left running head:** Hans Grymonprez et al.

**Short title :** In Search of Transformative Practice [AQ1](#)

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### Abstract

Health services, social welfare, housing and an adequate standard of living are all part of the economic, social and cultural rights which should be accessible to all. These rights are, however, not realised for all and societal resources are not accessible to all. In this respect, outreach work is a promising social work approach as it is often deployed to target, engage and bring individuals back into contact with services. Nevertheless, it is argued that outreach work leaves the mainstream unchallenged. We therefore examine the transformational potential of outreach work ([authors own Grymonprez & Roose, 2019](#)). Theoretically, we draw on the concept of symbolic boundaries, which are conceptual distinctions drawn between people and groups. This article contains an in-depth analysis of outreach work practice with marginalised homeless individuals in the Belgian city of Antwerp. We identified three conceptual distinctions important for the construction of symbolic boundaries: predictability, complexity and housing readiness. Our analysis identifies a range of tactics used by outreach workers to transform these boundaries. Such tactics may be helpful for social workers interested in transformational practice in contexts where challenging the mainstream is not seen as a mandate for outreach workers. [AQ5](#)

Based on an empirical study in the context of outreach social workers targeting homeless people, this article discusses how outreach social work can be important to illuminate and challenge the boundaries between welfare or health organisations and homeless people. Such boundaries are not characteristic for homeless people but are often the effect of how services are organised and functioning. Social workers can take up a mandate to support fundamental change in how services are organised and functioning.

**Keywords:** transformative practice, homelessness, outreach social work, boundaries

## Introduction

The extent to which welfare services are accessible is a central concern in the welfare state, social policy and social work. These concerns are guided by principles of human rights, fundamental social rights and citizenship (Harris, 1999; Dean, 2015). Clarke argues that access ‘is a claim to be a citizen: to possess rights and the capacity to make legitimate demands on the state’ (2004, p. 216). In times of globalisation, market imperatives in social policy and increasing welfare conditionalities, together with the persistence of the social conditions which initiated the construction of the welfare state, the guiding principles are under pressure. It therefore remains relevant to question access politics and practices empirically. For instance, in the context of this study, the Flemish decree on local social policy (Flanders is the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) clearly reflects the link between accessibility, social rights and social citizenship. The decree aims to guarantee a maximal level of access to social rights as described in the Belgian constitution. Of paramount importance is the notion of the right to live a life in human dignity. This includes the right of everyone to social security, the protection of health and to adequate housing. In this sense, homelessness is not the canary in the coalmine but a disgrace violating fundamental rights on a daily basis. Hence, accessible and targeted support to meet the needs of homeless persons remains crucial (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010). This is particularly the case for homeless persons perceived as being out of reach of services, whose basic human rights and human dignity are violated on a daily basis and whose ‘citizenship as practice’ no longer fits the societal demands and norms important to claiming access to social services.

Outreach work is an example of such a targeted approach. In a critical commentary published in this journal, Szeintuch (2015) argues that all outreach work shares two beliefs: (i) there are hidden populations that other services fail to reach; and (ii) engaging them will enhance their access to services, meeting their needs. As Smith and Hall argue: ‘outreach workers are attempting their clients that “the system”, with all its frustrations and bureaucratic hurdles, is the correct path to take’ (2017, p. 379). Hence, a dominant conceptualisation in the literature is that of outreach work as a bridge. Nonetheless, we argue that this conceptualisation fails to capture fully the transformative potential of outreach social work interventions (authors-own Grymonprez, Roose & Roets, 2017) . authors-own Grymonprez and Roose (2019) identified two perspectives on outreach work. First and dominant is the universalist view, which is inspired by post-positivist perspectives advocating to keep access manageable. The second, to which we aim to contribute, is the transformative view, based on constructivist perspectives on reality, conceptualising outreach work as an open process grounded in proximity to and reflexivity about the situations in which they intervene (authors-own Grymonprez, Roose & Roets, 2017, Grymonprez & Roose, 2019). Pursuing this second view further, we aim to explore the transformational potential of outreach work.

