Jnl. Soc. Pol. (2020), 49, 3, 643–660 © Cambridge University Press 2019
doi:10.1017/S0047279419000801

# The Discursive Construction of Accessibility and its Implications for Outreach Work

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## Abstract

Homeless individuals often find that welfare services are inaccessible, despite being designed to meet their needs. This frictions with access which is a fundamental principle in western welfare states. Adaptations in social policy and service delivery are therefore made to deal with the problem of inaccessibility to services and welfare rights. One such adaptation is outreach work and is often developed to engage with homeless people and link them up with available services. This raises questions on the transformative potential of outreach work to deal with those mechanisms which result in inaccessibility. We argue that in a context in which accessibility is increasingly guaranteed by rights-based frameworks, exclusion management is also increasing. This is due to hybrid developments in social policy and welfare ideology. Nonetheless, the initial transformational potential of outreach work never really vanished.

**Keywords:** outreach work; access; transformation; homelessness

## Introduction

Since the late 1980s, increasing attention has been devoted to homelessness as an important social problem (Farrugia and Gerard, 2016). This attention, Farrugia and Gerard argue, generated welfare reforms with complex relationships between a variety of actors in policy, practice and research. Such relationships are not linear or fixed and relate to both inclusivist and exclusivist strategies (Deverteuil *et al.*, 2009). The starting point for this article is the observation that, within these welfare reforms, policies and practices have shaped the definition of and interventions directed towards homeless people (Bush-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010). In these reforms, the concept of access has been pivotal and became the official language for talking about excluded populations (Clarke, 2004). Homeless individuals are excluded from the physical, legal and social domains (Edgar and Meert, 2004). In extensive

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welfare systems, the focus is likely to be directed towards homeless people with complex needs and whose relationship with and access to societal resources is complicated. Such homeless people – often identified as 'hard to reach' or 'care avoiders' – are seen as in need of more targeted social work approaches, such as outreach work (Crane and Warnes, 2000; Olivet *et al.*, 2010; Cortis, 2012; Elissen *et al.*, 2013; Andersson, 2013).

The policies and practices targeting homeless individuals, such as outreach work, can be examined as a function of maintaining, controlling and gaining access to societal resources (e.g. Ribot and Peluso, 2003). Following Ribot and Peluso, access refers to the right to benefit from things (which they call rights-based mechanisms of access) but are also taking into account the abilities and constraints to benefit from objects, persons, institutions and symbols. As such access brings also more structural and social relationships which enable or constrain people to benefit from resources, to the fore. Both mechanisms construe what they call 'a web of access relations'.

Access politics and practices entail a wide range of approaches, ranging from controlling access, through enabling individuals to bridge the divisions between the periphery and the mainstream, to aiming to transform those divisions (Clarke, 2004). Considering that the meaning and value of access between various actors is open for debate, this raises questions on the position actors in the field take in that web of access relations and how they perceive the role of outreach work in relation to access.

Despite the obvious link between outreach work and access, it is not clear how outreach work is related with different views on access actors in the web of access relations deploy. In that vein, we differentiate between two views on access; a universalist view and a more 'hidden' transformative view on access (Clarke, 2004). Therefore, the goal of this article is therefore: 1) to contribute to a clearer understanding how outreach work is entwined with views on access; 2) to ask how these views relate with developments in social policy and service delivery; and 3) to identify key-characteristics of that hidden transformative potential in outreach work.

## A universalist view on access

The universalist view on access is based on access as a claim to be treated as equals (Clarke, 2004). This view entails claims for citizenship, equality and change. In this vein, problems with inaccessibility are often conceptualised through various dimensions which form, on different levels, barriers to participation in the mainstream. As discussed earlier in this journal (Anderson and Ytrehus, 2012), there are no clear-cut answers for providing access while meeting the needs of homeless individuals. The universal view promisingly fits within welfare optimism but tends to neglect the complex relationships between social services, social rights and welfare reforms in contexts of shifting economic and political transformations.

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Despite the promise of 'universal' access – access for all in need – social interventions are not only characterized by the aim of inclusion but also by containment, surveillance and control (Clarke, 2004). First, the inclusive universalist agenda entails various normative assumptions and preconditions which predominantly apply only 'to those who share the characteristics of the universal subject' (Clarke, 2004). Second, access as a claim for change is often contested by economic reasoning. Third, social rights are increasingly approached within conditional frameworks expressing competing views on citizenship, rights and responsibilities (e.g. Dwyer *et al.*, 2014). As such, discourses on access seem to follow a residual-remedying approach on the level of services (Dierckx, 2007). The main idea in this approach is normative inclusion, on the basis of which services are analysed and adjusted to make sure more people can make use of them and through which it is expected people are enabled to participate in society. Hence, universal access tends to construct access to existing welfare services as self-evidently desirable (Clarke, 2004).

