

Visualizing Homelessness: A Study in Photography and Estrangement

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ABSTRACT

This article reports a qualitative study of how homeless people visualize their life in hostels and on the streets of London. Using a photo-production technique, the research enabled participants to show their situation as well as to tell about their experiences. Participants were given cameras and asked to take photographs typical of their day as homeless people, this material being the subject of a subsequent interview. This provided both visual and text data that were analysed together so as to establish different engagements of the participants with the city and with domiciled people. Presenting the material from six of the participants, these different engagements are described with reference to issues of estrangement, exclusion and visualization employed as explanatory concepts. The article identifies and compares the different ways in which homeless people attempt not only to survive but also to 'make their home' in the city. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: estrangement; exclusion; homelessness; photography; space; visual methods

INTRODUCTION

A recent issue of this journal devoted itself to the problems surrounding homelessness, pointing up some of the issues relating to its causes and methods of study (Christian, 2003). Reviews of homelessness research in Britain have pointed to difficulties in the definition of 'homelessness' (Fitzpatrick, Kemp, & Klinker, 2000). These difficulties stem partly from policy changes that have re-directed attention from structural causes to differ-

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Contract/grant sponsors: Suntory and Toyota International Centres for Economics and Related Disciplines (STICERD); British Academy International Joint Activities Award.

ences in subsets of homeless people, presumed to be individuals prone to the effects of social exclusion (Pleace & Quilgars, 2003). There have also been developments in the way that homelessness has been conceptualized from being a 'situation' to a process, where individuals enter and exit possibly more than one episode of homelessness (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000). This line of research has resulted in the conclusion that there are multiple risk factors for entering homelessness (Anderson & Christian, 2003) and numerous pathways into and out of this situation (Clapham, 2003). With respect to rough sleeping (an issue for the present paper) it has even been said that no consistent associations have been established between experience, structural factors and entering homelessness, and that the complex interaction of these features might even be unique to each homeless person (Neale, 1997; Pleace, 2000).

One consequence of drawing attention to the multiple causes of homelessness is that the concept is expanded to extend beyond the issue of housing. This does not undermine the importance of having a roof over one's head but, within a processual model, it raises questions about how other factors (e.g. offending behaviour, health status, excessive drinking, relationships with others including statutory services) operate during the time that people are without homes and afterwards. There is another consequence of acknowledging the complexity of homelessness as a problem for social science research. Many homeless people have a range of problems so that they are vulnerable in a number of ways, and therefore live their lives in ways that respond to this (Anderson & Christian, 2003). This recognition has given rise to an increased research emphasis on what Fitzpatrick et al. (2000) call 'holistic' solutions and in inter-agency working to meet homeless people's needs, with a focus upon both prevention at one end and resettlement at the other. However, it has also directed researchers in their efforts to look for subgroups whose needs have not been met by policy initiatives, with the implication that this specialization has limited value for an understanding of homelessness in general (Pleace & Quilgars, 2003).

Seen from another perspective, the multi-faceted vulnerability of homeless people raises questions about how this develops, is contained by homeless people or otherwise affects the relationships they make with others. Research from the US has shown that, in spite of their vulnerability, homeless people are not merely passive. They attempt to improve, or at least sustain their lives through participating in a culture that fashions a material world, one that allows them to develop a sense of ownership (Hill, 2003). While we should not be surprised that homeless people do what housed people do, refocusing research upon practice rather than talk alone is important in recognizing how homeless people might offset or contain their vulnerability (Hill & Stamey, 1990). This perspective goes beyond the idea that homeless people are either deviant (and need to be coerced) or are socially excluded (and need to be re-skilled).

Acknowledging that homeless people may have an active life, in spite of being dispossessed of numerous advantages, has implications for defining their situation as being more than an undesirable point on a pathway (Osborne, 2002; Snow & Mulcahy, 2001). It points to the value of describing their situation in more detail, something that is important if researchers are to understand why some homeless people are reluctant to leave a life of transience, or indeed why some return to the streets even after re-settlement (Franklin, 1999). A focus upon practice enables analysis in terms of material culture and social relationships, both of which have been argued to be important for opening up a range of possibilities for intervention (Christian & Abrams, 2003). Of course, understanding how homeless people live their lives will not prevent individuals drifting into this situation. But it can help researchers to conceptualize the action frame in which these individuals

decide whether to seek help, their degree of engagement with a street culture, and their criteria for accepting offers of re-settlement.

Against this background the results of a study describing how a small number of homeless people managed their lives on the streets of London are presented. The aim was to explore the practices through which these individuals survived in the city. By 'survived' we mean more than obtain basic needs for living, and more than establish a social identity. The key idea—seemingly paradoxical—is how homeless people 'make their home' in the city as a material expression of their way of life (Ingold, 1995). Arguably, the success or failure of this enterprise is a key part of the process through which homeless people are presumed to pass. Our point is that this is not just a passage through which people travel but a culture in which they engage to a greater or lesser degree. And because that culture is not separate from society but part of it, we need to conceptualize a way of envisaging the relationships of homeless people to others in the city. This will allow us to address questions that relate to, but are not adequately made the focus by approaches based upon housing or even policy about re-settlement. If people's decisions and reasons about re-settlement are made in the light of their actual circumstances, then researchers into homelessness need methods that engage with and concepts that embrace these contexts. This is more than producing a better 'static picture' of the homeless situation; it is showing us how options about living are grounded in the contexts in which homeless people live their lives.

