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 practices, atmospheres and relations between people, spaces and things.

The paper is divided in four parts. The first section assembles...
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 punitive 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; Laurensen and Collins, 2006, 2007; Sparks, 2012), and focused on the hospitalable and/or disciplinary nature of drop-in centers, shelters and spaces of transitional housing (Conradsson, 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 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, 1998, 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 to an increased emphasis on ‘emotional competence’ in the construction of successful citizenship and to 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,
and alongside the formation of subjectivity” (Anderson, 2009, p. 77) can also be found in recent geographical engagements with the concept of dwelling. Work on dwelling stresses “the relational nature of dwelling and the importance of variation in comprehending the dwelling experience” (Schelly, 2014, p. 682; see also Hasse, 2009) and highlights the prepersonal dimension of everyday existence that characterizes dwelling as a dense web of practices, affective atmospheres (Böhme, 2006) and relations emerging between people, spaces and things. Dwelling is a “form of assembly” that gathers together human bodies, non-human bodies, and all kinds of objects that make up everyday existence (McFarlane, 2011, p. 650). Geographers highlight that dwelling can be “conceived as a modality of practice that marks and claims a world through the building of material objects and/or environments” (Rose, 2012, p. 759), and at the same time also maintain that “dwelling is not ‘a human accomplishment, not something humans accomplish of their own accord or of their own merit’” (Rose, 2012, p. 768, quoting McNeill, 2006, p. 139). Rather, dwelling functions as a “middle term”: “‘subject’ and ‘world’, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, ‘private’ and ‘public’ are lines or planes descending from the event of dwelling” (Harrison, 2007, p. 628; see also McFarlane, 2011, p. 651) instead of preceeding it. As the analysis shows, governmental attempts to make homeless people ‘housing ready’ abstract from the prepersonal conditions and the diversity of experiences that characterize dwelling. The notion of ‘working on yourself’ hypostatizes ‘housing readiness’ as a personal state of mind that can be mastered and reenacted regardless of context. While this focus on subjectivity may be inevitable to deploy ‘housing readiness’ as an operative category for social work, it also evokes a range of paradoxical results that effectively reduce the possibilities of “dwelling as marking and claiming” (Rose, 2012, p. 757) and of non-normative expressions of belonging in spaces of care.1

3. “Unsettled and disaffiliated”: the trajectories of therapeutic perspectives in social policy responses to homelessness

The emotional and affective turns in geography urge us “to learn to respond to how contemporary forms of power, and their specific violences, work on and through affect” (Anderson, 2014, p. 8). However, while contemporary forms of governing may be distinguished by an increasing importance of ‘emotional governance’ in a number of societal fields, it is important to note that governmental concerns with the emotional and affective life of marginalized populations are not a new phenomenon. Strategies to transform the subjectivity of individuals through small-scale and everyday practices of ‘empowerment’, education and behavior change (Cruikshank, 1999) have a trajectory that can be traced back to the beginnings of the modern welfare state and the emergence of social work as a field of expert knowledge and practice. To assess the actual newness of contemporary practices of ‘emotional governance’ in social service frameworks addressing the homeless, it is necessary to situate contemporary articulations of ‘emotional governance’ in a longer history of emotions and affects as matters of concern for social policy and social work.

Foucault’s genealogy of modern power has called attention to the consequences of psychiatric conceptions of mental illness. His focus on the medicalization and hospitalization of ‘deviant minorities’ has highlighted how therapeutic logics have affected the already marginalized and impoverished much more severely than other social groups. While therapeutic interactions in a bourgeois context often took the form of psycho-analytical explorations on the self in psychologist-client-relationships, therapeutic perspectives on ‘deviant minorities’ lead to enforced surveillance, medicalization, and confinement in disciplinary institutions (Foucault, 1988, 2003). Researchers in the wake of Foucault have also retraced the ways in which the management of poverty from the second half of the 19th century onwards has advanced “a whole range of techniques to be brought to bear on the social as ‘behavior’” (Procacci, 1991, p. 158). In the context of the frameworks of modern social policy and social work emerging at that time, the “invention of a politics of poverty” (Donzelot, 1979, p. 157) became a crucial feature of governmental concerns systematically evolving around issues of moral order, education and behavioral change. Concepts of individualized poor relief and ‘self-help’ became popular as governmental techniques suited for the education of individuals capable of practising proper self conduct with regard to economic individualism and responsible citizenship (Procacci, 1989). Technologies of governing seeking to shape subjectivities by cultivating moral sentiments never conceptualized the citizen solely in formal juridical terms, but “as a being who needs discipline, training, care, empowerment and whose health and risks should be looked after” (Villadsen, 2012, p. 64) and thus never aimed at ‘rational’ behavior and practical skills alone, but always also at the ‘hearts’ and ‘souls’ of individuals.

