Spring 2013

“i Only Have Two Arms To Help Myself”: Relationships Of Power And The Rhetoric Of Autonomy And Individual Blame At A Crisis Center For Homeless Youth

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Abstract
Efforts to advance resident autonomy and stability are prevalent within homeless shelters. At the same time, relationships of power and negotiations of governance are commonly expressed in the implementation of rules and in the specifications of shelter guidelines. "How can all of these interests coexist?" In this paper I rely on participant observation research conducted at Covenant House Newark (CHN), a crisis center for homeless youth, to reveal an important contradiction in the operation of short-term shelters: though autonomy may be promoted, stringent regulations constrict independence. "Inherent in life at CHN is a struggle between more symbolically powerful staff members, who exercise power and judgments over residents in accordance with what society at large and shelter leadership deem appropriate, and youth, who variously profess to feel empowered and challenge those they perceive as interfering with their desires, goals, and philosophies." Understanding how effective processes of individual change can be initiated will require sincere consideration of the extent to which "necessary" limitations of personal liberty within an environment that pushes autonomy actually represent manifestations of symbolic processes of power. Furthermore, power differentials and the transmission of messages about worth, deservingness, and compliance should be scrutinized by shelter staff members and top leadership.

Disciplines
Anthropology
“I ONLY HAVE TWO ARMS TO HELP MYSELF”: RELATIONSHIPS OF POWER AND THE RHETORIC OF AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL BLAME AT A CRISIS CENTER FOR HOMELESS YOUTH

By

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In

Anthropology

Submitted to the
Department of Anthropology
University of Pennsylvania

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2013
ABSTRACT

Efforts to advance resident autonomy and stability are prevalent within homeless shelters. At the same time, relationships of power and negotiations of governance are commonly expressed in the implementation of rules and in the specifications of shelter guidelines. How can all of these interests coexist? In this paper I rely on participant-observation research conducted at Covenant House Newark (CHN), a crisis center for homeless youth, to reveal an important contradiction in the operation of short-term shelters: though autonomy may be promoted, stringent regulations constrict independence. Inherent in life at CHN is a struggle between more symbolically powerful staff members, who exercise power and judgments over residents in accordance with what society at large and shelter leadership deem appropriate, and youth, who variously profess to feel empowered and challenge those they perceive as interfering with their desires, goals, and philosophies. Understanding how effective processes of individual change can be initiated will require sincere consideration of the extent to which “necessary” limitations of personal liberty within an environment that pushes autonomy actually represent manifestations of symbolic processes of power. Furthermore, power differentials and the transmission of messages about worth, deservingness, and compliance should be scrutinized by shelter staff members and top leadership.
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INTRODUCTION

One of the most precarious public assumptions about the homeless has been that they suffer from some sort of condition that is responsible for their lack of housing. Their life circumstances and their personal characteristics have frequently been medicalized into a pathological nonconformity, expressed as anti-mainstream behaviors that decrease their employment potential and push them to the fringes of society (see Lofstrand 2012; Mathieu 1993; Nye 2003; Williams 1996). Practices aimed at “curing” the homeless are particularly common in homeless shelters, where staff often focus on “decreasing reliance on nonproductive coping strategies” (Dalton & Pakenham 2002, p. 88) and increasing clients’ abilities to comply with rules and respect authority, skills that are meant to mimic the criteria for subsistence in conventional society. Vincent Lyon-Callo (2004, p. 131), reporting on his time at a homeless shelter in Massachusetts, explains the ideological assumptions among the staff members he worked with:

Many of the staff pushing for more effective staff practices for treating deviancy within homeless people philosophically agreed with our assessment that what was needed were more services and broader structural changes. However, they felt that they were powerless to bring about such systemic changes. In lieu of acting collectively and powerfully, these staff are inclined to concede that guests must learn to cope by fitting into society, even when the homeless person might want that least of all.

Lyon-Callo, an activist and advocate of “broader structural changes” in the fight against homelessness, is challenged by staff members who feel that the most appropriate or realistic solution is to force residents to “cope” by teaching them to adopt mainstream behaviors. In this storyline, the emphasis is on suppressing
symptoms, on becoming a survivor of homelessness — and the medicine is a heavy
dose of strategic social education.

The issues of conforming and of treating homelessness become particularly
intricate and thorny in the context of homeless youth. It is clear that short-term
accommodations do some good for young people. Studies have shown that shelter
programming focused on providing interventions to and aimed at treating homeless
youth in crisis are successful at improving “outcomes identified as most critical for
runaway and homeless youth, days on the run and feelings of support from their
families” (Thompson et al. 2002, p. 599). Furthermore, “suspension, expulsions, and
detention,” as well as firings and sexual behavior, have been shown to decrease at
the six week mark post-intake, while self-esteem has been shown to increase
(Thompson et al. 2002, p. 599). However, these results may attenuate as the length
of time post-departure increases (Pollio et al. 2006). The “quick and effective help”
(Meyer 2005, p. 4) that shelters attempt to provide to youth often manifests as rules
that are “intended to control residents’ behavior,” and clients remain worthy of the
shelter’s services only “as long as [they are] compliant” (Marvasti 2002, p. 622). In
essence, rather than understanding youth as agents who play active roles in the
construction of their futures, shelters may perceive homeless young people as
“passive receptors of adult culture or objects of adult activity” (Bridgman 2001, p.
781). This interpretation is not conducive to the independence and long-term self-
sufficiency that shelters frequently aim to develop in residents.

Ecumenical solutions for restoring the structure that is often missing from
homeless youth’s lives and policies aimed at cultivating autonomy may not address
nuanced thought processes, distinct modes of rationalization, or specific histories of abuse, marginalization, and inconstancy. Even when caseworkers and social workers, as they do at many (if not most) youth shelters, develop targeted plans for their clients, there is a persistent risk that staff members will use “locally circumscribed descriptive techniques” to help quell trouble “and enforce the mission of the organization,” transforming assistance into “reality projects that are jointly constructed” (Marvasti 2002). This provides staff members with an “out” should they, for whatever reason, need to deny services or constrict the options of their residents: either residents are constraining themselves, or shelter rules are preventing staff members from acting in a certain way (Marvasti 2002).

Furthermore, rules and regimentation intended to help youth may, in fact, end up “limit[ing] residents’ scope of possibilities for escaping poverty and homelessness” (Armaline 2005, p. 1126). Youth bring complex challenges with them to shelters. Some come directly from the streets, having been kicked out of or having run away from their homes, while others have aged out of foster care. Some have been or are actively involved in gangs and/or substance abuse. Some struggle with mental health issues (see O’Reilly et al. 2009; Unger et al. 1997). The effects of these difficulties on youth are varied and multifaceted. Consequently, the way in which a shelter characterizes and responds to youth homelessness may or may not be appropriate given the diverse needs of its population (Armaline 2005).

Though program structure and resident autonomy have been motifs in the work of a number of scholars of homelessness, ethnographic treatments of how young shelter residents are empowered to rebel or prevented from rebelling against
rules and how they understand their own autonomy and agency are few in number. Studies that do examine these subjects thoroughly have been largely concerned with shelter geography (Williams 1996); staff surveillance, invasions of privacy, and the pushing of boundaries as catalysts for the desire (realized or not) to rebel (Lyon-Callo 2000; Williams 1996); and “alliances” between staff members and youth (Meyer 2005). While these studies are critically important for understanding power dynamics in youth shelters, I hope to add to the extant literature by addressing the following questions: How do notions of self-governance interact with shelter rules and regulations? How is symbolic power sustained by staff-resident interactions? And how is autonomy hindered, challenged, professed, and explained by different actors? The role of the therapeutic process that shelters initiate, so often presenting as stringent rules and efforts to correct resident behavior, is crucial to this type of investigation.