In this study, we draw on outreach work as boundary work and on the concept of symbolic boundaries as an analytical tool for highlighting the transformative potential of outreach work. As boundary work, outreach work refers to practices ‘in which services and identity are negotiated’ (Rowe, 1999, p. 81). Symbolic boundaries comprise a variety of conceptual distinctions categorising people, objects, practices and so forth (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). Hence, our focus is on how transformation might be triggered in the negotiations between outreach workers and service agents. Boundaries are crucial for understanding social work. Slembrouck and Hall argue that the social ‘comes into existence when the boundaries are being negotiated’ (Slembrouck and Hall, 2014, p. 73). Accordingly, outreach work can be seen not as a tool to end problems with access but rather as a means of ‘practising accessibility’, in which outreach work is seen as a tool for reflection on societal and structural issues (authors own Grymonprez, Roose & Roets, 2017). Before we discuss our study, we elaborate on what symbolic boundaries are and in what way symbolic boundaries are referred to in outreach literature. We then outline the meaning of transformation and transformational social work.

## Symbolic boundaries

Lamont and Molnár (2002, p. 168) distinguish social boundaries from symbolic boundaries. Whilst social boundaries refer to social differences, e.g. lack of income, and how they relate to unequal access, unequal distribution of resources and social opportunities, our focus in this article is directed towards symbolic boundaries. These play much more at the intersubjective level and engage with very diverse phenomena (Puetz, 2018). Lamont and Molnár describe symbolic boundaries as follows:


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*Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality (2015, p. 168).*


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Hence, these boundaries are fundamental for how reality is defined and who is defined as being on either side of any line of difference. For instance, notions such as ‘hard to reach’ (Andersson, 2013) and ‘care-avoiders’ (Maesele *et al.*, 2013) are popular in outreach literature. Moreover, they are often the rationale for deploying outreach interventions. But such notions do not capture some kind of essentialist feature of marginalised individuals. Homeless persons may have good reasons for developing a lack of confidence in service agencies and may even mistrust outreach workers closely associated with them (Kryda and Compton, 2009~~8~~). Symbolic boundaries, as socially constructed and often shifting lines of difference, are important in the construction of problem definitions and client constructions and how these mould access policies and practices. As such, they play a role in power relations, in the distribution and accessibility of collective resources and in processes of inequality.

Despite this very concise introduction, it becomes clear that identifying and critically deconstructing the symbolic boundaries that emerge from the negotiations between outreach workers and service agents, and the cultural attitudes and practices the latter maintain, is crucial for our research purpose.

As argued in our introduction, the concept of boundaries is not novel in research on outreach work. Gibson's study of street kids (2011) discusses outreach work, utilising a variety of performance theories that focus on themes such as practice, agency, subjectivity and power. In his moral ethnography of outreach work in Paris, Cefai (2014)  {Comment by Author: Cefai, D. (2015) 'Outreach Work in Paris: A Moral Ethnography of Social Work and Nursing with Homeless People', *Human Studies*, 38, 137–156, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-014-9328-y>} uses the pragmatic ethics of Dewey's valuation: outreach work is linked with professional instructions and institutional prescriptions, but these are embodied in their relationship with homeless individuals. Nonetheless, this practical embodiment is dependent on outreach workers and targeted individuals having sufficient space to come to a negotiated and shared problem definition within the contexts and complexities of everyday life. In a similar vein, Smith (2011) argued that the normalisation ritual, referring to the process through which stigma is suspended and problematic knowledge concerning individuals at the margins is denied, occurs mainly within the outreach encounter. But are these rituals witnessed in the mainstream? And do they lead to transformation in the mainstream?

