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Moral Distinctions and Structural Inequality: Homeless Youth Salvaging the Self

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This paper explores the construction and contestation of moral distinctions as a dimension of contemporary structural inequality through a focus on the subjectivities constructed by young people who have experienced homelessness. Empirical material from two research projects shows that in young people's narratives of homelessness, material insecurity intertwines with the moral economies at work in neoliberal capitalist societies to construct homelessness as a state of moral disgrace, in which an ungovernable experience is experienced as a moral failure. When young people gain access to secure housing, the increasing stability and security of their lives is narrated in terms of a moral adherence to personal responsibility and disciplined conduct. Overall the paper describes an economy of worth organised around distinctions between order and chaos, self-governance and unruliness, morality and disgrace, which structures the experience of homelessness. As young people's position in relation to these moral ideals reflects the material conditions of their lives, their experiences demonstrate the way that moral hierarchies contribute to the existence and experience of structural inequalities in neoliberal capitalist societies.

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Introduction

This paper explores the construction and contestation of moral distinctions as a dimension of contemporary structural inequality through a focus on the subjectivities constructed by young people who have experienced homelessness. The paper shows how moral hierarchies are experienced as young people experience homelessness, and connects these to the structural dynamics of late modern youth inequalities. Homelessness is both a highly visible example of contemporary poverty and an experience with unique and profound consequences for young people's identities, including experiences of stigmatisation and the struggle for what Snow and Anderson (1993) have called 'salvaging the self'. A focus on subjectivity and moral worth provides an important insight into the nature of youth homelessness, capturing the interplay between structural inequalities and processes of cultural distinction and abjection. An exploration of the resources for self-worth thereby goes beyond examining homelessness as an isolated 'social problem' to provide sociological insight into the structural divisions and cultural boundaries that differentiate young people in late modernity.

Young Homeless Subjectivities and Moral Worth in Late Modernity

Discussing the 'moral significance of class', Sayer (2005) highlights the way in which cultural distinctions are established through moral degradation, including divisions between

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the 'respectable' and 'disreputable' working class. Like hierarchies of cultural distinction described by Bourdieu (1984), the capacity to claim moral worth is a dimension of struggles for legitimacy and authority, and the intertwining of structural inequalities, cultural distinctions and moral divisions is manifested in struggles over the meaning of inequalities and the kinds of subjectivities available to differently positioned groups. As Smyth and Wrigley (2013) demonstrate, neo-liberal regimes construct people who find themselves in poverty "as incompetent failures in the market-place: they have simply not been able to work out how to present themselves in a marketable way" (p. 39). In an exploration of working class femininity, Skeggs (1997) shows how identities are forged in relation to cultural boundaries that define working class subjectivities as ugly, crass or offensive, and highlights the moral overtones of public discussions about the 'respectability' of differently positioned subjects. The moralisation of youth inequalities has often reached hysterical levels: the term "moral panic" was initially coined to describe popular and political responses to the 'problem' of youth (Cohen, 1972), and both political discussions of the fecklessness of a fictitious youth "underclass" (MacDonald, 1997), as well as claims concerning the criminality and greed supposed to have motivated marginalised young people during social unrest in London in 2011 (Ray, 2014), show that young people's supposed moral attributes remain stakes in the governance of contemporary youth inequalities.

Struggles for moral worth and legitimacy have not been addressed in the youth homelessness field in this way before, but parallels between the moralisation of contemporary inequality and young homeless identities are suggestive: young people describe feelings of worthlessness, shame, public denigration and stigmatisation, and tend to narrate homelessness as an outcome of bad choices (Carlen, 1996; Zufferey and Kerr, 2004; Kidd, 2007; Harter et al, 2005). Snow and Anderson (1993) describe the need for those experiencing homelessness to 'salvage the self.' This metaphor is particularly apt within discussions of moral worth, gesturing towards the illegitimacy of homeless subjectivities within the neoliberal economies of moral worth described by Skeggs (2005). 'Salvaging a self' may involve identity talk that distances the self from the idea of moral failure and rearticulates homelessness as the result of bad luck (Snow and Anderson, 1993), that constructs homelessness as a lack of housing rather than a social identity (Stephen, 2000; Parsell, 2010), or that valorises the toughness required to negotiate life on the street (Harter et al, 2005). The formation of 'street families' around ethical norms outside the neoliberal ideal may provide alternate resources for selfhood (Kidd, 2007), but may also be avoided by young people who wish to distance themselves from irresponsible, unruly 'homeless youth' (Farrugia, 2011b). At the centre of all of these strategies is the disgrace that the abject figure of 'the homeless' carries, and the moral requirement to avoid this disgrace in order to experience meaningful subjectivity.