Armaline (2005, p. 1135) argues that, while providing structure and teaching residents “life skills” are “necessary for the organizational operation of [a youth] shelter, this approach is problematic in ideologically defining the cause of residents’ marginalized position and in materially addressing adolescent homelessness as an individual rather than social problem.” Although the medicalization of homelessness is questionable in its own right, so too is the characterization of homelessness as an individual failing (though they are strongly linked); both misplace the onus of “fixing” the problem on the “problematic” population itself rather than on the larger structures that disempower and ostracize the homeless. Constant failure to take responsibility and a paucity of knowledge about how to
operate in conventional society are pegged as the symptoms of homelessness that most crucially need to be corrected (Armaline 2005). It is my goal to show that, while some form of remediation — be it educational or vocational — may frequently be useful, channeling the knowledge that homeless youth already possess, working with the motives that guide their current behavior, and situating their interpretations of governmentality within larger dialogues of power would likely prove worthwhile and enlightening for staff and residents alike.

**BACKGROUND: IMPOSSIBLE RECONCILIATIONS**

Erving Goffman first articulated his theory of the “total institution” more than 50 years ago. According to Goffman, institutions are considered total when they are “encompassing to a degree discontinuously greater than the ones next in line,” and their “total character” is “symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls, barbed wired, cliffs, water, forest, or moors” (Goffman 1961, p. 16). Goffman was referring to various types of institutions — geriatric homes, mental hospitals, prisons, boarding schools, monasteries (Goffman 1961, p. 16-17) — and not explicitly to homeless shelters. Nevertheless, his concept has been used as a framework by a number of scholars writing about the homeless (e.g., De Venanzi 2008; DeWard & Moe 2010; Marcus 2003). Shelters do, after all, seem to exhibit a host of the characteristics demanded by Goffman’s model: residents are treated alike, subsist in close quarters, are working towards the same end goal, and often partake in scheduled activities (Goffman 1961). But, Armaline (2005, p. 1126)
points out, while “structural elements such as rules and policy are influential,” they are “not static and impervious to challenge and recreation by residents and staff.” In this way, homeless shelters might more accurately be labeled “quasi-total institutions” (Armaline 2005, p. 1126).

The quasi-totality of homeless shelters gives rise to an important contradiction: the simultaneous promotion of independence and the constriction of self-governance with stringent regulations. Negotiations of power and attempts to advance resident autonomy and “stability” are prevalent within homeless shelters (e.g., Armaline 2005; Lyon-Callo 2000). Relationships of power are commonly expressed in the implementation of rules and in the specifications of shelter guidelines (i.e., Armaline 2005; Williams 1996). Using Foucault’s (1995) theory of “disciplinary technologies,” Williams (1996, p. 80) explains that “the homeless shelter as institution relies upon constant observation and recording of resident actions, as well as their social and sexual histories, as techniques of power that allow staff to ‘know’ homeless shelter residents and to measure and judge them against a ‘homogenous social body.’” Thus shelter staff members exercise power and judgments over residents in accordance with what (the more powerful) general society deems appropriate, since it comprises “the productive, sane, and moral norm” (Williams 1996, p. 80).

These practices may lend themselves to rebellion as youth, who understand that they are being pressured to become autonomous, feel that their autonomy is being constricted. Shelter life is, in this and in other regards, extremely onerous and stressful (Dordick 1996; Hopper & Baumohl 1994). Dordick (1996, p. 375-6) notes
that “excessive rules; hard treatment by shelter administrators, guards, and workers; and overly zealous programs of social control and reform make shelters difficult places to live.” And, as Rosenthal explains (Dordick 1996), a number of homeless individuals shun shelters “out of pride, distrust of other homeless people, or an unwillingness to accept regimentation.” While the youth I report on in this paper clearly chose shelter, they did not fail to challenge staff members whom they perceived as being unreasonable, a risky move in an environment that, in so many ways, demands compliance. At the same time, certain conditions mitigate the immediate risk of challenging authority in shelter environments, as I will show.

Furthermore, it is through the (quasi-)totalization of residents that shelter staff members fall into the trap of medicalization, transmogrifying dispossession into a syndrome that can be treated. Lyon-Callo spent a number of years working as a staff member and conducting ethnographic research at a homeless shelter in Massachusetts. The intake form, he explains, asked incoming tenants to explain why they were without residence:

One specific question during the intake asks the recently homeless person to state his or her “reason for homelessness.” The intake form includes a number of suggested reasons, each particular to that individual. As most homeless people have already learned a great deal of self-blame prior to entering the shelter, many guests will respond by disclosing a behavioral or training problem as the cause of their homelessness. For example, 39 percent of the people at this shelter during 1995 stated that they were homeless due to “substance abuse.” (Lyon-Callo 2000, p. 334)

The goal, then, becomes to deracinate the malady (homelessness) by addressing the root “causes.” Though the reported causes may not be the same for each individual, the idea that a resident’s homeless potential can be decreased with a treatment plan is constant.
Scholars occasionally medicalize homelessness as well, perhaps inadvertently. Reporting on their study of youth transitioning from shelter care, Nebbitt et al. (2007, p. 554) explain, “During the shelter phase, the youth experienced both freedom and structure; they experienced the structure, chose to comply, and became engaged in treatment. The process of engagement in treatment is perhaps the key component to success among youth returning home.” As the authors use it, “treatment” seems to be a catchall term for the utilization of shelter services and any act of working with a professional at the shelter to reform behavior. Thinking about treatment in this way reinforces the notion that all homeless youth who are willing to partake in a certain kind of process can be cured or mended.

Young homeless people are not blind to public perception, to the fact that others think they need to be fixed. David Farrugia (2010, p. 73) argues that “it is useful to understand homelessness as carrying a symbolic burden which young people who experience homelessness are aware of: that ‘homeless people’ are dirty, obscene, irresponsible, dangerous or passive, and are morally and ontologically inferior.” “Homeless” as a judgment, as a kind of person that can be picked out because of his or her looks or ways of acting, is acknowledged by a number of scholars. Kidd and Davidson (2007, p. 220) are particularly honest and candid about this in their methods section:

On the streets, I simply approached kids that I thought were homeless. Sometimes they looked homeless (e.g., sitting on the sidewalk, pan handling, old and worn out clothes, etc.). … Also, after having spent a lot of time out on the streets, I would just get a sense that a kid was homeless from some nonspecific ways he or she moved or looked and would make an approach
(which was, in a few cases, baffling to both the youth and myself as to how I picked them out).

This admission is brave but relatable. It is hard not to assume that certain street dwellers are homeless precisely because certain looks and ways of behaving have become stereotyped.

This reality begs us to consider homeless subjectivity and embodiment, which Farrugia (2010) so effectively tackles. Drawing on Bourdieu (1990 and 1984), he explains that each of us can think of our habitus, “a practical relation to the world which orients social action according to the power relations which the subject encounters,” as guiding us toward certain perceptions of the worth of others based on the symbolic capital we perceive them as having (Farrugia 2010, p. 74-5). And articulating Massumi (2002), he explains that relations of symbolic power “construct visceral feelings that can be pleasurable, or result in suffering” (Farrugia 2010, p. 75). Taken together, these theories help to explain how the suffering of homeless youth is the embodiment of a “cultural trope” that paints them as inherently less worthy than other more powerful segments of society and as possessing very little symbolic capital (Farrugia 2010, p. 75).