## Transformative social work

In his discussion of transformative social work, Witkin (2017) describes transformation as a foundational and systemic shift and includes a change for instance in the nature of knowledge or what constitutes reality. Transformation, Witkin argues, refers not to a predefined end state but to that point where something foundational occurs and is identified and articulated (2017). Hence, transformational change is located in new ways of thinking, as opposed to modernist thinking. Of course, modernist thinking is not bad and social work is rooted in modernity, but it has been criticised for overlooking voices from the margins, approaching social problems in terms of (calculable) risks and often seeming to go hand in hand with processes of categorisation and stigmatisation. For instance, research points at practices of differentiating between 'difficult' patients in mental health care, such as unwilling or worrisome care-avoiders or ambivalent care-seekers (Koekkoek *et al.*, 2006)  {Comment by Author: Koekkoek replaced with Koekkoek which now matches the reference in the reference list} Our ambition is therefore not directed at illuminating how outreach work might foster more, or easier, access to services systems. Nor do we want to prescribe that homeless individuals should make use of services. Our aim is to capture how outreach workers deal with emergent symbolic boundaries and challenge the knowledge constructions shaping those boundaries. Transformational sensitivity is not taken for granted. Outreach workers are not transformational because of their position but because their position allows them to develop a transformational agenda (~~authors own~~ Grymonprez & Roose, 2019). Nonetheless, we need to

bear in mind that the negotiations of outreach workers with service agencies are drowned in a range of power relations between themselves and other professions, between the voice of homeless individuals and how these voices are articulated in inter-agency networks. Hence, an important issue is whether outreach workers act ‘as transformative intellectuals who do not succumb to power, but engage in uncovering, confronting and resisting power’ (Cowden & Singh and Cowden, 2007, p. 492).  
{Comment by Author: Please add following reference to the reference list Cowden, S., & Singh, G (2007). The ‘User’: Friend, foe or fetish?: A critical exploration of user involvement in health and social care. Critical Social Policy, 27(1), 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018307072205> }

## Context of the study

Our fieldwork was undertaken between September 2015 and March 2017 in the context of an outreach team in Antwerp, the largest Flemish city in the northern part of Belgium. Despite its harbour of global importance, Antwerp is a relatively poor city with low average incomes and higher risks on the poverty index. (Raeymaeckers et al., 2017). Demand on low thresholds in services, public welfare and social housing is high (Meys and Hermans, 2014); (Comment by Author: 2014 matches the reference); Verstraete et al., 2018). Outreach work increasingly gained the attention of the local government and in 2013 existing street and outreach work initiatives were regrouped into a single outreach team (authors own Grymonprez & Roose, 2019). The team and its eleven outreach workers are part of a regional private welfare organisation but are supervised and evaluated by the local public administration. Their main target group is defined as ‘vulnerable homeless persons who live on the streets and have mental health and/or drug abuse issues, and whose behaviour on the street is perceived as a nuisance’ (Huygen, 2018). According to the year report of 2017, the outreach workers meet their clients in various public and semi-public spaces; generating 2,443 contacts, they offered needle exchange and more intensive support to 354 individuals (Huygen, 2018). In winter, they reach out to ‘hot-spots’ with coffee, sandwiches and warm clothes. These ‘territorial practices’ (Smith and Hall, 2018) are alternated with processes of negotiation with a large variety of service agencies (see also Farinas, 2018; De Corte et al., 2017). In that vein, the local government argued that solutions for dealing with homelessness are very fragmented across a range of agencies and service systems (De Bie et al., 2015). Therefore, a network governance approach (named Kadans) was implemented by the local government in 2015. Kadans is an organisational and field cross-cutting cooperation between the police, judicial officers, social work and local government (De Bie et al., 2015). The main aim of Kadans is to guarantee coordination and continuity of care and to reduce the public nuisance for which their target group is held responsible. The outreach work team is seen as pivotal for targeting and assessing individuals eligible for Kadans as they function as outreach case managers for engaged individuals with a Kadans case plan.