This paper goes beyond discussions of identity talk to understand how moral hierarchies are constructed and experienced by young people experiencing homelessness, and explores how formerly homeless young people accomplish meaningful subjectivity and moral worth. Drawing on a theoretical framework which situates youth homelessness within neoliberal

economies of worth, the paper connects the experiences of homeless youth with the broader relations of power and privilege that structure late modernity.

Neoliberal Economies of Worth

The construction of cultural/moral hierarchies as part of contemporary material inequalities is part of governmental regimes at work in neoliberal capitalism, which mandate the individualised accumulation of worth as a moral signifier (Skeggs, 2005; 2011). Rose (1999) describes discourses expressing the ‘soul’ of the contemporary individual through narratives of autonomous self-realisation. Drawing on Rose’s work, Skeggs argues that

“the significance of...pervasive vocabularies, which provide repertoires of trauma, stress, attitude, intelligence, self-esteem, fulfilment and self-realisation, is that they are always ethical scenarios with maxims and techniques of self-conduct, offering...a plurality of forms of selfhood...as solutions to the dilemmas of existence.” (2005, p 973)

The ethical condition of these techniques for conduct and visions of personhood is the notion of personal responsibility and self-governance which, following Foucault (1985), are central precepts through which to construct and conduct the self. Performing responsibility is a moral imperative of neoliberalism, which delegitimises collective identities and explanations for social life (Beck, 1992) and positions self-governance as a condition for meaningful subjectivity. The conditions to experience meaning within the terms of this compulsory individuality are structurally differentiated:

“The ethically complete self thus becomes an imperative: it has to be displayed as a sign of one's social responsibility, self-governance, morality and value. But this is not a level playing field and only some can display appropriately...those who do not know how to tell properly and show that they cannot operate an ethical self...are subjectivities out of control, beyond propriety, excessive. They cannot accrue value to themselves because their displays devalue, visually calibrating the failures of self-responsibility.” (Skeggs, 2005, p 974)

In this way, subjects who lack the material and cultural resources to mobilise and perform personal responsibility and self-governance become morally devalued. Unrecognised as moral subjects, they become public symbols of disorder, failure and misconduct.

This process is particularly acute in the case of homelessness, and struggles over the moral worth of homeless subjectivities have a longer history than neoliberal governance. The historical overview of public debates about homelessness provided by Gowan (2010) highlights the centrality of self-governance to the construction and contestation of homeless subjectivities, demonstrating the historical prevalence of what she refers to as ‘sin talk’ and ‘sick talk’, or constructions of homelessness as moral or pathological failure respectively. Wright (1997) argues that the very term ‘homelessness’ has had contradictory consequences, drawing attention to a significant form of poverty whilst simultaneously constructing symbolic and moral boundaries around a population of disordered, unruly subjects that attract

more moral condemnation than those who are ‘merely poor.’ Homelessness is therefore both an evocative manifestation of contemporary inequality (Gerrard and Farrugia, 2014), and a site for symbolic struggles over moral value. The daily labour of homeless recyclers described ethnographically by Gowan (2010) is a testament to this, illustrating the moral significance of productivity and personal fortitude even in conditions of extreme deprivation. The intensity of moral exhortations to self-governance and personal responsibility as a feature of both public tropes and personal experiences has been described as the ‘symbolic burden’ of youth homelessness (Farrugia, 2011a).

Notions of responsibility and self-governance are also central to contemporary constructions of youth. Wyn and White (1997) argue that youth continues to be understood as a universal and homogeneous, but transitory and transitional life stage marked by involvement in and completion of education, engagement in work, and family formation. During the youth period, young people are expected to accumulate the personal capacities to become productive, independent, responsible adults. Lesko (2001) situates the emergence of this developmental approach to youth within colonial distinctions between savagery and civilization, discourses which position youth as the passage from irrationality and unruliness to rationality and personal sovereignty. With a neoliberal inflection, Kelly (2006) describes the idealised young subject of late modernity as the ‘entrepreneurial self’ defined by the moral obligation to be active, reflexive and rational, whilst the consequences of structural disadvantage are grouped into populations of ‘risky’ young people whose failure to self-govern poses a threat to the social (and economic) order. Based on a normative injunction towards increasing self-governance, this intertwining of developmental and neoliberal discourses homogenises the youth period and erases the inequalities that both structure young people’s lives and differentiate youth as a sociological phenomenon (Mizen, 2004).

