



Learning to feel at home. Governing homelessness and the politics of affect



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ABSTRACT

The emotional and affective dynamics of homelessness are an established matter of concern in geographical research. Geographers have called attention to homelessness as an embodied phenomenon and to the emotional distress that affects people experiencing homelessness. What has achieved less attention though are the politics of affect that characterize spaces of care. Attempts to make homeless people 'housing ready' often target emotions and try to provide clients with a sense of belonging and feelings of responsibility in matters of housekeeping and homemaking. The paper takes these attempts to create emotionally stable 'housing ready' selves as a point of departure to open a set of broader questions concerning the nature of encounters between the welfare state and its citizens. It shows how spaces of care address 'housing readiness' as a personal ability and thereby abstract from the complex affective entanglements and prepersonal conditions that characterize dwelling. To highlight the paradoxical effects of therapeutic approaches to dwelling as a subjective emotional skill that can be mastered, I contrast the notion of 'housing readiness' with recent work in the field of affective geographies that allows for a different articulation of dwelling as a dense web of practices, atmospheres and relations between people, spaces and things.

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1. Introduction

This paper pursues the question of how affects and emotions become a matter of concern in contemporary social policy frameworks addressing the homeless and how they are being managed in spaces of care. While questions of embodiment, subjectivity and agency have already been raised in geographical research on homelessness, the emotional politics of welfare state responses have received less attention. To analyse contemporary responses to homelessness as a form of 'emotional governance' that seeks to govern marginalized populations through the regulation of affects and the cultivation of emotions, I turn to recent scholarship that has called attention to the connections linking emotions, affect and governing (Anderson, 2014; Horton and Kraftl, 2009; Thien, 2005; Stoler, 2007).

As the paper shows, conceptions of 'housing readiness' frame homelessness as the result of a compromised emotional ability that keeps homeless people from dwelling properly. They inform spatial settings of supervised transitional accommodation in which people

experiencing homelessness are expected to 'recover' and develop proper domestic subjectivities. Attempts to train 'housing ready' selves in spaces of transitional housing seek to provide clients not only with practical competences of self-regulation in matters of housekeeping, but also with a sense of responsibility and feelings of affiliation and belonging, though not in unproblematic ways. To highlight the paradoxical effects of therapeutic approaches to dwelling as a subjective emotional skill that can be mastered, I contrast this notion of dwelling with recent work in the field of affective geographies that allows for a different articulation of dwelling as a dense web of affective practices, atmospheres and relations between people, spaces and things. As I show through an empirical analysis of behavior change practices in transitional housing projects for the homeless in Germany, spaces of assisted living propose to increase homeless peoples' 'housing readiness'. But the actual possibilities of dwelling – of marking and claiming space, 'feeling at home' and flourishing in atmospheres – in these spaces are limited by practices of education and monitoring that assess clients' articulations of belonging in a normalizing manner and equate 'housing readiness' with the ability to comply with case management requirements.

The paper is divided in four parts. The first section assembles

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geographical work on the affective and emotional dimensions of homelessness and discusses how an analysis of 'emotional governance' in spaces of care can complement existing debates. The second section retraces the long-standing influence of therapeutic responses to homelessness to highlight the historical trajectories of medicalization that still inform contemporary approaches to the emotional dimension of homelessness. The third section gives a short introduction to the system of responses to homelessness and the forms of transitional housing available to homeless people in Germany and discusses the behavior change rationale of assisted transitional housing. The fourth and final section retraces the mundane practices of behavior change and affective normalization that characterize spaces of transitional accommodation. The section discusses how these attempts to train 'housing ready' selves relate to a broader 'therapeutic culture' and contemporary styles of governing that seek to govern (through) emotions.

2. Affects and emotions in geographical research on homelessness

In recent years, work on homelessness in geography has expanded from a focus on repressive policies that criminalize and displace the homeless to accounts that challenge a single-minded 'punitive framing'. Geographers have discussed social policy responses that differ from punitive approaches (DeVerteuil et al., 2009; DeVerteuil, 2006; Laurenson and Collins, 2006, 2007; Sparks, 2012), and focused on the hospitable and/or disciplinary nature of drop-in centers, shelters and spaces of transitional housing (Conradson, 2003; Datta, 2005; Johnsen et al., 2005; May et al., 2006; Veness, 1994; Williams, 1996). Work on homelessness has also called attention to the agency and performativity of homeless people, to their attempts to create spaces of refuge and to the ways in which they negotiate and maintain relations of belonging (Ruddick, 1990; Snow and Mulcahy, 2001; Sheehan, 2010).