ESTRANGEMENT—AN APPROACH TO METHODOLOGY

How does anyone make his or her home in the city? This question is worth posing because it recognizes not only that homeless people share space with the domiciled, but that both sets of people work out a *modus vivendi* within the terms of what it means to be a modern city dweller. 'To live in a city is to live in a community of people who are strangers to each other' (Raban, 1974, p. 7). This idea of estrangement derives from the work of Simmel who described the (new) cities (in contrast to traditional villages) as places where the dominance of the money economy leads to exchanges in which the 'anonymity of interests of each party acquire an unmerciful matter-of-factness' (Simmel, 1950, pp. 411–412). This, coupled with the density of living and the complexity of stimulation in the metropolis, gives rise to what Simmel termed the 'blasé attitude'. This attitude has the effect of blunting discrimination, not so that things are not perceived, but so that they appear fleetingly similar in quality. The result is an attitude of indifference that issues in an outward reserve producing a feeling of slight aversion to others. Established in social mores it is this that allows city-dwellers to walk from home to the bus stop each morning without feeling that they should greet each person that they pass by. By the same measure, this estrangement, which is at the core of the metropolitan attitude, enables one to expect no more than this from one's fellow citizens. This is the case because, in a world of thieves and hustlers, the practices of estrangement (e.g. avoiding eye-contact, keeping distance, disinclination to open conversation) are self-protective. To breach these practices is to risk breaking what Goffman (1972) termed the 'traffic rules of interaction'. These are the rules of the street, to which all are subject, both domiciled and homeless individuals alike.

There is a further aspect to city life that accompanies the fact that people deal with each other briefly, to the point, with respect to exchanges dominated by money and by time. Simmel argued that people do not enter into each other's field of vision as whole or

rounded persons, but only in terms of what is necessary for particular exchanges to take place or what can be seen by virtue of the space that they must share together. They experience fragments of each other in terms of glimpses of faces or bodies, shreds of conversation, smells of fellow travellers on buses or in lifts/elevators. This is not the same as saying that city people are 'fragmented selves' because they are members of diverse groups, but that they expose themselves to others and see others in fragmentary form. It is a world of glimpses (Goffman, 1976) that is traded upon by presentations that exploit surface qualities—using clothes, possessions and the occupancy of places having a social cache. Such encounters define the life of the city, so that estrangement makes possible the elaboration of appearances as well as the establishment of distance and reserve.

To occupy city spaces does not necessarily mean individual isolation. Cooper (1998) draws attention to the way that people in common spaces can engender a sense of togetherness out of a situation where, for example, there is an announcement that the bus or train will be delayed. Cooper says that people can identify as a collectivity of strangers where all they have in common is their shared use (of an ordinary practice) and—importantly—their shared equal regard. Homeless individuals share in this use of common spaces, but they run the risk of foregoing the equal regard (of housed people) where they lack the familiarity based on things like appropriate age, ethnicity and appearance. As a consequence, the production of community involves a process of purification (Sennett, 1970), so that if not exclusion then a process of gate keeping is expected to operate with respect to places that homeless people can occupy. This has implications for social relationships, for joining in with majority culture and for re-settlement.

There is an important corollary to this argument, concerning the evolution of the public's moral sense towards the weak and the failing. In the metropolitan world the public face of morality is experienced as duty—as fulfilling one's socio-economic function. This means that compassion is exercised in the form of moral duties guided by rational and economic concerns (Radley, 1999). In the case of homeless people, agencies have been created to help them. This provides the moral context in which homeless people must co-exist with the domiciled, in which the use of space is not just a question of occupancy by different groups, but of different manifestations of estrangement and approval.

This discussion of estrangement underpins the form of research that we undertook. Envisaged as a preliminary study to a longitudinal investigation, we decided to conduct qualitative work with a small number of homeless people who used hostels but also slept rough, using photography to collect a series of glimpses of the city as seen through their eyes. The use of cameras to capture spaces and places is important on two counts. First, it depicts settings that are identified with homelessness; and second, it shows other spaces that homeless people share with domiciled people. Previous research has shown photography to be useful in encouraging people to talk about their neighbourhood (van der Does, Edelaar, Gooskens, Liefting, & van Mierlo, 1992; Wang, Ling, & Ling, 1996); in illustrating the context of consumption among homeless people (Hill & Stamey, 1990); in facilitating community and empowerment among young homeless people (Dewdney, Grey, & Minnion, 1994); tracing the lives of boxcar travellers in the US (Harper, 1982) and in showing the situation of homeless people through their portraits (Zald, 2004). The advantages and the difficulties of employing photography as a tool to aid ethnographic research have been set out in a number of recent publications (Banks, 2001; Collier, 2001; Harper, 1998; Prosser, 1998; Wright, 1999).

There have been criticisms of research methodologies based upon small samples that appeal to the 'voices' of homeless people to legitimate what is, in the end, superficial

description that has little impact upon policy (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000). However, the diversity of experience of homeless people calls not only for greater quantification but also for more detail about lifestyle. Our study was one that was context-dependent so that its legitimacy and potential has to be judged locally (Blanc, 2002). This can then inform the conceptualization of what 'the situation' of homeless people entails as a present on which their future choices will be based.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

Context and participants

The research took the form of a photo-production study involving 12 homeless people recruited from two hostels and one day-centre in Central London. Staff from the agencies facilitated the recruitment of the participants and organized the interviewing facilities to enable researchers to conduct the study in a manner sensitive to the situations and needs of the participants involved. Written information was provided and signed consent obtained regarding both the giving of interviews, the photographic exercise and the rights to use of text and visual material obtained.¹ Selection of participants was guided by consent and the ability of participants to be interviewed and to take photographs. Of those taking part in the study, nine were men and three were women; all were White, British and aged between 30 and 60 years. The participants had varied routes to being homeless and had been in this situation from just over 1 to 27 years.