Although different models exist, outreach work seems mainly a 'linkage activity' (e.g. Olivet *et al.*, 2010). Despite the fact that outreach work is perceived as a mainstay, it is not undisputed. There are concerns about interventions aimed at changing the behavior of homeless people instead of addressing organizational, institutional and structural problems (DeVerteuil *et al.*, 2009; Whiteford, 2010). Hence, outreach work might be deployed as a form of 'exclusion management'. Exclusion management stands for the necessity emerging from the gap between inclusive universal promises in welfare state ideology, limited resources and the agenda for maximising life-chances (Schirmer and Michailakis, 2015).

## A transformative view on access

The concept of access has also a more hidden and radical conceptualisation which questions not the principle of universality but the 'us' in universalism and opens the door to democratic practice as a claim on constructing a different 'we' (Clarke, 2004). In this sense, access cannot be reduced to individual access but should involve a public debate on the meaning of access (e.g. Grymonprez *et al.*, 2017). In this view, patterns of socio-economic inequality are identified through the ways in which individuals are approached and processed in access politics, social policy and social work practices. Instead of deploying a residual-remedying discourse of accessibility, here a structural-anticipating discourse comes to the fore (Dierckx, 2007).

## Methodology

This study is based on what is called a discursive approach to public policy (Durnova and Zittoun, 2013). This approach pays '*particular attention to the*

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*subjectivity of actors, to the forms of practical knowledge they mobilize, the multiple interpretations they deploy to create meaning, and the particular context that individualizes the situations in which these meanings evolve*' (Durnova and Zittoun, 2013, p. 569). Following Durnova and Zittoun, discourse here is used for the diversity of ideas, representations, forms of knowledge, values, beliefs and how these are linked with those who are speaking and the position they occupy in the web of access relations. Additionally, discursive approaches also aim to highlight 'concealed normativity' in social policy and the implementation process of solutions in contexts where ambiguity and uncertainty is unavoidable (Brodkin, 2003; Stone in Durnova and Zittoun, 2013). Hence, this approach is helpful to capture how outreach work is perceived as a solution for certain problems while there is no general agreement what the problem is.

Our data is based on verbatim transcriptions of open interviews held between 2015 and 2017 with 33 key informants (see Appendix). We used open interviews as all our informants were chosen based on extensive experience in a specific position and/or field related with homelessness and are acquainted with outreach work. We presented following topics as key-questions from which the interview started: their view on the problem with access related with homelessness and how outreach work is associated with their viewpoints and which developments in the wider context contributed to their view. Starting from previous professional and research connections of the first author, we used snowball sampling to expand our view to a wide variety of informants engaged in different positions in the field but all connected with the topic under study. Criteria for inclusion were: 1) identifiable experience in social policy, management or fieldwork related with homelessness; and 2) a certain degree of familiarity with outreach work. All informants participated on the basis of written informed consent, while the study proposal was reviewed and approved in line with the research ethic guidelines of Ghent University. No incentives were given. We mainly used thematic analysis for its flexibility and potential to add a variety of other methods: in this case, thematic discourse analysis, which refers to thematic analysis "*within a social constructionist epistemology - i.e., where patterns are identified as socially produced*" but where no Critical Discourse Analysis is used (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 8). Patterns were analysed within and across the key informants with respect to the three goals of the study. First, we identified several themes emerging from the narratives expressing universal views on access. Several shifts in welfare ideology and service delivery, which connect with varying views on the role of outreach work, came to the fore. Hence, our analysis particularly enlightens complexities in the shifting relationship between social work, service delivery and social policy as emerging in the narratives of key-respondents while overarching more than thirty years of local debates. Following that, we identified several themes connected with transformation, in terms of challenging accepted views on social policy and service delivery regarding the construction of access and the accompanying role of outreach work. These narratives are reconstructed

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based on what was overtly discussed during interviewing or as a product of our interpretation of various categories across the data and moderated by keeping our conceptual framework under review. The first author debriefed the results with the second author, while the third author supervised the overall quality of the study.