## Methodology

This article is based on a cross-sectional analysis of data from multiple research activities executed during nineteen months on and off in the field. With the aim of becoming familiar with the setting, participant observation was undertaken during street work. Gradually our focus shifted towards team and various network meetings (not Kadans, as we were not allowed to do participant observation) and ad hoc meetings (e.g. with lawyers, housing agents, welfare workers). Five team meetings and ten network and ad hoc meetings were audiotaped and transcribed. On a regular basis, the first author discussed his reflections and preliminary findings with the second author. We proceeded with an 'interpretative focus interview' (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007) with the outreach team to present emerging findings and discussed these in relation to real-life cases. This interactive approach enabled us to capture the workers' narratives about several real-life cases. We were thereby put in a position to direct fieldwork more purposively towards three 'critical cases' (Patton, 2014). These cases were chosen on pragmatic grounds but foremost on the basis of theoretical arguments concerning persistent issues with access and impairment of human dignity. Finally, we conducted retrospective interviews with each of the three outreach workers covering nineteen months of their boundary work. As our raw material contained critical processes, we used a directed approach to content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Hence, we used deductive and inductive coding and formed and revised operational descriptions. Rather than fixed analytical units, the identified symbolic boundaries are sensitising constructs and need further research.

This study is authorised by the Ethical Commission of our department at ~~(Ghent)~~ [AQ6](#) University. The narratives presented of the critical cases are anonymised (with fictive names) and scrambled with crucial information equally recognisable in similar cases in order to pay respect and protect privacy. We proceed with the presentation of three narratives of our critical cases. Each narrative reveals a different boundary. We then show how transformative practice in these cases unfolds.

## The narrative of Ronnie

We start with the first critical case. His name is Ronnie. In his younger years, Ronnie experimented with illegal drugs. After years of abuse, he developed serious mental issues, which caused him much harm. His relationship with his own informal network became ambivalent, characterised by periods of frequent but highly instrumental contact, alternating with periods of repulsion. Over the years, many health and welfare services offered service, but often in vain. As his behaviour in public spaces and in contact with service agents has been experienced as highly problematic, support services fairly soon withdrew or he chose to quit. Due to legal violations, he was also under probation. Jumping from housing to street homelessness to shelter or a sofa somewhere, his relationship with the outreach worker was ongoing but erratic. When housed, his own logic of housekeeping rarely matched the social norms housing companies expect of their tenants. Ronnie expressed his need for support in such a way that most organisations considered him highly unpredictable. Other service agents involved



showed a degree of flexibility or discretion, but they had their limits.

In accordance with the contractual obligations of the outreach team, Ronnie was selected for Kadans. The various stakeholders in Kadans (local government, outreach work, drug and health workers, public prosecutor) composed a case plan, without his participation. Kadans uses a Dutch adaptation of the validated Self Sufficiency Matrix. Thus, all the partners involved contributed to filling in the matrix, which forms the starting point for designing a case plan. Hence, the case plan was based on the assumption that a correct assessment of Ronnie's self-reliance would result in improved predictability of his behaviour to the standards higher up on the matrix. In practice, his living conditions did not improve at all—to the contrary. Whilst the outreach workers remained close by on his turf, it became clear there was a profound mismatch between the starting assumptions, predicted outcomes and the way his daily life unfolded. Looking back at the whole situation, the outreach worker argued:

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*Everyone should realise that quite a deal of that planning and arranging is for our own sake and not theirs (retrospective interview, 18 October 2017).*

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In the end, things turned out badly and further support from Kadans ground to a halt. It was argued that the kind of help he really needed simply did not exist. In the meantime, he breached his probation conditions. Whilst waiting for new conditions, further legal counselling was cut off, just like that. Ronnie entered a kind of limbo. During our participant observation, we realised that taking on responsibility for Ronnie's situation, which agencies perceive as too unpredictable, is a risky gamble they rather prefer to avoid. Outreach clients like Ronnie likely mean trouble. Often they are already under pressure due to increasing output management, or follow-up support is lacking. Hence responsibility is redirected towards outreach workers to fill that limbo. Hence, Ronnie's outreach workers are expected to support him to that point where his situation might be perceived as more predictable.