Self-governance is also mandated by the structural insecurity of the youth period (Ball et al, 2000; Andres and Wyn, 2010). An insecure youth labour market, high levels of youth unemployment, and a hostile housing market all constitute structural conditions for youth homelessness, especially as changing family structures make familial support less secure (Carlen, 1996; Mallett et al, 2009). Whilst middle class young people are supported by families to move out of home (and may return multiple times [Jones, 1995]), young people experience homelessness after being deprived of familial support due to conflict, abuse and poverty (Rosenthal, Mallett and Myers, 2006), and are thereby excluded from biographical transitions idealised by contemporary discourses of youth. Homelessness also positions young people outside of the symbolic meaning of ‘home.’ Whilst the complexity of ‘home’ has been discussed by Mallett (2004), idealised visions of home are supposed to provide comfort, security, personal autonomy and attachment to significant others (Lahelma and Gordon, 2003). The family homes of young people experiencing homelessness are often dangerous and insecure places, an experience that these young people share with women who experience violence in the home (Bowlby, Gregory and McKie, 1997). Despite this, home has a symbolic meaning, historically associated with “economic independence, hard work, and the idea that one belongs in this world” (Arnold, 2004, p 71).

The profound material deprivation of homelessness thereby locates young people outside of a normative community of independent, productive individuals represented by this idealised image of the home, and positions them within complex economies of moral and cultural worth centred on the figure of the self-responsible individual of neoliberal capitalism. With this in mind, this paper situates young homeless subjectivities within the intersection of material insecurity, cultural distinction and moral division that defines homelessness as a position within late modern structural inequalities.

The Research Projects

Whilst definitions of homelessness in both social policy and academic research are politically contested, in Australia where this research was based, the most widely used definition is the “objective cultural” approach (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 1992), which encompasses forms of housing that do not meet the prevailing cultural standard in terms of security or adequacy of facilities. This definition forms the basis of this research, and encompasses literal homelessness (rough sleeping), “couchsurfing” (staying with a variety of people, often for one night at a time), refuges, boarding houses and state funded “transitional” accommodation.

This paper draws on data collected in two research projects. Both projects were qualitative explorations of young homeless subjectivities, the first conducted in a metropolitan centre of Australia between 2008 and 2011, and the second conducted in an Australian regional area between 2012 and 2013. Collectively thirty three young people (sixteen young men and seventeen young women) participated in the two projects. The material conditions of young people’s lives varied. Some were literally roofless, whilst others were living in short term youth refuges, or had exited homelessness into longer term supported housing projects, public housing, or privately rented housing. Those young people who were literally homeless or living in youth refuges had daily encounters with a social environment characterised by profound material and personal insecurity, as well as the threat of violence and intimidation created by the material poverty experienced by those around them. Subsistence strategies included government benefits, petty theft, and, for more securely housed and well supported young people, casual work. The day to day lives of participants therefore varied, and this will be explored further in the narratives reported below.

Young people participated in qualitative interviews of between twenty and ninety minutes in length. Interview questions discussed the experience of homelessness, including personal feelings, important relationships, sources of material resources, public perceptions of homelessness, thoughts on society and plans for the future. The experience of leaving homelessness to make a home was also discussed. Interviews were open and exploratory, designed to facilitate autobiographical narration. Data was analysed using narrative and thematic analysis (Reissman, 1993; Silverman, 2006). In this paper, we focus specifically on the resources for meaningful selfhood, situated within the above discussion of the intersection of moral hierarchies, cultural distinctions, and structural inequalities amongst young people in late modernity.

Becoming a Homeless Youth

Materially, the experience of homelessness is defined by a profound instability with regards to the basic necessities of life. Young people in this paper and in previous homelessness research (Mallett et al, 2010) emphasised feelings of uncertainty as characteristics of homelessness, inevitable responses to the daily struggle to secure accommodation and other necessities, as well as the violence and vulnerability of life on the street (Kidd, 2003; Farrugia, 2011b). As one metropolitan participant stated, *“homelessness is not having stability...you don’t know what’s going to happen the next day, you’re pretty much living from day to day.”* Moral distinctions centring on the significance of self-governance are, for unaccommodated young people, reinforced by this struggle for survival, and this intertwining of inequalities and moral distinctions structure the narratives young people tell about themselves and their experience of homelessness. This section analyses the experience of being positioned outside of the terms for morally worthy subjectivity available to young people in late modernity in order to frame the later discussion about the remaking of homeless subjectivities and the renegotiation of moral worth.