The analysis of the data was carried out in the framework of the approach that we had adopted towards data collection. We were mindful of criticisms of ethnographic studies of homeless people that have been accused of adopting an innocent ethnography that serves only to perpetuate assumptions of the homeless as 'Other' (Madden, 2003). By offering the participants a camera to picture their world we gave them the opportunity to 'turn upon' their environment and to provide an account of how and why they did so. These accounts often included mention of structural and ideological issues pertaining to the imaging of homelessness, particularly in the mass media (Hodgetts, Cullen, & Radley, 2005), so that we were able to see how these issues were adopted, adapted or refused by the participants involved (Hodgetts, Radley, & Cullen, forthcoming).

Procedure

There were three phases to the research. First, an interview was conducted with each participant exploring their pathways to homelessness, significant events in their lives, and the pattern of their typical day. At the end of the interview each participant was given a disposable camera, and asked to take pictures that represented their experience of being a homeless person. They were told that photographs could be of key times in their day, of typical activities and spaces, or of anything else that portrayed their situation. Taking the pictures and returning with the camera constituted the second part of the study. The

¹There are special concerns when using photography in social science research, but particularly so when employed with vulnerable groups such as homeless people. We were not under any illusion that giving the participants cameras to take their own pictures was empowering for them. However, they did say that it was often interesting and useful to be able to show us their world. In spite of their willingness for their photographs to be used in academic publications, it remains important to protect the anonymity of those concerned. Ethical issues in photographic work do not stop with a signature on a consent form (Gross, Katz, & Ruby, 1988).

film was then developed, a further meeting arranged and participants were offered a copy set of the pictures they had taken.

In the second interview, conducted 1 or 2 days after the photography session, participants were asked about their photographs that were set out in front of them. Following the procedure used by Radley and Taylor (2003), participants were asked to say what each photograph showed, what was its focus, and their response to the person, place or object depicted. All photographs were then spread out and the person asked to identify the ones that best captured their experience of homelessness. They were also asked to comment on the act of taking the photographs, and to express their feelings about the pictures that they had taken. Both interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Photographs were digitally rendered for ease of inspection.

ANALYSIS—TELLING ABOUT PICTURES

We used photography in this research so that homeless people could show us their world as well as interpret it. Rather than see the photographs as bounded objects for interpretation, they are better understood as standing in a dialectical relationship with the persons who produced them. Their meaning does not lie in the pictures, except in so far as this is part of the way that people talk about them. To talk about the photographs one has taken is to make claims for them—to explain, interpret and ultimately take responsibility for them.

From this perspective the interview can be thought of as a conversation between respondent and interviewer. The accounts given and the interpretations made are then a result of a dialectic relationship between these positions, not an outcome from prescribed movements from one to another. As interpretive practice, this comes near to Mitchell's description of representation as something assembled over time out of fragments. The aim is to 'make materially visible the structure of representation as a trace of temporality and exchange, the fragments as mementos, as "presents" re-presented in the ongoing process of assemblage, of stitching in and tearing out' (Mitchell, 1994, p. 419). Importantly, just as the interviews were made in the anticipation of photographs to be taken, and then on the basis of prints being looked at, the analysis involving the three investigators also had a conversational form. This meant that the aim was not so much an understanding of the pictures, as an understanding *with* the photographs about the lives of the respondents concerned. To go further, as Banks (2001) has argued, this involves tuning in to conversations that extend beyond the photographer and his or her audience (the investigators) concerning others who make images of homeless people, including television producers, newspaper editors and advertising agencies.

If interpreting photographs always involves what Wright (1999) has called a 'looking at' and a 'looking behind' the picture, how did we do this in this study? In our case we had available to us the sets of photographs together with the interview transcripts that accompanied them. The transcripts were—to a greater or lesser degree—an explication of what the pictures showed and why the person had taken those particular shots. As far as the analysis went, this was already made heterogeneous by the way that the researchers had been differentially involved in the study. Two of them carried out the interviews, and so came to the photographs with knowledge of the people concerned, i.e. they had already 'looked behind' the pictures in the course of setting up the photography and then asking respondents about it. The third investigator viewed the pictures prior to reading any

of the interview transcripts in order to be sensitive to the features 'within' the photographs. Subsequently, with all three investigators together, a first survey of the material involved a discussion in front of a slide show of the images, relating these to what had been noted in the interview transcripts. In this way we moved between text and picture for each respondent, on a case-by-case basis, and then between respondents in terms of their pictures and what they had told us about themselves. One aim of this analytic exercise was to determine any links between specific parts of the transcript and particular photographs, so that pictures might be seen to exemplify something about that person's experience of homelessness. Another aim was to find broader themes in the text and in field notes made about the respondents, so that these might serve as stories constructed by us about these persons and their worlds.

HOMELESSNESS PORTRAYED

In this section, we show how different depictions of homelessness can be understood by using the photographs that the respondents brought back to the investigators. By reading the transcripts and looking at the photographs, we identified six respondents as exemplifying different and significant positions with regard to being a homeless person. In order to illuminate these differences and to discuss their implications for understanding the situation of the homeless, we set out their accounts with respect to selected photographs that they provided. The names used are pseudonyms.

In the course of our discussions, we arrived at a simple category system for classifying the photographs. This classification arose out of the sense that the 12 respondents had taken some similar pictures and some that were quite distinct and individual. This was hardly surprising but formed the basis of further readings of the transcripts to point up questions such as, 'Why these pictures, and none of those? Why this detail? Why are none of these other types of pictures represented?' Alongside this, for each person, we identified the particular pictures that each said was most typical of homelessness and why this should be so. We also looked closely to see where in the transcripts there were elaborated accounts, or mention of significant material in relation to particular photographs.