This study was executed in the context of Antwerp, the largest city in the northern part of Belgium, with over 500,000 inhabitants and a relatively extensive network of organisations offering a variety of services to homeless people. In 2014, 717 homeless people were counted (Meys and Hermans, 2014). In Belgium, 'access' is well translated in several rights-based frameworks and social policy. On the local level, a crucial policy framework is the decree on local social policy which is defined as "*the whole of policy regulations and actions of local policy and the actions of local actors, in function of guaranteeing access of each citizen to the rights declared by the Belgian constitution*" (Decree on local social policy of 19/03/2014, own translation). This decree guarantees 'maximal accessibility', given that inaccessibility and the inefficient organisation of existing health and welfare services are perceived as the most persistent barriers to certain groups being able to realise their rights (Raeymaeckers, 2017).

## On the emergence of outreach work

By the end of the 1980s, the historically evolved supply of services for homeless people in Antwerp was predominantly aimed at the reception of homeless people in privately run but publicly funded reception centres. Due to shifts in the conceptualisation of homelessness as 'disaffiliated', formal decriminalisation and the General Report on Poverty of 1994, which dealt with structural issues (E1), in practice the focus was increasingly directed towards the psychosocial dimension of homelessness, progressively establishing a 'reanchorage model' (E1). This model refers to gradually integrating homeless people into society from shelter accommodation up to housing and independent living, tackling lack of interdependence and participation as core features of social exclusion. In practice, a small part of the population moved off and on between reception centres, psychiatric facilities, the bottom end of the housing market and street life (M15, E1, M3, EM14, F7).

*In crisis intervention, after 3 weeks homeless people left our facility for the private housing market which, at that time, was not saturated. There were enough poor-quality options (M15).*

Nevertheless, increasing appearance of homeless individuals in public spaces, unserved by traditional services, but particularly the growing diversity of people constructed as homeless people in an unfavorable socio-economic climate pressurised this model (E1; M15). Hence, access was no longer taken for granted and became increasingly and object of public concern. In this context, two outreach practices are noteworthy.

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In 1993, an action-based street-corner-work research project, based on previous experiences with street-corner work in Antwerp, questioned how to target those homeless people who did not make use of reception centres and how to adjust existing services while also raising awareness about alternatives (E1, M1). Rather than predefining homeless categories, street-corner workers started from what presented itself in places where, among others, homeless people were (E1, M1). This position, it was argued, produced critical reflection and alternative views on homeless individuals and the social status of homeless individuals entering mainstream services (E1, M1, M15). In 1994, a new mobile team focused on poly-substance users, who often combined mental health problems with homelessness and for whom low thresholds services were lacking. In those days, cooperation between different service systems deploying a different knowledge base and functioning from different problem and client constructions was lacking. An informant from outreach work expressed his role in the increasing discrepancy between homeless people and mainstream services in this way:

*My job was to point other services to their responsibilities (M3).*

These practices also provided advocacy workers with valuable insights as they witnessed processes of marginalisation in their natural environment. Hence, the initial idea behind outreach work was transformational in nature.

## Universal access while bridging a widening gap?

Due to the growing awareness of the inaccessibility of mainstream services, gaps in service delivery and the increasing policy potential of the local networks in which outreach and street-corner workers functioned (M19, EM14), the amount of services more tailored to the needs of homeless people expanded. Yet, in the slipstream of the 'small-scale movement' (e.g. deinstitutionalization) of the 1970s, the growing, fragmented and increasingly institutionalised field of homelessness organizations was also viewed as contributing to inaccessibility (EM14, E1). Emerging from the expanding policy terrain of the Flemish government, it was argued in policy circles, defragmentation, deregulation and greater accessibility of social services were believed to contribute to meeting the needs of individuals. Closely related with the latter, the importance of outreach practices is clearly acknowledged and is widely shared by our informants over many positions in our dataset (M6, S1, M8, M12, M14 & F8). Particularly their experiential knowledge on the sensitivities and needs of target group members and their ability to engage homeless individuals towards services is valued but also seems to veil the need to deploy more critical awareness on their positions and responsibilities.

*It is really helpful if the homeless, certainly those using illegal drugs, are brought to us by outreach workers, it is helpful to encourage my team to give it a try (M9).*

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Nevertheless, while service providers may be fully aware of their own responsibilities, economic arguments seem to hinder them from rethinking their access policies wherefore outreach work is viewed as a solution.