Historically, the bodies imagined in governmental problematizations of homelessness have often been deviant and pathological ones. From the late 19th century on, social service agencies and social workers treated homelessness as a phenomenon of ‘rootlessness’, a lack of emotional connectedness to place and subsequent unfitness for sedentary lifestyles that could only be cured by experts, if not at all. In the emerging welfare state, medical, psychiatric and pedagogical bodies of expert knowledge were mobilized in governmental knowledge production on the ‘wandering poor’ (Cresswell, 2001; Hacking, 1996, 1998). The growing influence of psychiatric authority enforced the medicalization of homelessness and the institutionalization of the homeless in therapeutic environments. In Germany, medical understandings of ‘impulsive roaming drive’ [Wandertrieb] and ‘unsettledness’ [Nichtschaftigkeit] – the latter term made popular by National Socialism (Ayaß, 1984) – persisted in social policy well into the 1980s. While interpretations of ‘therapy’, whether for the sake of the individual or the social body’s ‘hygiene’, varied greatly, therapeutic rationalities as a whole remained remarkably unchallenged even by regime changes (Scheffler, 1987).

It was not until the late 1970s that reform debates started to critically engage with the historical trajectories of the German system of care for the homeless (Rohmann, 1987). Experts started to argue against medicalization, for an understanding of homelessness as a phenomenon of socio-economic exclusion and for housing-led responses (Danckerts, 1982; Holtmannspötter, 1982;
While the social work and policy responses to homelessness have developed within the German corporatist welfare regime and the framework of subsidiarity. While federal legislation has become more important in recent years, regional and municipal governments still play an important role in the development of policy responses and the delivery of social services on the local level. Non-governmental welfare federations have also taken part in debates on social policy and traditionally play a major role in the field of service delivery for the homeless.

The delivery of social services on the local level is organized through contract-based alliances between municipalities and non-profit welfare associations. Through these alliances, the municipal administration assigns non-profit service providers with the delivery of support for people in need. Emergency accommodation for homeless people is provided through shelters, guesthouses, and hotels, run by the municipalities or contracted service providers. The system of responses to homelessness has a strong preventive and housing-led orientation. Since the 1980s, municipalities aim at a reintegration of homeless people into the regular housing market though housing-led strategies and additional individual support. Depending on the local context, different actors and networks have evolved that offer a diverse array of services and support. But despite the diversity of local service provision in German cities, many services are similar in that they follow a ‘treatment first’-rationale. Although housing-led strategies are important for the German system of responses to homelessness, service providers do not necessarily aim at an immediate reintegration of clients into permanent housing, but rather follow the assumption that many homeless people must be ‘housing ready’ before they can be rehoused. It’s important to note that the German system of responses does not represent a rigid ‘staircase regime’, where homeless people are required to master a whole series of different types of transitional accommodation, before they can enter permanent housing. But nevertheless, the practice of service provision often relies on the assumption that ‘underlying’ behavioral problems have either caused or contributed to homelessness and need to be overcome through counseling and assistance before people can be ‘released’ into permanent housing. Formally, these measures of assistance and supervision can also take place in apartments rented by the clients (either to prevent homelessness, or to foster quick social reintegration) — but in practice, they often take place in apartments rented by non-profits and allocated to clients only for the duration of support.

4. The behavior change focus of responses to homelessness in Germany

Traditionally, policy responses to homelessness have developed within the German corporatist welfare regime and the framework of subsidiarity. While federal legislation has become more important in recent years, regional and municipal governments still play an important role in the development of policy responses and the delivery of social services on the local level.2 Non-governmental welfare federations take part in debates on social policy and traditionally play a major role in the field of service delivery for the homeless.