Table 1 shows a simple count of the numbers of different kinds of photograph taken by each person. The categories are not to be taken as value free or neutral, but should be read here 'bracketed' while awaiting explication. That is, the category is there to facilitate determining the direction of further inquiry into 'Why these pictures?' 'Why that account of them?' 'Why that interpretation?'. The figures in *italic* indicate categories that are taken to be salient for those individuals, often because they indicate issues of importance in their way of living the life of a homeless person. Of course, this does not mean that where individuals took similar kinds of photograph their orientation to the pictures was the same. What is important is the dominance of certain kinds of picture, providing a clue to the issues that respondents raised in the interviews. Using Table 1 we explore how the respondents' photographs relate to their daily life in the city, and thence to the kinds of spaces that they occupied. Some but not all of these respondents lived in the hostel at the time of the interviews, though all had had to sleep on the streets previously, and on occasions continued to sleep rough. To a greater or lesser degree, all of the respondents made the hostels, the day-centres, their occupants and their interior spaces, subjects for their photographic essay.

Table 1. Categories of photograph taken by selected respondents

	Rose	Mary	Robert	Keith	Michael	Jean
Self	6	0	2	0	0	1
Homeless friends	0	11	1	7	3	2
Homeless strangers	0	2	2	1	0	1
Streets, places used by homeless people	6	2	2	4	15	12
Details of hostel or life of homeless people	4	1	6	0	1	6
Own room or possessions	0	0	2	8	0	0
Buildings, spaces primarily used by others	8	0	1	4	14	4

The homelessness of place

In this section we compare the photographs and accounts provided by two women. Mary had been homeless for only 18 months, whereas Rose had been homeless for 13 years. However, they are selected for comparison here because their photographs hardly overlapped in basic content. While Rose photographed herself and the public spaces she frequented, Mary photographed her friends and other homeless people. The women represent two poles of identification, with Rose attempting to live a 'normal' life in spite of being a rough sleeper, and Mary embracing the life of homelessness by associating with others who used the day-centre.

Rose was the only respondent listed in Table 1 who did not photograph other homeless people, either in or outside of the day-centre. At the time of interview, she slept beneath a windowsill and walked to the centre each day. Apart from some shots of sleeping places taken at night (these pictures did not develop successfully), Rose photographed details of the day-centre and a number of buildings that showed where and how she spent her day. Among these were Figure 1, showing a local shop that she frequented, and Figure 2 showing the entrance to the day-centre. These photographs are chosen to represent the fact that Rose was homeless, but led a life where she tried to pass for a domiciled person. She explained that, in the daytime, there was a market stall in front of the store where she bought fruit and vegetables. To represent the market stall she placed the stool, with a bag on it, in the position shown in the picture. Her photograph is meant to be indicative

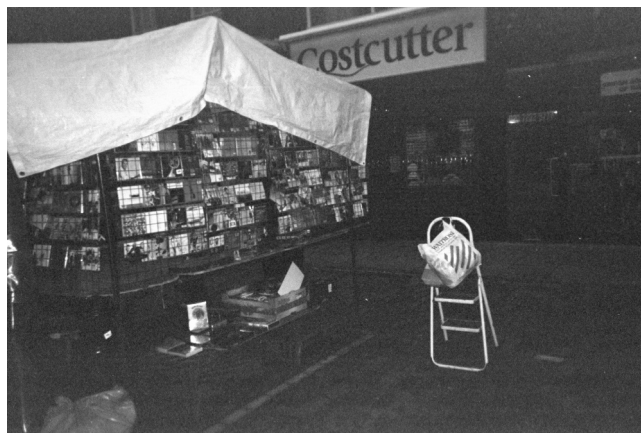


Figure 1.



Figure 2.

of a time when domiciled people mainly occupy this space. She was reluctant to take the photograph at one of these times, perhaps because she did not want people to know that she was homeless, 'because it can be backfiring sometimes'.

Rose's pictures included one of a local pub where she goes to buy a drink. This ('it's only a pint') she says 'makes me, then as a customer to go and use the toilets. I don't use them as a toilet, as a convenience. He's [the publican] not there just to be a convenience'. Rose said that she knew quite a few of the customers. She did not make clear whether they knew that she was a homeless person. Nevertheless, her way of talking about these places made it clear that this was her locale, so that:

The Prince Albert is somewhere not very far from my home, as I call it. That's right, it's my little home and it's just across the road and I can see it when I go down in between there. There's two ways to get in my place, there's off Victoria Street and there's another place where the bank opens and it's a side entrance, so I can go down there or go round.

In this excerpt we are given the conditions and presuppositions of what one would see, or what one might do as a consequence. Her account is in the form of a tour (de Certeau, 1984) as compared to the map provided by Mary (see later). Rose talked about her photographs in a way that told a story of her day, from leaving her sleeping place beneath the window sill to the passing bus ('every morning he toots his horn after me and if it's raining he gives me a little lift'), to the church ('I come past here and say a little prayer and then this is the most welcoming one, and that's my day starts with breakfast in the day-centre'). Figure 2 shows the entrance to the day-centre, about which she said 'the staff go there and I come down here and the staff welcome me in.' In turn she says that 'we welcome them, say "good morning"'. That's why I took it because it's our door to welcome'. With its facilities for keeping clean (Rose took two photos of the shower) the day-centre provided the wherewithal for her to move from being a rough sleeper at night to someone able to occupy, through the rest of the day, spaces dominated by people with homes and jobs. Recognized by the staff as a legitimate user of the day-centre, being clean and tidy, ensuring that she was well fed, all enabled her to become a customer, social drinker, gambler—effectively a member of the local community. She did not merely occupy prime space but could, if only tentatively, lay claim to it as a local user. This was sufficient for her to say



Figure 3.

that the prospect of paying bills in a flat meant that, 'Even now, I'd rather have no home', meaning no permanent place of residence.