*Of course, we don't like to put someone who benefits from his hospitalisation back on the streets. But the solution to the problem slows down our flow-through. In that regard, our expectations of outreach work are as high as their expectations of us (S1).*

For particular homeless individuals it seemed the gap itself has been redefined. These redefinitions not only affect how these groups are problematised and processed but also the role and position of outreach workers. For instance, on the practice level, new labels such as 'immune for support' (M5) or 'homeless rich in opportunities' (M8) were introduced to deal with complexity and seize on access maintenance establishing the idea of more differentiation in access routes. As the most vulnerable increasingly got stuck in shelters while being kept away from other access routes more directly leading to housing, one informant argued this led to 'third class support' (F4). This critique was of course not focused on the intentions of service agents, but on the dynamics constructing separate access routes and thus reducing the field of possibilities. Hence, while outreach workers were initially related with access maintenance in terms of keeping possibilities open, they seem increasingly to function as access controllers or gatekeepers due to the closing off of possibilities.

In the following sections, we outline three interacting and hybrid developments in social policy and service delivery which, according to our analysis, further strengthened the management of exclusion, shifting the role of outreach work increasingly towards access control rather than access maintenance. We argue this suppressed not only the initial transformative potential but also widened the gap between particular homeless individuals and mainstream services.

## Security and the conquest of the social

With the rise of the security agenda, criminalisation of homeless people re-emerged in public debate even before the abolition of the law on vagrancy in 1993. Outreach practices (EM14) came to the attention of the security plans of the federal and local governments, developed from the late 1980s. Aiming to deal with marginalisation, social exclusion and discrimination, these plans focused on social prevention (Hebberecht, 2008). Particularly in general welfare work, this was welcomed as an opportunity to substantially expand various strategies to better achieve their social goals of realizing welfare rights and fostering access to basic institutions. It also increased their dependency on local social policy which according to a key-respondent increased the possibility for influencing social policy.

*I think we had less decency than other organisations to be instrumentalised by the security agenda of the local government (EM14).*

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Due to the shift towards a moral-conservative agenda, focusing on public nuisance, street criminality and social cohesion, strategies were bent to liberal forms of techno-prevention geared to various forms of social control (e.g. Hebberecht, 2008). Such forms of social control are not necessarily targeted at homeless individuals but because of their frequent presence in public spaces, they often suffer from those forms. For instance, many street homeless individuals have been subject to frequent administrative sanctions that have left them with large debts. 'The conquest of the social' (e.g. Engbergsen *et al.*, 2005) became a central goal in local social policy: addressing safety issues and problems with social cohesion and the formulation of common competences and behaviour in everyday public life. The merging of the departments of Social Affairs and Integral Safety contributed to defining social problems as safety problems and vice versa (M16, F2):

*If you can control social problems, you can control safety problems and vice versa (M16).*

This shift led to an increase in interventions behind the front door. New outreach approaches were introduced as addressing the need (M16) for immediate and firm social action while other expressions of homelessness were neglected.

*Those on the street which are easy, they are visible to everyone (M3). Other expressions of homelessness (e.g. homeless women, rough sleepers, migrant families) disappeared out of the public debate (F4).*

This safety agenda resulted in a fierce debate, also expressed in the wide variety of conflicting perceptions. Informants on the front-level referred to the 'cleaning of the streets' (F4) while in public administration and mainstream services streetcornerwork lacked assertiveness and the willingness to cooperate and share crucial information (M16, M8, M11).

Outreach practices gained approval from the local government to the extent that they adapted to bridging the gap between the individual living conditions of predefined homeless populations, public nuisance and social cohesion and sharing sensitive information on homeless individuals. Views on the consequences (F4, F16, F2, M10, F8) vary between improved conduct in public behaviour and services more willing to cooperate within these new policies in public policy to degradation of informal street codes and solidarity networks between people in poverty, dislocation of homeless people and low-threshold services and invisibility of homelessness on the front level.

## Conditionalisation and responsabilisation

From 2007, based on broader shifts in welfare ideology (e.g. Dwyer, 2004) which conditionalised the right to social welfare, the local government propagated a new contract with its citizens wherein each citizen had a right to the city but also had to contribute to the city:

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*We began to invest in another way of working. I am not embarrassed to say, but we introduced a person-oriented approach. For me that was a kind of reciprocity, but not in a negative perspective but in terms of what are your dreams, what will you do for it and how can we help you. But, if we invest in you, we ask for efforts on your side (P1).*