This embodied subjectivity should certainly be understood as a source for much confusion — confusion which, I would argue, aggravates conflicts of autonomy and which the “treatment” of homeless youth and practices that lump many homeless individuals together attempt to mitigate. Ultimately, however, these efforts are paradoxical and cosmetic. According to Farrugia (2010, p. 74), homeless youth simultaneously “occupy a particularly marginal position in the power relations inherent in late modern social structures” and “are under pressure to
become subjects who succeed in their negotiation of these structures on the basis of an individual responsibility to manage a reflexive and rational subjectivity.” These clashing demands situate youth in an impossible and categorically inexplicable context; society, as it disempowers them, expects them to possess enough drive and character to overcome their hardships.

In this sense, homeless youth are both medicalized and individualized, the latter only when convenient. Finley and Diversi (2010, p. 7) express their confidence in the notion “that the process of perpetuation of systems of oppression that allow for dehumanizing social conditions like homelessness is grounded in grand cultural narratives of individuality.” We medicalize homelessness and blanket all dispossessed youth with claims of social illness but at the same time demand individual responsibility from them; we want to explain homelessness collectively but realize we cannot, so homeless youth become “individualized life projects that have ‘failed’ due to their lack of responsibility and active subjectivity” (Farrugia 2010, p. 74).

In this paper I draw on my ethnographic research at a crisis center for homeless youth in Newark, NJ as I attempt to make sense of how the conflicts I have mentioned manifest themselves in everyday shelter life. For the purposes of this study, an assumption made by Penuel and Davey (1999, p. 225) will be useful: “that when people speak, they are simultaneously locating themselves in relation to others, establishing, coordinating, and maintaining relationships with others, and orienting themselves with respect to their own image of themselves and of the places where they dwell.” The youth at my research site frequently voiced their
opinions about autonomy, and their interactions with staff betrayed feelings about deservingness, fairness, and positionality and revealed important, contextual power differentials. I hope to demonstrate the necessity of considering how rhetorics of autonomy, structure, and discipline — whether various speakers and actors agree with each other or are at odds with one another — are shaped by social conflict that disproportionately affects the homeless and socially marginalized, who are popularly viewed as defective and unable to care for themselves.

Milburn (2005, p. 6) explains that “young people’s perceptions can inform us how consumers experience the availability, comprehensiveness, adequacy, quality, and coordination of services.” As services are so largely based on assumptions about what homeless youth need in order to become self-sufficient, it is imperative to examine the fit and the mismatch between residents and the help (or, less optimistically, the treatment) they receive at homeless shelters. Early intervention is considered essential, since, as life course theorists posit, “childhood experiences can influence adult ties to conventional society” (Hartwell 2003, p. 477), so deviancy may persist even as individuals move out of “youth” as a category (Bucholtz 2002). An understanding of how ideological conflict and symbolic processes of power manifest in residents’ and staff members’ actions and words forms a necessary basis for discussions of how the “homeless experience” and the negative social connotations it possesses are perpetuated.

**METHOD**

*Covenant House*
Covenant House is a 501(c)(3) organization (nonprofit), and with shelters in 21 cities across the United States, Canada, and Central America, it is “the largest privately funded charity in the Americas providing loving care and vital services to homeless, abandoned, abused, trafficked, and exploited youth” (Covenant House n.d.). In addition to its crisis centers, which are meant to house youth in need for up to 30 days, Covenant House operates institutions in many cities that offer mental health services, programming designed specifically for young mothers and children, and accommodations for youth who qualify for longer-term “transitional” living. I chose a Covenant House crisis center as my research site for several reasons.

During the summer of 2012, I worked as an intern at Covenant House’s international headquarters in New York City; thus, I was familiar with its mission (described below) and had already established rapport with a number of individuals who would prove critical to the success of my research. Furthermore, I was interested in interacting with youth who had not, necessarily, shown that they possessed the “stability” requisite for gaining entry into Covenant House’s longer-term housing arrangements.

Conversations with several staff members directed me toward the Covenant House Newark crisis center (henceforth referred to as “CHN”). It was smaller than the New York crisis center and, I thought, would prove easier for a relatively inexperienced ethnographer to investigate in a comprehensive manner. Additionally, I had hoped to begin my research while still working at Covenant House headquarters, when Newark would have been a short train ride away.

Though this did not end up happening to the extent I would have liked, I had already
made two visits to CHN by the time the school year started, so I chose to continue on with the project rather than switch to the closer Philadelphia shelter.

Covenant House exists, broadly, to live out “[God’s] covenant among ourselves and those children we serve, with absolute respect and unconditional love. That commitment calls us to serve suffering children of the street, and to protect and safeguard all children” (Covenant House n.d.). It does this by emphasizing five guiding principles: immediacy, sanctuary, value communication, structure, and choice. Its crisis centers exist first to meet each resident’s basic needs (food, rest, clean clothing) and then to provide security; to promote trust, respect, and honesty; to reverse the instability that street life and dysfunctional family life engender; and to empower youth to make good choices (Covenant House, n.d.).

Because of its stated foci on and the centrality to its work of promoting stability, providing structure, and giving youth the tools they need to make proper decisions, Covenant House seemed especially germane to my research interests.

**The Journey**

My first visit to CHN took place in late July of 2012, but I did not commence my fieldwork in earnest until mid-September. At that point, I began visiting once or twice per week until the end of November. I made several more trips in January of 2013. The early-morning bus ride from Philadelphia took me on long stretches of highway before thrusting me into a cityscape that looks dilapidated while it looks up-and-coming. We debused in front of Newark’s Penn Station, where throngs of businessmen and the occasional backpack-wielding student (myself included)
would rush past older (sometimes elderly) black men loitering near entrances and benches, the rest of Newark’s comers and goers scattered around the station’s periphery as they fanned out to their destinations. I would then walk a mile to the crisis center, past just-opening storefronts, through large crowds waiting for buses, by street vendors selling hats and sunglasses on folding tables, and along stretches of construction and scaffolding that closed streets and never seemed any nearer to completion for the duration of my research. Outside of the shelter there was always a group of youth, smoking, conversing, and playfully heckling staff members who walked by them on their way from the parking lot to the shelter.

The walk from the train station to the shelter is evocative of Newark’s revitalization efforts. Newman (2004, p. 36) explains that, in modern urban areas (including Newark), “demolishing poorly constructed and maintained high-rise public housing, breaking up areas with concentrated poverty, and building new ‘affordable’ town homes in formerly devastated neighborhoods all look positive and exciting for lovers of cities.” These conversions are superficial, though, and they fail to address many of the most important social and economic woes in the city (Newman 2004). The commingling of large overpasses, under which homeless youth gather at night (according to a CHN staff member); avenues known for their prostitution (according to a CHN outreach worker); never-ending construction; well-dressed businessmen; and shabbily clothed mendicants seems a visual metaphor for the failure of “downtown revitalization” to “transform … cities” (Newman 2004, p. 47).
Crisis Center Activities

The shelter itself is a mid-sized, alternately brick-red and terra cotta building. To walk in through the main entrance you must head down a narrow side street. The glass front doors are located across from the staff parking lot; they are locked at all times, and you must be buzzed in by someone behind the front desk. The building contains a lobby (where the front desk is located); a cafeteria; a small chapel; a gymnasium; a day room (which is akin to a living room) with couches and a television; several classrooms, one of which contains a number of computers used for job-searching; a small library; a number of staff offices used for intakes, assessments, psychological appointments, and other general work; and the dormitories, which contain a total of 40 beds — 20 for males and 20 for females.