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Assisted living apartments run by non-profits are scattered across the regular housing sectors and therefore much less visible than traditional institutions. In this regard, they are an outcome of reform debates that advocated for deinstitutionalization and a housing-led focus on homelessness. Policy experts and social workers consider individual accommodation in transitional projects as progressive as it prevents further stigmatization and is presumed to feel like ‘normal’ housing to the clients. At the same time, transitional housing also is a spatial product of therapeutic, case-based approaches to homelessness. It is premised on the assumed unfitness of a homeless person for proper domestic self-governance. This behavior change focus is framed by the concept of ‘housing readiness’ [‘Wohnfähigkeit’]. Although the term itself is not new, experts note that ‘housing readiness’ as a core concept assembling social work practices and shaping the nature of responses to homelessness has gained increasing importance in Germany in recent years (Nagel, 2015, 82).

Such ‘treatment first’-rationales that inform responses to homelessness have not remained uncontested. In the last years, ‘treatment first’-, ‘staircase’-, or ‘continuum of care’-models have been met with increasing skepticism in many European countries and in the US (see Busch-Geertsema, 2010, Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007; Hoch, 2000; Ridgway and Zipple, 1990; Sahlin, 2005; Tsemberis and Asmussen, 1999; Wong et al., 2006). Compared to ‘housing first’-approaches that center on the quick provision of permanent housing without conditioning tenancy on the clients’ participation in services, transitional housing programs seem much less successful in reducing homelessness. Critics note that spaces of transitional housing reinforce the ‘social workers’ view of homeless people as ‘incapable of independent living’ and, therefore, neither needing nor deserving (regular) housing (Sahlin, 2005, 125). For the homeless, experiences of surveillance and sanctions in transitional accommodation projects may become a cause of additional stress, while compliance and behavior change are not necessarily ‘rewarded’ with independent housing.

In my empirical research on assisted living projects for the homeless in Germany, I soon learned that discussions on alternative models of social reintegration so far only happen on the fringes of the field of social policy and service delivery. While ‘housing first’-approaches have gained some attention in the last years, so far this seems to happen mostly in the context of conferences or debates in professional journals. In my interviews with social workers working in transitional housing projects, the idea that many homeless people need regular supervision and assistance in a place other than their own home to become ‘housing ready’ for the most time remained self-evident, uncontested expert knowledge.

2 Recent reforms of the German Social Code have introduced a whole set of ‘activating’ measures and a system of ‘qualifying’ for welfare services and social inclusion [‘Förderung und Förderrechte’]. As the paper argues, these new rationales not only inform employment-led support strategies, they also are reflected in the services provided for homeless people and in particular in the concept of ‘housing readiness’ [‘Wohnfähigkeit’] which bears a strong resemblance to the concept of ‘employability’ [‘Beschäftigungsfähigkeit’]. In German, both terms literally suggest that social inclusion in the job market or housing market first and foremost depends on personal abilities [‘Fähigkeiten’].

3 Service provision is characterized by a high level of qualification and professionalism on the side of service providers. Social workers working with the homeless usually have higher education degrees in social work and pedagogy from universities or universities of applied sciences.

4 As Johnsen and Teixeira (2010, 4) note, while the exact form of the services varies, “the model essentially involves ‘progressing’ homeless people through a series of separate residential services”. The model builds on the assumption that homeless people can (and must) only gradually qualify for regular housing.
5. Housing readiness training: the spatial fashioning of affective normalization

To understand how contemporary social policy and service frameworks respond to homelessness, I conducted qualitative interviews with non-governmental service providers and municipal representatives in several German cities, taking part in expert meetings of service providers and municipal administration authorities on the local level, and attended to expert conferences. The empirical findings discussed in this paper are based on 19 interviews that were conducted between 2010 and 2012 with service providers in Berlin. The interviews discussed in this paper focused on the provision of assisted accommodation based on German Social Code XII, §§ 67 ff. in single accommodation apartments (‘Betreutes Einzelwohnen’) and transitional houses (‘Übergangshauser’) run by non-profit service providers. Aside from the interviews, the discussion also draws on ethnographic fieldnotes from staff meetings and local workshops by service providers I attended as well as from visits in transitional housing projects.

