

This article examines the social dynamics of life inside a public shelter for homeless men in New York City. It shows how distinctive forms of association—in particular, a ganglike body of elite residents and marriages between residents—are the product of the nature and exigencies of life in the shelter and how the requirements of such a life may limit possible trajectories out of the shelter. Shelters, it concludes, do a lot more than provide a bed for the night.

Great Work! "10"

MORE THAN REFUGE The Social World of a Homeless Shelter

GWENDOLYN A. DORDICK

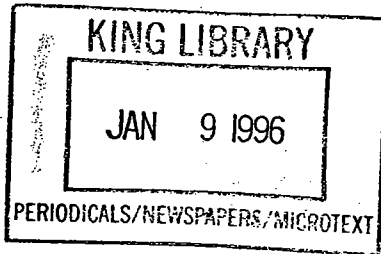
James has a "lover." Although they don't sleep together or engage in any kind of sexual activity, James refers to Rusty as his lover and even his "wife." His wife is a man, but James says that he himself is not gay. Muscles has a "Mo," Candy, a transgendered male. They have sex, or at least Muscles allows his Mo to perform fellatio on him.

Both Muscles and James live in a men's homeless shelter—the Armory. Muscles is also a member of the "crew," sometimes referred to as the "posse" or "house gang." Muscles has the "juice," the power. He commands and receives respect from the members of the crew and from many of the "clients" in the shelter. One member of the crew swears that Muscles would "give you the shirt off his back." Some residents who are not members or "down with" the crew like the way they run the "house"; others are more wary of their activities.

The Armory can be, I learned early during my stay there, a dangerous place. On the vast, open drill floor that 700 men call home, things can happen. Men get sick; they disappear; they die. The authorities do nothing. Muscles, James, Rusty, Candy, and the others who live here need allies, other residents they

AUTHOR'S NOTE: An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1992 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The author would like to thank Lewis Freeman, Herbert Gans, Seth Rachlin, Paula Rust, Allan Silver, Nusi Sznalder, Chris Toulouse, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments. Support for this research was provided by a National Research Service Award from the National Institute of Mental Health (No. 1 F31 MH10269-01 BSR).

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY ETHNOGRAPHY, Vol. 24 No. 4, January 1996 373-404
© 1996 Sage Publications, Inc.



JCE

Journal of Contemporary Ethnography

Volume 24, Number 4 January 1996

amilies

a

y
ersity
Carolina
Davis
avis
sity

orida
a,

ity
ticut

a,

titute

'fomia

can count on to help them get by and stay safe here. They get married; they form organizations; they create structure within the open space. They make their shelter more than refuge.

Argue
against!

Marriages (neither legally sanctioned nor ritually sealed) involving heterosexual men and ganglike behavior might be taken as yet further "evidence" of the "deviance" of the homeless (see Baum and Burnes 1993 for a definitive statement). This article argues otherwise. Although the participants in both marriages and the crew are by virtually every definition homeless (Jencks 1994), these relationships are not so much the product of the "lack of access to a conventional dwelling" (Rossi 1989, 10) as they are a response to the exigencies and opportunities of the specific unconventional dwelling in which these men live. This article demonstrates how a particular type of institution—a large, public homeless shelter—gives rise to a particular type of homeless life and how the requirements of such a life shape and, in fact, limit possible trajectories out of the shelter.

Summary

Key

As the homeless crisis wears on through its third decade, shelters have evolved from an emergency stopgap to a permanent fixture on the urban and suburban scene. As a collecting ground for those without conventional homes, shelters have also offered many opportunities for researchers to study the homeless. Ethnographers looking to study the homeless as people (Liebow 1993; Snow and Anderson 1993) and survey researchers looking to document the demographics of this population (see Shlay and Rossi 1992 for a review; Hopper 1991 for an exception) have found their respondents in public and private shelters.

Recent analyses suggest that shelters may be important in a very different way. Rather than simply providing a place to study the attributes of the homeless, shelters can be seen as institutions that shape the practices of life among the homeless as well as trajectories (or lack thereof) out of homelessness. Shelters, these new analyses suggest, may do more than offer emergency refuge.

For Christopher Jencks, it is the mere availability of free housing that is important. In a short yet provocative chapter in

his acclaimed book affirmative answer to homelessness?":

Improving the lot of some people who or poor, wants to stay avoid it. If shelters available . . . some hotels may well pass places that are free

Jencks suggests, all shelters affects the suppositions, he correct Stone, in a critique of of rationality" than of (1994) himself writes on where the homeless (p. 44).