My method of choice at the crisis center was participant-observation. I attended classes (vocational, math, and reading comprehension), sat behind the front desk, and interacted with staff members and residents whenever possible. When I had the chance I would try to engage residents or staff members one-on-one, almost as if I were conducting an extremely informal and unstructured interview. Particularly enlightening, as well, were morning reflections. On most mornings residents would gather in a room (usually the chapel or the day room) and share their thoughts, conversationally, on a topic chosen by the discussion leader. The leader was almost always a staff member, though on one of my trips it was a former resident who had returned for a visit. I did not use a tape recorder during my trips to CHN; instead I took detailed jottings, which I later typed up into fieldnotes, and wrote down extensive quotations, many of which I have been able to reproduce.
verbatim in this paper. Ellipses in fieldnote excerpts do not represent natural pauses in speech but rather the omission of words that I could not write down quickly enough, that I could not hear, or that I was able to record but that seemed repetitive or distracting to the message at hand.

I was mistaken for a resident on multiple occasions. When asked, I was always forthcoming about my role at the shelter (I was a college student writing a paper about CHN). I did frequently mention my history with Covenant House headquarters in New York City, as I thought it might increase my credibility and help me to more quickly establish my trustworthiness among staff members and residents.

Finally, I interviewed a staff member of Covenant House International in New York City. This staff member, whom I will call Andrea, was suggested to me by my former supervisor from my time as an intern at Covenant House. Andrea has worn many hats at Covenant House and worked for constituent shelters in several different cities. Furthermore, she has served as a liaison between headquarters and each site in the United States and Canada. I conducted the interview in-person, recorded it, and transcribed it. It was semi-structured and meant to provide, as much as one interview can, a representative and holistic institutional viewpoint regarding autonomy, structure, and shelter regulations.

My fieldnotes, including the interview transcript, were few enough in number that I did not find it necessary to use software to code my data. Instead, I read over my notes many times and selected the most appropriate excerpts given the themes that had emerged during the course of my fieldwork and that form the
basis for this paper. The results that I present below rely on those excerpts. In every instance, I attempt to explain the context of the passage presented. Additionally, I have chosen, when I felt it appropriate, to represent some conversational episodes from my fieldnotes in dialogue form. All names of individuals have been changed.

FINDINGS

Rules and Regulations

During one of my very first visits, I went to have lunch in the cafeteria. Though I sat with two residents to eat, they finished well before me and I was left alone at the table. Several staff members — two health fellows, a nurse practitioner, and a physician — saw me and invited me to join their table. I introduced myself and apologized for interrupting their conversation, which they promptly renewed. The excerpt below picks up right as their conversation began:

**MY FIELDNOTES:** I gather that they have been talking about whether or not Covenant House has a limit on how long its residents can stay. The kids who stay longer, the physician suggests, are at the end of their ropes. “Tell me what to do,” the physician says, taking on the persona of one of the residents, “and I’ll do it.”

I could not tell if the physician was referencing CHN or Covenant House’s longer-term housing options, but my time at CHN suggests that residents are not uniform in their passive acceptance of rules and regulations. Youth have their own ways of actively choosing to be noncompliant. The following exchange occurred as I was sitting in a reading comprehension class. Miss Danielle, the teacher, had provided her students with some snacks, and one young man, Timothy, had just finished his.
TIMOTHY: Those cookies was good.
MISS DANIELLE: Were. Those cookies were good.
TIMOTHY: No, I already ate them, so they was good.
MISS DANIELLE: When you have a plural subject, you need a plural verb.
TIMOTHY: [Attempting to frustrate her] Those cookies was good.
MISS DANIELLE: Jesus, Jesus. [Clasping her hands in prayer] Lord, help me.
TIMOTHY: Okay, okay. Those cookies were [sic] good.
MISS DANIELLE: Jesus, you gotta use grammar.
TIMOTHY: I’m just speaking. When I speak I don’t use grammar.

Timothy’s claim that he is “just speaking” reveals an awareness of the adoption of situationally specific conduct. He understands what Miss Danielle is saying, that she is attempting to correct his grammar. But he rebels by refusing to conform with what is “proper,” reminding us of Lyon-Callo’s (2004) assertion that learning to blend into society may not be at the top of youth’s priorities.

Miss Danielle’s motives are in keeping with shelter staff members’ desires to normalize residents’ heterodox behavior (e.g., Lyon-Callo 2000). During a previous visit of mine to CHN, she explained to me that when she corrects grammar she is not trying to be disrespectful, but the “GED will test for these things,” so residents need to know them. Her exhortations stem from a desire to see her students succeed. At the same time, they illuminate a conflict between prescriptive behavior (i.e., “talk this way”) and independent thinking. What results is a qualified autonomy: residents should learn to govern themselves and their own thinking, as long as their behavior is in line with the mainstream values that children with functional families and stable housing and education learn. This is the murky message inherent in most interactions between staff and residents.
Miss Danielle is keenly aware of the possibility of defiance from residents. A conversation I had with her, during which she summarized her career and explained her teaching style, confirms this:

**MY FIELDNOTES:** Miss Danielle was a high school teacher — at public, charter, and private schools — for several years before coming to Covenant House. She had a reputation for being really hard and tough: kids would get their schedules, see that they had been placed in her class, and go to their homeroom teachers asking to be switched out. Here at Covenant House she has tried to be different. She does not want to create a “negative stimulus” because that would trigger a negative response. Residents have been through a lot; many have experienced prison and probation. They have a “street mentality,” she says, taking up a thug persona and mimicking how they talk for a moment.

Miss Danielle attempts to correct for residents’ learning styles and ways of viewing the world. She understands that she will not receive respect from her students if she does not offer it; this is a lesson she has taken away from her days as a schoolteacher. However, her words also betray the challenges presented by the act of embracing totalizing philosophies — which, it seems, permeate certain (but not all) realms of shelter life. Some residents come from lives on the street, but others do not. Similarly, residents have received disparate levels of education are more or less familiar with current scholarship. During a morning reflections session, one young woman (a resident) quipped that “if you follow sociology or psychology, people are products of their environments, and you learn most of your habits by the time you’re five years old” — a sophisticated concept for a street thug.

There are ways in which staff members preempt rebellion, the most common seeming to be by withholding resources, more easily accomplished than compelling someone to speak or act a certain way. In the excerpt below, Susie, a staff member who frequently works at the front desk, is talking to Diana, a resident:
MY FIELDNOTES: Diana comes into the lobby from the day room and
announces that she needs to make a phone call. Susie motions to the phone
on one side of the desk. “You got two minutes,” she warns her. After chatting
with someone for a minute, Diana asks Susie for a bus ticket so that she can
get to the mall, where she intends to look for jobs. “Can I have Zone 2?” she
asks. Susie responds: “What mall?” Diana tells her, but Susie replies that the
mall is in Zone 1. Diana says that she meant the other mall, then. But Susie
insists that she go to the first one. It’s “around the corner” and there are lots
of new stores, she says. Diana begrudgingly takes the ticket and walks off.

In this instance, Diana cannot rebel; she has no bus tickets of her own, and it is likely
that she has no money to buy one. It is not clear why Diana wants to go to the mall
in Zone 2 or why Susie does not want her to, and I cannot in good conscience make
suggestions or inferences about either woman’s motives. The outcome, regardless,
is that Diana has no option but to take the Zone 1 ticket or not search for a job —
and presumably searching for a job is something she must do to remain in
compliance with shelter rules. The differential in tangible risk becomes apparent
here. Residents can refuse to alter their speech, and they will not be severely
disciplined or asked to leave the shelter. According to conventional philosophy,
though, they may perform poorly in job interviews if they do not speak like proper
adults. On the other hand, residents can throw tantrums over bus tickets, but
ultimately this may result in failure to obtain any ticket at all and additional
sanctions or difficulties if they do not follow their case plans. In this regard, the
longer-term implications, however, may eventually coalesce.