This affected various expectations of homeless individuals which express the concealed normativity. For instance, in public welfare it was argued that there are more than enough doors to knock on, 'they' have to do that themselves *(M7)*. Public benefits were increasingly accessible only if homeless people asked for them (F2, F3, F4). Research (Chareyron, 2015) revealed that such positioning results in a lower uptake of services and legal benefits. This shows how situations of dependency are interwoven with conditions of which is taken for granted that homeless individuals can meet them. For instance, in 2015, the winter shelter was accessible on the condition homeless individuals called upon their own network the first night. It was argued that not showing up was proof of the ability to find solutions of their own (M8). Similar views on constructing access routes also seem to have affected the practices that connect homeless individuals, outreach workers and housing facilities. We illustrate this with the following example. In Flanders, people confronted with homelessness have priority rights to social housing, regulated by social housing tenancies:

*In practice the housing rules are bureaucratic and rigid with hardly any discretionary space (S2).*

Due to waiting lists, there was no real sense of urgency (S2). Hence, outreach workers often kept things going in terms of aiming to meet the formal regulations. Social housing tenancies seem to prefer trustworthy tenants.

*Outreach workers enroll the homeless with far fewer housing competences, this is unprofessional as it only leads to evictions, damage to property or problems with social cohesion (S2).*

To deal with these tensions, non-formal procedures emerged based on vague and far from neutral concepts such as 'housing readiness' (M3, S2). Hence, it seems that outreach workers needed to adapt to processes of exclusion management which shifted their role from maintaining access towards controlling access. For instance, it was argued that with more and particularly more complex cases in mind, only 'stronger' homeless individuals were enrolled, also to secure future cooperation (M3). Responsibility seems redirected towards outreach services to keep up with less attractive alternatives (often shelters and admissions).

## Strategies of governance

With the election of a conservative right-wing government in 2013, the historically relatively stable partnerships between third sector and local government were increasingly brought into question. As often becomes a point of discussion in this

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journal (e.g. Daly, 2003), the local government became more interventionist in the process of policy implementation and implemented a person-oriented approach to homelessness (M8, M16, P1).

*There is a real need for a more interventionist approach, problems do not resolve on their own (M16).*

To the satisfaction of the local administration (M8), experiments with new outreach practices in the context of the 'winter plan' – targeting homeless individuals on the 'Groenplaats' (a tourist hotspot) and aiming to engage homeless Eastern European labour migrants – flourished. Hence, the local government increasingly perceived outreach as an instrument for goals described in policy. This illustrates the increasing capacity, described as 'governance', as a crucial feature of managerially powerful cities (Daly, 2003; Boogers & Schaap, 2007).

*Social problems are fragmented in many parts over many private services. They organised their own inaccessibility. That is why the government became more interventionist (M8).*

Hence, a new coordination mechanism particularly designed for homeless individuals defined as multi-problem care-avoiders was installed (S1, F5, M9, M17).

*The starting point is that the social environment is worried or experiences nuisance. Most often there is a severe nuisance, and most striking is that there is no support. We aim to bring them on the move by the use of more interventionist care, coercion or if really necessary, compulsory hospitalisation (M8).*

Despite initial doubts and mistrust, particularly on the front level (M17, F3, F2, M3) and the fact that these homeless individuals are now approached as a discrete category, it also seems to function as a forum in which the local administration, often to their frustration were confronted with the complexity of service delivery and persistent institutionalised but competing access policies (M3, M8). In that vein it was argued that:

*Structural and multi-disciplinary cooperation contributes to a better accessibility and supply of mainstream services and fundamental social rights (P1).*

Nevertheless, it remains unclear what this means for the position of outreach work in this shifted web of access relations. While an overall strategy for dealing with homelessness is in the making and in general welfare work, and a housing approach is envisaged due to reconversion of shelters to smaller independent housing facilities combined with support, it was argued that (despite increased cooperation) the responsibility for 'keeping things going' with contracted homeless individuals also increases as overall services remain inaccessible and ill-adapted (M8, M3, M15, M16).

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## Transformational views and outreach work

With the third goal of this study in mind, we focus on how transformational views on access and the relationship with outreach work in our data comes to the fore. We present two strongly interrelated themes, proximity and reflexivity, which to varying degrees show how more transformative views on access are discursively envisaged.

### Practicing proximity

Particularly frontline workers and other informants working in direct contact with homeless individuals seem to struggle with the above described developments. The way subjects are constructed, based on predefined social constructions of homelessness strongly anchored in social policy and mainstream service delivery, seems a deeply rooted underlying tension dependent on the position in the field.

While there was considerable debate on the legitimacy of the safety agenda it was argued that irrespective of that

*One always needs the cooperation and the engagement of all the actors involved, which requires time, space and open-ended goals (EM13).*

We captured this as proximity, a well-documented feature of outreach work (Baillergeau *et al*., 2009). Nevertheless, based on our introduction and analytical framework, we captured different views on proximity.