Hence, rather than 'outreach as bridge', outreach work functions as a 'waiting room' or as a 'release valve' for pressure experienced elsewhere, which hampers working for transformation with other professionals or agencies. Service agencies find in outreach work and its characteristics of flexibility and proximity an acceptable legitimization of their own disconnection. Hence, disconnection is a derivative of the importance of predictability in professional, managerial or scientific conduct. But service agents also seem to moralise predictability as they match their conduct to the 'unpredictable nature' of homeless persons, which complicates their work.



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*So now she (quote from the third critical case) is finally housed, and now she wants a residential admission, that is typical for this group (homelessness interagency meeting, 16 February 2017).*

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Whilst situational, this quote is also revealing. Lack of predictability draws lines of difference between homeless individuals—those adaptable to predefined routes and predictable outcomes and to which they are very engaged, and those who are not:

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*Homeless individuals regarded as without an clear need for shelter are referred to the outreach team, the others can apply to the dispatch team of the public welfare agency (homelessness interagency meeting, 16 February 2017).*

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## **The narrative of Branco**

Over to our second case. Street life undermined Branco's physical and mental condition and all options for more specialised help appeared to fail. He was often discharged from hospital because of a violation of rules or he ran away as pressures bore in on him. Admissions always ended up in conflict. Due to the terror attacks in Brussels in 2016, soldiers and federal police agents were explicitly present in public spaces and many homeless people, as well as outreach workers with 'Islamic looks', felt hunted. Branco's life in public spaces deteriorated and alarmed many actors involved, who felt distraught. Although outreach workers and statutory case managers preferred compulsory hospitalisation, his GP refused to advise it. His argument was ethical rather than medical. One option after another was discarded as Branco became increasingly suspicious and his medical problems worsened.

It became apparent that the whole situation needed to be unlocked. The entwining of his deteriorating physical, mental and social conditions interfered with the way in which the produced and shared knowledge of this complex situation provoked increasing hesitation about situations that were perceived as too complex. As in the case of Ronnie, Branco found himself in limbo. Outreach workers often feel failed in their role of negotiating access and in some cases they form moral judgements about professionals around the table with whom they often have to share sensitive information about their clients. In fact, the position is that sensitive information, particularly when it adds to the complexity of a case, may as well be deployed as a counter-indication. Hence, the multi-actor perspective of the network in which outreach workers are involved and which is developed for mutual learning in what is perceived as the most complex cases does not prevent benchmarking to their

agencies' inclusion criteria. Each actor involved may come up with counter-indications to fully engaging themselves or they do not have a mandate to take up engagement. Agents take part in the discussion but complexity rules out options for unlocking cases like these.

Whilst Branco's situation might seem hopeless, he shows sufficient agency to remain in control. He clearly expresses his need for a safe place, but on his terms. But Branco's ways of being swift to challenge rules and regulations confirm the sense of complexity surrounding him.

### **The narrative of Cindy**

The third critical case is about Cindy, who has been in frequent contact with the outreach team for a very long time. We narrow her story to her struggle for adequate housing and how housing readiness is important for understanding her progressively deteriorating situation. Each time involving extensive negotiations between all stakeholders, various available housing options were tried but they all failed due to her not feeling safe, issues with neighbours, insecure contracts or lack of follow-up support.