Although an explicit focus on the emotional and affective dynamics of homelessness is rather new, emotions and affects have never been absent from research on homelessness. Important references to emotions date back to early accounts of the 'revanchist city' (Smith, 1996) that have stressed how fear of the 'other' in the middle and upper classes may result in NIMBYism (Dear and Takahashi, 1997; Takahashi, 1997) and vengeful practices of 'reclaiming' public space from marginalized groups (Amster, 2003). Scholars have problematized the different degrees of sympathy and compassion granted to homeless people based on race, gender and age (Baker, 1994; Passaro, 1996; Takahashi et al., 2002). A certain attention to homelessness as a felt experience also informs research on the rise of 'designs of discomfort' in the built environment ('homeless proof' benches, trash bins etc.) that seek to displace homeless people by making them feel out of place (Davis, 1990).

In recent work, an explicit focus on homelessness as 'lived and felt' (Robinson, 2011) has gained more importance. The challenge to stop excluding emotion from geographic scholarship has produced studies that further enrich the existing debate with approaches to homelessness as an embodied and emotional experience. Work on questions of embodiment has shown that for the homeless, "the body assumes increased, even paramount, importance. Lacking access to that second skin, the home, the homeless body becomes the first and often only line of defense against a dangerous world" (Wardhaugh, 1999, p. 102; see also Higate, 2000; Kawash, 1998). Geographers have moved beyond 'rational' readings of the homeless city by stressing the emotional and performative dimension of homeless people's engagements with place (Cloke et al., 2008; Daya and Wilkins, 2013), by retracing experiences of mobility and placelessness (Jackson, 2012) and by theorizing the 'more-than-

human' entanglements with the urban world through which subjectivities of homelessness emerge (Lancione, 2011). They have examined the ambiguous nature of spaces of care that results from the discord between the intentions of service providers to provide a safe and welcoming refuge and the realities of such environments for staff and service users (Johnsen et al., 2005) and highlighted the ambivalent feelings of homeless clients toward the therapeutic settings they (are required to) participate in (Evans, 2012). They also have shown how competing understandings of poverty and homelessness affect poor people themselves in that they shape their everyday lives and self-images (Gowan, 2010). Emotionally attentive accounts of homelessness have called attention to the severe distress of social exclusion and the painful experiences of loss, non-belonging and displacement that affect people experiencing homelessness (Robinson, 2005, 2011) and may even continue to haunt the ways in which formerly homeless individuals relate to places (Fields, 2011).

This paper seeks to contribute to the existing research on the emotional and affective dimensions of homelessness by turning attention to the politics of affect characterizing welfare state responses. Thus, the paper does not ask how being homeless feels, but rather why and how the affects and emotions of people experiencing homelessness become a matter of concern and an object of intervention in service delivery responses. As the paper argues, attempts to make homeless people 'housing ready' frame dwelling as an emotional ability that needs training and assistance. Spaces of transitional housing address the complex affective field of dwelling by carving out the 'homeless self' as a compromised emotional subjectivity and thereby turning it into a target of governing.

The paper's focus on the emotional dimension of service responses to homelessness builds on two strands of recent geographical scholarship: To highlight the relations between emotions and governing and the importance of 'emotional governance' in spaces of care for the homeless, the paper relies on work in geography that retraces how affective life is mediated through apparatuses of governing and that stresses the "connections between that field of practice conventionally known as policy and that range of affective, bodily intensities conventionally named emotion" (Horton and Kraftl, 2009, p. 2985). Researchers working on the politics of emotions observe a novel drive within contemporary governmental practices to capitalize on emotional self-management and to govern through therapeutic interactions. They call attention to the rise of behavior change models of governing (Jones et al., 2011), to an increased emphasis on 'emotional competence' in the construction of successful citizenship and declare the emergence of a broader therapeutic culture that encourages us to understand and manage ourselves as emotional beings (Thien, 2005; Gagen, 2015).

To analyse spaces of care for the homeless as governmental spaces that enable specific forms of 'emotional governance', the paper also builds on work that stresses the relational and political character of affect and the distribution or 'spacing' of affects across assemblages that entangle us with the object world (Ahmed, 2010; Anderson, 2014; Brennan, 2004; Massumi, 2002; Wright, 2015). This theorization of affect emphasizes that "there is no such thing as affect itself" (Anderson, 2014, p. 13). Affects cannot be 'directly known', they do not simply arise from 'within', nor can they be directly evoked from 'outside' – rather, they 'flow' among bodies and in between bodies, places and things (Ahmed, 2010, p. 29). Scholars working on the politics of affect stress that governing projects do not realize themselves "through some abstract process of 'internalization,' but by shaping appropriate and reasoned affect, by directing affective judgments, by severing some affective bonds and establishing others" (Stoler, 2007, p. 9).

Accounts that reflect on affects as "occurring beyond, around,

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