A first understanding of proximity and outreach work seems congruent with outreach literature describing outreach work as a place of first contact and the construction of a relationship of trust with envisaged target groups. In this view, proximity is viewed as a strategy to link homeless individuals with the mainstream. This view was quite well shared over different positions in the field (e.g. M3, F7, M15, P2, M14). While of course this view is valuable and probably very obvious in a context where engaging the 'hard to reach' is seen as a contribution to universality, it also appears that this view is vulnerable to overlooking the ambiguities behind the universalist view on access. In that vein, the following quote is very enlightening:

*I have the impression that we should be less and less different. And that, in turn, this is in stark contrast to the 'socialisation of care', which is aimed at bringing difference back into society. While society says we cannot not have madness, we cannot deal with it, so that is a very contradictory trend (EM13).*

This informant suggested that practising proximity must be understood as a regular form of inclusion rather than a front porch to 'real inclusion' which only can be achieved after access is established. Proximity as a regular form of inclusion appears more clearly in a second understanding. In that understanding, proximity is related with more outspoken social ambitions through community-oriented outreach work.

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*If we want to reach vulnerable groups, we must welcome them and create environments in which they can function socially (EM 14).*

It was argued, particularly by such community-oriented positioned informants (M4, F4, F8, M5, F3) that outreach work should develop a counter-discourse for the spatial politics in which outreach workers are caught up in the security agenda of local government (e.g. Smith, 2011). In this view, proximity refers to a network of solidarity-promoting practices throughout the city:

*There is a real need for a diversity of places where people will 'make themselves at home' (F5).*

A third understanding depicts proximity in more political terms (M4, EM13, M5, F2). Rather than developing new places in which homeless individuals might feel at home, here proximity is a foundation for exercising solidarity in terms of a call to relate to the whole of the social fabric. Hence the differentiation between different target groups is pointless, as relating with the whole of the social fabric is also beneficial for homeless people (M5, EM13). In that vein, proximity becomes politics when real-life experiences are the soil to excavate

*the power struggle on those structural mechanisms which are responsible for inaccessibility (M5).*

Within the context of the earlier described hybrid developments which shifted the role of outreach work, we illustrated how the above described different views on proximity are entangled and result in what Baillergeau described as a conditional balance (2014). The 'summer bar' offers an alternative low threshold meeting point for homeless individuals visible in public space. This place was installed after several negotiations between the local government, the police and a range of welfare actors, including outreach workers, to address the lacunae when removing homeless individuals from public space, but for whom hardly any valuable alternative during daytime was at hands. In that vein, the summer bar transformed relationships between a range of actors in various ways (EM13, F8, M3). The summer bar not only became a valuable alternative for police interventions based on public nuisance, it also became an alternative for social workers to meet homeless individuals outside the context of their agencies. Yet embedded within the safety agenda, the local government demonstrated its potential for coordinating a range of actors in the field while acknowledging their frontline expertise but also seemed more open to allow less conditional relationships between a range of actors and homeless people.

## Practising reflexivity

The acknowledgement of accessibility as a policy goal within a broader framework of social rights (e.g. *supra*) and the increase of more structural oriented answers to homelessness are illustrations that in the end challenging emerging mechanisms of exclusion and advocacy pays off. However, post-welfare transformations, which we also contextualized above, indicate that social work is not by

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definition a critical agent (Kessl, 2009). In this section, we show that in the above described arena of tensional relationships constructing different views on access and the position of outreach work, reflexivity is attributed as a crucial feature for developing a more transformative view on access. In literature, reflexivity refers to the need to analyse one own's position and the arguments, basic assumptions and legitimations which are used (e.g. Fook, 2002). Despite a thin ethical and political line between being critical and being exploitative (e.g. Valado, 2012), real-life situations and experiences of homeless individuals and how they friction with access politics and practices are perceived as crucial within a transformational agenda (M1, M5, M13, F1, F2).