The power to preclude protest is further illustrated by the interaction
between Susie and a male resident presented below:

MY FIELDNOTES: Afterward, he turns to Susie and says something that I
cannot hear but that clearly irritates her. “Where’s your money? Where is
“Your check?” she asks him. He shrugs off her questions. “Y’all think y’all too slick around here. You spent your last three paychecks.” The next one, she tells him, needs to go in his account. The young man protests by saying that he did not squander his money, he just put it in another account. “Then you can move it to this one,” Susie says. “I’ll get the paperwork ready.”

Susie leaves the young man no choice but to do what she says. Ultimately residents have little control over the money they earn, as they are required to deposit a large percentage of it into a savings account. In this instance, Susie chooses when the conversation is over, limiting the young man’s ability to dissent just as the shelter limits his monetary storage options. This is reminiscent of an example that Jean Calterone Williams (1996, p. 87) provides. In it, she recounts the story of a shelter resident who was yelled at by a case manager in front of her sister:

Embarrassed by the case manager’s treatment of her in front of a family member who was not staying at the shelter, unable to respond in kind due to his ability to evict her (“verbal abuse” of staff is grounds for termination), Betsy felt that she had been treated like a child but had no recourse that would not jeopardize her stay.

Residents must assess the potential repercussions of disagreeing with or challenging a staff member. Different situations present different risks, and when residents determine that the risk is too great, they are often silenced.

Some residents are more willing to submit to authority or to take it with a grain of salt. The following excerpt, which describes an interaction between Susie and Harris (a resident), illustrates this point:

**MY FIELDNOTES:** Harris walks into the lobby from the day room and asks Susie for a ticket (for the bus, I think). “Why?” Susie asks. He explains that he is serving lunch and leaving right afterwards. “Okay,” Susie says, “so you’ll get it after. I don’t give people tickets to hang around the shelter.” Harris tries again: “But I’ll be in the cafeteria, and I’m leaving right after.” “So you’ll get it after, Harris!” Susie says definitively. A smile unfurls across his face: “Miss Susie, I love your passion,” he says playfully. He begins skipping down the hallway.
Harris and Susie, from the ultimately friendly tone of their interaction and based on other visits of mine to the shelter, seem to have a good working relationship, which may set the stage for Harris’ concession. Though, like other residents, he persists for a while, his interaction with Susie does not end angrily. This is noteworthy given Susie’s characterization of what Harris would be doing as “hanging around the shelter,” when he made it clear that he would be working in the cafeteria and leaving immediately afterwards. Operational definitions of what constitutes productive behavior seem to be lacking. Furthermore, while the enforcement of certain modes of conduct is (more or less) constant, how that enforcement shapes relationships and plays out among different groups of shelter staff and residents is not uniform.

Alongside these instances of (attempted) resistance are a number of examples of what seem like rules and commands designed to address issues of etiquette and appropriate public behavior:

**MY FIELDNOTES:** I thank Maya [a staff member], and she heads into the day room. “Why do I hear music?” she asks loudly almost immediately after entering the room. “How many times do I have to tell you?”

**MY FIELDNOTES:** “No music, please,” Miss Danielle adds, asking everyone to remove the headphones from his or her ears before beginning to work on the problems. Additionally, she says, as a general rule, “If you arrive more than ten minutes late, don’t come in”; wait until the break. Some officials came over to the crisis center recently to make sure she was enforcing this rule, which she had not been.

**MY FIELDNOTES:** Miss Danielle comes back into the classroom, and, addressing everyone, says, “How many times I gotta tell you to take the hats off your heads?” One young man responds, “But it’s bad luck.” Miss Danielle says, “Leave them upstairs on your locker or something.”
Arriving on time, removing hats, and lowering the volume of music were constant themes throughout my time at CHN. The rules concerning these behaviors are all outlined in the orientation packet that residents receive upon admission to the shelter, so they should come as no surprise. When I asked Dana, a staff member and my main point of contact at CHN, why these rules were in place, she responded that they were largely meant to teach residents about courtesy. Furthermore, Andrea explained to me that hats and other clothing or colors may be affiliated with gangs, so rules like these are also meant to ensure that residents feel safe inside of the shelter. And, she added, hats could be used to hide weapons.

These kinds of rules seem to be as much about teaching residents structure as they are about allowing staff members to maintain constancy for their own sakes. Miss Danielle’s admission that she used to bend the rules but got caught suggests that her strictness is, at least in part, based on a need to conform with the standards of other shelter staff members and officials. The following interaction between Susie, Dana, and two residents corroborates this notion:

**SUSIE:** [To Thomas and Jordan, two young men she has just buzzed in] What are you here for today?
**THOMAS:** Class.
**SUSIE:** You’re late. Y’all can’t go back there this late. [To Jordan] You can’t go either. You’re gonna have to wait until 11:15. And you have to wait outside — you can’t be in the day room when you’re late.
*A moment elapses, and Susie walks into the day room*
**THOMAS:** Miss Dana, can I go to class?
**DANA:** No, you have to wait until 11:15.
**THOMAS:** Can I at least print my resume?
**DANA:** [Angrier] No, when you’re late, you’re late. Whatever you need to do has to wait until 11:15.
**THOMAS:** [Under his breath as he walks away] You got your panties in a bunch.
**DANA:** Yeah, I know.
Had Dana relented, she would have directly contradicted Susie’s decision. Instead, she acts in solidarity with Susie, her fellow staff member. Both Susie and Dana enforce rules about lateness to maintain the structure that Covenant House provides, but also because they, as individuals with more symbolic capital than CHN residents, understand the normalization and constancy demanded by society.

At CHN, rules and authority are shaped by a complex mixture of considerations regarding risk, positionality, power, and end goals. Staff members attempt to maintain order by enforcing a host of regulations, which concern everything from money, stability, and employment to hats and music. In the end, staff members will generally come out on top. Residents must make decisions about what and when to resist. In certain instances, their capacity to forge successful complaints is greater. Furthermore, how residents internalize staff resistance to their actions may be related to how they interact with and feel about certain staff members. Ultimately, however, it may not matter how successful residents are in their minor acts of rebellion. Staff members and the rules they enforce are supposed to, according to CHN’s welcome packet, help residents “redirect [their] time, change some of [their] old ways of thinking,” and “leave ... in a better place than when [they] came.” In other words, residents are meant to internalize better behaviors so that they may continue to enact them once they are on their own. If their actions do not teach them something about how they will need to carry themselves once they leave CHN or once they transition to longer-term housing arrangements, they will be fail to move through the ranks and will remain peripheralized. Resident resistance and compliance, staff assistance and refusal,
and acts of teaching and of disciplining all play out in the name of autonomy and self-sufficiency.

*Autonomy and Individual Responsibility*

During my time at CHN, one of the most commonly repeated ideas about choice and agency was that it is up to each resident to ensure that he or she is taking the right steps to work toward independence. In the example below, Dolores, an intake worker, has been approached by Martha, a resident:

**MY FIELDNOTES:** Martha is complaining that she has been waiting to meet with someone, and Dolores is explaining to her that she has to wait because that person is busy right now. “She’s gonna go with you,” Dolores says, “but right now she’s in a meeting.” I gather that Martha missed an earlier meeting with this person and is now upset that she cannot immediately see the woman. Dolores reminds Martha that it was her fault she missed her initial meeting, to which Martha responds that she was in so much pain earlier that could not move and had to lie down. That’s why she missed the meeting, she says.