In the following, I want to discuss my empirical findings by highlighting the forms of emotional regulation that characterize the behavior change focus of transitional accommodation. As I show, the concept of ‘housing readiness’ is not just a practical orientation, but also an emotional and affective expression. In the interviews, dwelling was addressed as a set of practices and practical skills, but also as a complex emotional phenomenon of belonging and homemaking that goes beyond everyday practices of cooking, cleaning, budgeting etc. Many social workers I interviewed who worked with clients in assisted living apartments repeatedly stressed that “dwelling of course is so much more than keeping the place clean and paying your bills” (B18). The aim is to produce subjects with the skills to manage a household under conditions of scarcity, but also to nurture a “balanced” (B19) emotional attachment to the space of the home. As a result, social workers not only focus on clients’ skills to manage a household in the face of low income, but also on their “sense of self” (B16) and on expressions of belonging in clients’ attempts to create homely atmospheres.

While the financial housekeeping skills trained in assisted living at first sight address the client as a rational economic subject, in my interviews, these skills were often discussed in emotional terms, effectively framing housekeeping as a terrain of “economic sentiments” (Rothschild, 2013). With regard to the economical dimension of housing, the governing of the affective self is considered to require a control of passions and a cultivation of feelings of obligation and responsibility that the clients are presumed to be lacking. Clients are urged to learn to “feel obliged” (B18) to pay their debts instead of impulsively “running away from their responsibilities and making it worse” (B11). Social workers apply calculative practices of book-keeping and disbursing social benefits bit by bit across the month to induce a “sense for money” (B12) in the clients, help them overcome problematic patterns in their financial decision-making and encourage them to “handle even small amounts responsibly” (B16). The idea that staying debt free first and foremost depends on personal feelings of responsibility illustrates “the slide between affective and moral economies” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 30) that characterizes ‘housing readiness’-training.

“It’s not just about the debt itself. It’s about feeling responsible. We talk about this a lot with the clients. It all depends on how well the client can handle money. Then we decide on the arrangement [of disbursing social benefits in small sums] […] We talk about this a lot, and we also urge [them] to always open their mail promptly. Because there could be bills in there. To really internalize all that is what is most important, I think.” (B18).

While social services often negotiate partial debt reliefs with creditors, they also oblige their clients to repay the remaining sums. In my interviews, some social workers expressed uneasiness with “sometimes feeling like a quasi-debt-collector” (B11), and helplessness in the face of lacking alternatives from urging clients to repay debts. Although assisted living is supposed to empower clients to gain control over their financial decision-making, in practice, to learn to get by with minimal income and to accept that there is no alternative to paying debts are crucial lessons to be learned.

Aside from economic sentiments in the project apartments, social workers also seek to stimulate a heightened level of self-awareness in clients through practices of self-disclosure, self-reflection and counseling in social worker-client-relationships. The requirements for a normalized self-conduct brought forth in spaces of care touch questions of the clients’ personal conduct in terms of self-awareness, self-presentation, and capacity for (bodily) self-care. According to the social workers I interviewed, ‘housing readiness’ necessarily requires the client’s willingness to disclose personal statements in counseling sessions, work on an emotionally honest attitude towards previous failures and truly commit to behavior change.

“[…] housing readiness depends entirely on someone’s willingness to say ‘yes, I want to collaborate, I want to change’ […] If someone says ‘ok, I’m not fit’; if that person admits to that himself, but also says ‘ok, I want help’ then I’d say that is already the first step towards housing readiness.” (B19)

Agreements on objectives [Zielvereinbarungen] between social workers and clients are supposed to empower clients to initiate behavior change and commit themselves to forms of self-development that comply with societal expectations.7

In the interviews, personal hygiene and a neat appearance were brought up as important indicators for behavior change and a client’s improved “sense of self” (B16):

“Hygiene. Keeping an apartment tidy and also personal hygiene. I think there must be this basic form of self-dependence […] but always coupled with the understanding that they cannot decide everything by themselves.” (B12)

A way to practically assess ‘housing readiness’ is to evaluate the “look and feel” (B16) of the home environment that clients establish in the project apartments. While social workers encourage their clients to nurture a sense of belonging and commend them on

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5 In Germany, Berlin is known as the “capital of homelessness” (von Mahr, 2013, 2) because of the city’s high numbers of homelessness and increasing housing shortage (Berner et al., 2015).