Dovey (1985) positions home and homelessness as experiences constituted within phenomenological tensions between self and other, order and chaos. As discussed above, these dichotomies are not merely phenomenological, but situated within cultural hierarchies which construct inequalities as the outcomes of differences in the moral inclination towards responsibility, self-governance and personal success. At the time of the interview, Jacob² was 18 years old and living at a supported housing service for young people. He grew up in a small rural town with no services for young people experiencing homelessness, and after a period of conflict with his mother he couchsurf and experienced rooflessness for a number of years. Eventually Jacob moved to a nearby regional centre where he continued couchsurfing. Whilst he had been excluded from school a number of times, Jacob eventually made contact with the housing service through a social worker at a school he attended whilst staying with a friend in this regional centre. Jacob narrates his childhood and youth in the following way:

Well it all started when I was about 11, no 12 or 13 years. I was really a middle child and I just wanted to get out more and I was just really rebellious and everything like that. Yes and then one thing just led to the next.

I’d just run around the streets, cause mischief and break into places.

It was my fault...I was a cunt of a kid, it’s plain and simple...I just didn’t listen and I just wanted to do what I wanted to do.

In this narrative Jacob describes himself as a problematic child, rebellious, lacking discipline and respect for familial authority. His movement into homelessness is described as ‘one thing leading to the next,’ a slide into homelessness made inevitable by Jacob’s tendency to create mischief and chaos. Experiencing homelessness, he comes to experience himself as a moral

² All names used here are pseudonyms.

failure and a threat to others, a position which recalls the figure of the ungrateful, wanton child. His narrative positions him as unruly and undisciplined, one of the problematic young subjectivities of late modernity. In so doing, Jacob constructs himself as abject to standards of moral worth which valorise self-control, self-governance and rationality. The tensions involved in this process are discussed by Mark, who was literally homeless in the metropolitan city at the time of the interview after having had to leave an abusive father. Whilst Mark did not feel able to ever return to his father, part of the reason he refused to make contact with his family was a feeling of shame:

I just don't want to call them. I feel too ashamed. Embarrassed...I know they're looking for me and I know the cops are looking for me but I'm not going to go back even if they tell me to...my dad drinks and yeah, gets abusive.

Mark did not attend school due to the day to day uncertainty of his life, slept in an abandoned warehouse in an outer metropolitan suburb and, lacking access to government benefits for reasons he did not specify, made most of his money from petty theft. The material conditions of Mark's life were profoundly insecure: he described a frequent need to manage encounters with police and violent confrontations between groups of young people. Throughout the interview he describes constantly feeling as though he is judged by others and assembles notions of personal control and moral worth into a vision of active subjectivity that he feels unable to successfully accomplish:

Um well if I had control I wouldn't be on the streets.

What is stopping you from getting off the streets?

Um I reckon self-esteem.

Can you tell me a bit more?

I don't know just. I can't talk, I can't speak much....[to] pretty much everyone. Except a few friends.

Here Mark describes his hesitance to speak to others as a consequence of exclusion from the capacity to construct an active, self-governing subject position. The material insecurity of his day to day life is intertwined here with the moral requirement to govern the self in an ungovernable context, an experience which is profoundly disempowering. Experiencing homelessness means that he feels unable to take control of his own life, and this failure to self-govern means a lack of self-worth. The constant work of surviving in this context makes him feel out of control and unable to articulate himself to others.

Whilst explicit self-blame was common in this study, it was not universal, nor was it necessary for the kind of affective suffering described by Mark above. Grant experienced homelessness in a rural town, and this became widespread knowledge in his local community. Grant described a sense of rejection and social isolation during a period of literal homelessness:

Because just walking around all day pretty much like I was in my own world, people tried, like kind of avoided me, I'd see my friends and they'd be, they'd walk off and do something else while I kept walking. So, I pretty much had no one at the time.

I felt like nobody wanted to talk to me, like everyone was trying to avoid me and It was like I, I was on a lot of drugs, when at the time I wasn't but that's how I felt [because] some drugs make you really depressed, um, that's how I felt.

People thought that there was something wrong with me for not living in a stable house, or with a stable family, they thought that I'd messed up real bad, um, when in actual fact it wasn't me that messed up, it was my family that pretty much threw me away because I showed them that I don't want to follow in their footsteps cause they're all drugged up all the time and it's not my lifestyle.

You never blamed yourself?

Nah. I knew the truth but nobody would listen.