*Critical awareness by the homeless of services must be used as a mirror. Awareness must be discovered and then organised (M5).*

For instance, the introduction of performance measures in a nursing outreach practice failed to grasp the complexity behind seemingly single-cut nursing interventions, which are highly dependent on proximity (F3). While experiencing that homeless individuals are disconnected from mainstream health care, this respondent seemed very aware that the introduction of performance measurement entailed a real risk to disconnect from homeless individuals. But most striking was that she questioned her own position as the result of unequal outcomes of funding mechanisms in universal health policies. Hence, she understood very well the need for uncovering how mainstream services are unable to adapt to the needs of homeless individuals. But also public administration seems to acknowledge the transformative potential of outreach work grounded in reflexively engaging with how relationships between homeless individuals and mainstream services are constructed:

*Outreach workers must ask critical questions; as such, we can promote better cooperation. More partners in the integrated care plan should do that. That is part of the engagement they need to take up. I am glad that outreach work is addressing several tensions in care circuits [ . . . ] and which are important for us to deal with on a strategic and policy level (M8).*

Other informants (M3, EM14) argued that to deal with inaccessibility, outreach workers need to connect individual situations and biographies with their institutional and structural determinants. In that vein, it is argued that also within the new strategies of governance there are new possibilities for questioning how the whole of services systems are functioning in the light of problems homeless individuals encounter (M7, M16, EM13). It seems that the local administration reconnected with a more reflexive approach to outreach work, not solely as a means to target homeless individuals but also as a means to engage more reflexively with the complexities individuals and outreach workers experience in the encounter with access. Hence, outreach workers are deployed as means to maintain access, as the local government perceive it as their task to

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*explicitly call on their agencies to 'colour outside the line'. If we see things get struck because of procedures, then we need to adapt and try something else (M8).*

Hence, several informants considered important that outreach worker engage in a broad variety of networks; those top-down networks organised by the local government but also those bottom-up networks which deploy a more critical view on the role of the local government. In literature, described as 'structural closure', this position is indispensable for transformation (e.g. Battilana & Casciaro, 2012) but also adds to the awareness that accessibility needs to be realised in each and every case.

*Yes, you can indeed invest more in proximity, but you will always have a group which for whatever reasons is not getting there (M16).*

Besides advocating for a wholesale strategy (E1, F4, M5), we also captured the idea for a more residualized approach (M8, M16), particularly when both institutions and homeless people prove much more resistant for change than they appear. Hence, reflexivity on one's own position does not necessarily lead toward transformative views on access. In that vein, it was argued that despite legal frameworks guaranteeing the right to social welfare, there will always be homeless people struggling with access. But the outspoken awareness that this struggle is more an indication for shifts in welfare ideology and social policy than a manifestation of individual characteristics shows reflexivity as means to develop alternatives (M5, EM 13).

## Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we used a discursive approach to public policy to disentangle the relationship between views on access and outreach work and relate such views to developments in social policy and service delivery. From there, we aimed to capture those ideas, beliefs, points of view and experience which illuminate the 'hidden' transformative potential of access. The limitations of this study include interviewing about complex issues and 'lived experiences' that might have changed over time. Also, we experienced that an open interview approach and the wide variety of actors and positionality produced a large amount of data, which complicated the analytical process. Hence, this article also reflects our own positionality in this debate from which we cannot absent ourselves.

In a policy context in which access is legally anchored, we argue that the management of exclusion, in terms of residual-remedying approaches to specific target groups, is a dominant discourse among a wide variety of actors. Our interviews, at least in most of the cases, also entailed a more historical understanding on the relationship between access and outreach work. In that vein, it seems that underneath the umbrella of 'access for all' the socially constructed divisions between us (the mainstream) and them (the periphery) seem to be intensified, at least for

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those individuals perceived as very reluctant to change. This is not a contradiction, but more particularly the effect of how inclusion and exclusion are connected (e.g. Schirmer & Michailakis, 2015). As such, structural factors remain unchallenged.

Hence, we argue these findings contribute to a better understanding of the apparent success of outreach work. Particularly due to the shifts in policy and welfare ideology identified in this study, it seems that outreach work functions as a pressure valve for mainstream services. While initially more related with transformational aspirations, it seems that views on the role of outreach work became more ambivalent in terms of its relatedness with keeping open possibilities but at the same time its increasing relatedness with access control. Hence, it seems that, in various positions in our data-set, outreach work was conceptualised as exclusion management while codifying that ambivalent relationship between the mainstream and the periphery in more fixed terms needing more specialized interventions. Bringing back in mind how we theorized access, rights-based frameworks are not sufficient for the realisation of access for all. Strangely enough, these frameworks rarely underpinned the narratives of our key-informants. Maybe this is far from odd. Access rights are difficult to realize, both for mainstream and more specialized services struggling with individuals accordingly constructed as too complex, as for those homeless individuals struggling with services not engaging well with their needs. Within this void, outreach work is constructed as an interventions filling in the gaps.