Hopper and Baurr fact, provide a "free tive to Jencks's rati shelters are part of the role of providing work—to 'redundant ruptive threat to social housing on demand "makeshift" subsistence 1985) that requires re Shelters do not, actually "offer secure refuge. of most shelters has there for extended periods degrading" (p. 530).

Several ethnographic ways in which shelters Rosenthal 1994; Snow harsh treatment by shelters and overly zealous police

his acclaimed book *The Homeless* (1994), he offers a partially affirmative answer to the question, "Do shelters cause homelessness?":

Improving the lot of the homeless may even change the behavior of some people who have been living on their own. Nobody, rich or poor, wants to spend all their money on housing if they can avoid it. If shelters become more attractive or more widely available . . . some people who have been living in very cheap hotels may well pass fewer nights in hotels and more nights in places that are free. (p. 106)

Jencks suggests, albeit cautiously, that the very existence of shelters affects the kinds of choices individuals make. Such suppositions, he concedes, are based more on what Deborah Stone, in a critique of *The Homeless*, calls a "universal standard of rationality" than on actual data (Stone 1994, 31). As Jencks (1994) himself writes, "We badly need more reliable information on where the homeless get their money and how they spend it" (p. 44).

Hopper and Baumohl (1994) contend that shelters do not, in fact, provide a "free ride." Providing a neofunctionalist alternative to Jencks's rational choice perspective, they argue that shelters are part of society's "abeyance" process, they serve the role of providing "sustenance and occupation—virtual work—to 'redundant' people who might otherwise pose a disruptive threat to social order" (p. 530). Rather than providing housing on demand, as Jencks sees it, shelters are part of a "makeshift" subsistence strategy (Hopper, Susser, and Conover 1985) that requires real effort on the part of those who live there. Shelters do not, according to Hopper and Baumohl (1994), "offer secure refuge. . . . [The] aggressively transient character of most shelters has . . . meant that residents forced to live there for extended periods find the experience taxing if not degrading" (p. 530).

Several ethnographies of homeless life suggest the many ways in which shelter life is truly burdensome (Liebow 1993; Rosenthal 1994; Snow and Anderson 1993). Excessive rules; harsh treatment by shelter administrators, guards, and workers; and overly zealous programs of social control and reform make

View
1

So keep
Then
mostly?

View
2

x shelters difficult places to live. Many of the homeless, in fact, choose not to avail themselves of opportunities for "free" shelter "out of pride, distrust of other homeless people, or an unwillingness to accept regimentation" (Rosenthal 1994, 57; see also Snow and Anderson 1993).

Free
Wagner (1993), in fact, sees the decision to eschew shelter life as empowering. Studying collective resistance by subjects of Checkerboard Square, a homeless community in "North City," he found that the loss of freedom and control resulting from a punitive municipal shelter system was more than some of the homeless would bear. The more pervasive the social control, the more shelter residents chose "literal homelessness over submission" (p. 104). According to Wagner, Checkerboard Square residents weighed "the relative strength of their social networks on the street and in the shelter" (p. 104), foregoing the latter in order to retain their "dignity" and "autonomy" in the former. In the end, this among other acts of collective resistance empowered individuals and furthered their struggles for recognition.

The Argument
Taken together, the works summarized above suggest a dynamic interaction between shelters and the homeless persons who use them. Whether shelters attract the homeless (Jencks 1994), keep them busy and occupied (Hopper and Baumohl 1994), or repel them (Rosenthal 1994; Wagner 1993), the consensus is that shelters are important agents influencing how the homeless live. This article builds from this basic understanding to consider how life inside a shelter transforms the situations and identities of the individuals who live there. More than simply influencing the kinds of choices homeless people have, I argue that shelters produce an enclosed social world whose rules and values come to constitute the worldviews of those who live there.

My approach draws on the more general sociological concern with the power of place, or more specifically, of particular types of places in shaping people's lives. A classic exploration is Goffman's (1961) *Asylums*. Defining mental hospitals and prisons as "total institutions," Goffman affords such places a power that extends beyond their formally prescribed function. More than simply housing mental patients or criminals, these

places provide a (p. xiii) and help in a particular kind of institutions? Do kinds of people

Through a de explore these c generalizing fro conclusions reg the economics c benefits from the no benefit of sh have its costs. shaping the nat form of a shelt homeless exper such places: bot homeless shelte shelter.

At the norther York's largest ho ing on the seaso is one of New Yo authority of the f agency.

Within the Nev in size and purpo for the mentally il There are also ge of sex—that are cerned with the ge shelter, I decidec facilities. I randon by New York City