Here, Martha has a reason for having missed her meeting. Presumably she did not communicate to the woman she was supposed to meet with that she would not be attending the appointment. She was, after all, in a great deal of pain earlier and “could not move.” Still, in the “real world” one might be expected to send a note or make a phone call to report absence from work or a scheduled meeting. In this sense, it might be appropriate for Martha to accept some blame for failing to send notification. On the other hand, residents may not have phones or the means to easily communicate with staff members who are not in the immediate vicinity.

This raises questions of motivation: could Martha really not make it downstairs to report her sickness, or did she lack the motivation to do so? The issue
of drive came up during one of my visits while I was sitting in Dolores’ office and talking with a former resident, Gloria, who had dropped by.

**MY FIELDNOTES:** Dolores wonders aloud how those who do not help themselves expect to receive help from anyone else. Gloria seems to agree and goes on to say that the biggest problem at Covenant House is that residents lack motivation. They stay at Covenant House for however long, and then they leave and are homeless again. The other big problem is stealing, which is related, she says. Residents do not want to work for money or get jobs of their own so they steal from others. They tell new staff members that they have to get things from their rooms or their closets, but the rooms and closets they go to are not actually theirs. The recently hired staff members do not know any better.

The picture Gloria paints is important: she is suggesting that residents lack motivation to such an extent that they will devise behaviors, or rely on deviant behaviors they already practice, to skirt responsibility. Rather than make an effort to engage in the productive behavior that entrée into society demands (working), they confine themselves to the margins and fail to help themselves.

This insinuation stands in direct contrast with a number of comments I heard youth and staff members make about responsibility, choice, self-worth, and autonomy. For instance, during a session of morning reflections, Ray, a resident, espoused the following philosophy:

**RAY:** You still got to this point. The point isn’t that you’re at the bottom. This is the point where you felt like you needed to change so you came here. ... This whole argument about who did that, who’s doing this — at the end of the day, you shouldn’t give a fuck about that, because you’re here doing what you gotta do.

Ray’s words highlight a rhetoric surrounding the positivity underlying the choice to enter CHN. Residents could have remained on the streets or could have suffered through days and nights with their dysfunctional families, but instead they decided to leave those lives behind and enter a shelter. This act, in itself, demonstrates
strength and a desire to change. The future is alluded to — residents are at CHN to “change” into different people, the people they will be once they have left the shelter. But the present, the act of “doing what you gotta do,” is the most essential.

Flashes of optimism are also detectable in some of the things residents had to say about the future success they envisioned for themselves. During morning reflections, David, a staff member and that day’s discussion leader, asked the residents what steps they needed to take as they worked toward an independent lifestyle, and one young man, Malik, responded:

MALIK: Having a positive mindset. Always believe in yourself. Never think about failing. Failing is never an option.

[A bit later]
MALIK: The steps is not sitting around daggling [sic], waiting for somebody to give you something. You gotta go out and go get it. Stop being a follower and be a leader.

Again, active participation is key. Residents must choose to believe in themselves and to trust that they will overcome the hardships they have faced. They need to go out and take what is theirs. They cannot rely on handouts; they must guide themselves toward success. This is in line with Marvasti’s (2002, p. 621) observation that, at the homeless shelter that served as his research site, an “emphasis on independence and self-help borrow[ed] from the broader psychiatric discourse that casts clients’ troubles in the language of individual responsibility and finds the solution in ‘independence.’”

Motivation was important to discussions of the process of change itself, throughout which relatively uniform perspectives on self-governance persisted. Many residents, and David, expressed a strong belief that success was dependent on
the individual and that those around you, at least while you were still working on realizing your own autonomy, could only hold you back:

**DAVID**: You have to understand at the end of the day, you gotta worry about yourself. You need to be that support sometimes. But you can’t help nobody if you ain’t helping yourself. ... We wanna lift each other up and help and support each other, but put yourself first.

**JASMINE [a resident]**: You are your own worst enemy. When you convince yourself you’re doing everything you have to do to make it better, you’re lying to yourself. Can’t nobody mess you up more than you can. ... If y’all gonna sit here for months and months and months and do absolutely *nada*, y’all need to dip and give it to somebody who’s gonna use this bed to do what the fuck they gotta do.

**MARGOT [a resident]**: When I first came here, I felt like a lot of people, it was dumb of me to think I could trust people here. That was my mistake. I realized there’s some fake people in here but I’m not gonna let any of these fake people or their lies have any effect on me. ... There are some people in here who think they’re better than everybody, and you’re not better than nobody at this point because you’re at the bottom, you’re at a shelter.

The theme running through these three excerpts is the criticality of residents putting themselves first. During the several morning reflections sessions where this topic was discussed, very few people voiced any sort of strong opposition to this notion.

Just as pronounced is the belief that if you are not willing to help yourself, you should not be at CHN. Residents (as seen in some of the examples above) and staff members alike expressed this view:

**DAVID**: I don’t support being high, but you can’t even support your own habit. You gotta wait for someone to go in with you. If that’s what you wanna do, why are you here, why take up space? ... Many people wanna come in but beds are full. I know some people here who shouldn’t be here. You don’t need to be here if you’re not gonna be serious about change.

David uses substance abuse to make his point. If residents are willing to prioritize drugs above success, and if their dependence on drugs is so strong that they are
content with pooling the little money they have so that they can buy drugs to share, they should give up their spots at CHN and offer them to others who are going to take advantage of all that the shelter has to offer.

When a visitor, Drew (a former CHN resident who had been out of the shelter for five years), challenged this perception as he led morning reflections, opposition was fierce.

**DREW:** What about the guy sitting next to you?

**MALIK:** That’s none of my business. At the end of the day you do things by yourself. You get outside and you’re by yourself. I’m not a phony.

**MARCUS [a resident]:** You came out the womb by yourself, you gonna leave by yourself.

[Later]

**DREW:** Why?

**MALIK:** I’m not about to talk to another grown man or grown woman, damn them.

**DREW:** Understand what I’m saying, understand what I’m saying. If I can help an individual, if I can help somebody get in school and I know a pathway to make it easy for them to get in school, I’m gonna take their hand and help them. ... I can introduce them to somebody. Hook people up with one another.

[Later]

**MARGOT:** How you gonna help somebody if you don’t even got yourself together?

**MARCUS:** I only have two arms to help myself.

**MARGOT:** I got my own stuff I gotta do. When I got my own stuff down, then I’ll think about helping you, if you show you need the help.

Residents were unwilling to accept the idea that they could help others achieve success if they had not improved their own situations. This fits within a logical framework espoused by Andrea. She explained that the real goal of Covenant House [crisis centers] is to get [youth] into these transitional living programs, get somebody from crisis to transitional living, because you need more time to build that autonomy. You need stability for autonomy, and you don’t get that with [the crisis centers]. You get access to
resources to put that in place, but it’s really a longer-term stability that builds that autonomy.

Residents who prioritize self-help embody this institutional belief in the criticality of stability. Stability is what will lead to autonomy, and it is what crisis centers are meant to start building before transitional living setups solidify and strengthen it.

Building stability requires, ideologically and practically, that residents change. The presumption is that they currently lack stability, or that they lack it when they enter CHN. Here, too, the role of self-governance is essential. Consider this excerpt from David’s address to the residents at morning reflections:

**DAVID:** If you haven’t changed, I encourage you to start that process. ... But I feel like, I think that sometimes we don’t realize the change is that we’re focusing on other things, we’re not looking at the little things that stick in place. So we miss the big picture because we’re missing out on the little things that create the big picture.