Addressing the third goal of this study, two interrelated themes came to the fore. One was, despite the promise of access and the overall discourse in service delivery, that services must be tailored to the needs of all and that this requires proximity. Particularly applicable to vulnerable homeless, there is the awareness that proximity is important, but also the idea that more outreach is needed. This is an interpretation of proximity which seems not to be connected with transformational views. This interpretation is based particularly on the link between outreach work, proximity and processes of engagement and linkage activities. Hence, it might be concluded that responsibility for proximity in service delivery might as well be redirected towards outreach work rather than developing a more proximate mainstream. Nevertheless, this view seems to get stuck in competing views on inclusion and how proximity is approached strategically in terms of facilitating the linkage process. It is quite obvious that, in that vein, transforming one's own views may be not necessary after all. Furthermore, it is argued that the interaction between outreach workers and homeless individuals is not witnessed in the wider institutional environment (Smith, 2011). Nevertheless, we captured more social and even political views more acquainted with transformation related with constructing places where social relationships can flourish. A second interpretation on proximity is more related with developing proximity within the wider social environment of homeless individuals. Transformation, in this view, is more related with finding places where homeless individuals might develop social relationships

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279419000801 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which might add to a shifting social status. In a third interpretation of proximity, proximity is related with a social and political analysis on the problem with access and how outreach work might contribute to such analysis. Hence, proximity and reflexivity seem quite well entwined in their goal to keep social situations open (e.g. Kessl, 2009). As an overall recommendation for social policy, this study shows that views on access are very diverse, also in contexts in which access more managerially approached. Based on our results, we argue that reflexivity and proximity, as key-features of outreach work developing transformative views on access, are important. This is not only on the individual level but they might inform social policy based on experiences with homeless in the web of access relations in which social policy is an important force.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279419000801 Published online by Cambridge University Press

## Appendix 1. Brief description of the key-informants

In the article following abbreviations are used for: peer and professional frontline workers (F), public, private (M) and executive managers (EM), politicians (P), experts (E) and specialists (S).

| S | Occupation | Actual position | Years of experience | Code |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Former street corner worker | Manager | < 30 | M1 |
| 2 | Private welfare worker | Manager | < 20 | M2 |
| 3 | Street outreach nurse | Frontline work | < 15 | F1 |
| 4 | Spokesman Secretary of Social Affairs | Spokesman | < 5 | P1 |
| 5 | Outreach worker | Manager | < 20 | M3 |
| 6 | Community worker | Manager | < 40 | M4 |
| 7 | Peer-worker | Frontline | < 30 | F2 |
| 8 | Street corner worker | Manager | < 30 | M5 |
| 9 | Private welfare worker residential care | Manager | < 20 | M6 |
| 10 | Psychiatrist | Manager | < 40 | S1 |
| 11 | Former public welfare manager Homelessness | Manager | < 10 | M7 |
| 12 | Social housing manager | Manager | < 10 | S2 |
| 13 | Public Administration Homelessness | Manager | < 10 | M8 |
| 14 | Drug addiction worker | Manager | < 10 | M9 |
| 15 | Street corner worker | Frontline | < 15 | F3 |
| 16 | Advocacy-worker | Frontline | < 30 | F4 |
| 17 | Former secretary of social affairs/ secretary public welfare | Politician | < 30 | P2 |
| 18 | Street corner worker | Manager | < 30 | M10 |
| 19 | Private welfare worker homelessness | Manager | < 10 | M11 |
| 20 | Expert homelessness | Policy expert | < 40 | E1 |
| 21 | Mental health care worker | Manager | < 20 | M12 |
| 22 | Drug addiction worker | Executive manager | < 30 | EM13 |
| 23 | Charity worker | Frontline | < 10 | F5 |
| 24 | Former street corner worker | Manager | < 20 | M13 |
| 25 | Private welfare worker | Executive manager | < 40 | EM14 |
| 26 | Public administrator housing | Manager | < 10 | M14 |
| 27 | Public administrator Case-Management | Manager | < 30 | M15 |
| 28 | Public administrator | Manager | < 20 | M16 |
| 29 | Private welfare worker day center | Manager | < 40 | M17 |
| 30 | Private welfare worker night center | Frontline | < 30 | F7 |
| 31 | Drug addiction worker | Manager | < 40 | F8 |
| 32 | Private welfare worker housing support | Manager | < 20 | M18 |
| 33 | Former public administrator drug addiction | Manager | < 20 | M19 |

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