The Flemish housing market favours ownership and the social housing market is underdeveloped with long waiting lists of up to eight years. Nonetheless, being homeless or temporary sheltered is an important eligibility criterion for obtaining a higher ranking. In practice:

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*Enrolling our clients on the waiting lists of housing companies sets all alarms on (team meeting, 1 March 2016).*


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Bad tenants are perceived as a problem. Housing owners are not well disposed to tenants who damage their property. In terms of social cohesion, individuals like Cindy are also considered a risk they would rather not take. A major dispute between the outreach team and the social service of the housing company is that they enrol clients who are not housing-ready at all. The outreach workers appear to have developed two tactics: on the one hand, they are quite cynical as they feel that they enrol their most housing-ready clients; whilst on the other hand, they like to send clients far less housing-ready as a crucial test of the assignment procedure. After all, housing readiness is not a formal criterion.

In the following chapter, we show how transformational practice unfolds. In the case of Cindy, we show some of the limits to boundary work, as the transformational agenda was not the road taken.

### **Finding transformational practice**

Ronnie's outreach worker, who is a trained psychiatric social worker, learned to deal with the many uncertainties and ambiguities Ronnie brings with him. It is important that the uncertainties and

ambiguities be located in the outreach worker and his position. Initially thinking that he was losing his grip on his professional standards and knowledge base, he learned to engage more reflexively with those uncertainties and ambiguities. Reflexivity is an important feature in social work but is threatened by the certainties of professional, scientific and managerial conduct. Grymonprez, Roose & Roets ~~authors own~~ (2017) showed that reflexivity is essential for a social constructionist approach to outreach work. Reflexivity means being aware of how sense is made of situations and questioning how knowledge is generated in relation to power (D’Cruz *et al.*, 2007  {Comment by Author: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcl001>}). Whilst learning to remain approachable however and whenever Ronnie popped up, the outreach worker understood that allowing unpredictability is crucial. Agents in service agencies also know this but as the following remark shows, it is not the common sense in our society:

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*A fundamental assumption is the malleability of our society and human beings. We too readily assume we can fix everything (chief manager local drug treatment centre, 21 October 2015).*

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However, we cannot know the real world, only a representation of it (Cowden & Singh ~~Singh and Cowden~~, 2007). Hence, many representations are possible and what counts in outreach work is remaining close to Ronnie’s representations. The question is how to transfer reflexivity into agency contexts where reflexivity is in tension with the need and desire for predictability. In a discussion between shelter workers and outreach workers, participants commented:

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*Trust, in terms of asking fewer questions and less paperwork before someone gets in offers, is a better foundation for guiding people from the street towards shelters (homelessness interagency meeting, 16 February 2017).*

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It involves luck, persuasion and a belief within agencies in investing in establishing a social relationship. In one of the Antwerp shelters, for instance, outreach workers often visit the centre and allow homeless individuals to get used to the setting and decide whether or not to stay. The whole setup is more light-hearted, with less professional seriousness:

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*A big advantage is unconditional access, without obstacles, for homeless people in precarious living conditions. It is the only way to enable people to hook on (retrospective interview, 27 January 2017).*

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Ronnie's behaviour was no longer benchmarked to predictability but to his human agency and to responsiveness on the part of the shelter worker from his agency. Other shelters prefer rather stick to their target groups. They relate this to the importance of diversification, which is not a problem as long as they are reflexively 'looking outward' (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2007) to the political and cultural dimensions which shape diversification processes. In that vein, the outreach worker described his role as a pedagogical role with service agents in terms of keeping open alternative possibilities that challenge the predefined repertoires of access (retrospective interview, 27 January 2017). An example from another case is how a welfare agent was invited onto the turf of homeless individuals. Urgent medical assistance is a procedure for which undocumented homeless individuals need to contact a local welfare worker. She was invited by the outreach worker to go with them on the streets. As such, she lost bureaucratic control and needed to adapt to what was for her uncharted territory. This was a reflexive and boundary-interrupting act that offered her insights into the social dimension of the demeaning living conditions of undocumented homeless individuals and her own position as a welfare worker.