Grant's experiences of rejection and isolation reflects the experiences of other urban and regional homeless young people in both this project and in previous literature (Roschelle and Kaufman, 2004), even when young people do not necessarily blame themselves for their experiences. In attributing these experiences to perceptions that he was 'messed up' due to his lack of a stable home or family, Grant's narrative constructs normative boundaries between order and respectability, and mess, unruliness and disreputability. In attributing his isolation to perceptions he was messed up, Grant positions himself in a state of chaos and disgrace.

Grant's experiences are also reflected by Owen, who was unable to live with his mother due to her own poverty and history of addiction. Owen experienced homelessness in a regional centre after having to leave his grandparents' house following his grandfather's death, and he spent time literally homeless and couchsurfing. He described filling his days by riding busses, walking the streets, and intermittently contacting people who might provide him with a place to stay. Recollecting his feelings about this time, his story has parallels to that told by Mark and Grant above:

Um, well, I did feel a little bit less, um, than other people when I was homeless due to the fact, like, I never really had a home... Yeah, just didn't really feel the same as everyone else.

What is it about a home that means if you don't have one you feel less than other people?

Um, probably the fact that I don't feel stable and I can't walk around with a big grin on my face, like, I've got a home, I'm settled, I've got all my life on track, and yeah.

The metaphors Owen uses to describe his sense of worthlessness are revealing here, focusing on the instability and indeterminacy of homelessness. Owen sums this up by saying that he

did not have 'all his life on track.' This metaphor positions homelessness as a deviation from a linear progression through life, an aberrant state off an undefined track that Owen feels compelled to anticipate. In this, Owen's narrative recalls the dominance of cultural ideals constructing youth as an individualised, linear and transitional life stage (Wyn and White, 1997), as well as the work of Fopp (2009) on the significance of metaphor in making sense of homelessness, in which a language of 'pathways' positions homelessness as extraordinary to an individualised progression through life.

Together, these narratives assemble and articulate what Skeggs (2005) describes as a 'repertoire of trauma' geared towards finding a solution to the 'dilemmas of selfhood' intrinsic to the moral status of homelessness. In this repertoire, the cultural hierarchies and moral distinctions that give meaning to contemporary structural inequalities are orchestrated reflexively in the autobiographical narratives young people tell about homelessness. Experiencing the profound insecurity and unpredictability of homelessness, these young people confront a social environment that is practically ungovernable. In this context, they lack the material resources to operate and perform a self that is ethical according to the moral conditions for active subjectivity in neoliberal capitalist societies. Occupying a position that is 'off track,' these young people are outside of the normative trajectories prescribed to contemporary youth. Experiencing homelessness thereby positions them as unruly subjects and abject moral failures, "a spectacle of subjectivity turned sour, an epidemic of the will, their own responsibility for making bad choices" (Skeggs, 2005, p 974). An active, morally worthy subjectivity during or after an experience of homelessness cannot be taken for granted, but rather must be salvaged from the experience. The remainder of this analysis details how this salvaging takes place.

Salvaging the Self

Analysis in this section focuses on young people who had experienced homelessness in the past, and were in the process of remaking their selves and their lives after having gained access to relatively secure housing. Whilst this is not always the case (Mallett et al, 2010), in all instances covered here access to housing had been provided by welfare services, and participants discussed below were either living in supported accommodation, or had moved from supported accommodation into public or privately rented housing. Welfare and housing services are not always experienced in positive terms by people experiencing homelessness, and may reinforce stigmatisation and degradation (Snow and Anderson, 1993; Gowan, 2010). However, as argued by Beck (1992), in the absence of collective identities, contact with institutions is one of the primary means by which identities are reflexively integrated into the social world, and supported housing was the most significant influence on the moral worth constructed by young people across both research projects discussed here.

The idealisation of 'home' in late modernity constructs both a place and a social position which is supposed to allow comfort, security, autonomy, personal responsibility and the resources for engagement in the public sphere (Lahelma and Gordon, 2003; Arnold, 2004). When young people have experienced homelessness, these meanings are rearticulated in order to construct positions of moral worth. Analysis of the remaking of homeless

subjectivities describes coexisting impulses towards autonomy and responsibility, and togetherness and belonging, as central dynamics in the creation and recreation of young people's identities following an experience of homelessness. The tensions involved in these impulses are made more complicated by discourses of youth which balance developing responsibility with immaturity and the need for intervention and control (Lesko, 2001). Analysis here is separated into two sections, one discussing the importance of order and self-governance against chaos and moral failure, and the other discussing the importance of belonging and togetherness against isolation and disgrace.