Mary had a hostel room near the same day-centre, so did not need to 'sleep rough'. Reference to Table 1 shows that she took 11 photographs of people in the day-centre—more than anyone else in this group. She did not take any pictures of buildings or spaces that are primary for the public in general. The faces of the people in these two photographs (Figures 3 and 4) have been blanked out to protect their anonymity.

Mary described Figure 3 as follows:

That's my hostel room. And this is a friend. She was homeless for 11 years. She's now an alcoholic and you can see the drink and that's a carrier bag for the drink. She's got half a bottle of gin in there and that's how she lives her day. She wakes up in the morning, drink, drink and drinks.

Looking at this photograph in its original form one sees a picture of a woman smiling at the camera. She is content to be photographed by her friend, holds a half-empty bottle



Figure 4.

between her knees and appears comfortable in the setting of the room. The curtains are drawn—we do not know at what time the picture was taken.

Figure 4 shows a woman and a man, also holding drink. About this photograph she says:

Mary: 'This is where we sit and drink. That is the same place as this. Here, like just on the path. He's sitting there and we're sitting here.

Interviewer: So this is your area during the day and this is the area at night?

Mary: They call it The Wall, Vauxhall Bridge Road.

Interviewer: Why is it called The Wall?

Mary: Because that's where we sit... it's only 5, 10 minutes away from here. And this is the hostel, again this is B. This is where we can sit. You can drink any time you want. B's Scottish as well.'

In essence Mary shows us a community of friends who share not only a place but also an activity—drinking. There is no reference here outside this group, no concern to photograph other places or spaces concerning other things, the past or future. The denoting of people in place is reminiscent of a kind of mapping of places as opposed to the narrative tour provided by Rose (earlier). In mapping, there is a description (a setting out) of places without articulation of activities or viewpoint (de Certeau, 1984). There is something almost syncretic about Mary's descriptions, as if people and place go together, features of a condition—the homeless body—that they denote:

This one. And that one. Here's another one. There's loads of them. They are all here. There's another one. And there's another one really. It's just homelessness. And another one and that one. It's all just homeless people and it doesn't matter where you look there's alcohol involved in every one of these pictures apart from these two.

Unlike Rose's account, Mary's provides pictures of people drinking together who do not seek to be other than they appear. Everywhere she points the camera Mary seemingly frames the same thing. She presents for us a view inside her world, where other drinkers stare back at us from places that are defined accordingly, without reference to the domiciled, without reference to the activities that might define these spaces in other terms. Once the request to be photographed has been accepted by the other, the camera diminishes distance in the pose that portrayal invites, almost requires. For that reason, the 'happy drinkers' we see are people who are not estranged from each other. These are friends on their own territory, even though gathered together in public view. Holding their cans or bottles they risk being labelled as 'down-and-outs' by passing members of the public.

In a quite different way Rose also portrayed a condition of community, of temporarily surpassing (though not escaping) estrangement. But in her case the community is that of the locale—the bus driver, the shopkeeper, the pub landlord—who accept her as 'a regular'. This does not mean having to be their friend—for the life of the city is one of fleeting fragmented exchanges. Rose's relationships here are no different from the ones enjoyed by any domiciled individual, someone who shares a word with the shopkeeper or landlord of their local pub. These brief exchanges are the stuff of city life with regard to feeling that one belongs in a particular locale, that one is not a stranger in the sense of being from somewhere else (and not known). Equally important, these local exchanges mean that one is not treated as being 'unlike us', as would be a member of a disparaged minority like Mary, whose claim to being a worthy citizen is likely to be rejected.

Establishing a way of life in public space

While, Rose and Mary portrayed a life of community through either avoiding or else surpassing estrangement, there were other respondents who embraced being a stranger in



Figure 5.

order to live in the city. Although Keith and Robert were different in how they achieved this, both were similar in that they distanced themselves from the role of homeless person, and used the photography exercise to portray this difference (Snow & Anderson, 1993).

Keith was one of the younger respondents, and had a history of drug abuse. Rather than attempt to pass as an ordinary citizen, he went into public places in order to beg for money. (Begging was criticized by several of the respondents as a demeaning act for homeless people, as something to be avoided.) For Keith, however, begging was a way of life, and in order to sustain it he exploited his homeless situation. He frequented places where members of the public might give him money, for example near cash machines and ticket offices. Figure 5, of Waterloo Station, is one of the very few photographs taken by a respondent to show ordinary people going about their daily life.

Keith's interview is a justification of begging as a way of life, and his photographs included several of his friends who also begged. In order to do this successfully he had to appear needy—in effect to satisfy ordinary people's expectations of what a deserving homeless person should look like. This involved him in a form of self-presentation, something done deliberately and in full consciousness of the effect he must achieve.

Interviewer: So what do you have in there? You've got a sleeping bag?

Keith: Nothing. Just a sleeping bag. It just looks good.

Interviewer: OK, for a visual effect? I was talking to one guy and he said that a lot of homeless people have a whole heap of stuff and they use a trolley.

Keith: That's just the old timers isn't it? Old tramps really, running about with a trolley. A shopping trolley. It's not something I do.

Interviewer: So for an effect, having the two bags makes it look as if, what sort of effect does it...?

Keith: Well, homeless isn't it? I mean, they associate homeless people—if you are homeless then where is all your stuff? Walking about with nothing, just your clothes on, you must have somewhere to live, you know what I mean?