Back to the case of Branco. It became clear that reflexive positionality of outreach workers makes a difference in contexts where the boundaries are more strictly guarded. In that respect, medical staff in hospitals tend to socialise the medical problems of homeless individuals and argue that their social problems are too complex for them. Branco was completely exhausted physically and morally and in need of a time out. Of course, a housing strategy would have been more appropriate but was not an option. Through persistent negotiations between outreach workers, statutory case managers and the psychiatrist of a local hospital, admission and discharge criteria were approached less restrictively than they normally would allow. For a brief period, Branco could come and go on his own terms. All staff learned to allow more flexibility and more responsiveness towards Branco (communication at team meeting, 22 March 2016). Asked to reflect on this situation, the outreach worker responded:

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*You can't tell why you receive such a mandate or why not.... Above all, you have to deal with service agents who develop alternative perspectives and who, within their organisation, have the power to deviate from the usual procedures (retrospective interview, 18 October 2017).*

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In our contacts with the psychiatrist of that facility, he argued that the hospital setting, with its medical perspective and its knowledge claims, was not designed to deal with cases like Branco's. But he convinced his staff to be more open to the uncertainties and ambiguities and accepting of the diversity of how people express their needs. Hence, Branco was put in a position with more space for agency, whilst gaining a decision-making voice to which other actors inevitably had to relate. Admission and

discharge were no longer experienced as a failure but as a responsive act of engagement. As the situation remained complex, complexity was for the time being no longer a symbolic boundary but a starting point for dialogue.

Finally, the case of Cindy shows the limits of transformational practice, particularly when the residual strategies in social policy are unavoidable (Grymonprez, Roose & Roets ~~authors own~~, 2017). Key to understanding the limits for transformation in Cindy's case is the temporality of alternative housing strategies, housing of adequate quality and lack of sustained support. Overwhelmed, Cindy was sent to a new care hostel as her situation deteriorated further:

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*We found that the only good solution was housing with sufficient support, this since a long, very long time. But now the care hostel is there, and because over the years much damage has been done, we have argued that housing is no longer an option we will support (retrospective interview, 18 October 2017).*

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The care hostel, established by the local government, adopts similar principles and technologies and targets the same groups as Kadans and the outreach team. But if more structured solutions are lacking and transformative practice through outreach work fails, all actors involved may as well conform to the idea that homeless individuals are in the end better off in a residual circuit, designed for and adopted to their specific needs. And that is the point where outreach workers seem to succumb to power as it also seems a solution for pressure in their work. Following our analytical framework based on Lamont and Molnár (2002), this is precisely where symbolic borders will match social boundaries.

## Discussion and conclusion

Each type of research has its own qualities. Before entering the discussion, we clarify some shortcomings and strengths. Typical for critical case studies is a small sample. Often perceived as a shortcoming, Flyvbjerg argues that it is a condition for human learning (2006). Although we tried and put much effort into doing so, our failure to bring in the voice of the homeless people on transformative practice is a limit. We also often felt the burden of balancing the tension between valuing human efforts in distressing contexts and remaining critical of interventions which were often presented as a solution but might at the same time obscure the social and political character of homelessness. Farrugia and Gerrard (2016) argue that the extraordinary aspects of homelessness are produced by practices of government. If it concerns marginalised groups in public spaces, Baillergeau (2014) shows that conflicting and collaborating rationalities are entwined. This tension between conflict and collaboration also applies in the context of this study. Various shifts were in the making

whilst we were undertaking our fieldwork and outreach work gained much attention. Discussions on the marketisation of homelessness care, the introduction of Kadans and tensions in the relationship between the local government and private welfare agencies coloured our fieldwork and were tangible throughout our data.

In this article, we identified predictability, complexity and housing readiness as important conceptual lines of difference but with real effects. These boundaries, socially constructed and mediated by various actors in various fields, are important for the way opportunities for access unfold. Predictability is an important feature of modernity and important to managerial, professional and scientific conduct. Negotiations with service agents often concern a demand for predictability. Nonetheless, the living conditions of marginalised homeless individuals rarely match such demands. On top of that, service agents feel pressure due to spending cut policies and outcome measurement. Service agents are often therefore reluctant to take responsibility for situations that introduce too much uncertainty. Whilst predictability is important for rationalising service delivery and the trajectories of homeless individuals, unpredictability is, as the case of Cindy shows, reconstructed as part of the persona of homeless individuals.