Order and Self Governance / Chaos and Moral Failure

Owen was living for the medium term in a supported housing service in a regional centre during the interview. This supported housing scheme provided young people with a relatively long (two year) lease on a private room, support in attending school or gaining work, and support in finding accommodation on the conclusion of their lease. In his time at this service, Owen had returned to school, and had been provided with casual labouring work. Owen describes the significance of being housed in this service for his sense of self in terms which emphasise the moral worth that comes with the development of disciplined self-governance:

This place was very good at - because they've got when you move in you have to do this, you have to go to school. There are certain criteria you have to do to live here. I really had nowhere else to go so I was going to do it, and that's put me right back on track. I've now got a job, my job's nearly finished so I'm going for another one. I'm now back at school and just about to finish my Year 11.

Yeah like I had so many years without rules and just doing whatever I wanted to finally get back into this atmosphere where there is boundaries and there is restrictions was good.

I think they just want someone who's going to be willing to put in the hard yards and get their life back on a track. Not just move in and try and use the system, just sitting around all day and not doing anything, not accomplishing anything.

Here Owen again emphasises the importance of having his life 'back on a track,' and the moral significance of order and control. His time spent homeless is described as 'without rules,' and placed in opposition to the governed and scheduled nature of his present life. He emphasises the importance of performing responsibility, of not 'using the system,' but putting in effort, following rules, and receiving both personal and material rewards. Owen affirms the normative importance of discipline for young people to develop personal responsibility, and his supported housing has provided him with the resources for both self-worth and material security: he is housed, attending school, and has casual work. The material security provided to Owen allows him to experience himself as a productive, responsible, self-governing subject who is 'on a track' to a successful future, and to reap the material and personal rewards that follow. The importance of personal autonomy and disciplined self-governance is also emphasised by Carole, a resident in the same service:

Do you feel at home living here?

Yes I do... 'Cause I've got my own room, like my own thingos, I've got my own kitchen, I've got my own bathroom, I've got my own bed, its, its somewhere to come back, at night, so, I know it's very good for my head.

And I like the responsibilities, like cleaning and using like the oven and stuff, so yeah...It teaches kids respect, like you can't have people like coming in and then leave or come in and, you know, it's not respectful...And you can't be like loud and, or have people over.

Here Carole foregrounds the security and autonomy provided by control over her own space, describing it as 'good for her head,' and then discusses the importance of responsibility and rules that 'teach kids respect.' Liking these responsibilities, Carole positions herself as in control of an orderly existence, and as more mature than unruly young people who lack discipline and respect for rules. Nick, who was homeless for seven years in a metropolitan city before negotiating multiple welfare services to eventually secure public housing, adds another dimension to this narrative:

[Services] should always have rules. It teaches someone to be disciplined and to um abide by the law...A lot of criminals they don't really care about anything, so if they go into a refuge and they want to keep their accommodation they've got to abide by their rules there otherwise they have no roof.

They have to find themselves and they have to make themselves realise what they want to do.

Recalling Skeggs' discussion of narratives of self-discovery as dimensions of an ethical self, here Nick connects notions of discipline to the creation of moral worth and personal authenticity, reinforcing the importance of self-governance as a condition for meaningful subjectivity. Those who are unable to perform this self are thereby positioned outside of the moral requirements for authenticity and personal sovereignty, a process which excludes young people experiencing homelessness due to the basic material conditions of their lives. In these narratives, hints of a moral/symbolic economy emerge around the poles of responsibility/irresponsibility, order/chaos, discipline/unruliness, with young people positioned in relation to these dichotomies by the material instability or security of their lives. However, individual autonomy is not the only dimension of meaningful selfhood, and the following section considers the importance of belonging and togetherness and their relationship to a disciplined self.

Belonging and Togetherness

Whilst young people experiencing homelessness face moral dilemmas for selfhood that come from an ethical obligation for self-governance, the construction of personal and moral worth was also described by some young people in more relational terms. Critiquing the mixture of neoliberal and developmental assumptions that construct young people as objects of governance, Cuervo and Wyn (2014) argue for a relational focus which situates young people

within webs of belonging. Skeggs (2011) argues for more attention to collective and relational practices of valuing that may articulate alternative working class modes of ethical selfhood. However, experiencing homelessness problematises young people's relationships: as Grant discussed above, isolation and loneliness are often aspects of the experience of homelessness, whilst stigmatisation and violent struggles for resources may make young people distrustful of others (Kidd, 2003). In the narratives below, young people describe relationships both as resources for a moral, self-governing self, and as spaces of intimacy situated outside of the abject moral space of homelessness. Whilst the significance of "street families" as resources for self-worth for roofless young people has been discussed by previous research (Winchester and Costello, 1995; Farrugia, 2011b), analysis here again focuses on young people who had exited literal homelessness. Whilst narratives were primarily focused on individual self-governance, some young people did place more emphasis on relationships, primarily discussing relationships within housing services, and intimate relationships, as spaces for the construction of moral worth.