6 Some service providers offer their clients the possibility to take over the rental contract of an apartment once support measures have ended ‘successfully’. In Berlin, this practice has lost importance in recent years though: In my interviews, all of the service providers who used to transfer rental contracts to their clients reported that they could no longer maintain this practice due to an increasingly tight rental market that makes it more and more difficult for service providers to rent apartments for transitional housing projects. A study from 2009 (Gerull et al., 2009, 17) on services based on Social Code XII, §§ 67 ff. in Berlin estimates an average length of stay in single accommodation apartments of ca. 11 months and ca. 7 months for transitional houses.

7 As Villadsen (2007, p. 320) notes, in these contract-like agreements “self-fulfilment, then, no longer constitutes a personal or private goal but rather a form of social duty. The proliferation of contracts in social work can be understood, therefore, as an attempt to solve the troublesome task of committing the client to a self-governed process of self-fulfilment. What most social work contracts do, however, is to nullify the will of the client, only to recreate it in the image of the authorities.”
practices that seem to prove emotional affiliation (hygiene, tidiness, cooking, creating a “cozy and personal atmosphere” [B16] with candles, pillows, posters etc.), they also problematize practices and expressions of belonging that do not follow social norms (“messiness” [B07], lack of personal hygiene, graffiti on apartment walls) or seem suspiciously excessive (“hoarding” [B07] too many things, having “too many friends” over or having them over “too often” [B12]). Alongside ‘good’ behavior, the production of homelessness through the use of domestic artifacts and neighborhood connections are important indicators of ‘housing readiness’. But at the same time, transitional housing also restricts the possibilities of clients to assemble an affective environment around them. In some transitional houses, training ‘housing readiness’ may include limitations to having friends over:

“We have the feeling that things get out of hand, and that it’s not good for the client, and when he starts getting difficult in counseling for example, then we’ll put a stop to it.” (B12).

Social workers’ practices of normalization that seek to educate people to behave within the limits of acceptable expressions of belonging range from counseling strategies (problematizing objectionable behavior in social worker-client-dialogues) to disciplinary measures (supervising and allowing only a certain number of visitors, things etc. in the apartment) and may also include elements of coercion (threatening termination of accommodation in cases of non-compliance). While clients are encouraged to feel at home, their leverage to make an actual claim to the space of the transitional apartment remains restricted – not only because of the time-limited nature of accommodation, but also because of social workers’ attempts to foster socially acceptable forms of claiming space. In this setting, unconventional forms of dwelling and self-conduct that do not measure up to the social workers’ expectations of personal hygiene, tidiness and sociability run risk to be counted as indicators of lacking ‘housing readiness’. Regular home visits are a key technology for social workers to keep track of the client’s domestic practices and to assess expressions of belonging. In several interviews, social workers stressed that home visits need to happen often and unannounced.

“We go through all of the apartments regularly, we have the keys with us, no matter if the clients are at home or not. [We go] into the apartment and also into the rooms. For us, as a validation, to get an idea of what is actually happening in these apartments.” (B07).

These practices of access and surveillance are not controversial though. Some of the social workers I interviewed also expressed skepticism about the benefits of home visits. Some stressed that, while they regularly inspect the state of the apartments, their “tolerance for messiness is actually quite high” (B11). Others put emphasis on always announcing their visits, reducing visits when they “feel that all works out well already with that client anyway” (B16), and never opening apartment doors on their own, because “clients are supposed to experience a sense of normalcy – and normal, that is not having people bursting in constantly” (B11). For these social workers, constructing compassionate relationships with the clients necessarily implied to refrain from exercising the full range of control that transitional housing enables.

As a crucial part of the system of responses to homelessness, spaces of transitional housing are a site of encounter between homeless citizens and the welfare state and its agencies. They are at once intimate spaces and an arena of governmental intervention. The forms of ‘emotional governance’ exercised in these spaces “are not all by any means nice or cuddly, which is one all too common interpretation of what adding affect will contribute” (Thrift, 2004, p. 58). Calling attention to the way self-conduct is addressed in governmental answers to homelessness helps to gain insight into the everyday workings of the welfare state and to move beyond idealized notions of spaces of care as sites governed by a completely different political rationality where the homeless are met ‘on their own terms’ (Evans, 2012; Murphy, 2009). Instead of simply understanding these spaces as hospitable counterparts to spaces of exclusion, a focus on the concept of ‘housing readiness’ and its demands for compliance and normalized self-management as societal duties shows the principles by which homeless people are measured as proper citizen subjects.