David’s exhortation that the youth “start that process” is noteworthy, as it implies that change comes primarily and can be initiated from within. It demands a certain complicity; residents must agree to stop scrutinizing their minute failings and consider the larger contexts of their present stations in life.

David went on:

**DAVID:** Either you’re gonna change willingly, or life circumstance is gonna force you to change. And I’ll tell you what – it’s a bad road to go down when you’re being forced to change in certain ways that you have no control over.

This idea is in keeping with something Andrea said as I was interviewing her. I had asked her a question about structure and responsibility, and below is part of her response:

**ANDREA:** So we’ll be there to provide these services; you can choose whether to access them. We will be there to educate you on your choices and to guide you and provide supportive counseling about what some of your
options are, but at the end of the day, you're kind of choosing, you know, what job, what school. And I think that comes out of a personal empowerment. I think the research will show that the more people make choices for themselves, it's more empowering than somebody deciding for you. So that kind of leads towards more autonomy and self-sufficiency within choices.

Covenant House provides access to services, but residents have to make the choice to use them. That they even have the option to make this choice should be empowering, according to the official narrative of structure and stability — certainly more so than the violent street life or dysfunctional family life compelling them to change. Andrea and David simultaneously suggest that homelessness results from an inability to change willingly and demand that residents take responsibility for their own growth. Success results, then, from residents getting themselves into a position such that they have some control, acknowledging and visualizing that control, and taking advantage of it.

**DISCUSSION**

Inherent in life at CHN (and other shelters) is a struggle between more symbolically powerful staff members — who prevent youth from rebelling or, when they cannot, at least remain aware of the detriments spawning from a failure of residents to conform — and youth, who variously profess to feel empowered or to be aware of the necessity of personal responsibility and challenge those they perceive as interfering with their desires, goals, and philosophies. In several ways, my research corroborates some of Marvasti's (2002, p. 617) claims: staff members “respond to anticipated or real disputes using ... ‘raps’ or ‘semistructured narratives’ that define the procedural boundaries of the shelter.” They quell conflict by
“respectively emphasizing what the agency is willing to do for the clients, what the clients are expected to do for themselves, and, in some cases, how shelter rules prevent the staff from assisting clients” (Marvasti 2002, p. 617). This can be seen in many of the interactions that residents have with Susie, Miss Danielle, and Dana.

A rhetoric of self-help and discussions about what clients needed to “do for themselves” were pervasive throughout shelter life. The conversation about personal responsibility starts as soon as residents are admitted to the crisis center. The following is from the orientation packet:

But our Covenant with you is more than an agreement. Our Covenant involves sacrifice. ... We ask you to make this sacrifice not for us, but for YOURSELF. If you are willing to make this commitment it may be possible for you to obtain a job, a diploma, an apartment and freedom from drugs, danger, violence and unhealthy relationships.

One implication is that a failure to sacrifice “drugs, danger, violence, and unhealthy relationships” pre-CHN has been a reason behind residents’ inability to achieve independence. Another is that youth must abandon a part of their identity that has been contributing to their delinquency. They must give up the behaviors that have been controlling them and learn to control themselves.

How does an institution promote independence while it prescribes behavior? Fairbanks (2009, p. 107) suggests that a balance is achieved when residents “work the program,” which involves the implementation and regulation (by the institution) of sufficiently broadly conceived activities such that individual liberties can coexist without colliding disastrously. Covenant House edifies its residents according to its own philosophies, and in order to work the system and realize the standard of independence that Covenant House champions, the youth must believe that
autonomy is something worth striving toward in spite of the subordination inherent in service-providing institutions. Only then can “an atmosphere of discipline” be substantiated (Fairbanks 2009, p. 107).

Reaching a state of self-governance is, of course, easier said than done for vulnerable populations, constrained by antagonistic social forces and their own particular habituses. The youth at CHN, or some of them, may perceive a need to summon motivation, to set themselves on a path toward independence and prosperity — but how do they practice what they preach? Stigma is not volatile, its epitomization not easily shaken (e.g., Goffman 1963; Kleinman 1988, ch. 10). David urged them to shun detractors and prove their worth in spite of adversity: “Now, now it’s a matter of who goes from homelessness to independence. Who is gonna be the one to take the step and say, ‘You know what? They can say that my cookie stink, my underarms stink, my feet stink, I done gave this one head, that one head — but you know what? I just passed my GED and I’m about to start working.’” Yet this philosophy encourages us to consider to what extent these anti-mainstream or (unintentionally) countercultural behaviors can coexist with normative savoir-faire and underscores contradictions in shelter philosophy.

As David Harvey (2005, p. 5) notes, “Concepts of dignity and individual freedom are powerful and appealing in their own right,” long inspiring social transformation and serving as infrastructure for numerous large-scale movements (for better or for worse). CHN values individual liberty and means for it to be productive, both for the individual and for society. This point is not lost on the shelter’s residents. It would appear, however, that autonomy is not, in their minds,
necessarily at odds with “street” behavior or conventionally frowned-upon
everyday practices. Randall Collins’ (1981, p. 985) work provides a useful fabric for
thinking about this reconciliation of behavior and logic:

Actual everyday-life microbehavior does not follow rationalist models of
cognition and decision making. Instead, social interaction depends upon tacit
understandings and agreements not to attempt to explicate what is taken for
granted. This implies that explanations in terms of norms, rules, and role
taking should be abandoned and that any model of social exchange must be
considerably modified.

Thus it does not seem worthwhile to explain residents’ behavior in terms of
mainstream rationale concerning self-determination. Normative inference is
relatively fruitless in this specific context of dispossession, conduct, and personal
liberty.

How should we think of the relationship between the promotion,
internalization, and management of autonomy and the regimentation characteristic
of shelter life? Covenant House does not seem to falter in its belief that the key to
success for homeless youth is that they be empowered to overcome their common
hardships. In Almost Home, Covenant House President Kevin Ryan and former New
York Times staff writer Tina Kelley suggest that the main architect of youth
homelessness is failed home life:

Yet there is one main reason most of them have no place to stay: their
parents or guardians left them, discarded them, or abused them, physically,
sexually, and/or emotionally, further stacking the odds against them. … Most
of the young people in this book have survived at least five such difficult
events, through no fault of their own. (Ryan & Kelley 2012, p. 4)

Our message to kids: even if you can’t go home again, because your parents
are missing or dead or abusive or in jail or hate you for who you are, you are
still valuable and special and deserve safe shelter. You still have the right to
a future. We open our doors, and we promise safety. We want to help you
find stability, and we want you to pursue your dreams. (Ryan & Kelley 2012, p. 5)

This representation seems, to a degree, more forgiving than the harsher tone of some of the conversations at CHN. Essential to Ryan and Kelley’s message is the idea that homeless youth lack stability in their lives because of the things that have been done to them. This view comes off as slightly more structuralist, but it is, nonetheless, totalizing, and it almost seems to undermine the rhetoric of personal responsibility that I identified up on at CHN.