Keith's use of the word 'tramp' is most unusual in this group of respondents. It evokes a different world, one from which he distances himself. His is a world of enterprise in which the careful choice of clothes is important. (Figure 6 shows his 'begging clothes' laid out on his hostel bed to be photographed.) What we see here is part of an outfit that enabled him to penetrate public spaces during the daytime. The dark green trousers and black jacket are



Figure 6.

such that Keith said, 'you can't see the dirt on it can you?' This means that the potential cleanliness of the clothes is also invisible, a feature that might undermine his claims to be homeless. Whatever the case, this drab outfit allowed him to be on the station platform—to claim a marginal hold in this place—while not appearing too bold or too visible in what is primarily a space for others. By sitting 'in the dirt' where people pass by, wearing the clothing of the dispossessed, and (we assume) avoiding eye contact, he was able to suppress fear in others while evoking their sympathy. His use of space is a presentational one that calls out in others a recognition (in tossed coins) of their own purposive mobility, bodily cleanliness, and moral worth.

The contrasting situation to this is where homeless people utilize the estrangement of the city to 'pass' as people who lead legitimate lives beyond public space. Robert was concerned to present himself as someone who, though homeless, not only aspired to be like other people, but also asserted a claim that he should be treated in this way. This claim was made in part through the kinds of photograph that he took, as well as in what he said about them. With reference to the surface criteria shown in Table 1, his pattern of photographs has no distinguishing feature. This is because it is not so much what is shown in Robert's pictures that is of interest, but how they refer, and take up other meaning.

Amongst his photographs Robert took two of himself, one with a friend in the hostel and the one shown as Figure 7. In this photograph, he stands on the Embankment with the Thames and the Houses of Parliament as backdrop. He holds a bag and smiles directly at the camera. He had asked a passer-by to take the picture, which is in the style of a tourist photograph. He said:

It's because it's London again, homeless again see. The wandering around, aimlessly wandering around the big city. You know, I'm also doing it. I go to Westminster, boring.

What he is saying here is that he, too, is entitled to be pictured in this prime location, and to treat this event as other city dwellers would do. He said that he also visits the Palace of Westminster—often enough to be blasé about it—and so this picture establishes his claim to exercise the gaze of the tourist. The aspiration to be like the majority of people—or at least to be treated with the respect that the domiciled can command—ran through his interview. However, the realization that, as a hostel dweller, he was not like 'ordinary peo-



Figure 7.

ple' led Robert to state that he was an outsider, with all the consequences for his feelings of self-worth:

I feel out of place going to Westminster . . . You don't feel the same. You feel out of it when you're on the streets, going to these places. You actually feel out of it. You don't feel like you're part of the tourists. You seem different being homeless, really, seriously, everywhere you go like.

Robert's photographs were an attempt to question the way that he is made to feel an outsider because he has not got work or a home of his own. In order to raise this question in the interviews he distanced himself from the homeless as a group. He took only one picture of a 'homeless person' outside—a man apparently asleep on the Embankment next to the river Thames (see Figure 8). He then proceeded to show his knowledge of homelessness by explaining that the man was 'dressed wrong . . . he's obviously not on the road, because he'd have all his stuff with him'. Robert's apparent ambivalence about his own situation re-surfaced later when he chose this picture as the one that best represented



Figure 8.

homelessness, even though he had said that the man in the picture was not ‘on the road’. The image represented homelessness as a life from which he tried to distance himself, to the point of describing the hardness, the discomfort of the paving on which the man on the Embankment is lying. To use this space in this way he said is ‘unnatural’—not like ‘ordinary people’. To be like ordinary people is to use public space in the way that it is intended (Hubbard, 2001), and to represent oneself like this is to show (as in Figure 7) oneself in the act of doing this.

To summarize, Keith and Robert were unlike Rose and Mary in that they moved towards, embraced even, the possibilities that come from the estrangement of city life. Having said that, both of them also had friends among homeless people, but this did not mean that they identified with the homeless as a social group. On the contrary, they distanced themselves from a label that implied, in Keith’s case, passivity and failure, and in Robert’s case, worthlessness and being undeserving of respect.

No stranger to the city

There is a distinction to be made between ‘estrangement’ as a condition of all city dwellers and the concept of ‘stranger’ that connotes the idea of being labelled as a member of a stigmatized group (Bauman, 1995). And yet, while homeless people are seen as strangers to the domiciled—that is, in the city—they are not strangers to the city itself. As long as there have been public spaces there have been those who were deemed to occupy them inappropriately (Daly, 1997; Desjarlais, 1997; Hebdige, 1993). In the modern metropolis the presence of street people is almost part of the fabric of the city, so that they are tolerated within certain bounds, kept at the edge so that their visibility does not challenge the moral certainties to which most people adhere concerning the injustices of life (Coser, 1969). All of the respondents in this study had spent some time living on the streets, either at the time of interview or at some time in the past. All knew what it is like to wander the streets of London, to have to move on, to be denied the sense of ‘dwelling-in’ that is the precursor to a sense of belonging. Two of the respondents expressed most clearly this sense of being trapped in a world from which they could not escape, a world in which the lack of a home turns into a sort of presence that captured them.



Figure 9.

One of these, Michael, took two kinds of photograph—those representing places used by homeless people and those showing many of the larger and newer building developments that represented the world of people with resources and options (see Table 1, Figures 9 and 10). He explained this in relation to the photographic exercise:

Ah well, it makes you think a bit more different than if I was just seeing what I photographed—it would be just thoughts. But when you take a photograph it becomes a bit more significant, you know. Photographs, I don't know. When someone looks at a photograph they don't see what I see. Ah, it's hard to explain. It's a good question. But it's hard to explain.

In choosing to make these two kinds of picture he drew attention to the gap between his present position and that of domiciled people who lived near to him. Whereas Robert asserted his claim to be treated as 'normal', Michael expressed through his pictures the impossibility of making that kind of transition. Significantly, there were four photographs that exemplified this, one of which (Figure 10) is shown here.



Figure 10.