Focusing on the behavior change focus of transitional housing also highlights how practices of subjectification are spatially mediated. These spaces structure the “possible fields of actions” (Foucault, 1982, p. 221) of clients through specific modes of access, visibility, autonomy and intimacy. Behavior change is promoted through the spatial organization of social relations between social workers and clients. Frameworks of service delivery that problematize and train ‘housing readiness’ thus both enable the production of (therapeutic) space and rely upon the spatial mediation of affective normalization. They are sites of governing that bring “both norms and forms of the social environment into a common frame that would produce a healthy, efficient, and productive social order” (Rabinow, 1989, p. 11). The shaping of conduct that is supposed to take place in and through spaces of transitional housing pieces together modes of paternalism, surveillance and normalization that are characteristic of the traditional welfare state with a new emphasis on responsibility, self-sufficiency and autonomous self-governance. As a spatial formation of government, transitional housing on the one hand opens up possibilities of control that circumvent liberal limitations of governmental exercise in the private space of the home. On the other hand, this form of governmental intervention is always time-limited and does not offer permanent perspectives. Improved ‘housing readiness’ is not necessarily ‘rewarded’ with greater possibilities to access permanent housing provided by the welfare state.

6. Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to analyze contemporary welfare state responses to homelessness as a form of ‘emotional governance’ that seeks to govern marginalized populations through the regulation of affects and management of emotions. To ask how practices of care seek to govern through homeless peoples’ emotions does not turn away critical attention from more ‘serious’ phenomena of exclusion and punitive responses to homelessness. Rather, it helps to highlight the importance emotions assume in the construction of proper citizenship. By discussing the governing of emotions that characterizes contemporary service delivery addressing the homeless, I did not wish to make an argument against ‘emotional governance’ as a response to homelessness per se. Social policies and services need to recognize homelessness as a phenomenon of social suffering in order to develop comprehensive responses. However, existing approaches to the emotional dimension of homelessness are saturated with normalizing problematizations of homelessness as an ‘unfitness’ for proper domestic self-management. To a certain extent, social workers acknowledge dwelling as a complex field of atmospheres and entanglements of people, places and things, but the therapeutic logic of ‘housing readiness’ discriminates between acceptable and questionable forms of dwelling and demands behavior change for the latter. As the analysis has shown, a potentially vital contribution of emotional care is compromised by output-oriented demands for compliance and behavior change as conditions for social inclusion.
The narrow concept of ‘housing readiness’ and its focus on the order of the self does not capture the diversity of dwelling experiences and produces a range of paradoxical effects that limit the possibility of dwelling in the very places supposed to enable and even ‘teach’ it. Asking homeless people to produce the complex affective effect of a connected and dwelt-in environment in the context of transitional housing almost inevitably sets them up to fail because the whole nature of this time-limited, supervised and regulated setting works against the notion of fully-embedded dwelling.

While problematizations of ‘housing readiness’ target a segmented audience, the ‘emotional governance’ exercised in and through spaces of care for the homeless is bound to a wider therapeutic culture that seeks to align “conduct, desire and decision [to] the aspirations and objectives of government” (Rose, 1998, p. 122). Nevertheless, the ways in which homeless peoples’ emotions are being problematized in spaces of care is not just one of many examples of ‘emotionalization’. Here, the demand of ‘working on yourself’ is entangled with a range of limitations to personal autonomy, exercised with the help of disciplinary measures and enforced with threats of sanctions that remain reserved for marginalized populations, even within a wider therapeutic culture. Frameworks of service delivery that focus on homeless people as ‘insufficient dwellers’ problematize poverty, exclusion and vulnerability in therapeutic terms that politicize the self and at the same time abstract from social and economic issues. In the context of increasing housing shortages, the focus on homeless peoples’ self conduct becomes part of a compensatory logic where the absence of secure housing is counterbalanced with the education of ever more emotionally resilient, understanding and flexible subjects.

Acknowledgements:

I am grateful to Andreas Folkers for insightful comments on drafts of this paper. Research for the paper was funded by the German Science Foundation (DFG).

References