Whilst young people's relations with others in housing services vary (Stephen, 2000; Farrugia, 2011b), one service in a regional centre was described by many young people as supporting mutually supportive and positive relationships between residents. Jacinta lived in this service along with Carole and Owen above, and describes a community built on mutual experiences of hardship that provides a refuge from isolation:

Because people here, we are around each other nearly every day and they're awesome people. They've been through some of the stuff that I have. Where people from school and stuff I don't really click with, but these people are really cool...I reckon the people here have had like hard times. Well everyone has had hard times, but really these people didn't have a place to go and stuff like that.

As well as the capacity for responsible self-governance, for Jacinta these relationships provide recognition and personal affirmation of moral worth. Amy also lived in this service, and describes her relationships with workers at this service in positive terms, primarily due to the material resources and opportunities they were able to supply her with, including work, and support in finding future housing. Like many young people experiencing homelessness, Amy did not have a close relationship with her family, although she had not experienced the abuse and neglect that often precipitates experiences of youth homelessness. Nevertheless, she describes the relationships between young residents within her housing service as family, and connects this with her movement towards adulthood:

Have you ever had a relationship with someone that felt like a family?

No. Just here, pretty much.

You mean with the other people here?

Yes, we're like a big family...Because we're like growing up and we're not little kids anymore and we are all nice to each other and we help each other.

Recalling Carole's discussion of the importance of discipline and respect as a means to responsibility and maturity, here Amy positions other residents in this service as a community of supportive and mature young people growing towards a responsible adulthood. However, whilst Amy is appreciative of these relationships, she is like other young people in this project in foregrounding an intimate relationship with another young person as the central support in her life. Watson (2011) emphasises the importance of intimate relationships for young people experiencing homelessness, but shows that these may be violent and abusive due to young women's reliance on men for resources. Watson argues that for some young women, intimate relationships represent personal solutions to structural problems in the way described by Beck (1992). Whilst this is an important caveat, it does not describe the intimate relationships discussed below, perhaps due to the relative material security that the young men and women had attained after exiting rooflessness.

For some young people, the significance of intimate relationships led back to the capacity to construct a morally worthwhile subjectivity. Steph and Grant had lived together in a shed behind the house of Grant's former foster parent before eventually securing supported housing through contacts made by this foster parent. Prior to their relationship, Steph had experienced homelessness alone, and had met Grant after he had returned to their regional town after a few months doing labouring work in a nearby town. Whilst this was no longer available to Grant, work provided him with security and moral worth, and he credits this period of time with allowing him to find himself after experiencing homelessness:

Living down [there] changed me big time, it was a reality check. Really showing that I don't have to be this dickhead kid anymore I can be myself which is all I've wanted to be and people accept, people are going to accept me for it or they're not, it's up to them, just shows who your true friends are.

Following this period of self-discovery, Grant returned to his home town and formed a relationship with Steph. After a period of time living in the shed, Steph and Grant moved into supported housing, with the following consequences for Steph's sense of herself:

I've like changed, well I think I've changed, I've stopped being, how I used to be, like snotty nosed little bitch all the time... like I realised how low I'd gotten...Like, yeah, not going to school, like hanging out down the street all day, drinking, drugs and stuff like that...If I had of stayed like that, I wouldn't really be going anywhere, not going to school, no education, no job. So, life revolves around cigarettes, and alcohol and that sort of thing, so, it's what I spent all my money on.

When do you know you're going somewhere?

I don't know, I think just, you just have to try...Just try and succeed...If you don't try, well then you have no chance...If you're just not going to try.

Ok, so what was it that made you start on the path to going somewhere?

I don't know, actually, probably when I started dating [Grant], cause he like, he'd stopped like doing drugs and stuff and he didn't really do much, and I was sort of like with him and I was like, oh, they're so gross.

Here Steph articulates an individualised sense of moral responsibility in relation to an idealised but unspecified vision of success, but then goes on to connect her progression along this path to her relationship with Grant, who she felt had already begun this journey. Together, they have enrolled in an alternative education program where they are studying for certificates equivalent to year 12³. Grant says that his relationship with Steph has also motivated him to be recognised as more responsible and morally worthy:

Cause in the long run, one day I'd like to marry [Steph], and show [her father] that I am a good person.