First, Figure 9 shows a car with a smashed windscreen parked under a railway bridge, and another car behind it. Further away is an area that has all the look of marginal urban space and a 'Dead End' road sign is visible at the far end of the tunnel. Michael described this and then went on to discuss others, including Figure 10.

Interviewer: So if you were to pick the ones that best represented homelessness to you, which ones would you pick?

Michael: Well, the ones under the bridges. . . . This car, it hasn't come out, the window has been smashed, but people sleep rough in that car anyway. So that's why they stand out. . . . these would be places where I could sleep or put my sleeping bag down or something. But definitely that one because I know that car, I mean it's not a good representation because there was a car in front of it with a wheel clamp on. But yeah, that's what they mean. The others are a bit more to do with wanting to break free, you know, seeing, like travelling, like I said to you a while ago. I wouldn't know where to go. If you said to me, 'Right, there's a free bus pass, where would you go?' I'm still going to be homeless at the end of the day . . . You feel like you've got to keep moving but you don't know where, when you get there, wherever that is, still you feel like you've got to keep moving.

The impossibility of making a break from homelessness was expressed in four photographs that involved movement away from the urban spaces he occupied. One was of a railway station, the other three were of the river Thames. One of these (see Figure 10) is of two birds flying over the river. This is an interesting photograph because its use of light and contrast—together with the figures of the birds in motion—appeal to an aesthetic that draws upon the practices of photography as art. The image of the river evokes a natural world (not an urban one), its flowing waters the idea of passage (beside the static bench on which he sits) while the birds, as he explained, are 'symbols of freedom to me'. Michael's pictures showed, he said, 'what a homeless person can do and what a homeless person can't do'. These photographs do more than denote the spaces and places of homelessness—they express the condition of hopelessness that emerges from the yawning gap between the perception of the domiciled and those without a home.

To underline this point we shall consider one last respondent who, on the surface, provided a set of pictures showing mainly places and spaces used by homeless people.

Jean was a woman who, though previously a teacher, had been homeless for more than 20 years. She used the study as an opportunity to communicate the detail of life on the streets. However, this was not a matter of merely documenting where she went and what she saw, because: 'I enjoyed taking the photographs. I enjoyed even more thinking that it could be a project. I was getting very excited about the idea that it could be a project, a story.' Among her photographs was Figure 11, which shows some steps with bags of rubbish and cardboard stacked on the pavement nearby. She described this photograph as follows:

That's opposite the step where I used to sleep. Those cardboard bits, I took a photograph of the cardboard bits because we use these cardboard bits and we flatten them out along the steps to sleep on so, soft you know it covers the concrete and the wet and the damp and everything so. You know we rely very much on cardboard being left out for sleeping on. You know that it is important that we have cardboard. Other than that we have to go out and put big newspapers if there's no cardboard around.

Detailed descriptions of rough sleeping were relatively rare among the participants' responses. However, Jean felt it was important to communicate the sense of degradation that rough sleeping involves. Perhaps for that reason, many of her pictures centred upon litter and rubbish bins, as well as doorways and steps on which she had to sleep. About the last, she complained, was the annoying habit that people have of pissing on them,



Figure 11.

something that can be interpreted as a metaphor of displacement, of the abject situation in which rough sleepers find themselves (Cresswell, 1997). She returned to the matter of cardboard later on in the interview when she spoke of homeless people as building 'little cardboard houses round them at night' so that, as she said,

You know, that cardboard is so close to you, it could almost be a person and there's a lot of times that homeless people have been considered a piece of cardboard themselves. We've often been called 'cardboard people'.

When asked which photograph was most representative of her day, Jean chose Figure 12. It shows a street between tall buildings with parked cars and litter.

Jean: The street can claim you. The street will claim you, how's that? And it has various ways of claiming you. That's why [this picture] I feel epitomizes completely my view. That street, just one back alley will claim you as a homeless person. Dramatic, but if I had to write a story about it you would understand. One street alone can claim you and keep you as a homeless person.



Figure 12.

Interviewer: How does the street keep you?

Jean: Well, how does a car end up being parked in one street for a very long time? I've often seen cars like this that have been abandoned... There are a lot of times when you think, I am not human anymore.

Interviewer: How do you get through or cope with that?

Jean: You go into a dream world. You go into a cartoon of a world.

Interviewer: What's the cartoon?

Jean: Well, that you are a detective in a cartoon film. In other words, everything becomes totally different. The street itself takes on a completely different atmosphere and life and everything and you are a different person altogether. You're a different thing altogether. You even use second hand clothes as your different thing. You'll go on and get clothes from the clothing store. I would get a mac that looked like a detective's mac, you know, to be used as a prop for my world, that I would create, if I wanted to get through a night or two of homelessness. You would use it as a theatre.

She said that she would walk around the streets pretending that she was a detective, looking for 'little clues' in the rubbish, especially odd buttons that she would put in jars. She would think about the person who had owned the buttons and make up stories, because 'It keeps you alive'. That homeless people engage in fictive storytelling and in fantasizing has been reported before (Snow & Anderson, 1993), but we interpret this less in terms of identity claims and more in terms of the condition of extreme urban exposure. That is, living on the streets, being exposed to the complex, fragmented and inchoate stimulation of the city, anyone might 'find oneself unconsciously slipping into magical habits of mind' (Raban, 1974, p. 159). As Raban says, the city's daily cascade of stimuli means that one's imagination is always being stretched, as one collects signs like a 'jackdaw's nest of badges and trinkets'. By contemplating in a detailed way the small discarded items around her, Jean was able, mimetically, to transform these urban spaces in order to re-occupy them. This, in turn, allowed her to re-enter temporarily the world of the domiciled through the portals of this detritus, albeit that this entry was imaginary. Nonetheless, this transformed the dirty, harsh environment in ways that enabled her to figure herself apart from it, to dissociate herself from the cardboard so that it no longer 'claimed' her.