When he was leading morning reflections, Drew broached the topic of families: “A lot of times with situations like that, when a parent makes the child feel like they’re not welcome at home, that child will resent that parent. There’s always gonna be some kind of resentment. ... The child is gonna be stagnated.” But a resident in the room, a young woman whose mother had driven her to the shelter, immediately countered his statement: “I mean, I don’t feel that way, ‘cause at least [my mom] dropped me off. [She] coulda just told me to get out, you know?” It may be (and probably is) true that a proportion of youth will harbor some resentment toward family members they find unsupportive (see Thompson et al. 2003 for some considerations of relationships between runaway youth and their parents), but the notion that the pain associated with that resentment is insurmountable is prohibitive. Many of the youth at the shelter were still in contact with their parents. In his doctoral dissertation, Benedito dos Santos recounts how “most of the former street youth I met, with the exception of a few cases that I will describe later in this chapter, placed the locus of the initiative for leaving home on themselves and used the first person to start their account, although they frequently described a situation
that ‘pushed them away” (dos Santos 2002, p. 194). The young woman who spoke clearly found herself in a situation that “pushed her away” from home, but she was willing to consider that she might triumph over her struggles, that she was not going to “be stagnated” indefinitely.

Successful transition out of a crisis center might have less to do with conquering hardships are more to do with persevering in spite of them. It is challenging to say how much shelter and staff philosophies can actually change a young person in just a few weeks. Anthony Marcus (2003, p. 140) writes,

> Shelter residents entered the shelters carrying with them the prejudices, aspirations, kinship patterns, ideal social norms, and individual deviations from those norms that are ubiquitous in the United States. They left with most of the same ideas and behaviors with which they entered. ... More like a beach on a crowded day than a unified institution, community, or small town, the human networks among shelter residents mirrored the dispersed and atomized surrounding city.

Failing to recognize the constraints imposed by the guiding forces of habitus and early socialization, shelters and other institutions or individuals hone in on its manifestations and label them as standalone bases for homelessness. In their minds, these “display[s] of resistance” must be curbed if the individual is to fit into contemporary, conventional society (Bourgois & Schonberg 2009, p. 133). While the youth at CHN may all be homeless, they come from different places and backgrounds. Something needs to change in their lives, but that something is not necessarily their individuality or their dreams and goals. It is something larger, something social, structural, lofty, and challenging.

CHN and its staff members are doing important and extremely commendable work. It is clear that most, if not all, staff members are guided by admirable motives,
and it would be unreasonable to suggest that systems of regulation should not be in place; they provide constancy and promote safety. It is not surprising, then, that concerns over rules, regulations, structure, and autonomy are common at CHN — but it is important to note that they are influenced by power and capital. In spite of the good intentions of shelters and staff members, homelessness persists, and “we must contemplate how the homeless and homelessness, as categories, are produced and resisted. These categories are products of discursive conditions that give rise to concrete ways of thinking and acting” (Lyon-Callo 2000, p. 341). Are youth shelters correct in their suggestion that homeless young people need to be snapped out of their condition? Or does this argument misunderstand its targeted cohort and overlook the structural forces that are expelling youth from their homes? I have tried to provide a foundation for constructing answers to these questions; to comment on the applied logistics of attempting to save youth in crisis; to expound upon some of the ways of thinking that give rise to the promotion of therapeutic processes over structural reform; and to link structure, social and symbolic power, individual and collective responsibility, and autonomy within the context of CHN.

LIMITATIONS

This paper and my research are affected by several limitations. First and foremost is the number of visits I was able to make to the shelter. Attempting to juggle a full undergraduate course load and weekly trips to Newark proved challenging, and I was limited to one (or two, if I was lucky) trips per week. As a result, the relationships I formed and the rapport I established with certain
individuals were not as deep and meaningful as they might have been had I been present at the shelter more frequently. A feeling of passivity never quite left me, and, as much as I tried to actively engage with residents and staff members, I do not feel that I was ever as fully immersed in the shelter community as I would have liked to be.

Furthermore, I almost always made my trips to CHN in the morning. The classes I sat in on, the staff members and residents I engaged with, and the rest of the interactions I observed or partook in epitomize a particular temporal dimension of life at CHN. As a result, I hesitate to call my research fully representative. Had my flexibility been greater and my schedule more forgiving, I would have liked very much to visit the shelter later in the day or to stay for longer stretches of time.

I also must acknowledge that, in this paper, there are certain elements of shelter life and dynamics that I do not strongly consider, which include how different kinds of staff members (i.e., staff members filling different professional roles and niches) might interact with residents in particular ways; how race and ethnicity — given that the large majority of residents, as well as many staff members, at CHN are black — may affect certain philosophies; how specific life histories (i.e., having run away versus having been kicked out) may inspire disparate views on autonomy, structure, power, and regulation; and how Newark, in particular, may serve as a unique venue for the development of the opinions, philosophies, and rhetorics addressed in this paper. These are dimensions of the homeless youth experience, especially at CHN, that I hope will be pursued in future research, whether it is my own or other scholars'.

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Finally, Covenant House is, at its core, a Catholic institution. Its mission very strongly reflects this religious association. While my own experiences at CHN suggest that religion is not the largest force at work in the shelter, it is worth noting that every session of morning reflections ends with a prayer, and several comments David made during a session of reflections were overtly religious: “Y’all give people too much power over you. Except for the man above, ain’t nobody should have power over your mind and body like that. Except for the man above, if that’s what you believe in.” I cannot comment fully on the extent to which Covenant House’s religious affiliations permeate everyday life at CHN, but I present the organization’s ties to Catholicism as a potential influence on certain residents’ or staff members’ feelings about power and governance.

CONCLUSION

In spite of these limitations, my research underscores a pressing need to think about how to reconcile calls for autonomy within youth homeless shelters (i.e., freedom with fine print) with contextually grounded end goal autonomies. This is especially important, and profoundly complicated, for transient groups of poor and homeless individuals, such as CHN’s. Marvasti (2002, p. 622) explains that, “from an official standpoint, violations of the house rules do not call into question the shelter’s organizational ideology and its fairness, but they are occasions for enforcing staff authority by expelling or restricting clients from services.” Power differentials and the transmission of messages about worth, deservingness, and compliance should be strongly considered by shelter staff members and top
leadership. The philosophies that youth internalize and embody may be extremely important to their ability to establish long-term “stability” and should not be taken for granted.

David sought to keep CHN’s residents grounded while he pushed an agenda of independence: “Y’all still homeless. You at Covenant House, but technically you still homeless. When you have a date, you can’t bring ‘em back here. You can’t say, ‘Oh, let’s go watch TV at my crib.’” This reasoning (“you are homeless and dependent but you need to be independent”) is, perhaps, less of a dual logic and more of a permissible admonition given the impermanence of CHN’s population, but the extent to which David and CHN’s residents recognize how discrete messages and actions interact with and reinforce one another is unclear. Understanding how more effective processes of change can be initiated will require sincere consideration of the extent to which “necessary” rules and limitations of personal liberty within an environment that pushes autonomy may actually represent manifestations of symbolic processes of power.

There is no right way, necessarily, to envisage autonomy in the context of homelessness and poverty. Paul Rabinow’s interpretation of Foucault helps to illustrate this point:

Foucault is highly suspicious of claims to universal truths. He doesn’t refute them; instead, his consistent response is to historicize grand abstractions ... For Foucault, there is no external position of certainty, no universal understanding that is beyond history and society. His strategy is to proceed as far as possible in his analyses without recourse to universals. (Foucault & Rabinow 1984, p. 4)

Autonomy must be understood within the contexts of the individuals who seek it; as an ideology it cannot be globally applied. At CHN the individuals in question are
homeless youth who may have grown up practicing, and may continue to practice, behaviors that contemporary society at large deems aberrant (but that are acceptable within the limits of their habituses). As Marcus (2003, p. 139) explains, “Most of the deviant behavior my informants engaged in derived from patterns and needs that they brought with them to the shelter” [emphasis added]. Youth shelters should strive to recognize the influence of these patterns and needs on behavior and on present station in life and to use their knowledge to advance messages and systems of regulation that are forthright and compatible with one another.

REFERENCES CITED