Complexity has become an important rationale for changes in the organisation of social welfare. And whilst many of the situations outreach workers bring back in are indeed complex, defining cases as more complex than others is helpful, knowing that complexity can be used to redirect engagement and locate responsibility for it elsewhere. Another solution for dealing with complexity is redirecting responsibility for engagement to interagency networks. Whilst such network meetings function as a forum for debate, there is also a risk of network euphoria (De Corte *et al.*, 2016). Whilst these networks often bring in a range of expertise, boundaries are maintained for a variety of reasons. An important reason is that responsibility for keeping close to the factual situation remains in the hands of outreach workers. They must do the 'dirty work' and bring homeless individuals over the bridge, if the bridge is not closed. Cooperation and mutual engagement are important values, but cooperation can blind social workers to the prevailing power relations. Social workers need to bear in mind that boundary work contains enabling and constraining elements at the same time (Slembrouck and Hall, 2014). Housing readiness forms a conceptual distinction between those individuals perceived as housing-ready and those who are not. In a context in which pressure on social housing is high, lack of housing readiness can be used to redirect individuals to targeted welfare programmes or outreach work. As such, the distinction will be maintained and reproduced.

Nonetheless, our quest for transformative practice in social work was fuelled by the idea that outreach social workers can approach social work 'as an open-ended and democratic practice in which they might intervene in several ways to realize their social justice mission' (De Corte and Roose *et al.*, 2020, p. 227). In this sense, the temporal suspension of symbolic boundaries opened up new possibilities to re-engage with the social dimension of homelessness and with how lines of difference

are socially constructed and mediated. The outreach workers take part in what De Certeau calls 'strategies' (De Certeau, 1984-1984). Our identified boundaries are the result of strategic institutionalised decisions in social policy, service agencies and health care developed as a unified whole, in which individuals tend to be objectified. Hence, their task of engaging specific homeless people on the streets and promoting access is part of those strategies. Nevertheless, our research rarely points to well-thought-out strategies by outreach workers. On the contrary, our analysis indicates that developing transformational practice is related more to tactics (De Certeau, 1984) (Comment by Author: reference added in reference list). Tactics are everyday practices that seem to escape from the unified whole that never fully determines outreach work. Several such tactics come to fore: inviting service agents to meet homeless individuals where they are; questioning prevailing knowledge claims of medical science; unlocking their interest in predictability; bringing in the representations of reality of the homeless individuals involved; and forming coalitions with agents who can bring about transformation in their organisation. We agree, of course, that the situations of our selected cases are complex, that some homeless persons do lack housing competencies and that social policy and social work cannot function without predictability. But we have shown some effects of defining some situations as more complex than others or defining some homeless individuals as more housing-ready or as more closely matching demands of predictability than others.

Boundary-crossing negotiations are tied by what Zheng calls 'the role-responsibilities that make up the moral division of labour' (2019, p. 115). We have shown how outreach workers can raise responsibility so as to keep service agents much closer to the unjust social and structural conditions of homelessness. As such, they can support service agents, each to their own abilities, to strive for transformation in their agencies (Zheng, 2019). A more radical positioning is self-destructive, as the need to maintain their legitimacy is important (authors-own Grymonprez & Roose, 2019). Fundamental is their ability to remain proximate to the situations in which they intervene and reflexive as to their own ambiguous relationship with the boundaries to which they are required to relate if they want to develop transformative practice. In that sense, the social is indeed not in vain (Hanssen *et al.*, 2015), unless social workers refrain from uncovering boundaries.

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*Conflict of interest statement.* None declared.


## References [AQ8](#) [AQ9](#)


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