Just like Rose and Robert, Jean said that she would occasionally pass as an ordinary shopper, though some traders were wise to her domiciliary status. However, in attempting this she was unlike Robert, for whom claims to 'ordinariness' were made by passing as a domiciled citizen in public spaces.

Well I don't think that I am what they say I am. I don't think I am a bag lady. I have accommodation, be it that it's a homeless hostel, but it's a roof over my head. I'm not a bag lady. You don't see me with lots of bags very often, I'm not. In other words, I thought that people in general they love to categorize. You belong there, you belong there, you belong there. If they see that you're on the streets they do categorize you as a bag lady. And that is dreadful for me, they want to put you in little categories.

This is a critical reflection, however, more than a plea from a victim. In being able to survive in the harsh environment of the streets, she saw herself as someone who could manage what would terrify the ordinary citizen.

Jean: Yes. and there is different shades of black, there's different shades between black and white but people are dreadful, and scared. They're scared of the homeless. They're absolutely petrified of the homeless.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Jean: Very, very hard to actually say. Because a lot of people today are frightened of losing their jobs and they think it wouldn't take much for me to be in that situation. If I lost my job they'd probably think I wouldn't be able to pay the mortgage, I'd lose my house and they can more or less see themselves as you. You know, the most awful thing is they can see themselves as you.

In saying this, Jean draws upon ideas consistent with the history of attempts to deal with the 'problem' of homeless people, which is characterized on the part of the domiciled majority by the twin responses of fear and sympathy (Borchard, 2000). The perceived threat is to a unitary 'us', which is sustained by excluding those individuals who are different (Kawash, 1998). The discriminatory act of purifying the idea of 'the public' involves a material act of exclusion of homeless people. This results partly from differences in physical appearance, something that matters in a world where aesthetics has become conventionalized (Dear, Gaber, Takahashi, & Wilton, 1997). Calling her a bag lady is an instance of the practice of containment, displacement and exclusion that produce 'the homeless' as a group, so that even the specific places they inhabit can become stigmatized (Takahashi, 1997).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this project was two-fold, attempting to describe in detail how some homeless people survive in the city, and to do this using a methodology that could be extended within a longitudinal design. Because of the emphasis upon the visual as a way of engaging the participants, the data provided more information about spaces and places than might otherwise be gathered in research with homeless people. We have two points to make in this regard. One is that the participants said that they enjoyed making the pictures, enjoyed having the opportunity to show as well as tell about their lives, their constraints and their possibilities. Second, the foregrounding of the material aspects of their lives included an accent on the body, and on the way that survival in the city is closely related to matters not just of appearance but of fabrication and imagination (cf. Hill, 2003; Hill & Stamey, 1990). One cannot include matters to do with discomfort, dirt, pleasure and danger without theoretical concepts of the body, bridging ideas of self-concept, home and urban setting (Shilling, 2004; Radley, 1991).

The findings of the present study show variation in the way that the participants lived in the city, as suggested by their photographs and interviews. However, while the excerpts presented in this paper suggest a specific focus of action for each participant, many of the respondents said that they used various ways of operating, depending upon circumstance. All attempted to pass as domiciled citizens under certain constraints and in certain situations; all had slept rough, knew the streets and could survive on them; all knew what it was to drink in order to blot out problems and hardships. These variations depended upon (a) the degree to which they attempted to be socially visible, and hence morally acceptable, and (b) the degree to which they were willing to be restricted in terms of space and place. A willingness for restriction followed where individuals accepted exclusion, such as in Mary's case. Here the day-centre and its environs provided a place away from the public gaze so that she and her friends could be socially invisible in order to drink their world into being. Restriction was also the price paid by Keith in the hours spent begging, sitting on the ground at Waterloo Station. This restriction was necessary because the begging place enabled his conditional visibility as a person in need, as a pitiable individual suffering at the hands of an un pitying economic system. However, he also told us that he often spent his nights on the streets with other homeless friends, where the darkness (and lack of people) provided the cloak for them to be unrestricted in their use of city space.

A relatively unrestricted use of public space was achievable by those like Rose and Robert who could pass for 'ordinary people'. They used the powers of estrangement that

enable city life in order to be with domiciled people, either *en masse* or in specific exchanges in varied settings. In both cases, they emphasized the need to enhance their appearance and maintain personal hygiene in order that the glimpses they afforded to others in the city should be acceptable. The sense of social worth and acceptability that they sought depended upon how they were seen by others, though this sense was challenged each night when they returned home—one to a hostel room, the other to a place below a window sill. Compared to these two people, the unrestricted use of space reported by Michael and Jean is that of the streets ‘as home’, as they tried to remain invisible to avoid the public gaze. This ‘unrestricted use’ might equally well be said to be ‘of them by the streets’, in that they were seemingly condemned to wander the city. In that situation wandering (except in the ‘wrong’ places) is protective in the context of the psychological distance that the metropolitan attitude encourages. It also avoids situations where exchanges with others would soon reveal that one has no money, has no pressing engagements, has no home to go to.

Questions of appearance, materiality and the use of space provide good reasons for the use of photo-production methods in research on this topic. This is particularly the case once one acknowledges the necessity of studying not just ‘the identities of the homeless’ but the practical ways in which they endorse, maintain and repair the effects of their social and material situation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by a Suntory and Toyota International Centres for Economics and Related Disciplines (STICERD) grant awarded to Darrin Hodgetts while at The London School of Economics, and by a British Academy International Joint Activities Award made to Alan Radley. The authors are grateful to directors and staff at Thames Reach Bondway and The Passage Day Centre for providing facilities and for their invaluable advice.

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