For Steph and Grant, the construction of an ethical and morally worthy self is a relational endeavour, conducted with and in relation to one another. However, whilst one aspect of Steph and Grant's relationship is the resources to mobilise and perform moral worth and personal responsibility, other young people described intimate relationships in terms that did not reference these ideas at all. Instead, these young people described their relationships as offering simple comfort and support, a space in which they felt valued and recognised without reference to the moral consequences of homelessness. Julie, interviewed in another supported housing project in the metropolitan centre, experienced homelessness after having to leave home due to her mother's disapproval of her sexuality. Julie couchsurfing for a number of months before gaining access to supported housing, and was enrolled in post-compulsory education at a vocational training institute. She describes her intimate relationship as the most significant support in her life. Responding to a number of questions about what constituted this support, notions of moral worth, or of a 'life on track,' are absent from her response:

Has the relationship with your partner made going through everything easier?

To have the kind of support, you know.

What kind of support?

The kind of like super support like, because you know she's my partner and stuff... You don't have any other support like that as in a loving love support like in a relationship kinda thing if that makes sense... The support and love that you can only get from someone like a partner that loves you.

For Julie, this relationship is a space of comfort, security, love and 'super support.' Described without the need to perform narrow neoliberal constructions of value or moral worth, this relationship may be seen as a haven from the pressure to reflexively construct the self within demanding ethical norms, a space of unconditional positive recognition outside of the need to

³ Year 12 is the final year of post-compulsory secondary schooling in Australia. Those young people who do not leave school before this time complete year 12 at around eighteen years of age.

be ‘going somewhere.’ In this sense, Julie’s intimate relationship is a space not subsumed by the hierarchies of moral worth that are so central to the experiences and subjectivities of young people who have experienced homelessness. The regard and recognition that form the basis for intimate relationships like this may provide young people who have experienced homelessness with sources of moral worth that do not come from the neoliberal moral/symbolic economies described by Sayer and Skeggs above.

Salvaging the Self Within and Outside Economies of Moral Worth

The cultural hierarchies and moral distinctions that structure late contemporary inequalities are writ large in these young homeless subjectivities. Together, these young people’s narratives describe an economy of worth organised around the fundamental importance of personal sovereignty, self-governance, and responsibility as moral attributes of late modern subjectivities. These economies create distinctions between order and chaos, self-governance and unruliness, morality and disgrace. Young people’s position in relation to these moral ideals reflects the material conditions of their lives. Young people experiencing homelessness are positioned within a difficult social environment characterised by isolation and profound material insecurity. Young people make sense of these experiences through a repertoire of trauma that is itself degrading, positioning them as morally devalued subjects unable to follow a neoliberal mandate to self-actualise through self-governance. The ‘market failure’ (Smyth and Wrigley, 2013) created by the material impossibility of following the routes through education and work prescribed to contemporary young people is experienced here as a state of moral failure. Exiting homelessness, young people have both the material resources and the ethical mandate to govern increasingly governable lives, articulating a commitment to the disciplined conduct of life expressed in education, work, and care for the home. Whilst young people’s position remains precarious and dependent upon housing services, the movement out of homelessness allows moral worth to be accumulated, performed, and recognised in relationships with others. This is experienced as self-actualisation, self-worth and authenticity. In this, young homeless subjectivities illustrate the moral dimensions of late modern inequalities.

Whilst Skeggs (2011) critiques a focus on individualised, value accumulating subjects through renewed attention to ethical practices focusing on relationality, the kinds of community relationships and collective definitions of selfhood available to Skeggs’ working class participants are not available to young people experiencing homelessness, and their narratives show that youth homelessness is a social experience deeply embedded within neoliberal economies of moral worth. However, whilst acknowledging the consequences of these moral economies is part of a critical sociology of contemporary capitalism, it is also important to note the spaces for alternate forms of subjectivity that remain possible within this context. The example of young people’s intimate relationships shows ways in which the moral demands of neoliberal capitalism may be subverted, escaped, or avoided for a time. Whilst intersubjective relationships are of course influenced by both the exigencies of homelessness and wider gendered power relationships (Watson, 2011; Farrugia, 2011b), relations and forms of intimacy continue to provide alternate spaces for subjectivity and resources for self-worth not subsumed by the logic of capital. Refuges from the interplay of

moral, symbolic and structural divisions described in this paper, these relationships are all the more significant for young people experiencing some of the most profound consequences of contemporary poverty.

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